

Reflection: Creating Space for Dialogue in Student Evaluation

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1. Abstract:

Reiterative evaluation of student work -- a natural extension of experiential learning, participatory in-class discussion, and autobiographical reflection -- can become a catalyst for the individual's further development and for self-initiated and self-directed learning. An invitational approach, developmental feedback encourages students to revisit their learning, to take ownership of it and responsibility for it, and through further reflection, to fine-tune, expand, and deepen their content knowledge, insight into their own thinking and learning, and their transfer of learning to practice. If we truly want to model and support authentic learning and to prepare lifelong learners, then this approach has something of significant practical value to offer.

Key Words:

Experiential learning, dialogue, reflection, mentoring, reiterative evaluation, provisional marking, developmental feedback, lifelong learning, student engagement, grade inflation, student responsibility, transfer to practice

2. Perspectives on Deep Learning

I confess that as a university student, I always felt that once I received my mark on an assignment, that particular conversation was over. That piece of learning, whatever its state of development, was tucked away on the shelf to gather dust; it was history. I suspect that all too many learners know exactly what I mean by this.

These days, I'm a community-based adult educator who teaches part-time in a university setting. The two upper-level undergraduate courses that I've had the good fortune to develop and teach represent two areas of learning that I very much want my students to integrate into their daily lives and professional practice. In *Bridging Difference: Diversity and Inclusion in Adult Learning* (Faculty of Education) and *The Respectful Workplace: Principles and Practices* (Faculty of Business Administration), it's important to me that they discover practical value in the ideas with which we grapple, and that because of what they've learned, they'll be motivated to view the world differently and to interact with it more wisely.

Welcoming new learning and finding a place for it in our frame of reference can be a delicate dance for all of us. Many adult learners arrive on our doorstep suffering from what is commonly called "imposter syndrome", the fear that they really don't belong here and will be found out. Against that backdrop, being confronted with ideas that are new and disconfirming can be even more stressful. Without support, as Jack Mezirow (1991) notes, "We trade off awareness for avoidance of anxiety when new experiences are inconsistent with our habits of expectation..." (p. 63). But as Laurent Daloz (1999)

adds, “In the trusting and privileged relationship between a caring teacher and a student, the risk of exploring new ideas is minimized, and the student is encouraged to experiment in ways she might not otherwise try.” (p. 219)

As adult educators, then, we’re called upon to create a climate of safety for risktaking – both in the classroom, and in our one-on-one written and electronic exchanges with each of our students. Henri Nouwen (1975) describes what can result: “Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place... Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.” (p. 51).

To set the stage for our time together, I introduce my students to, and try very hard to model, Margaret Wheatley’s (2002) concepts of “listening to understand” (pp. 32-33) and “willingness to be disturbed” (pp. 34-37). The first refers to the importance of being fully present to others in the learning group and remaining open to what they have to say. As Wheatley puts it, “When I’m in conversation, I try to maintain curiosity by reminding myself that everyone here has something to teach me.... Somehow this little reminder helps me to be more attentive and less judgmental. It helps me to stay open to people, rather than shut them out” (p. 30). The second addresses our tendency to tune out, or as I put it, to “shut our earlids”, when we hear something disconfirming or unsettling. Wheatley points out that these are the very moments when we most urgently need to listen with particular care and attention, because something that the speaker has said has challenged some of the hidden values, beliefs, and assumptions on which our worldview rests. When this happens, we are being called, as learners and as facilitators, to revisit this framework to determine whether it still serves us well, or is due for some renovation.

Parker Palmer (1990) reminds us, “Good teachers know that discomfort and pain are often signs that truth is struggling to be born among us. Such teachers will not allow their students, or themselves to flee... They will hold the boundaries firm, and hold us all within them, so that truth can do its work” (p. 73). I think that applies not only to classroom discussion, but to the way that we approach feedback on student assignments. Wherever possible, in both classroom discussions and in the individual work that they submit, I actively encourage my students to link theory with their own lived experience. Together, we explore the alignments and disjunctions between the two, and refine our understandings accordingly.

3. Stumbling into Provisional Marking

As a rookie, I was first assigned to teach in the very compressed format of a three-week university summer session. I was forewarned that students would have to hit the ground running. So in my written introduction to the course readings, which students purchased in advance, I indicated that the first assignment (an autobiographical reflection) was one that they could begin before the class actually started. To my astonishment, two of my fourteen students arrived on the first day of class with the first assignment already completed and ready to hand in. Somewhat taken aback, I felt it was unfair to give them a hard-and-fast mark without their having had the benefit of any prior discussion of the assignment goals, so I provided a conditional mark and afforded them the opportunity to respond to my comments. And that, quite simply, is how I

stumbled into a process that I initially dubbed “provisional marking”, and now think of as “developmental evaluation”.

In adult education, we strive to be learner-centered. In community development practice, we place a strong emphasis on being non-judgmental, and working with people from whatever their individual starting points may be. Against this backdrop, the whole notion of assigning a grade to someone’s learning can feel very counter-intuitive. And because the learning in both of my courses calls for a good deal of introspection on the learner’s part, attaching a mark to a student’s efforts also felt to me to be an intrusion into a very personal learning process.

I’ve come to terms with this in part by inviting a back-and-forth exchange of ideas, where the learner decides how far he or she wants to travel. I respond in depth to each learner’s assignments with individualized acknowledgements of their current thinking, and with extensive comments and questions aimed at helping them to “dig deeper”. I then invite them to respond. Whether or not they choose to do so is then entirely up to them.

4. Applying Principles of Good Dialogue

In many respects, this one-on-one exchange mirrors the group discussions which occur during class. For insights into effective developmental evaluation, then, we would do well to turn to the literature of dialogue.

In *The courage to teach*, Parker Palmer (1998) suggests some of the elements that we need to bring as instructors to such an exchange, to wit:

- ❖ A desire to help my students build a bridge between the academic text and their own lives, and a strategic approach for doing so
- ❖ A respect for my students’ stories that is no more or less than my respect for the scholarly texts that I assigned to them
- ❖ An ability to see my students’ lives more clearly than they themselves see them, a capacity to look beyond their initial self-presentation, and a desire to help them see themselves more deeply
- ❖ An aptitude for asking good questions and listening carefully to my students’ responses—not only to what they say but to what they leave unsaid
- ❖ A willingness to take risks, especially the risk of inviting open dialogue, though I can never know where it is going to take us. (p. 69)

In *Discussion as a way of teaching*, Stephen Brookfield (1999) explores a range of conversational roles which I believe are transferable to this mentorship approach to offering student feedback:

- ❖ Problem, dilemma, or theme poser (introducing topics, themes, and relevant personal disclosure to help others make their way into the conversation)
- ❖ Reflective analyst (noting what issues are surfacing and which ones are being sidestepped)
- ❖ Scrounger (drawing in helpful resources, examples, and suggestions)
- ❖ Devil’s advocate (introducing contrary and alternative points of view)
- ❖ Detective (making note of unacknowledged, unchecked, and unchallenged biases)

- ❖ Theme spotter (noting emergent themes that might warrant further attention)
- ❖ Umpire (ensuring that the conversation remains respectful) (pp. 115-116)

William Isaacs (1999), in *Dialogue and the art of thinking together*, advises, “To listen respectfully to others, to cultivate and speak your own voice, to suspend your opinions about others – these bring out the intelligence that lives at the very centre of ourselves --the intelligence that exists when we are alert to the possibilities around us and thinking freshly.” (p. 47)

5. The Mechanics of the Process

Much of my teaching these days is via audioteleconferencing, which connects small groups of students in four or five sites. Because they are in remote locations, the quality of my written interactions with each of them takes on added weight of importance. Most of this occurs via e-mail.

Each student submission and corresponding response from me counts as a “round”. In my adult education course, where I have a cap of twenty students, I allow up to three rounds for each of five assignments; in my business course, with a ceiling of thirty, I limit it to two rounds for each of four assignments. My first set of feedback is very rigorous, and usually runs from a page to a-page-and-half per student; subsequent responses are generally somewhat shorter, although they maintain the character of back-and-forth conversational flow.

6. Student Performance and Student Feedback

Over the past four years, 131 students have completed my courses for degree credit. Of these, 115 (87.8%) have used the provisional marking option at least once. Twenty-six (19.8%) have used it on every assignment. This latter group have raised their grades by an average of 10.6 percentage points. My opening statement to my students is that there is no reason that they should not be able to achieve a very respectable grade in these courses, and that if they do, they can be justly proud of the outcome, knowing that they will have earned every mark. This is decidedly not an easy route to an A+. Rather, it is a demanding process that requires students to really think. A student’s submission of a response does not guarantee a grade increase.

I would argue resoundingly that this is not an instance of grade inflation. On the contrary, it is a system that sets a high standard, invites active student engagement, and encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning. They decide how far to push themselves, and my role is to support and challenge them in this process.

Student reactions are, for the most part, very positive. A few resent the extra work that it entails, even although that is at their discretion. Those who really “get it” soon come to see that this isn’t just about a chance to improve their GPA. They tell me that they feel freed from having to guess what I’m looking for, and can tackle the assignments in the way that best suits their learning needs. If they veer off track, they know that they have a chance to go back and try again without penalty. And for those who are really ready to go the distance, there is enormous benefit in this one-on-one tutorial; we’re able to tackle issues in this forum that it would be awkward or impractical

to address in the larger group. I've even had students continue this e-mail dialogue with me out of pure interest after they've maxed out their mark!

Students appreciate the time and effort that this process takes on both our parts, and are quick to acknowledge the greater depth of content mastery and self-insight with which they emerge. Among their end-of-course comments are these: "You were doing exactly what any great teacher would do: you were stretching my learning, letting me tease things out in my mind...you were expanding my thinking and learning." "I have learned more than I ever could have imagined in this course over such a short period." "I wish to thank you for making me reach inside of myself, and beyond myself." "We're impressed by the length and probing nature of your replies, and what they elicit from us." "My engagement was total." "I really believe that the growing will continue from this day to the end of my time. I can't thank you enough for that."

7. Growth as an Educator

From my vantage point as an adult educator, this approach helps me to gain insight into each student's thought processes, and to support and challenge each learner as an individual. As part of the bargain, it constantly stretches my own thinking and challenges me every step of the way; my feet, too, are held to the fire! It is a demanding discipline for both learner and teacher, and requires careful thought, focused attention, and the capacity to engage constructively with each person at whatever point they may be in their learning journey. I offer real-life examples, share my own struggles with controversial issues in the field of study, point out themes or contradictions that I see emerging in their work, and suggest resources for further reading, tailored to their interests. I have to be prepared to bring all of who I am to this interaction.

In this dance, both learner and teacher are challenged to move towards Jack Mezirow's (1991) vision of a developmentally advanced meaning perspective:

- ❖ more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative of experience...
- ❖ free from both external and internal coercion
- ❖ open to other perspectives and points of view
- ❖ accepting of others as equal participants in discourse
- ❖ objective and rational in assessing contending arguments and evidence
- ❖ critically reflective of presuppositions and their source and consequences (p. 78).

Without question, development feedback is time-consuming and labour-intensive. During the semester, I sometimes feel shackled to my laptop, as e-mails fly back and forth. I would find it difficult to do this with larger classes without overburdening myself. But at the end of the day, having tasted the fruits of this approach, I wouldn't do it any other way.

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