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Feedback in an Age of Efficiency

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When feedback is reduced to a number, teachers must find ways to provide more meaningful and nuanced responses.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"It's my father."

"What is wrong with your father?"

"Nothing's wrong with him—I'm just angry at him."

"Why do you say you are angry at him?"

A half-century ago, a conversation like this unfolded on a college campus. This may not seem extraordinary, but given the circumstances, it was. This particular interaction occurred in a computer lab. And the "person" asking the questions was a computer named ELIZA.

Joseph Weizenbaum, a professor at MIT, designed ELIZA in 1964 as an experiment in artificial intelligence. ELIZA was constructed with a library of ready-made questions that could be summoned at a moment's notice in response to human input. When users' statements fell outside the program's scripting, ELIZA could adapt by rephrasing the words into a question that demanded further elaboration. Thus, if someone confessed, "I'm angry at my father," ELIZA could respond, "Why do you say you are angry at your father?"—and the "conversation" could continue.

ELIZA was a sensation in the computer science community, but Weizenbaum's own reaction was tempered by his observations of how people interacted with his invention. According to Weizenbaum (1984), people seemed to forget that the machine couldn't really understand them. His secretary, for example, caught herself disclosing more and more personal information in response to ELIZA's probing questions. Although the calculated feedback of the computer imitated genuine human response, it lacked the intention and spontaneity of true interpersonal interaction.

The ELIZA project illustrates how easy it is to conflate technical feedback with meaningful response. This has significant implications in the classroom—especially in the 21st century, when we have rubrics to justify student grades, online services to analyze student writing, classroom management software to calculate student progress, and standardized tests to compare student performance. The digital age has enabled us to make just about every instructional teacher-student interaction quantifiable, systematic, and scalable.

But at what cost? Has the desire for increased efficiency and objectivity in assessment conditioned teachers, students, and parents to be satisfied with technical calculations that lack the nuance of meaningful human feedback? And if so, how might teachers begin restoring personal, dialectical response to student learning?

The Cult of Efficiency

Originating in the early days of audio recording and amplification, the term *feedback* referred to the abrasive mechanical impulse that sounded when a live microphone—or feed—was set incorrectly. It is significant that this term has become the principal word we use to discuss response to student work. Just as audio feedback was largely a nonspecific, technical means of indicating error, feedback in the classroom has gradually become more mechanical, more abstract, and more about pointing out mistakes than nurturing growth.

Throughout history, it has been generally understood that a teacher's role is to provide meaningful responses to help guide students toward greater understanding. Socrates accomplished this through dialogue; Aristotle researched beside his students so that he could guide them. In the 19th century, as schools began documenting feedback, many professors wrote lengthy narratives to their students each term, commenting on their academic discipline and growth (Durm, 1993).

But as the population swelled in the early 20th century, schools faced increased pressure to find a standardized way to provide feedback. Callahan (1962) called this preoccupation with systematizing every aspect of education "the cult of

efficiency," drawing parallels between the structure of schools and assembly lines in which students are products and teachers are machines. In spite of Callahan's criticism, schools shifted away from nuanced response to student learning and toward the calculated grading that continues to be the most prevalent framework for classroom feedback today (Newkirk, 2009; Tchudi, 1997; Wilson, 2006).

This shift not only changes the form feedback takes, but also alters the way students approach their learning. Kohn (1999) argues that when we imply that the goal of learning is the reward of a good grade rather than the learning itself, students begin to measure their success by comparing their status with others' rather than monitoring their own growth. And it is not only the students who have adopted this mind-set. Parents—many of whom were products of the "cult of efficiency" themselves—are often satisfied to receive feedback about their child's learning in the form of one-dimensional calculations on a report card, even though such abstractions say little about their child's growth.

Consider the recent case of a school seeking to improve the quality of feedback it provided to parents and students by using a standards-based report card similar those proposed by Marzano (2000). Even though they could learn far more about their child's performance from these report cards, many parents protested the change. They wanted the familiarity of abstract, conventional grades (Tyre, 2010). Such accounts confirm Olsen's (1995) indictment that "letter grades have acquired an almost cult-like importance in American schools" (p. 24).

The increased use of online services that enable parents and students to check their quantified scores daily has compounded the problem. I've seen a marked difference in students' attitudes toward grades since our school adopted such a system. On days when I input grades, I am usually inundated with student questions about why they lost a point or whether they can get extra credit. These comments are always framed around numbers—never around knowledge or understanding.

Systems strictly based on numerical calculation emphasize to students that their work is only as valuable as the number assigned to it. They also suggest that anything that is not graded is not worth doing. And yet, even though the feedback does not provide a clear picture of who a student is in the classroom, many parents with whom I interact speak highly of the feedback such systems provide.

When the entirety of the education system seems to favor the systematic over the personal, what hope is there for those teachers who wish to provide more personal feedback?

Emphasizing What Matters Most

In his landmark philosophical work on the nature of human relations, Martin Buber (1970) distinguishes between two forms of human interaction—the "I-It" relationship and the "I-Thou" relationship. When we categorize and classify a person into abstract constraints, we dehumanize him or her, creating an "I-It" relationship. In contrast, when we acknowledge the nuance and complexity of the other person, we enter into an "I-Thou" relationship.

Evaluating student progress through rigid rubrics and standardized assessments leaves little room for teachers to provide the personal, dialectical feedback required for "I-Thou" relationships. But we can find ways to work within the constraints of the system to affirm the things that matter most in the classroom. Here are a few ways that we can begin to reorient our classrooms toward personal learning and growth.

Make time for meaningful discussion about student work.

Class time frequently occupied with conversations about points, grades, and extra credit implies to students that these are the metrics by which success is measured. On the other hand, time spent on meaningful discussions about learning provides a different measurement. There is a great deal of value in setting aside time to speak with students one-on-one about the course, their work, their strengths and weaknesses, and the things that confuse and interest them. It is important that each student recognizes that the classroom would be a different place if he or she were not there, that his or her ideas and contributions matter, and that the teacher's role is to help all students learn—not to rank and sort them.

Although face-to-face conversations are ideal for this sort of interaction, it can be hard to have regular conferences with every student. One way around this is to have students use writing to engage in reflective dialogue with teachers. Kirby and Kuykendall (1991) use a written "audit," in which students write freely in response to a few questions related to their learning. Using this model, at the end of a week, a teacher might ask: What held your interest? What was confusing? What questions or connections did you consider? What did you add to the classroom environment? What goals do you have for next week?

To keep the conversation from being one-sided, the teacher should respond to the student's writing by answering queries, posing new questions, providing direction, offering encouragement, and acknowledging challenges. When such written dialogues are conducted with some regularity, meaningful discourse about learning might replace conversation about grades as a foundation of the classroom community.

Value qualitative behaviors over quantitative scores.

There is a misconception among kids that high grades are the mark of a good student. Teachers often reinforce this misconception by allowing bright students to coast through class and still receive higher grades than their classmates who work diligently, participate actively, and show tremendous growth. One way to take the focus off numerical achievement is to engage students in inquiry about the qualitative behaviors of learning.

Elbow (2000) provides an outline that teachers who are required to submit grades can use to weave qualitative feedback and evaluation into their courses. To earn an A in his writing class, students are required to demonstrate specific learning behaviors, such as conferring with a classmate about writing outside the course, revising independent writing, reflecting on contributions to the classroom community, and seeking publication for written work.

These behaviors reflect what Elbow deems most important in a college-level writing student, but teachers at other levels could list qualities of effective scholarship that align with their students' age and development. Or better yet, teachers and students could generate such a list together—opening up classwide conversation about the nature of meaningful scholarship. If the class agrees that independent reading is an important behavior to develop, the teacher could require that any student who wishes to earn an A must read at least one book per month. Although such a mandate will not turn all students into successful independent readers overnight, it at least shifts the focus away from grades based on numerical calculation to grades based on decisions students make.

Acknowledge student growth over time.

Students tend to view their work on an assignment-by-assignment basis. Their work habits are governed by the tyranny of the urgent, and they do not always see their growth as readers, writers, and thinkers. They tend to trace their progress based only on the numerical grades they receive, and these grades do not always reflect the profound changes they undergo throughout a given year.

To help students see their growth as learners, educators must look beyond the context of a given assignment and find signs of improvement. When so many students view themselves as "closed and finite systems," an important role of teacher feedback is to help them see that they are progressing (Gustavson, 2007, p. 159).

Providing this sort of feedback requires teachers to distinguish between "marking for error" and "responding to ideas." The former is a mechanical response, and as such it is easier and far more common in classrooms. The latter, however, demands that a teacher be familiar enough with individual students' work to see not only the places where they can grow but also the places where they have avoided the errors they have made in the past. By noticing these details and pointing them out to individuals, teachers are able to provide students with specific evidence of their growth and encourage them to continue cultivating and refining their abilities.

Reframing the Conversation

Just as Weizenbaum's test subjects became conditioned to accept ELIZA's scripted replies as a replacement for substantial human response, many of our students and their parents have become accustomed to mechanical feedback in our schools. Although we cannot change the system overnight, it is possible to create space for nuanced human response in our classrooms.

By shifting our attention from categorizing, sorting, and organizing students on the basis of falsely objective criteria, we can reframe our classrooms around meaningful discussions about learning. In an education system that often views students as abstracted data points, teachers are in a position to see students as the individuals they are and to give them the individual feedback they need.

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