Improving peer feedback with Public Critique

February 8, 2013   [assessment](http://www.learningspy.co.uk/category/assessment/), [Featured](http://www.learningspy.co.uk/category/featured/), [learning](http://www.learningspy.co.uk/category/learning/)   [38 Comments](http://www.learningspy.co.uk/assessment/improving-peer-feedback-with-public-critique/#comments)



So, how much of the feedback students get do you think comes from their peers?

I’m not talking about feedback on their choice of trainers or on their ability to wear a hoodie with dash and élan, I’m talking about classroom feedback on their learning.

So, go on; how much? Most teachers when asked to guess hazard something along the lines of 10-20%. In fact, according to research undertaken by Graham Nuthall\*, the actual figure is more like 80%.

And of that, 80% is, apparently, wrong.

This leaves us with something of a problem. Whether we encourage it or not, whether we’re aware of it or not, students are continually giving each other erroneous feedback on their work. If this alarms you as much as it does me we have a limited number of choices; we can either make them work in absolute silence and stand over them with a rolled up newspaper ready to beat the slightest misapprehension into submission, or we can try to harness the fact that peer feedback is so prevalent and work to improve its accuracy. We can of course do neither of these things but that will result in perpetuating an awful lot of misinformation and misunderstanding, and on balance, I cannot recommend this course.

And even when students’ feedback isn’t wrong, it can be pretty bland and meaningless. We’ve all had students peer assess work which gems like ‘make it neater’ and ‘do more’ which, while possibly helpful will have zero impact on their chum’s ability to improve. Clearly we can give them clear, focussed success criteria to inform their feedback but while this *may* mean they make better comments in formal peer assessment, it has little traction on all the informal feedback flying around.

So, what to do?

Well, along with many other teachers up and down the land I’m fortunate to have found out about and read Ron Berger’s impassioned plea for ‘beautiful work’, [The Ethic of Excellence](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0325005966/theleaspy-21). In it he lays out his manifesto for creating a culture of craftsmanship in schools, part of which is his insistence that if work isn’t perfect, it isn’t finished. A big part of this is that students need to get used to drafting and redrafting their work with regular Public Critique sessions where students offer each other advice and guidance on how to improve their work. Berger explains the process to bunch of primary kids using a lovely visual example in the following clip:

As you can see, this is great for demonstrating progress and encouraging resilience. The other huge win is that, if properly modelled, it can have a resounding impact on students’ ability to give each other useful feedback.

Berger outlines a number of principles he feels are essential for getting the critique process right:

1. Feedback should be kind, helpful and specific.
2. It should be hard on content but soft on people
3. All students need the opportunity to step up and share their thoughts and then step back and let others have their turn.



Critique protocols

Being a tinkerer by nature, I can never just leave these ideas entirely alone and have polluted the purity of Ron’s message with the following advice:

**Kind (but honest)**

It’s all very well for feedback to be kind but this is something most students are already a bit too comfortable with. They will happily festoon their feedback with smiley faces, kisses and other mitigations all of which ensure that they’re so busy being inoffensive that nothing of value gets said. So feedback needs to be kind, but *honest*. It helps students to be ‘kind, but honest’ by focusing them on the work, not on the student. They should depersonalise their comments by avoiding statements like ‘you haven’t…’ and rephrasing as ‘it should have…’ Phrasing advice in the form of a question is the master skill for making feedback ‘kind, but honest’ – because questions are much less threatening than statements ,they’re much easier to hear and then act on.

**Helpful (so that)**

I’m very keen on teachers (and students) explaining why our instructions should be acted on. To this end I’ve found it helpful to insist that students should take the trouble to explain why their advice is helpful by adding a ‘so that’ on to whatever it was they were suggesting. This might result in a comment along the lines of ‘begin the first sentence with an adverb *so that* it makes more impact and your sentences are more varied’. If you can’t see how your feedback will help improve the work, don’t give it.

This idea is synthesised (pinched) from[Zoë Elder’s advice on constructing learning outcomes](http://fullonlearning.com/2012/10/01/marginal-gains-so-that-squeezing-learning-out-of-los-pt-2/).

**Specific (be precise)**

The more precise feedback is, the easier it is to act on. I tell students to zoom in on details and offer specific advice for improving these. They should be making suggestions along the lines of, “Can you think of some alternatives for the word ‘weird’?” or, “Can you think of something else the writer might have meant by the word ‘cold’?” When feedback is as specific as this it’s almost impossible not to act on it.

This all requires effort. Embedding a culture where students give each other high quality feedback informally will not happen by itself or because you wish it to be so. In my limited experience I’ve found that some groups are better at it than others but all groups require persistence to get it right.

The start of the journey is to use Guided Critique sessions. In these I would model the critique process by focusing on a small number of students and encouraging all members of the class to ‘step up’ to offer critique and ‘step back’ so that everyone gets a say. This is vital if you want to build affiliation within your classroom and it makes the process safe. Most importantly maybe, as a teacher I can also engage in meta critique by discussing whether comments are conforming to the critique protocols.



Gallery Critique

From there, we should aim to get classes using Gallery Critique. This is where students lay out their drafts for each other to look out and spend a lesson, or part of a lesson, commenting kindly, helpfully and specifically on each others’ work. I’ve found that it pays to give students a fair bit of warning about these sessions as displaying their work before they’re ready can be damaging on some students’ fragile egos. But the benefit is immense; most students immediately begin to take more pride in their work when they know the whole class will be scrutinising it. I have had some students who are reluctant to take part in the process at first and have found it easier to let them wait until they see the benefits. It’s normally at the second Gallery Critique session that the progress of some becomes truly evident. Those that haven’t been trying or who feel ashamed of what they’ve produced start to see the point in making effort and learn to see that making mistakes is just part of the process of creating ‘beautiful work’. For any kind of written work, I would heartily recommend that [Slow Writing](http://learningspy.co.uk/2012/05/12/how-to-improve-writing/) be part of this process.

The final stage and the point at which we all want to end up is the point at which Critique becomes informal. I start to embed this by asking a class to offer each other critique at various points during lessons and float round monitoring that all is well. Eventually, if you persevere you’ll be rewarded by hearing this happening without you directing it. These are the golden moments which we teach for and some of my classes have become wonderful at supporting each other through the process of mastering skills and creating high quality products.

Like most great teaching, this is incredibly simple, but it ain’t easy. You will get it wrong along the way and, if you’re anything like me, some of your mistakes will be spectacular. But, if you believe it’s worth doing; if you persevere; and if you’re determined it will pay dividends.

**Potential pitfalls**

Here’s an FAQ of the sort of stuff I field from teachers anxious to avoid the pitfalls:

Q: How do you manage a mixed ability class where less able students are expected to critique more able students’ work?

A: Manage Gallery Critique so that the weakest students do the rounds with you as teacher’s assistants; point out to them how and why you’re critiquing and concentrate on those students whose work is ‘just out of reach’ and explain how they might emulate it. Other students might need critique stems to help them make meaningful comments. I sometimes give out pro formas, sometime I focus them on the [though stems](http://learningspy.co.uk/2012/12/29/developing-oracy-its-talkin-time-2/%22%20%5Co%20%22Developing%20oracy%3A%20it%E2%80%99s%20talkin%E2%80%99%20time%21) on my classroom wall. In more informal critique sessions it all depends on your seating plan; think carefully about giving students critique partners whom they will benefit from working with.

Q: What happens with poor behaved, demotivated students? How do you make them take part and not ruin it for others?

A: I don’t. I encourage them to take part of course, but I wait for them to be ready. In my Year 9 class I initially had 3 reluctant class members who would share their work and weren’t prepared to ‘step up’ to offer kind, helpful and specific critique. (It’s important to come down hard on anyone deliberately offering critique which does not meet these requirements ) As a class we picked them off one by one; they quickly started to see the benefits and felt they were very much on the outside of the classroom culture we were establishing. One boy took two months before he started to give way and still has times where he choose not to take part but this is so much better than he might have been in a different classroom environment.

Q: Some higher ability students struggle to accept feedback from their peers – how should you approach this?

A: By making your own work part of the critique process. Model accepting criticism and invest time affirming the feedback of other students which is not being ‘received’. Normally, students refuse to act on feedback when it’s perceived as not kind enough or not helpful enough. Make sure comments are ‘soft on people’ and that the ‘so that’ has been clearly articulated: without this some students may not see the point. Sometimes it’s our job to help bridge the communication gap by rewording and smoothing. We also need to be aware of students with fixed mindsets and help them to take a more ‘growth’ approach to feedback.

Q: What happens when a student has ‘done everything’ and other students can’t think of any feedback to move them on?

A: Ha! That old chestnut! Normally this is my fault because I won’t have pitched the work high enough and my success criteria might not be clear enough. In this case I revert to Hattie’s advice:

*A teacher’s job is not to make work easy. It is to make it difficult. If you are not challenged, you do not make mistakes. If you do not make mistakes, feedback is useless.*

*Visible Learning*

And then I ask how I can get them to make more mistakes. Works a treat.

**Things I wish I knew before I started**

1. Establish the right culture first. This sounds obvious but when taking over a tricky class in September, put the groundwork in before launching into gallery critique sessions – feedback will be unkind, unhelpful and vague!
2. Go over the rules… every single time. As soon as you assume they’ve got it, they’ll prove they haven’t.
3. Aim for perfection and insist on quality. Berger says, “if it isn’t perfect, it isn’t finished.” High expectations are transformational but if your insistence on perfection is too inflexible, students can become discouraged
4. Critique a variety of media – don’t only focus on written work – apply critique to presentations as well.
5. Only critique work when it is ready – giving clear deadlines works really well: “We will having a gallery critique session next Wednesday. Make sure your work is ready to critique.”

Now, I’m afraid I’m not really adding much to the debate or saying anything new or exciting; this post really just collects together my thinking on a teaching tool that I’ve been experimenting with in earnest since September The final word, however, must go to the master of Critique, Alan Partridge:

\*Nuthall (now sadly deceased) documents his fascinating findings in, [The Hidden Lives of Learners](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1877398241/theleaspy-21).