Chapter Sixteen

Peer Review

There is one surefire way to make a room of students roll their eyes—assign them to complete a peer review of writing. Like no other assigned task, peer review is met with cynicism and scorn for reasons that make a lot of sense. Much of the current cohort of college and graduate students has suffered through poorly designed high school and college peer-review assignments where, as reviewers, they did not know what to offer their peers, and as reviewees they received an awkward mix of bland and silly pats on the head ("great topic!") and harshly worded, demeaning criticisms ("you left me totally confused.").

Not only undergraduates suffer under peer-review. Faculty and graduate students seeking to publish their work in academic journals endure formal peer review as well, usually with the same cynicism and anxiety. Each can recount painful tales of mistreatment, misunderstanding, and glacially slow turn-around times. The stakes are higher for these senior and junior professionals who have likely spent many more months on a project than the typical undergraduate. But the same problems arise where reviewers provide them often useless, sometimes vicious, feedback that leads to a manuscript rejection or to sometimes conflicting advice on how to improve an invited revision.

On many occasions, when I have requested a formal peer review of my writing, I have been known to avoid opening the email or letter for a few days, trying to control when I will receive the happy or sad news, timing its anticipated impact on the rest of my day. The emotions run high for me, even when a close friend and colleague returns a marked-up manuscript, because I expect the worst. Never underestimate the degree to which our emotions are wrapped up in peer review, whatever our criticism may be of the process after having gone through some negative experiences with it.

These concerns notwithstanding, I believe the peer-review process in the classroom or in journals can be done well, and when done well, promises to improve our writing. Having received both helpful and awful peer reviews, and having reviewed some excellent and awful manuscripts, I have developed some practices and strategies for giving and receiving effective peer review. I hope you will find them helpful.

Giving a Review

Your effort to help another author is in fact a generous act. Your time is valuable and your insights are valuable, even if you are not an expert in whatever topic you are reading about. Your review of others is a gift, as long as you treat it as such.

When someone asks you for input (or if the professor asks for them by assigning you the task), they are likely to experience some of the emotions mentioned previously. As a result of this asking, giving, and receiving, your provision of a review is really a moral or ethical act, and it is wise to approach it with that kind of gravity. It is not neutral.

As with other kinds of communication, the big questions about how to proceed are related to familiar questions we think about in other settings: what do I say, how do I say, and how much should I say?

What to Say

Years ago a marriage counselor suggested to me a practice for improving communication. He told me to try, during those difficult conversations when making a decision together, or evaluating the dynamics of our marriage, repeating back to my wife what I just heard her say. For example, Angela says to me, "It infuriates me when we get home, you ask about my day, but then when we start talking, you begin sorting through the mail and checking your phone for messages." I could defensively turn this into a criticism of her summary of the facts ("I don't always do it," "Sometimes I'm expecting an important message," "What about the time when . . . ?"). But that leads of course to an argument and to devaluing what she has observed and how it impacts her. If I'm serious about showing I just heard what she said, I could say, "Let me see if I'm hearing you right—you feel like I say I'm interested in how you're doing but then I do stuff which sends a different message, that I'm more interested in other things." "Yes," she says, and we are now able to deal with that issue with a further conversation.

I find that this same approach has worked very well in reviewing other people's writing—first saying back to them in my words what I see them

saying or explaining in the paper. Articulating back to the author what you understand the argument to be is an important first step for demonstrating that you actually listened to his or her writing. Be careful. It is tempting to include criticism at this point, but that is not helpful. Imagine if my earlier response to Angela was, "Allegedly, I listen poorly and you think I am a jerk." She didn't say I was a jerk, nor is it time to determine whether her facts are accurate or not. Instead, it is time to only say, "Here is what, on its face, you say that you are experiencing." So when I review a student's or professor's manuscript, I also write back in the opening lines a restatement of the research question, method, and findings. For example, "The author seeks to demonstrate how the stigma experienced by welfare recipients is reduced or not by the way social service offices treat them. The author uses interview data with clients to explore how different customer-service techniques increase or decrease clients' feelings of shame and frustration." Notice that I have not said yet whether they were successful in answering their question, nor whether it is a good question to ask, nor whether I was convinced of their answer. But they know that I understand what they have been seeking to accomplish.

Stating the question and approach to answering it in a way that does not overinterpret it will challenge you as a reviewer. It is so much easier to say, "The authors offer weak evidence from a small number of client interviews to illustrate what they say are better or worse approaches by social service offices." This loaded set of criticisms may be what you ultimately want to say by the end but it would help first for them to hear that you actually understood the core question and were prepared to be convinced by the study. Then in subsequent paragraphs, you may highlight the weaknesses and strengths you observed in the project.

Unless a project is just downright awful, it is possible to identify what works well in the paper. Admittedly, there are some very awful papers out there, but it is possible to point out successes that you can identify along several dimensions. A nonexhaustive list of items to comment upon may help:

- The importance of the question
- The effective linkage of the question to the literature and/or to existing theory
- The structure and content of the literature review and its effectiveness in framing or justifying
- The research question
- The strength of the research design (data source, how data was collected, measurement sophistication, and power of and appropriateness of analytical technique)
- The overall clarity of the presentation of results and effective discussion of them

Note: In a class setting, your instructor should advise you on what qualities of the paper to evaluate. If you are evaluating early drafts, for example, you should not be evaluating grammar and punctuation, but rather focus attention on the flow of the paper. If you are evaluating late-process, nearly final drafts, then perhaps you will turn attention to stylistic and professional quality issues in the writing.

How to Say It

Recalling that you are engaged in a generous act and a moral act, take seriously the tone of your review. Words really matter here because the reviewee cannot hear your tone of voice, but the words you choose certainly set that tone. The tone you strike in your review communicates much about your attitude toward the writer. In a classroom setting for peer review, the goal is likely to be one of mutual benefit and help. So in this situation, you likely will want to communicate a collegial attitude of camaraderie and assistance. If you are reviewing a paper for publication, you may have to be less supportive because, in the end, you have to defend why you are perhaps suggesting that the paper be rejected from the journal.

Even in high-stakes situations where you may have to be very critical, there are ways to communicate generously and respectfully. In the past 15 years, I have submitted dozens of manuscripts for review and have received a strikingly broad array of responses, sometimes with very different evaluations of the same manuscript. Some reviewers have told me that parts of my paper were "lame" or "obtuse," accused me of committing "fatal" errors or of using "irritating" style, describing my manuscript using adjectives that I can still recall verbatim after all these years. The way they said it was unnecessarily harsh, even if it was sometimes true. With a little more attention to their word choice, they could have communicated their concerns without displaying disrespect. I suspect that when peer review is done anonymously, reviewers feel freer to say things harshly than they would if their name were attached to the review.

One of the great insights of the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism is the observation that human beings have the ability to imagine what others are thinking of a situation. This ability makes it possible to do unto others as we would have them do to us. Applying these insights to our reviewing of others' writing is useful. We can imagine how they will receive our input and how they will perceive us as we provide it. Using this capacity to take the role of the other gives us the ability to communicate effectively, generously, and professionally.

How Much You Say

Students are often cynical about peer review because the feedback they have received in the past has been so brief that it was clear to them that the reviewer did not care very much about the process. Reviews that are too short imply disengagement, disrespect, and/or dismissiveness. After working for many hours on a paper, you would like to know that the reader actually took some modest but nonnegligible amount of time to formulate some thoughts and reactions to the paper. On a couple occasions, I have submitted a 30-page manuscript to a journal after working on it for six months and received back a five-sentence paragraph that gave the impression that the reviewer hastily dismissed the paper and made no effort to identify its strengths and weaknesses. (I'm pretty sure these papers were not wholly without merit since each of them was eventually published in respected journals.) Similarly, in the class setting, the reviewee can only guess how much time the reviewer spent reading the paper. But a detailed, thoughtful review of a couple pages (single-spaced), with some specific examples, makes it clear that the reviewer really thought about it and sought to promote an improved paper rather than simply trying to get the review process over with.

Sometimes, reviewers make vague or foolish suggestions, failing to stop and think about what the reviewer is realistically supposed to do with these suggestions. Being specific is helpful; being vague or off the cuff is never helpful. For example, you may wish to tell the author that the measure of education in a paper has some measurement problems. You could say, "On Page 7 the author indicates an interest in measuring educational achievement, but on Page 10 the measure only distinguishes between college attendance or not, which does not . . . " It takes a little time to put into words what you mean and to point to what it is in the text that leads to your concern. But it's very tempting to take the shortcut and just say, "get a new measure of education" or "this measure has validity problems" and leave it at that. Such a claim has, on its face, the appearance of a methodological insight, but the vagueness of the suggestion is merely a ruse to hide the reviewer's laziness or own fuzzy thinking about it.

Other reviewers suggest unrealistically ambitious alternatives, such as, "the author should have collected different data." When I have reviewed papers and come to such a conclusion, I have at the least acknowledged the dramatic difficulty of taking this advice (e.g., "The author obviously cannot go back and collect different data, but this lack of clarity about . . . is a serious limitation that keeps the authors from being able to make the claims she or he wants to make."). Notice that even devastatingly bad news can be offered in a way that avoids saying, "You were an idiot."

Receiving a Review

I have already admitted to my somewhat compulsive behaviors of avoiding e-mails and envelopes when I believe they have in them reviews of my work. You may have thicker skin than I do, but I suspect that most students and other writers really do experience a quickened heartbeat when they are receiving input from others. So the first piece of advice about receiving a review is to not read too much into it. Recognize that some reviewers will have completely ignored everything I have said in the previous section, and due to their lack of professionalism, their laziness, or their ineptitude, they may have written mean, foolish, and vague reviews. My experience has been that even these reviews, in spite of their poor word choice or occasional vague suggestions, often contain feedback that is worth taking seriously. Take a deep breath and remember that, as in other kinds of communication, it is not immediately obvious if your feelings of frustration, anger, or despair are the result of your sensitivities or the weak communication skills of the reviewer, or both.

Another helpful response to a review is to annotate it. By this, I mean that I either type or hand-write responses in the margins, identifying which comments I think are reasonable suggestions and which are not, which are evidence of the reader not paying attention and which are evidence that I did not communicate clearly. Recently in a paper that I submitted for review, two reviewers seemed to have some serious doubts about my paper, and said so forcefully. However, as I read their reviews, and wrote down in the margins what I thought they were saying, it became clear that I had led them in the introduction to believe I was going to do one thing, but then the paper did another. So for the next version of the paper, I cleared up my promises in the front part of the paper so that they could not say, "You didn't do what you promised." I did not need to abandon the whole paper or question my analysis—it was a communication problem that became evident only by carefully noting what the reviewers said.

Occasionally, you will find yourself in a situation where you receive conflicting reviews, with one reviewer giving a favorable critique and another treating it rather harshly. Or you may receive specific, but conflicting, suggestions. In a classroom setting, this may happen when the professor or TA gives one kind of advice and a fellow student gives another. Here you have to use good professional judgment. Who do you need to satisfy as your reader? Which suggestion is objectively better, permitting you to tell the truth about what the data or the literature reveal? Who will read it again? This is a case where it is wise to include other writers who can help you make a good decision.

Finally, here is a note about the give-and-take of peer review. Asking others to review your work is to ask for their time and energy, similar to asking them for money or a favor. This request for generosity requires you to provide them a paper that shows some real effort. It is a colossal waste of time, and shows disrespect to the reviewer, to toss together a paper the night before and give it to the reviewer to do much of the heavy lifting reorganizing the paper or developing paragraphs for you. I am a fan of ungraded peer review because it provides the kind of user-feedback that a writer needs without much fear of criticism from a teacher. But some students treat this process as coauthoring, giving the barest bones of a paper to their peer reviewer, in hopes of the reviewer stepping in to invest much in the paper. The same process happens, unfortunately, in the professional peer-review process where half-baked papers are sent to a journal for review, in hopes that anonymous peer reviewers will tell the author how to improve the paper. This sort of dishonoring the reader adds to many people's cynicism about what is really happening when we participate in peer review.

To the extent that you can embrace the value of collegiality, you will be able to give and receive peer review. As with many things in life, our character flaws (laziness, selfishness) and circumstances (overwork, deadlines, responsibilities) together make it challenging to perform as good colleagues with others. Remembering this may help take the sting out of receiving a bad review and just may help us offer high-quality, professional review to others.