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Constructive Peer Evaluations: The Toilet Paper Stuck to My Shoe Lesson

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Abstract

Peer evaluation is a useful learning tool that provides students with a holistic view of their work. However, getting students to provide quality feedback to their peers can be a struggle. The purpose of this activity is to make students realize that constructive criticism, when given tactfully, is the only polite option so that they will share thorough, useful feedback throughout the semester.

Courses

Any course in which peer feedback is utilized. This activity has been especially helpful in public speaking and data communication courses.

Objective

Through this activity, students will realize that constructive criticism, when given tactfully, is polite.

Introduction and Rationale

Peer feedback has long been used in college courses to give students a more holistic view of their work (Nilson, 2003). There are a variety of communication courses that benefit from peer feedback, including public speaking (e.g., feedback on speeches and visual aids), research methods (e.g., feedback on assessments and reports) and visual communication (e.g., feedback on infographics and logo designs). The recent popularity of hybrid classes has allowed for peer reviews to become a more popular instructional tool, using virtual lab time as an opportunity to leave peers feedback through discussion boards (Ertmer et al., 2007). Discussion board peer feedback is typically hosted on a course management system (CMS) such as Blackboard or Moodle. Students often enjoy completing assignments through a CMS because they are internet-based systems that can be accessed at a student's convenience in terms of both time and preferred internet-connective device (Gibbons, 2009). Thus, a CMS is a convenient platform to facilitate peer feedback discussions.

As any instructor who has ever required peer feedback knows, it is difficult to elicit quality peer feedback that includes both praise and constructive criticism. The explanation for this struggle may be found in politeness theory, which teaches us that humans will seek to avoid communication that could be face-threatening to the speaker or receiver (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Brown & Levinson, 1987). In other words, students often hesitate to give peers constructive criticism in order to save face: both their own face, as they may appear unkind, and the face of the student being criticized, who may become embarrassed. Thus, the job of the

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instructor is to reframe constructive feedback as an act of politeness that students should not hesitate to offer.

Quality feedback helps receivers understand how to accomplish their goals (Wiggins, 2012), so when feedback is vague—such as “nice work” or “I didn’t like the topic”—peer feedback is not useful. During semesters in which peer feedback has lacked substance, a short lesson and activity has dramatically changed the quality of feedback. Both are described in the following sections. Note that this is not a lesson that should necessarily be used every semester, but only in response to weak peer feedback.

Preparing the Classroom

This lesson is best implemented immediately after the first round of poor peer feedback has been submitted. Before students arrive to the next class period, the instructor will need to prepare the classroom. The only materials needed are a streamer of toilet paper and piece of tape.



The toilet paper should be placed on the floor, hidden from students—behind a podium is ideal. The toilet paper should lay with a piece of tape connected to it, sticky side up. The tape should overhang enough to stick to something else, as shown in Figure 1. It is important for the toilet paper to be (a) out of student view, (b) somewhere the instructor would naturally walk during class, and (c) easy for the instructor to step on.

The Lesson

The instructor should ensure that students have access to the feedback that they wrote. This may involve handing back authored work or asking them to pull up electronic feedback. If students do not have access to classroom computers, they will likely have their cellular phones present (Tindell & Bohlander, 2012) which they can use to access their CMS discussion boards through a mobile app or browser. Once students have access to their work, the instructor should move about the classroom while reviewing the purpose of peer evaluations (to give peers feedback that will help them meet their goals), emphasizing the usefulness of tactful, constructive criticism. Halfway through the review, the instructor should step on the tape and toilet paper and pace throughout the classroom dragging the toilet paper on their shoe. The instructor should continue with the review as though unaware of the toilet paper. (It may be wise to practice this in front of a live audience before trying it in the classroom, as it can be hard to keep a straight face once the toilet paper comes into play.)

Student Reactions

Once students notice the toilet paper, most will initially either snicker or look to their peers for behavioral cues. A few good classroom citizens will try to subtly get the teacher's attention or step on the paper as the instructor passes by. Once the students inevitably catch on and start laughing, the instructor can stop talking and acknowledge the toilet paper. At this time the instructor should move on to the debriefing.

Debriefing

The instructor should remove the toilet paper and tape it prominently in the classroom as a visual reference for discussion. Students should be asked about the influence the toilet paper had on them as an audience. Such questions may include:

- How well were you able to pay attention to what I was saying once you noticed the toilet paper?
- What did the toilet paper do to your perception of my competence?
- Is it possible to look credible with toilet paper on your shoe?
- Was it kind or unkind when people in this classroom tried to help me get the toilet paper off of my shoe?
- What is more polite: pointing out the toilet paper or leaving me unaware?

The instructor should guide the conversation to the idea that pointing out the toilet paper was an act of kindness intended to boost the instructor's credibility, and that the purpose of peer evaluations is the same. Students can discuss the notion that there are many types of toilet paper in communication: ums in presentations, circular reasoning in arguments, clutter in visual reports, redundant wording in writing, etc. By completing effective peer evaluations that include constructive criticism, students are helping their peers to enhance their peers' competence in future endeavors and to achieve the goals of their assignments.

Activity

After the short lesson, students can be given an opportunity to seek clarity on the feedback process. It is important to avoid setting strict parameters for the content of peer feedback because that may prevent students from giving substantive feedback for fear that it wouldn't fit into a designated box; however, some students may need guidance to get started. If so, instructors might suggest Strang's (2013) schema for peer feedback, which includes an assessment of purpose, content, and style.

Students should then be directed to review the feedback they wrote to ensure that it helps their peer remove all of the toilet paper, so to speak. The teacher should emphasize that the students' job is to share anything their peers should be aware of, and that doing so is really more polite than not pointing out an area of potential improvement. It is rare for a student not to have additional feedback to share during this activity.

Conclusion

In total, this activity takes 15 minutes: 5 minutes to set up the classroom, 5 minutes for the lesson, and 5 minutes for the activity. Despite being a very brief lesson and activity, it is

productive. The activity has been less effective when used *before* the first round of peer feedback; it seems to be most fruitful when students have already struggled with what to share with their peers. Overall, though, the outcome of these 15 minutes of work is evidence that students have reframed their understanding of peer feedback: sharing ways to help their peers save face in future assignments, rather than threatening face by being rude.

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