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Making Critique Work

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Like many educators, I introduced critique to my class after reading Ron Berger's manifesto, An Ethic of Excellence. Following Berger's example, I explained to students that critique should be "kind, specific and helpful" (Berger, 2003, p.93). Initially, the feedback they gave each other was kind and specific but not particularly helpful — certainly nothing like the feedback Berger described his students giving to each other. For the most part, my students corrected each other's punctuation and grammar.

From speaking to other teachers in elementary, middle and high schools, I have found this to be a common problem. After trying a number of strategies, from children writing a question that critiquers must answer to modeling what good critique looks like, I found a simple solution: provide children with a checklist detailing what should be in the writing. I give this to the children before they start writing and then again when they are critiquing each others' work. This checklist differs from a rubric because it does not evaluate the piece of writing and there is no sliding scale for success: the writing either has an element or it does not. Equipped with this checklist, every child in the class can look at a peer's work and say what the writer has included, and what is unclear or left out.

The Goals of Critique

Creating the conditions for peer critique to thrive is one of the core principles of my classroom. Without a culture of collaboration and critique, it falls upon teachers to impart knowledge, advise, judge, and guide. This is inefficient, and it creates learners who do not have ownership of their learning. In his conversation with Paulo Freire in *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change,* Myles Horton explains that when we come to an idea ourselves, rather than because an authority has told us, it is far more likely to be retained (Horton, 1990). This sounds ridiculously simple but it is not the way that most people experience school. In a 2013 interview, the actor Daniel Radcliffe (best known for playing Harry Potter) spoke for the majority when he said he didn't do well in school because, in his words, "I am not somebody who will learn best when you tell me to sit down and be quiet and sit still. I learn by talking back and engaging in conversation and walking around." (Hattenstone, 2013). By allowing for many voices to be heard, a culture of critique enables us to begin to build the conditions for this active learning and collaboration. Juli Ruff, a ninth grade humanities teacher at High Tech High explains this well. In her work on using student voices to improve student work, Ruff explains that critique "invites students to take a critical eye to their own and others' work, and puts the student in a place of power, by asserting that his or her opinions and judgment about what makes for quality work matter" (Ruff, 2010 p. 6).

Another reason that critique is a powerful force for improvements in student work is that it allows students to see what their peers are producing. This creates a healthy sense of competition that is not to be underestimated. In fact, the single most useful thing that I can do to improve the quality of writing in my class as it is happening (as opposed to during critique) is to walk around the classroom and read aloud exemplary words or phrases that different students have used.

Sharp-eyed readers will note that in the example above, the teacher is still the arbiter of quality and imparter of knowledge, and when I introduced critique sessions, I found it difficult to step back (and difficult for students when I did so). The trouble was that after nearly two decades of formal education and several years of experience as a teacher, I had internalized schema for the elements of high-quality work that the students had not yet developed. Thus, left to their own devices, they honed in on what they knew (or thought they knew): grammar. As a result, I observed many children leaving critique sessions disappointed - they hadn't received useful feedback, they didn't feel like their peers had noticed what they had done. This wasn't because the students I teach didn't want to critique well, it was because they didn't have the skills to do so. That is where a checklist comes in: it provides a basis for conversation, a starting point and a focus. In his 1993 article, 'Choices for Children' a teacher told Alfie Kohn "I'm in control of putting students in control." Checklists do just that.

Why Checklists?

Within the last two decades, checklists have revolutionized medicine. In The Checklist Manifesto, surgeon Atul Gawande explains how in 2001 Peter Pronovost, a critical care specialist at John Hopkins Hospital, implemented a checklist outlining the steps needed to correctly insert lines into patients in the ICU. He plotted the five steps needed to avoid infection and then authorized nurses to stop doctors if they were skipping a step. In the year after the checklist had been implemented, the ten-day line infection rate went down from 11% to zero. After two years Pronovost and his colleagues estimated that the checklists had saved eight lives and two million dollars. In addition, he found that the checklists "helped with memory recall and clearly set out the minimum number of steps in a process." Moreover, the checklist actually "established a higher standard of baseline performance" (Gawande, 2009, p. 39). The impact of these findings have led to other hospitals around the United States and Europe adopting checklists for patient care.
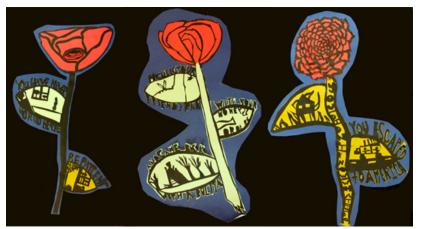
It seems absurd to equate the classroom with an intensive care unit. However, in both situations, a simple checklist has made a dramatic difference to the quality of the work. Similarly to Pronovost's findings in the ICU, I found that checklists provided students with a map for each step of their work and a tool to help them assess the work of others. Furthermore, these checklists improved the work of every student — just as Pronovost had found in the hospital.

In addition to helping students to assess the work of others, checklists have led to greater equality of feedback in the classroom. One of the challenges in a critique session is that some students are much better at it than others. While every student has a valuable contribution to make, many are not yet able to formulate their ideas in a way that can be easily understood by their peers. Checklists provide a structure upon which students can base their responses. Every student, whatever level they are working on, can look at the work of every other student and provide them with clear and useful feedback.

Checklists in the Classroom: The Results

At first, I created checklists that simply contained a series of topics that needed to be included in the work. I introduced my first checklist when students were writing artist statements for paper cuttings (see picture below) that we had produced to tell the story of somebody who immigrated to California. Each group had chosen one person who had come to California and then divided up their journey into separate sections that were worked on individually. The paper cuttings were beautiful but they needed some explanation. After much discussion, the class decided that each group should write one joint artist statement to describe what the paper cuttings showed and how they fit together as well as individual artist statements. The components that students identified were the elements I compiled into the checklist. The finished artist statements were excellent.

(See them all at **http://eeroom15.weebly.com/a-room-of-their-own-online-exhibition.html**) However, this was a lot of work for the students and one group in particular needed a lot of support with the checklist.

I have since moved on to creating separate checklists for each stage of the work. This allows the students to critique using a manageable amount of foci. For example, when my class wrote biographies, the first checklist indicated, paragraph by paragraph, what should be included, the second checklist focused on accuracy and meaningfulness to the subject of the biography, and the third checked for accuracy in writing conventions.

At the end of the project in which the students wrote biographies, I set up an anonymous survey to gain student feedback on various parts of the project. We had completed four critique cycles—the critiques based on the checklists listed above and an initial gallery walk. One question in the survey asked students to rate how the different critique sessions helped them to improve their biographies. Students chose from a Likert scale with the following options: it was extremely useful, it was useful, it wasn't useful, and I didn't do this. There are 24 students in my class and 18 of them completed the survey. Out of those 18, 16 children rated the three checklist critiques as either "useful" or "extremely useful." This is a contrast to the 11 children who rated our first gallery walk critique as "useful" or "extremely useful" (in fact, only 4 out of the 18 found that gallery walk to be "extremely useful").

Creating the Conditions for Success

A good checklist is one that is created with the students (Berger, 2003, p. 70). In order to do this, my class and I pore over models, both professionally written ones and those written by me to find out what makes a good biography, diary entry, newspaper report (or whatever we are writing). We talk about what we like, jot down phrases or words that we want to use and pull out the elements that make that piece of work successful (or not). As Ron Berger points out, using student work as models is particularly effective. Typically, I know the students are ready for a checklist when they are able to answer the question "What makes a good…" on the chart that they read when they come into school in the morning. I then organize these answers into a checklist, expanding on each point or breaking it down as necessary.

In his 2006 article, "The Trouble with Rubrics," Alfie Kohn states that "rubrics are, above all, a tool to promote standardization" through a "narrow criteria for what merits that rating." He then questions whether "standardizing assessment for learners may compromise the learning" (pages 6 - 12). Kohn's criticism of rubrics is predicated on the idea that rubrics are evaluative and prescriptive. On the other hand Ron Berger sees rubrics, not as a way to narrow student work but as a way for us to "try to name features of the work that we feel are making it successful." (Berger, 2009). In An Ethic of Excellence, he explains that projects "begin with a taste of excellence." The teacher and the students work together to "critique and discuss what makes the work powerful" (Berger, 2003, p. 31). These "list(s) of strong dimensions" (Berger, 2009), containing elements of success to guide students to creating powerful pieces of work are what the students create when they reply to my question on the morning message chart. I then organize and expand upon their thoughts to create a checklist.

To keep checklists from becoming, in Kohn's words, "tools to promote standardization," it is important to explain to students that checklists are not rule books. While the first checklist for our biographies stated what information would be useful in each paragraph, writers could choose whether to follow it. In addition, no student was required to alter their work based on the critique—if the critiquers had noticed that information was missing but the writer didn't wish to include it, then that was their decision. However, most children leapt on the critique sheets when they were returned. From scanning down the list of checks and crosses they

quickly identified which areas the critiquers hadn't found in their work and they rushed to the computers to make changes.

Finally, I have found that checklists work best when students work in pairs to read each other's work and then check that all the elements have been included. When children critique individually, they are more likely to be too accommodating or too exacting but critiquing in pairs slows down the process and means that the critiquers must be able to discuss and justify their judgments.

A Mental Map

Providing useful critique is hard. It is hard for adults and it is even harder for children. As a result, loosely structured critique can leave students frustrated, confused and even more reliant on their teacher than they were before. I found that checklists gave students the mental map they need to see the piece of writing that they were critiquing as both a whole and a set of components. It is clear from the student survey responses that the children I teach found that checklists helped them to improve their work and gain relevant feedback. Without a clear structure, the critique process can reinforce inequality between students. With the transparent structure that a checklist provides, critique can become a powerful force where every voice is equal and important.

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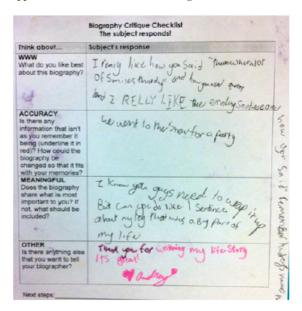Michaels, K. (2012). Clear guidelines, open response: Introducing peer critique, *Unboxed,* 9.

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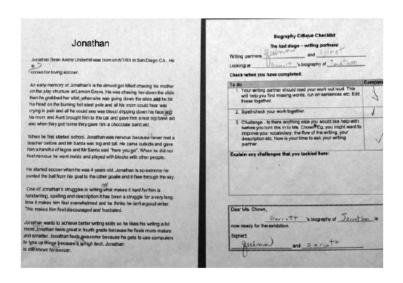**http://eeroom15.weebly.com**

Appendix 1: paragraph by paragraph checklist

Appendix 2: truthfulness and meaningfulness checklist

Appendix 3: writing conventions checklist