Feedback: The Communication of Praise, Criticism, and Advice

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Feedback: The Communication of Praise, Criticism, and Advice, edited by Robbie M. Sutton, Matthew J. Hornsey and Karen M. Douglas, is an interdisciplinary compilation of research on evaluative feedback. As the editors note, research and theory on feedback, rather than having one central locus, is published in a variety of disciplines, and pulling it all together into one volume is no small feat. The contributors to this volume come from management, psychology, education, and communication studies, and it includes empirical studies, theoretical discussions from different perspectives, as well as discussions of a more practical nature.

Although the topics of the 20 content chapters are, like the topic of feedback itself, so wide-ranging as to seem overwhelming at first, the editors and contributors have managed to make this rather dense volume accessible in several ways. First, disciplinary jargon and specialized vocabulary are avoided, making the material digestible to any reader with an interest in feedback, regardless of her/his background. Secondly, the content is divided into five useful categories: (1) General processes and parameters; (2) Feedback across social divides; (3) Feedback in families and...
relationships; (4) Feedback and organizations; and (5) Feedback in helping professions. This organization makes it easy for a reader to either browse the book on a general level or to home in on a particular topic of interest. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the disparate topics and disciplines are woven together by four “guiding questions”:

- What’s at stake when feedback is given?
- What are the main factors that determine the success or failure of feedback?
- Is it possible to identify some general how-to principles on feedback that apply across settings and disciplines?
- How can the science (and art) of feedback be advanced?

These questions, which succinctly encompass what anyone might need to know about feedback, are clearly put forward by the editors in the introductory chapter and are well summarized and discussed in the conclusion, giving a satisfying coherence to what might otherwise have felt like a hodgepodge of topics and contexts.

Although there are no chapters specifically dedicated to feedback as it relates to writers and writing, the information given about feedback in non-writing settings can, with very little stretch of the imagination, easily be put to good use by writers, writers’ groups, or teachers and coaches of writing. Of particular and immediately practical pertinence for writing teachers are: (a) the discussion by Matthew J. Hornsey, Carla Jefferies, and Sarah Esposo of the reduction of defensiveness in feedback events (Chapter 9, “More science than art: Understanding and reducing defensiveness in the face of criticism of groups and cultures”); (b) Karen M. Douglas and Yvonne Skipper’s examination of linguistic variation in feedback (Chapter 6, “Subtle linguistic variation in feedback”); and (c) Soeren Umlauft and Claudia Dalbert’s analysis of how people’s sense of “justice” affects giving/receiving feedback (Chapter 5, “Feedback: A justice motive perspective”). It is also good to be reminded, particularly as writing teachers or facilitators of writing groups, that evaluative feedback is a face-threatening act and that we must always consider how to minimize threats to face (William R. Cupach and Christine L. Carson, Chapter 10, “Criticism through the lens of interpersonal competence”). Even the chapter by Matthew R. Sanders, Trevor G. Mazzucchelli, and Alan Ralph dealing with parenting (Chapter 21, “Promoting parenting competence through a self-regulation approach to feedback”) introduces valuable information on self-regulation that could be of use for individual writers, as well as for writing teachers or coaches. The conclusion by Robbie M. Sutton, Matthew J. Hornsey, and Karen M. Douglas (Chapter 22; “Feedback: Conclusions”), with its exposition of the
four guiding questions, has enough valuable information on its own to merit writing teachers buying this book.

The chapters mentioned above are those that I find to have the most immediate relevance to writing. The other chapters, however, may also have value for those working in the writing area who are specifically interested in the nature of feedback, such as in writing centers and writing conferences between teachers and their students. Christine Chang and William B. Swann, Jr., write in Chapter 3 of “The benefits of self-verifying feedback” while Chapter 4, by Erica G. Hepper and Constantine Sedikides, examines “Self-enhancing feedback” – both topics of relevance to students’ assessment of their own writing. Paul K. Piff and Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton offer a chapter entitled “Mixed signals: Culture and construal in the provision of feedback across group boundaries” (Chapter 7) that can be related to feedback on students’ writing in contexts of cultural difference. Chapter 8, by Kent D. Harber and Kathleen A. Kennedy (“Praising others to affirm one’s self: Egalitarian self-image motive and the positive feedback bias to minorities”) considers the complex dynamics of praise as self- and other-enhancement, giving reminders of the potential for not just negative but also positive bias in giving feedback. Anita L. Vangelisti and Alexa D. Hampel contribute Chapter 11, “Hurtful events as feedback”, giving a reminder that valuable lessons can be learned from negative experiences. Nickola C. Overall, Garth J. O. Fletcher, and Rosabel Tan have researched the important topic of “Feedback processes in intimate relationships: The costs and benefits of partner regulation strategies” (Chapter 12).

A specific section (Section 4) is devoted to “Feedback in organizations.” This section includes a contribution (Chapter 13) by Gary P. Latham, Bonnie Hayden Cheng, and Krista Macpherson offering “Theoretical frameworks for and empirical evidence on providing feedback to employees” that is of potential interest to administrators of writing programs. In Chapter 14, “Not everyone is above average: Providing feedback in formal job performance evaluations,” James L. Farr, Natalia Baytalskaya, and Johanna E. Johnson offer advice about giving feedback as part of performance review that is also relevant to educational contexts. “Feedback and organizations: Individual differences and the social context,” by Paul E. Levy and Darlene J. Thompson (Chapter 15), addresses context and individual differences in feedback, while “Upward communication in organizations: How ingratiating and defensive reasoning impede thoughtful action,” by Dennis Tourish and Naheed Tourish (Chapter 16), raises issues about tailoring messages in the chain of command. “Feedback-seeking behavior in organizations: Research, theory and implications,” contributed by Kathleen De Stobbeleir and Susan Ashford, focuses on the ways in which organizations promote feedback.
Section 5 which is devoted to “Feedback and helping professions,” includes two contributions of particular note for readers of this journal, “Feedback in schools” (Chapter 18, by John Hattie) and “Helping construct desirable identities: An extension of Kelly’s (2000) model of self-concept change” (Chapter 19, by Anita E. Kelly), in addition to “Using feedback to prepare people for health behavior change in medical and public health settings,” by Colleen M. Klatt and Terry A. Kinney.

Although there is an abundance of good information and thorough research, not to mention reader-friendly writing, a disappointment with the book is that it all but ignores the existence of non-evaluative feedback – feedback that is neither “confirmatory [praise] nor corrective [criticism]” (Kurtoglu Hooton, 2008) but is rather a productive engagement that involves no evaluation on the part of the feedback giver. Indeed, the only miniscule nod given to non-evaluation is by Mark R. Leary and Meredith L. Terry in the title of Chapter 2, “Interpersonal Aspects of Receiving Evaluative Feedback.” The inclusion of evaluative here subtly implies that non-evaluative feedback might indeed be a possibility, but no further mention of it is made. It is understandable that a book already this tightly packed might necessarily need to focus on evaluative feedback, rather than encompassing non-evaluative as well; however, a chapter with an overview of non-evaluative possibilities, or at the very least a paragraph or two in the introduction suggesting reading on this topic, would serve to give the book more balance. As it is, the book puts forth the idea that evaluative feedback is feedback, which is, though conventional, a limited view.

Peter Elbow, for example, writes of the value of non-evaluative response to writers and writing (Elbow, 1999). Although he does not call it feedback, Julian Edge’s notion of “cooperative development” (Edge, 2002) is a non-evaluative discourse framework that has, at least in part, a developmental aim that is not inconsistent with the goal of feedback put forth by the editors of this volume: “[bringing to light] information about the gap between the actual and ideal” (p. 1). Since the editors see goal-setting as an important part of feedback events, they might have included “analytic discourse,” as discussed in the action research literature, as a possible model for constructive, non-evaluative feedback (see e.g. Sagor, 2010). Furthermore, since this book indicates that variant forms of feedback are necessary, and since different people respond positively to different types of feedback, surely it ought to be acknowledged that non-evaluative feedback could be one such variant.

The lack of information on non-evaluative possibilities for feedback notwithstanding, this book would be an excellent read for those researching feedback, as well as for those writing teachers hoping to improve feedback in their own settings. The volume covers a lot of ground in a readable and
well-structured way. If one does not have time to read it cover to cover, I would suggest getting an overview by reading the introduction, and especially the conclusion, and from there digging in further as interest or need dictates – keeping in mind, of course, that a reader might also eventually want to dig a bit into the non-evaluative feedback possibilities, to fill that gap in what is otherwise a worthwhile volume.

About the Author

Sarah Haas earned her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Aston University in Birmingham, U. K., and is currently a teaching fellow at Ghent University in Belgium. As part of her research interest in writer development, she also runs writers’ groups and retreats for Ph.D. students in Belgium and several other countries (Denmark, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States). Her interests lie specifically in helping research writers become self-directed, and in researching how this development happens.

References
