

RESEARCH NOTE

Seeing the writer behind the writing: How the Writing Lab influenced my feedback-giving practices

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Working at the Writing Lab changed the way I saw feedback. Before being a writing consultant, I had a very corrective approach to feedback. I would identify and correct every spelling, grammar, and punctuation error, as well as make comments and suggestions on structure and content. At the time, though I did not realise it, this over-focus on feedback most likely stemmed from my own feelings of not being “worthy” enough to give feedback to students, that I did not have enough authority or experience to give someone advice on their writing (hello, Imposter Syndrome, my old friend). I could therefore prove my worthiness by slathering students’ essays with comments and corrections – the more feedback I could give, the worthier I was to give feedback.

The Writing Lab, through its various training sessions, helped me with these feelings of “unworthiness” by imbuing me with the skills and techniques needed to help students, and by enabling me to refine those I already had, and, in so doing, helped build my confidence in applying those skills. It made me realise that I do know what I am talking about, and that I do not have to over-compensate for my insecurity with too much feedback. This was especially brought home to me during a particularly daunting consultation. One day, I was told that I would be consulting Sharifa Daniels about a piece of writing, that is, I had to be her consultant. When I saw that Sharifa was going to be the person I had to consult that day, I became incredibly nervous – how on earth do you consult someone who is *the* writing consultant? But I did, and I could. Despite the impending fear that I would be caught out as not being “good enough” (hello again, Imposter Syndrome), it was like any other consultation – we talked about the piece, we read through it, and we worked out strategies to improve it. Even though she was my boss at the time, she was also still a writer who needed to consult about her work. There were other examples too, such as working with students whose fields are vastly different from my own (for example, working with Economics students, or postgraduate Engineering theses), but even as I worried about being good enough, I realised it is not about me and my fear; it is about helping the writer.

Being a consultant at the Writing Lab also helped me to (re)define what it means to help someone with their writing. What my fearful, insecure self had not realised is that the consequence of correcting every error on a student’s essay and trying to fix everything takes agency away from the student-writer. I was imposing *my* voice onto the writing, and not letting

the student find his/her voice. I focused so much on fixing a piece of writing that I did not see the writer struggling to emerge from the cocoon of writing.

Moreover, working at the Writing Lab made me see the process and the person behind the product – it enabled me to (hopefully) take a more developmental approach to feedback. I now try to focus on developing the writer's voice rather than imposing my idea of what constitutes a good essay. I do not correct every single error anymore. I do not litter students' essays with comments and suggestions that would probably take too long to dissect and turn into useful advice. Instead, I give students specific points, usually about three, that need improvement for the next essay. There are times when it is difficult stopping myself from correcting all the spelling errors, but I try to look for the voice that is attempting to emerge from the writing and to develop that. Spelling and grammar will (usually) sort itself out as time goes by.

Helping someone with their writing, whether it is feedback in the form of a consultation or in the form of comments on an essay, as I have learned, is linked to issues of power and expertise. The feedback-giver is, implicitly, the authority figure because they are the ones to whom someone is coming for advice. I think we often forget that, even if we feel like imposters, our students come to us for advice on writing because they see us as experts. Working at the Writing Lab, and working through my fears of unworthiness, made me aware of the implicit (and often taken-advantage-of) power relations within the act of giving and receiving feedback. The Writing Lab was one of the places where we could create a shared, safe space for developing writers and their writing. I try to recreate that in the one-on-one consultations with my students, and even with the feedback I give.

I feel like it is an understatement to say that working at the Writing Lab changed my approach to feedback for the better.