Learning to Praise

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In *A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway recounts his first meeting with F. Scott Fitzgerald. One night while Hemingway is sitting with friends at the Dingo Bar in Paris, Fitzgerald unexpectedly walks in, introduces himself, and proceeds to talk nonstop about Hemingway’s writing, especially “how great it was.” Hemingway reports that he was embarrassed by Fitzgerald’s lavish compliments—not because he felt flattered by them, but because he and his fellow expatriates “still went under the system, then, that praise to the face was open disgrace” (150).

The distrust of praise among American writers abroad seems to have rubbed off on composition teachers at home. In a 1985 study at Texas A&M University, Sam Dragga analyzed forty freshman essays that had been graded and marked by four randomly chosen and traditionally trained teaching assistants. They wrote a total of 864 comments on the essays, but only 51 of them were comments of praise. This means that 94% of the comments focused on what students had done poorly or incorrectly, only 6% on what had been done well. The same pattern apparently prevails in high school as well. A study of responses by thirty-six secondary English teachers revealed that although 40% of their end-of-paper comments were positive, the percentage of positive marginal comments was a meager .007% (Harris).

The conclusion that college composition teachers find error more attractive than excellence is consistent with a pilot study of my own conducted in 1982 at Miami University (Daiker). I asked twenty-four colleagues to grade and comment on “Easy Street,” a student essay chosen because it combines strength with weakness in both content and style. I asked my colleagues to mark the essay as if it had been submitted in their freshman composition course. They made a total of 378 separate markings or comments on the student essay: 338, or 89.4%, of them cited error or found fault; only 40, or 10.6%, of them were comments of praise. What may make the predominance of correction over commendation even more significant is that during the previous month, a departmental memorandum reported scholarly consensus on two matters of grading: (1) an instructor should not mark every writing error, because students cannot psychologically cope with a deluge of deficiencies; and (2) an instructor should use praise and positive reinforcement as a major teaching strategy.
Scholarship notwithstanding, composition teachers have traditionally withheld praise from papers they have considered less than perfect. A case in point is the well-known “Evaluating a Theme,” published in the Newsletter of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English (Stevens). The issue consists of twenty-five responses—twenty-one by college teachers, four by secondary teachers—to a single composition, and the issue’s popularity carried it through sixteen printings. According to my figures, the proportion of criticism to praise is roughly the same as in the Texas A&M and Miami studies; the Michigan teachers identified nine errors or problems for every instance of praiseworthy writing. Just as important, fifteen of the twenty-five teachers found nothing in the paper deserving of praise. In three of those instances, college professors sufficiently skilled to ferret out thirty flaws apiece in a brief essay could not—or would not—identify a single source of strength. Their wholly negative comments reminded me of a grade-appeal procedure in which I was asked to evaluate eight compositions written for a colleague’s freshman English class. I read the compositions in order, paper one through paper eight, and I read them with increasing despair—not because of what the student had written, but because in responding to a semester’s worth of writing, my colleague had offered not a single word of praise. Not an idea, not an example, not a sentence or clause or phrase or punctuation mark—nothing, apparently, merited a compliment. I began to wonder why the student was appealing only a grade, and I had visions of Bartleby the scrivener at work in a dead-letter office.

Francis Christensen observed a quarter century ago that there are two sharply contrasting points of view toward the teaching of English (Christensen 1962). The first he calls the “school” tradition, the second the “scholarly” tradition. The school tradition, nourished by a view of language that regards all change as decay and degeneration, encourages instructors to respond to student writing primarily by identifying and penalizing error. Because of the school tradition, it has long been common to speak of “correcting” themes. There is no clearer embodiment of the negative and narrowly conformist values of the school tradition than the popular correction chart. The 1985 “Harbrace College Handbook Correction Chart,” to take a recent example of the species, provides seventy-one correction symbols for instructors to use and students to interpret. Why are correction symbols needed? Why write “d” rather than “diction,” or “frag” rather than “This is not a complete sentence because it lacks a verb”? Presumably because instructors find so many errors to mark that not enough time remains for them to use whole words or complete sentences themselves. Significantly, what the correction charts never include is a symbol for approval or praise.

To become teachers of English in a “positive, joyous, creative, and responsible sense,” Christensen urges us to replace the inert, rule-encumbered school tradition with more enlightened scholarly views. For several decades now, composition scholars have reported the value of praise in improving student writing. Paul B. Diederich, senior research associate for the Educational Testing Service, concluded from his research that noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly, and that it is especially important for the less able writers who need all the encouragement they can get (“Measuring” 20).

Since writing is an act of confidence, as Mina Shaughnessy reminds us (85), it is not surprising that the scholarly tradition emphasizes responding with encouragement. Ken Macrorie recommends that we “encourage and encourage, but never falsely” (688). E. D. Hirsch, who believes that written comments may turn out to be “the most effective teaching device of all” (159), agrees that “the best results are likely to be produced by encouragement” (161). For William F. Irmscher, “the psychology of positive reinforcement . . . should be the major resource for every writing teacher” (150). All of these individuals would support Diederich’s statement that “The art of the teacher—at its best—is the reinforcement of good things” (“Praise” 58).

Praise may be especially important for students who have known little encouragement and, in part for that reason, suffer from writing apprehension. Writing apprehension is a measure of anxiety established through the research of John Daly and Michael Miller. According to these researchers, the highly apprehensive writer is one for whom anxiety about writing outweighs the projection of gain from writing. Because they fear writing and its consequences, “high apprehensives” seek to avoid writing situations: they are reluctant to take a stand or to commit themselves to a position. They try to play it safe not only by embracing neutrality, but by saying less: in intense than people with low writing apprehension; that is, they are more reluctant to take a stand or to commit themselves to a position. They try to play it safe not only by embracing neutrality, but by saying less: in response to the same assignment, high apprehensives write fewer words and make fewer statements than low apprehensives (Daly and Miller “Apprehension”; Daly “Effects”; Daly and Shame; Holland). The problem for highly apprehensive writers is circular. Because they anticipate negative consequences, they avoid writing. Yet the avoidance of writing—the lack of practice—leads to further negative consequences: writing of poor quality that receives low grades and unfavorable comments.
One’s attitude toward the act of writing. Daly concludes, clearly affects not only how one writes and how often one writes, but even how others evaluate that writing (Daly “Effects”). What may be equally important—since writing is a powerful and perhaps even unique mode of learning (Emig)—is that by systematically avoiding writing situations, high apprehensives close off opportunities for learning and discovery.

But the cause of writing apprehension may suggest its cure—or at least its treatment. A major cause of writing apprehension is past failure or a perception of past failure; high apprehensives perceive their writing experiences as significantly less successful than low apprehensives. Daly says that the “highly apprehensive writer expects, due to a history of aversive responses, negative evaluations for writing attempts. This expectation likely becomes self-fulfilling” (“Effects” 571). These “aversive responses” include negative comments on assignments and low grades on papers and in writing courses. The connection between writing apprehension and teacher response is supported by the research of Thomas Gee. Working with 139 eleventh graders, Gee found that students whose compositions received either criticism alone or no commentary at all developed significantly more negative attitudes toward writing than students whose compositions received only praise. Moreover, after just four weeks, students who received only negative comments or none at all were writing papers significantly shorter than those of students who were praised.

Since positive reinforcement, or its lack, is so crucial to a student’s level of writing apprehension (Daly and Miller “Studies”), one way of reducing apprehension is by allowing students to experience success with writing. They will experience success, of course, whenever their writing is praised. For students who do not share their writing with others—and high apprehensives fear negative responses from their peers as well as their instructors—the writing teacher is likely their only potential source of praise.

But praise, however beneficial as a remedy for apprehension and as a motivator of student writing, is more easily enjoined than put into practice. Draega notes in his study, for instance, that the four teaching assistants trained in praiseworthy grading all experienced “difficulty in labeling and explaining the desirable characteristics of their students’ writing.” He concludes that teacher training must emphasize explicit criteria for praiseworthy grading. The title of this article implies that praise does not flow readily from the marking pens of writing teachers; it must be learned.

Still, an instructor’s conscious decision to praise the work of students is a promising starting point. Sometimes all that’s needed is a gimmick. My own method is to allow myself nothing but positive comments during an initial reading of a student paper; I lift my pen to write words of praise only. Another practice is to ask, just before moving to another essay, “Have I told Melissa two or three things about her paper that I like?” R. W. Reising’s technique is even more effective: he has developed a grading form that requires him to write one to three positive comments before he even considers noting a weakness (43).

But sometimes what we need is not a gimmick but understanding. We need to understand that what deserves praise is, for a teacher of writing, a relative and not an absolute question. As Ben Jonson says, “I will like and praise some things in a young writer which yet, if he continue in, I cannot but justly hate him for the same” (617). Following relative standards, we are in no sense dishonest or condescending in praising one writer for what we might ignore or criticize in another—even within the same class. Diederich urges us to praise everything a student has done that is “even a little bit above his usual standard” (“Measuring” 20).

After all, we follow relative standards in most of the teaching we do outside the classroom. In helping children learn how to talk or how to color or how to swim, we don’t hold them up to the absolute standards of Demosthenes, van Gogh, or Mark Spitz; we don’t even expect them to match their older friends or siblings. In fact, we praise them for the most modest achievements. I still remember trying to help my six-year-old daughter Pam learn how to hit a softball in our backyard on Withrow Avenue. Although I pitched the ball as gently as I knew how, trying to make it eminently hittable, Pam just could not get her bat on the ball. We tried all sorts of minor adjustments in her batting stance—hands held closer together, feet placed further apart, head turned at a more acute angle—but Pam kept missing. Despite my encouragement, she was losing heart in the enterprise. Finally, on perhaps the thirtieth pitch, Pam did hit the ball—nothing like solid contact, but still a distinctly audible foul tip. Of course, I jumped up and down; of course, I shouted, “Way to go, Pammy!”; and of course, she smiled. I praised her lots more when she managed first a foul pop, then a dribbler to the mound, and then a genuine ground ball. As a high school student, Pam started at first base for the varsity softball team.

Even with relative standards, a commitment to positive reinforcement, and perhaps a gimmick or two, most of us could benefit from some practice in praise. For that purpose, let’s work with an essay written several years ago by a Miami University freshman in response to an open assignment.
Easy Street

The crowd screams and chants, as a bewildered contestant nervously jumps up and down in search of help. Excitedly, Monty Hall comments on the washer and dryer behind box number two in trade for the big curtain where Carol Marroll is standing. The contestant, with glamour and greed in her eyes; wildly picks the curtain. But when raised there stands a 300 pound cow munching on a bail of hay. Embarrassed and sad, the woman slowly sits down.

The old American ideal of hard work and get ahead had traditionally been one followed by many men. But with the arrival of the twentieth century, their seems to be a new way to get ahead. The new American ideal of something for nothing. It seems to have taken the place of honest work. In our popular television game shows, the idea of being able to win prizes and cash by just answering a few simple questions seems to thrill the average American. It is so popular and fascinating that the morning hours are consumed with five to six hours of the programs. The viewer is thrown into a wonderland where everything is free for the taking. The reason for such interest in these programs is that they show life as most of us really wish it be to be-soft, easy, free. Our society now enjoys the simplicities of life, and our television game shows exemplify that.

One of the newest of all American dreams is to win a state lottery. What easier way is there to become a millionaire with such a small investment? The state makes it as easy as just reading a couple of numbers off a card, or scratching away a secret spot. Who hasn’t at least once in their life, dreamed of hitting the big one, and living off the fat the rest of their life; without ever having to work again? Our country clubs, local junior football teams, even our churches have lotteries now thriving on that dream.

In our whole vocabulary their is no word that can command as much attention as the word “free.” It sums up our modern culture and feelings. Advertisers use the word as frequently as possible knowing its strong effect on the public. The idea of giving something away without the consumer having to pay for it has made many a company successful.

The old American ideal seems to have moved over for the new. No longer does a man have to work late or get up early. By just guessing the right tune in five notes; he could be ordering caviar in the morning rather than toast.

When “Easy Street” was evaluated by college instructors, grades ranged from B to F, with C and C- by far the most common. But my colleagues found much to praise even in an essay they rated average or slightly below average in quality. Their comments of praise are categorized below, according to the four levels Nina Ziv used in her study of teacher response: conceptual, structural, sentential, and lexical.

A. Conceptual level.
1. “Your thesis—that the new American ideal is ‘something for nothing’—is strong and clear.”
2. “Your thesis is interesting and clear, and your use of particular, graphic details to support the thesis greatly aids your reader’s understanding. The conversational tone of your paper also helps the reader understand you.”
3. “The content of this paper is interesting & to the point, the essay is fairly well unified, and you show the ability to use effective details.”
4. “There is much that is strong here; your sense of detail is good and your ideas are insightful.”
5. “You have provided some excellent examples which capture the essence of the ‘new’ American ideal.”
6. “Your ideas are brilliant, and the way you have argued your point is convincing. Keep up with original and thought-provoking ways of looking at life, around you.”
7. “I like the scope of your commentary, which moves from the initial, interest-provoking example, to the statement of American ideals in paragraph #2, to the further example—of the state lottery—in paragraph #3.”
8. “You come across as being perceptive and as concerned about an important trend in our culture.”
9. “Your ideas here are strong and clear” (refers to second paragraph).
10. “Your paper has fine unity and some precise illustrations.”

B. Structural level.
1. “The paper is well-organized and well-focused, with some nice paragraph transitions.”
Although these positive comments show that “Easy Street” has much to praise, instructors marking the paper more readily recognized error than they identified strengths, especially on the sentential and lexical levels. For example, many instructors pointed out the dangling modifier in the next-to-last sentence of the first paragraph (“But when raised”), but no one applauded the effective use of appositive adjectives (“Embarrassed and sad”) as modifiers in the following sentence. It seems clear that we have been better trained to spot comma splices and fragments and other syntactic slips than to notice when students take risks: Only one of two dozen evaluators commended the student for “soft, easy, free,” a notable instance of series variation with the coordinating conjunction eliminated. Instructors routinely called attention to the misused semicolon in “By just guessing the right tune in five notes; he could be ordering caviar in the morning rather than toast.” Far fewer heard the interesting sentence rhythms created by the sophisticated use of repetition.

So perhaps we need to go back to school ourselves to learn how to recognize what merits praise in student writing. A good starting point for syntax are the chapters on free modifiers in Notes toward a New Rhetoric (Christensen and Christensen) and in The Writer’s Options (Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg), and the articles on coordination by Winston Weathers and Robert L. Walker. But probably even more useful are sessions at conferences, at department meetings, and at workshops for teaching assistants in which we help each other learn what to praise and how to praise. But, if we listen to students, the “how” may not be all that important. At the same time that students tell us that criticism must be specific to work—a comment like “diction” or “logic” or “awkward” is almost always misunderstood unless explained in detail—they receive even vague compliments like “nice” and “good” and “well written” with gratitude and thanksgiving (Hayes and Daiker). Don Murray once casually remarked at a Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English that one of his favorite responses to student writing begins with the five words “I like the way you.” He told us we could complete the sentence in any way we chose: “I like the way you use dialogue here” or “I like the way you started your paper with a story” or “I like the way you repeated the key word animal in this paragraph.”

In his preface to John Gardner’s On Becoming a Novelist, Raymond Carver recalls his experience as a college freshman in Gardner’s creative writing class at Chico State College. Carver remembers, above all, that Gardner lavished more attention and care on his work than any student had a right to expect. Although Gardner would cross out what he found unacceptable in Carver’s stories and add words and even sentences of his own,
he was always looking to find something to praise. When there was a sentence, a line of dialogue, or a narrative passage that he liked, something that he thought “worked” and moved the story along in some pleasant or unexpected way, he’d write “Nice!” in the margin or else “Good!” And seeing these comments, my heart would lift. (xvt-xvn)

It’s a good bet that genuine praise can lift the hearts, as well as the pens, of the writers who sit in our own classrooms, too.

Works Cited


