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Feedback as Fan Letter

In fourth or fifth grade, I began cutting out syndicated Dave Barry humor columns from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* to mail to my best friend Julia. I don't entirely know why. Julia lived only a few miles away. I saw her in-person—in school or out—nearly every day. Her parents already subscribed to the newspaper, and Julia was already a Dave Barry fan, the one, in fact, who'd turned me on to his jokes. She didn't need my letters; she'd already read his columns. I guess I was lonely, sometimes, living with my dad and grandpa on weekends, which is why I raided my grandfather's discarded newspapers for Barry's musings on Miami, a city which, at that age, I never expected I'd move to in my late twenties even in my wildest musings.

I was never much for fan letters (with the exception of my recent quest for a signed photo from Judi Dench), but I have sent post-mailed letters to friends and relatives throughout my life. As I continue to write letters as an adult, creative writer, and teacher of creative nonfiction, I also recognize that epistolary writing is enjoyable because there are clearly delineated boundaries (a greeting, body, and closing) and an intimate, attentive audience, real or proxy. A letter is a familiar and cozy room.

Let's talk about the genre of fan letters in general, for a minute. Fan letters usually include accolades related to creative accomplishments. They often explain *why* the fan is a fan. Fan letters are self-aware. This is true for any epistolary writing; after all, there's a signature at the end. Lia Purpura writes of the letter as "a space for communion…" (4). In a letter, the writer/narrator is present, not omniscient. There may be a sense of awe in a fan letter, though fan letters are often honest in their criticism. Fan letters tend to be

earnest, not cynical. Fan letters are set in the present; the fan is saying, *I wanted to let you know what I'm thinking about right now.*

The fan letter is a bit different than a regular letter because there isn't necessarily the expectation of a response, only the hope for one. When my grandmother and her sister died a few years ago, the surviving family members found hundreds of handwritten letters saved in shoeboxes. Starting in the 1940s, these letters were utterly quotidian, mentioning a sale on tomatoes at the grocery store, the health conditions of various family members, and, of course, tremendous commentary on the weather.

Fan letters are not so intimate as the letters the World War II generation of our families wrote to each other. If you think about it, a fan letter is more formal because it may be the first interaction a fan has with a celebrity. When we write epistolary feedback to our students, it's not the first interaction we have with them, but we certainly maintain some sense of formality or distance. Writing any kind of letter to a student, however, does have the potential to disrupt the power dynamic of the banking education model because a letter is inherently open to—through it does not necessitate—a response. Through fan letters, we are communicating with students as members of the vast ecosystem of writers.

Responding to students with fan letters requires finding something to commend in each person's work. My background in writing center tutoring taught me that it's possible to identify something admirable in any piece of writing, even if it's just a sentence, an idea, or the choice of a single word. In general, of course, there is much more to laud. And the laudatory outlook is an asset, especially when a student submits a piece that is off-base, unpolished, or, to use a totally subjective metric, "just not very good." For me, the laudatory outlook also removes some of the resentment associated with grading. Instead of fostering a festering grudge toward the pile of student work in front of me, I can reframe the evaluative work of teaching: I get to find gems in every portfolio. They are there if I look for them.

The "compliment sandwich" (feedback bookended by two accolades with a critical comment in between) is an oft-suggested feedback style for beginning instructors. While I think that the compliment sandwich is a useful way for brand new teachers to think about narrative feedback, the compliment sandwich has the capacity to be tinged with contempt for the student writer, the compliments there only to make the critical pill supposedly easier to swallow. And students can see right through it. Take this crowdsourced definition of "compliment sandwich" from the *Urban Dictionary*: "When someone tries to ease the blow of criticism by delivering it between two insincere compliments."

Though creative writing teachers spend time in the classroom talking about how to give and receive critique, it's not entirely our job to teach students how to take criticism; finding confidence through critique is an internal journey related to issues deeper than those addressed in the university classroom. But I do think that we're called to provide *authentic* feedback to students. In *Engaging Ideas*, John C. Bean writes that "Teacher comments are often unintentional examples of first-draft writing—clear to the writer but cryptic and baffling to others" (336). Cryptic, baffling, insincere… The compliment sandwich is useful as one of an array of ways especially new instructors can craft feedback, but I don't know if it should be the formula for *all* of our feedback. It might be more helpful to think about the possibility of narrative feedback as a flexible epistle, especially since letters are another genre of first draft writing. Letters are more organic than the compliment sandwich's one-two punch.

Deliberate noticing encourages students to observe instead of judge. For instance, "I notice that nearly all of your paragraphs start in the same way" or "The information on page two clarified many of the questions I had about your narrator on page one." Asking students to practice deliberate noticing is a way to stay away from the less useful judgements of "I liked it" or "I didn't like this." I think that deliberate noticing is also a way to help students maintain a growth mindset because instead of creating an immediate self-judgement of "I don't get this…it's not my thing" or "I'm just not smart enough to understand," students are simply called to find a place to begin. My own professor Julie Marie Wade often

employs some useful Jorie Graham lines in this kind of situation: "The way things work/is that eventually/ something catches." The way we learn close reading is to begin to search for what catches our attention.

In a society permeated by hyper-competition and a scholastic context that shames creativity, often inadvertently, I also think that teaching students to observe instead of react to what they notice is a way of keeping the internal editor at bay, a practice that's essential in order to accomplish any kind of significant writing, "creative" or not. Learning how to notice is perhaps one of the most valuable gifts we can give our writing students, whether or not they continue a creative writing practice after our class.

The responder's summative letter to the workshop writer is a kind of metacognition. "Here's the bottom line of all those stars and checkmarks and tiny notes," the final letter says. "Let me explain *my* thinking." Whether or not a student's workshop mates take their feedback to heart does not negate the good work a student is doing when they spend time thinking about and articulating their reactions to a piece of writing. For instance, "There seem to be three phases in this narrative" or "Your narrator drew me in and provoked me emotionally. I've identified some of the craft reasons for this, and I want to list them here." A letter is an accessible, low-stakes genre container in which to do high-level metacognition.

We often ask undergraduates in workshops to write short letters at the end of workshop packets with summative comments. Students also typically write down line-level comments, edits, and reactions as they read. These two kinds of written feedback represent two different reader experiences: the in-the-moment experience, and reflections after the fact. Sometimes in the summative comments, students partially redact what they wrote earlier. It's helpful for the writer to have the knowledge of the whole reading experience under her so she can identify patterns, strengths, and pain points in the work.

We are trying to teach our students that learning to write better is an exercise in noticing. We've encountered (and have been) students who say something to the effect of, "If only I could get what's in my brain down on the page." But as Brian Jackson points out in "Metacognition and Mindful Writers" from *Teaching Mindful Writers*, the frustration of the separation between brain and page is simply anxiety.

Engaging in metacognition (which is to say, mindfulness) is one way to temporarily escape our perpetual struggle against self-judgement, one that's turned many a writer into stone. When we ask student writers in a workshop to craft a process note or author's note with their workshop submission, we are asking them to engage in metacognition. *Notice what you're thinking*, we say. Eventually, they will be able to transpose noticing/metacognition/mindfulness into one of the most valuable tools that sustains a personal writing practice.

For me, the workshop letter allows feedback from a vantage several paces back from any particular page or paragraph of the workshop submission. Epistolary workshop feedback is big picture, addressing the essay, story, or poem as a complete, evolving being. The workshop-based summative epistle is often motivational as well. One of my graduate school classmates always wrote, "thanks for sharing" as a closing to his letters, which lent an air of graciousness and gratitude, I thought, because we were *required* to share!

Bean writes, "In writing end comments, I try to imagine the butterfly while critiquing the caterpillar. The purpose of the end comment is not to justify the current grade but to help writers make the kinds of revisions that will move the draft toward excellence" (333). This made sense for composition classes and mirrored what I'd experienced in creative writing workshops, but I realized that many students' final creative writing portfolios contained very few changes from their original drafts. Furthermore, I made the mistake of asking my students to submit final portfolios in hardcopy. I did not require students to pick up the portfolios after the semester was done, and I lost touch with many of them after I posted the final grades. A few teacher friends said, in not so many words, that spending so much time on final portfolios was a rookie mistake. I should have instead scheduled optional student conferences to talk through the work. I don't know how many students would have actually scheduled a conference, but I think that's the point: in the mad dash to the finish line of the semester, instructors find ways to save time by creating structures where feedback delivery is student-initiated. I spent hours annotating those portfolios, and I handwrote letters to every student. Because I was enjoying the graduate student luxury of teaching only

one class at a time, I know I won't always have so much time to spend, but I still think writing all those letters was worthwhile from a close reading perspective as well as from the way in which we always learn about teaching—and learning and writing—when we pay attention to students' work.

Giving feedback on final portfolios is a different genre of feedback than our comments on in-progress work mid-semester. When our students read our end-of-semester epistles to them, they interpret our words differently since we have run out of class meetings. Often, this written feedback to the student is our final communication, the last word. In light of the fact that final impressions are lasting, I want to present a new consideration, the idea that when we are responding to a student's final portfolio, we are writing her a fan letter. *These were strong elements. Here are the things I have questions about. If you don't mind, here's a suggestion. Keep going! I am excited that I get to be here to witness your writing. I'm a fan of your efforts.*

Fan letters are alive and well, and creative writers are doing interesting things with the genre. The literary journal *Sweet* publishes fan letters that are book reviews in disguise. The reviewer is the fan, and the "celebrity" is the author of the book. As a book reviewer myself, I think this model makes sense because I wouldn't write a review of a book I *wasn't* a fan of. This use of the fan letter-as-review also disrupts power dynamics in a different way: I often suggest to writer friends or students that they try their hand at writing and publishing reviews, not only for the writing experience and publishing credits, but because writing a review encourages close reading of another person's work that is both educational and pleasurable. The response I usually get to my suggestion is one of caution: *Am I really qualified to provide commentary? Who will care what I have to say? I'm not an expert.* Next time, I'll say that a review is simply like a fan letter. We all have experience as fans; we all know how to admire. The work is in articulating that admiration. In my personal creative nonfiction practice, I find myself writing "fan letters" to my literary heroines, many of whom have been deceased for years. Some of these letters have little to do with the recipient; instead, they are often observational, letters about the ecstatic awareness mentioned above: "Here is a list of things worth

noticing. I wanted to share them with you because you aren't around to see." The epistolary container and the proxy audience of late literary heroines motivates me as a writer and has helped me orient an otherwise-amorphous genre-hybrid project.

When we position our instructor selves as avid fans of our students, this stance not only illuminates the artistic possibilities in their work (something useful to communicate), but we also enjoy the very pleasant side effect of making grading more enjoyable. Reading and grading student work as a fan also helps us avoid a purely corrective approach and encourages us to think more about student intention, a philosophy I'd argue is helpful in workshop as well. We may even be helping a student identify an unnamed, intuitive intention, enthusiastically asking each student about their next artistic project in just the way loyal fans tend to do.

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