



EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING

The Role of the Teacher in a Critique Lesson

Excerpts from Leaders of Their Own Learning

The teacher must take an active role in facilitation throughout a critique lesson. This process works best when it looks organic (emerging entirely from student ideas) but is in fact skillfully shaped. The teacher chooses students strategically for comments, governs the flow of discussion and contributes enthusiasm, interjects compelling comments to build interest and makes key points, and reframes student observations when necessary to make them clear to the group and connected to the learning targets. The teacher needs to remember that the critique is a lesson with clear learning targets, and should not hesitate to take charge of the flow to ensure the session is productive.

Be a Strong Guardian of Critique Norms

The most important teacher role is to foster and sustain a critique culture that is emotionally safe for students and productive for learning. The critique rules, or norms, must be explicit and tracked vigilantly during the lesson to ensure that all students feel protected from ridicule (even subtle sarcasm or facial expressions) and that comments are specific and instructive. The critique rules should require participants to be *kind, specific, and helpful* in their comments. In addition to guarding against any hurtful comments, this also means guarding against vague comments (e.g., “I like it,” “It’s good”). Participants must point to specific features (e.g., “I think the title is well chosen,” “Including the graph makes it much clearer to me”). It means that repetitive comments or tangential comments that derail the momentum of learning should be avoided. The participants should be aware of the goals for the critique lesson, and their comments should relate to the group effort to build understanding.

To do this well, the teacher must convey that she is in absolute control of the rules and will tolerate nothing that is mean-spirited. At the same time, she must also encourage positive, helpful comments. It is also useful to “critique the critique,” that is, for the teacher to continually note and compliment insightful or thoughtful comments and to lead the class in reflection about what constitutes good critique. There are additional guideline suggestions that can help to build a positive climate. Examples of such guidelines include the following:

- It should always be clear that it is the work itself, not the author of the work, that is the subject of the critique.
- Use “I” statements (e.g., “I don’t understand your first sentence” rather than “It doesn’t make sense”).
- Begin comments, if possible, with a positive feature in the work before moving on to perceived weaknesses (e.g., “I think the eyes in your portrait are very powerful, but I think adding eyebrows would give it more feeling”).
- Frame ideas, when possible, as questions rather than as statements (e.g., “Why did you choose to leave out the illustration on this draft?” rather than “It was better with an illustration”).

These norms are especially important when students are sharing their own work with their classmates, but they apply even when the work is from outside of the class. Explicitly teaching and using critique rules will strengthen students’ critique skills as well as their abilities to hear and use descriptive feedback.

Keep the Critique Moving at an Interesting, Energetic Pace

To keep the critique engaging, the teacher should be sure the work being analyzed is accessible and clear. Photocopies should be made for each student or posted and projected work should be close enough for students to easily see. This preparation will help the teacher keep the lesson lively, as will using the following strategies to compel student involvement: involving a range of voices in the discussion, reading work aloud with a strong voice or choosing selected students to read aloud, or calling students up to the board to point out exactly what they see in the posted work.

Distill, Shape, and Record the Insights from the Critique

Many of the insights that the teacher hopes students will come to may arise from student comments, but the teacher may need to jump on them, repeat them, reword, or reframe them. Later they may even be codified for the class in the form of criteria or next steps. It is helpful to return to these insights during the critique, explicitly attributing them to the original student (“Tamika’s theory” or “Jonathan’s observation”), even though the teacher has perhaps changed and deepened the original comment. If particular key insights don’t arise, the teacher shouldn’t hesitate to seed them as questions or discovery challenges in viewing the work (“Did anyone notice . . .,” “Can you see an example of . . .”) or simply add them directly.

In a gallery critique, the teacher can’t rely just on students picking the examples that are most useful and generative—she must direct attention to examples that are important bridges to the learning targets, and ones that will stimulate new insights. She can use gallery critiques for other purposes as well—to give public affirmation to students who have made particular progress, or conversely, to use the critique to push students who have exhibited less than best effort. If there is a guest critique expert from the professional community, the teacher can seed the critique by explaining to the expert the learning targets and goals for the session, and perhaps help to direct his or her attention beforehand to particular pieces of work. (For more on using guest critique experts, see “Strategy Close Up: Speed Feedback”).

Focus on Naming the Specific Qualities and Strategies That Students Can Take Away With Them

It is not useful for students to leave the session with the idea that “Aliya is a good writer” or “The book review we read was great,” but rather, “Aliya used eight strategies that made her piece good, and now I know them and can use them.” Naming the effective qualities and strategies must be explicit, openly discussed and negotiated, and must result in terms that students understand—in their language. Sometimes it is not even clear to the teacher at first what feature in the work is being cited as strong—this is a perfect opportunity to engage the class in a spirited discussion to define and name the feature. The more concrete the naming of features, the better. Charting the names of features and hanging them on the wall for reference helps. Vague insights put on a chart, such as “Use ‘voice’” are less helpful, particularly to weaker writers, than specific suggestions such as “Include dialogue,” “Use verbs other than *said*,” “Use punctuation marks other than periods.” Again the teacher should not hesitate to reshape student ideas into words that she feels will be clear and helpful, and to add to the list if students have omitted important qualities or strategies.

Teach the Vocabulary

The Common Core State Standards require students to “acquire new vocabulary, particularly general academic and domain-specific words and phrases.” In line with the Common Core, this kind of vocabulary acquisition is the foundation of effective critique. Imagine a fifth-grade writing lesson with the following learning target: “I can use teacher feedback to make decisions about how to revise my script,” derived from Common Core writing standard, W.5.5: *With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.* In order to meet this learning target,

students must understand the academic vocabulary words *feedback* and *revise*. The teacher may support students in deconstructing a word like *revise*—identifying the prefix *re-* and explaining its meaning as *again* and the root *vise* as derived from the word *vision*, which means to *see*. Additionally, students must use domain-specific vocabulary such as *script*, *narrator*, *character*, *lines*, *conflict*, and *theme* to give effective feedback. To use a metaphor, if critique is like surgery, carefully cutting into a piece of work to determine what is working well and what is not, then the surgical tools are the words we use to dissect the piece. If a student can only use simple terms to describe a piece (e.g., “It’s good. I like it”), it’s like attempting surgery with a butter knife. Students need sharp precision in their language to be effective surgeons (e.g., “I think the narrator’s voice sounds too much like a kid our age and not like someone his character’s age,” “There is a confusion here between correlation and causation”). The need for precision gives students an authentic reason and immediate application for learning new vocabulary and putting it to use.