Praising Students’ Writing: How Compliments Encourage and Motivate

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How Compliments Encourage and Motivate

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Abstract
How to praise students in either the role of a teacher or a tutor is daunting task. These two
different roles require different techniques as to the amount and quality of praise that can be
given to writers. As a teacher, it is difficult to give specific praise to every single one of your
students due to time limitations and volume, but tutors can and should give specific compliments
to writers to increase their confidence and motivation in writing. This paper outlines several
tutoring practices that have been successful on an individual level in helping students gain
confidence in their writing through praising specific aspects and skills evident in their writing
process.
Key Words: praise, tutors, teachers, encouragement, specific praise, motivational scaffolding
I’ve never been very good at giving compliments. It’s not that I don’t think her hair looks nice or that his socks go nicely with his sweater. I think those things but I usually don’t say them. I don’t know if it’s because I’m too shy or if it seems like too much effort, but either way, it is always selfish to withhold praise when it can be beneficial to the receiver. When I get compliments it increases my confidence, and it can do the same for others as well. As I’ve been trying to give more sincere praise to those around me, I’ve also been trying to give sincere praise to my students in my English 1010 class as well as the students I work with in the Writing Center. However, the praise you give to a friend is of a different sort then the kind you give to your students and different still from the kind of praise you give to your peers in the Writing Center. In considering these different kinds of praise, I realized that while specific praise to a writer regarding what they’ve done well in their writing is helpful and encouraging, that level of specificity can rarely be applied to a whole classroom of students. It can, however, be applied to every student who comes into the Writing Center. While I can give praise to my students in class and through comments on their paper, I can use my role as a tutor to give personalized, specific feedback to every student I work with to increase their confidence in their writing abilities.

Praise is helpful to writers, but by praising specific aspects of their paper, writers can gain confidence in their writing skills and encouragement to continuing writing. According to an article titled “Academic Achievement The Role of Praise in Motivating Students,” the most effective way to help students become better writers is to praise the work they are doing well rather than praising them as a person (Maclellan 8). Equating their worth with that of their paper may result in temporary motivation, but what happens when they get their paper back and it isn’t
the grade they wanted? They no longer feel elated but instead feel like a failure. Specific praise about things they are doing well will instead instill confidence in their skills as a writer. Sincere and specific praise has been one of my goals as a tutor ever since I started. Every once in a while I’ll say to a student “I think this paper is good” as an attempt at sincere praise. Every time I say this I immediately correct myself because a paper is not good or bad. There are working elements and there are elements that can be improved. For me it is difficult to give a lot of specific praise. There is no set number on how many positive things you can say but I tend to want to match up my critiques with an equal number of praise. While it doesn’t really matter how much praise you give, giving specific detailed praise in order to help the writer continue to develop that skill is the purpose of such comments. I look for specific techniques that they are doing well at and compliment those skills, such as “strong diction” or “professional tone.” I once told a student that they had “good voice” and he looked at me very confused, asking “The other tutor said that to me too. What does that mean?” I then explained to him what good voice meant and he was very pleased with himself. By praising a specific skill the student feels more confident in their writing abilities and often is excited to write more.

Positive feedback also helps to build empathy with a writer so they can open up with a tutor. Just as the tutor is gauging the writer’s reactions to their tutoring practices, so too is the writer gauging the tutor’s reactions to their paper. Positive comments about the student’s paper help them to feel comfortable and less vulnerable. It also allows the tutor to take on the role of friend and collaborator, not of critic or professor. As a professor, you can’t give your students one-on-one specific praise for their papers. There are simply too many papers to grade, your students rarely read the comments you make, and after you have graded so many papers, your
comments start to get generic. As a tutor, you are focusing on one paper and one writer; This allows for more specific praise on what an individual student is doing well in their writing.

Verbal praise is very encouraging to students but body language can also play a very important role in how a student feels about their writing. In one tutorial, a student and I had been brainstorming for twenty minutes before we both cried “Analogies!” and slapped our hands together in a joyous high-five. We had been brainstorming rhetorical tools to use for a rhetorical analysis paper to no avail. Finally, the student came up with the answer about what tool they would like to write about. I didn’t have to verbally announce to her that she had done a good job brainstorming or reaching a conclusion because the celebratory high-five and excitement evidenced in my posture said it all. If, while a student is reading their paper out loud or brainstorming, a tutor is slumped over with their head slightly bowed or leaning back in the chair with their arms crossed, it can send a message that the student’s writing is boring. It becomes the opposite of verbal and non-verbal praise and instead becomes an implied criticism. Even if that isn’t the tutor’s intended message, non-verbal cues and body language play an important part in praising writers. This is also true of facial expressions. Being aware of your facial expressions can help you encourage and motivate students with a smile or encouraging nod rather then frightening them with a blank expression or a slight frown. As a teacher, I often have to think about my body language and facial expressions. If I’m not expressing excitement through my body language then it is hard to get my students excited as well. Non-verbal cues are important when encouraging students about their writing.

Praising specific aspects of a student’s paper verbally and non-verbally allows a tutor to highlight what is working well in their paper so they can use that as an example for other papers
and help the writer feel comfortable discussing their paper. Even though finding something positive to say about every paper can seem like a challenge, it is worth the effort. Unless a writer feels that they are doing something right, they will become discouraged and frustrated. As a teacher, I can provide generic feedback that can be helpful to my students, but as a tutor, I have a greater opportunity to provide specific feedback to each student I work with.
Works Cited