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## Praise as a Learned Behaviour

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Utah State University

### Praise as a Learned Behaviour

Writing Centers should teach tutors how to praise to create a better experience for students and tutors alike. Tutors are often encouraged to give praise in their comments and conversations with students, but are rarely instructed on how to do so effectively. This article examines the purpose of praise in tutoring, why it is important for tutors to learn how to praise, and what strategies may be used to teach praise to tutors.

Keywords: Praise, Politeness, English Language Learner Students, Training, Motivation, Student/Tutor Interactions

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I stare at the essay on my computer screen, making direct eye contact with my worst enemy. I remind myself that I don't have all day to write paper comments, so I need to just buck up and write a note to show the student what needs to be done. The error in tense is easy to spot, but that's not what has me frozen. I've heard time and time again that I should give praise as well as criticism when I write my comments, but as I look over the surrounding text I can't think of a single thing I deem worthy of complimenting sincerely. Caught in a time crunch, I decide to write the correction now and come back for praise later. I make a comment and move on to the rest of the paper. Somehow, I never make it back to add anything positive.

Tutors are constantly reminded by instructors and peers to take time to give praise. Praise often comes up in conversations on how to help students have a good experience with tutoring. We may even have fond memories of times we ourselves received praise. And yet, praise often only makes up about 10% of all comments written for a paper (Daiker, pg. 1). Why is it so hard to follow through on a resolution that will encourage and uplift students? Oftentimes, the answer is that tutors do not know how to give praise effectively. Because this struggle is so common despite the benefits of praise, tutors should be taught how to give specific and effective praise during their training.

But is praise really important enough that tutors need to be actually trained in it? Research on the subject says that yes, it absolutely is that important. The main purpose of praise is motivational scaffolding, essentially giving students the motivation to interact with tutors and actually implement strategies or suggestions they may have. Praise, sometimes called "positive politeness," builds rapport with a student, showing them that the tutor is not merely a glorified grader. This increases a student's level of comfort during their session, making them more likely to interact with the tutor and increasing overall satisfaction with their conference (Mackiewicz

and Thomson, pg. 4). Without motivational scaffolding a student may leave a tutoring session feeling disheartened and unwilling to return to the Writing Center. It may also make them feel less confident with their ability to write. Tutors need to be aware of how praise can change a student's entire attitude and experience with their writing.

However, tutors also must be aware of how praise affects interactions with non-native English speakers from culturally different countries. In many of these cultures the tutor/student dynamic is considerably less collaborative than American tutors may be used to. A tutor's attempts to use positive politeness to build rapport with these students may simply complicate the session and cause confusion on both sides (Bell and Youmans, pg. 3) An American tutor will often use praise as a way to soften and introduce criticism. For instance, saying "This right here is a good start" and then communicating what needs to be changed. However, a non-native student may perceive the praise as an indication that the section does not need to be fixed. The criticism after the praise will then confuse the student because it contradicts what they had just been told. Without specific training most tutors won't be aware of these situations, greatly decreasing the effectiveness of a resource that many non-native English speakers rely on for help navigating an unfamiliar education system.

Praise plays an essential role in how tutors interact with students, yet very little, if any, time is spent training tutors in how to effectively use it. Even experienced tutors often struggle with this concept. According to Daiker, "Dragga 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.'" This shows that without specific training, tutors may never learn how to effectively praise.

So how can tutors be taught praise? What strategies can they utilize to create a better experience for themselves and the students they work with? Interestingly enough, I couldn't find much research on how to teach people to praise. Again, the focus seemed to be on praise as a broad concept instead of a tangible solution. My breakthrough came during a conversation with my mother, in which she described to me how she used praise when raising me and my siblings. The ideas were simple. Never guess what a child's drawing is of, instead compliment specific shapes or patterns. Thank a child who takes time to show or tell you something. Always comment on the structure or format of an assignment, even if it seems like the basic standard for that sort of work. I realized that these ideas line up perfectly with Daiker's discussion of praise during childhood. When speaking of praising children he said "we don't even expect them to match their older friends or siblings. In fact, we praise them for the most modest achievements."

When tutoring on a college level, it's easy to feel that praise should be reserved for grand accomplishments. Some great breakthrough or elegantly written paper that rises far above the norm. However, realistically nothing that drastic has changed between childhood and now. Most papers that we as tutors encounter will not change the world. But that doesn't mean they're not worthy of praise for even the smallest things, like a student finding a good quote or correctly using in-text citations. Tutors need to be taught to look for the small things, to see the excellence in students reaching what may be considered the basic standards.

Praise is a vital tool in connecting with a student and creating an environment of collaboration. It may seem like a small thing, but specifically training tutors in how to praise can have an enormous effect on how students see their writing and how they interact with Writing Centers. We always tell students that they're much better writers than they think. It's time that we show them we believe it, too.

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