

Feedback: Sorting Signal from Noise

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Last year, I (Sarah) handed a paper into one of my MA-IS professors with mixed expectations. I was excited about the idea the paper put forward, but just did not have enough time to polish it up and do additional research to strengthen my argument. All things considered, balancing competing priorities at the time, I was ready to settle for a lower mark.

My professor must have somehow known this, as she returned the paper to me – unmarked - with a number of notes calling out the various shortfalls, some I recognized and some I had completely missed, asking me to revise and resubmit. At first I was a little put out at the refusal to accept the assignment, but as I worked through her notes I saw the benefit of the criticisms she was offering. While I did not agree with them all, I addressed the majority of her review and re-submitted a strong paper I was proud of. I kept note of her comments and have applied them to subsequent work, ensuring that I do not fall into the same traps with each assignment I submit (although I am sure I find new ones), strengthening my future work.

Whether submitting to a professor for a course, or to an academic journal such as *JIS* for publication, putting your work out there for judgment can be stressful, especially as the feedback begins to roll in. Sometimes, as in my experience, we are at least somewhat aware of the shortcomings of our work, and sometimes a review uncovers a blind spot in style or in the argument we are trying to make. Keep in mind a couple of things: a review is an opinion (although it may be an educated one), and the feedback it contains is intended to strengthen your work, not simply point out its flaws. While a review should not be taken as a list of required changes, it can provide some objective thoughts on how to improve a piece of work and things to be mindful of in future writing.

It can be difficult, certainly. When you write something, you are showing everyone else what's going on inside your head, what you think, how you think. And when someone else criticizes *your* writing it can be difficult sometimes not to take it as a statement that the person doesn't like your thoughts, how you think, what you think, and ultimately, doesn't like you, yourself.

But taking criticism gracefully isn't just growing a thicker skin, it's about changing your mindset from one of defense and feeling picked on and put down, to one of open consideration for growth. Consider a review, especially those given through volunteer-led publications such as *Journal of Integrated Studies*, as free advice.

If you are familiar with Toastmasters, you'll know that the group is specifically structured to teach people how to do public speaking by also teaching them how to do constructive criticism of each other. I (Heather) had the privilege of being part of a wonderful group in Spruce Grove, Alberta for a few years, and not only did I learn and improve amazingly over those years, I also saw other members of the group transform their speaking and speech-writing ability in that time. One

member of the group, however, a lovely person, was unable to take even the gentlest of criticism. She would only hear the compliments and praise we gave her, and deliberately shut her ears to any suggestion that she hadn't done the speech perfectly. She was quite a good speaker, so the praise we gave her was sincere, but she also had a few bad habits that she did not improve appreciably in the time that she and I were both part of the group, especially compared to the improvement seen in other members.

If you are enrolled in the MA-IS program, or any other graduate program, presumably you have done so not only to gain the letters behind your name but also to improve your mind, your thinking, and your writing skills. To improve, to grow, to learn, requires not just practice, but an objective view of what is good, what works, what is effective, and what is not. You can do that for your own work to some extent, but in the end, there is no replacement for the view of someone else. Other people can usually see flaws and weaknesses in our work to which we are completely blind. Submitting a piece to a peer-reviewed journal such as *JIS* is a great alternative source of feedback to a professor, as the editorial process offers a lot more collaboration and discussion.

Just remember that commentary is always somebody else's opinion. Even when the review is couched in the most objective and impersonal way, there is still a person on the other end, expressing a purely subjective opinion. But you are the ultimate author of your piece, and only you have the full vision of what the piece should look like. Your task is not to mindlessly apply the other person's opinion, but to thoughtfully consider whether the review is at least somewhat illuminating and whether the suggestions will improve the piece or not. If you disagree with the reviewer's opinion and think that the suggestion misses the point, then feel free to ignore it. But consider carefully before you dismiss it. Like the woman from my Toastmasters group, if you dismiss all criticism out of hand, you are also dismissing the opportunity to grow, learn, and improve.

That being said, we *JIS* editors have been happy with the overall quality of the submissions we have been seeing, and with the willingness of the authors to work with us to improve the pieces before publication. Though the author's name is the only one that appears on each piece published, it truly is a team effort with the editors, reviewers, copyeditors and proofreaders. We would like to offer kudos to all our intrepid volunteers and authors.

We hope you enjoy this issue of the *Journal of Integrated Studies*. Keep those submissions coming in!

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