

handling personal criticism

James A. Sparks

Adult educators—especially Extension faculty—grind out thousands of words every year on the merits and technology of evaluating teaching-learning activities. Participants, in return, respond to evaluation instruments, describing what happened (or didn't happen) during Extension classes, workshops, and conferences.

If you've planned, coordinated, or taught an adult education program, you know what it feels like to be on the business end of an evaluation—learning what others think of your work and sighing with relief when nearly all express congratulations on a job well-done.

But how do you feel when people say the class, workshop, or conference hasn't met their expectations? Do you calmly and objectively analyze their critiques and rationally integrate them into a revised instructional design? Or do you react as many do—by feeling hurt (depending on how sharp the criticism) and nursing the pain for several days afterwards? In spite of all the rhetoric on how beneficial evaluation is, rarely do we tell each other how it *feels* to be criticized.

To find out how other teachers and programmers cope with personal criticism, I informally interviewed several University of Wisconsin-Extension award-winning faculty—the ones least likely to receive criticism, or so I thought. Here's what I learned.

We've learned that people can be helped to understand criticism without being victimized by the inevitable guilt feelings. All of us, with some reinforcement and practice, can become more skillful in receiving and giving criticism.

Fearful of Failure

The teachers I talked with seemed unusually sensitive to criticism of their teaching. It also surprised me that they regularly receive criticism about their teaching and programs.

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Not even outstanding faculty are immune from critical assessment. Like other professionals who draw criticism, the Extension faculty said they accept and welcome criticism publicly, but in private they lick their wounds. They wanted to *believe* that criticism isn't personal (a reflection on them), but they talked about it as if it were.

One instructor described a class where he invited the participants to join a group activity. He noticed a trainee who obviously wasn't participating although everyone else was enthusiastically engaged. Not only didn't this student participate, but he crossed his arms and sat silently for most of the morning. Two days after the event, the instructor was still confused. He told how this student's nonverbal criticism altered his timing and attitude toward the class. He wondered where he had failed.

Risk Profession

Extension staff seem to be at the mercy of their own inner motivations to accept new challenges and top last year's record, putting Extension work clearly into the category of a "risk" profession.

One of the key risks is being available to help other people and thus being vulnerable to their criticism when their expectations aren't met. The faculty sample I spoke with reinforced my idea that the more successful a person is in what he/she does, the more others will expect of him/her. It isn't a new idea—St. Luke described it more than 1,900 years ago: "Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required"

Although all the instructors I interviewed seemed hurt by criticism, they tried (often unsuccessfully) to balance it with the participants overall assessments. I discovered that no matter how high the positive ratings, the teachers worried over the negative scores long after the experience.

Their concerns were the same as the reactions of over 1,500 people I've talked with during my workshops on coping with personal criticism. There's a natural tendency for people to try to rationalize "unpleasant" news about their work or behavior. The problem is how to cope with feelings after the initial impact, so people can learn from the experience.

Value of Criticism

Have you ever had a workshop or conference participant confront you at a coffee or lunch break and say: "Do you mind if I give you some criticism?"

You tried to hide your surprise because you felt things were going so well. You pretended the question was routine, while the critic stated his/her evaluation or complaint.

It's these moments of truth when our knees feel rubbery, and we become painfully aware of a hollow feeling in the stomach. Our automatic response to such stress is either to: (1) assume that we're failing not only with that student, but with all of them or (2) tune that person out by rationalizing that he/she didn't understand the objectives or came with unrealistic expectations. Such automatic responses keep us from discovering how we can improve the program.

Criticism is the only communication tool we have to deal with strained relationships, minor irritations, missed expectations, infringements on our freedom, or anything that undermines our sense of well-being. This applies to the teacher-learner relationship, as well as other interpersonal relationships.

Many of us covet the right to give criticism when it's necessary. (Try taking a faulty piece of merchandise back to the store without using criticism.) But we don't like being on the other end—being criticized.

. . . how do you feel when people say the class, workshop, or conference hasn't met their expectations? Do you calmly and objectively analyze their critiques and rationally integrate them into a revised instructional design? . . .

It's little wonder that criticism makes us jittery: it's identified with such synonyms as "reprehend," "blame," "censure," "condemn," and "denounce." To be criticized means that we've been reviewed and judged, and have fallen short of expectations. One of the instructors I interviewed used "criticism" and "weapon" in the same sentence. It shouldn't be surprising that criticism can be an effective club to punish people closest to us, including children, parents, friends, and spouses.

But there's another side to criticism, if we could learn to understand and value it. Criticism can be a vehicle for change and growth when it's appropriately communicated and received.

But such growth doesn't come easily or without pain. Remember that being criticized doesn't always mean you've failed as a teacher or that your program was a bust. Don't treat all criticism the same way.

What's the Critic Saying?

All criticism communicates one or a combination of *four messages*. If you're going to learn from criticism, you need to know what the critic is trying to say.

Intention One of these four messages is *intention*. Basically, this message says, "I want you to change your behavior." During a presentation recently, one student objected to the speaker's exclusive use of masculine pronouns. The speaker made the *appropriate changes in the second half of his program* and the student publicly acknowledged her appreciation. She wanted her criticism to change the speaker's behavior and was satisfied when it did.

Disapproval Another message is *disapproval*—a common form of criticism, but alone it's incomplete. It's not enough just to disapprove of someone's behavior. To be complete, the message should also state how that behavior should be altered. If someone disapproves of your behavior, press your critic to suggest how you should improve. Anything less is an incomplete message, short of being helpful.

Frustration Another message is the expression of *frustration*. This usually comes with hostile or hurt feelings. It's painful because you not only have to cope with the critic's feelings, but also with your own. It's rarely transmitted as a useful communication. Instead, the critic's frustration dumps an overload of feelings that have built up over time. You may react just as emotionally, and learn nothing to help solve the problem.

Disappointment The fourth and final message of criticism is *disappointment*. It may be the most difficult message for a teacher or program coordinator because the critic says, "I'm disappointed in this program. It's not what I expected. I'd hoped for more." The disappointment message is potent—it carries the implied message of failure. Teachers should study their feedback to students so the other three messages don't communicate failure to the student.

The Sky Isn't Falling

More than 75 administrators, faculty, and secretarial staff from the University of Wisconsin-Extension system have participated in workshops in the past several months to learn why and how people fear criticism, and what they can do about the way they give and receive it. Following one of these workshops, one young participant wrote and said that before the program he felt the sky was falling because of negative performance evaluations he'd received, but the workshop had helped ease his stress.

Based on our experience of working with more than 50 groups from many occupations and professions, we've develop

a five-part tape cassette program on coping with personal criticism to be used in small groups. We've learned that people can be helped to understand criticism without being victimized by the inevitable guilt feelings. All of us, with some reinforcement and practice, can become more skillful in receiving and giving criticism.

Remember . . . those who are never criticized, usually don't do much worthy of comment.

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(Signed: Barbara A. Schutz, October 5, 1978, financial manager.)