Formulating Written Feedback For Staff Mentees – An Aristotelian Approach

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Abstract:
This article reflects on the intricacy of providing written feedback from a mentor to a mentee in the Study Group Fellowship Scheme, an international education provider in partnership with more than 50 universities and colleges across the world. Using Aristotle's rhetoric principle of ethos, logos and pathos, it argues that appropriate use of open-ended questions in combination with the situatedness of being ethos-centric, logos-centric, and pathos-centric can be a useful approach centralising the mentee in their learning and developing process.

1. Introduction

I remember reading from Illeris (2018) about how humans learn, not only by physicalising things but also through emotionalising them, in addition to the intellectual dimension. In academic development, "the learning" is often specified into "mentoring", "coaching", and sometimes "advising". However, unlike the straightforward nature of a-learner-to-a teacher, the communication between a mentor and a mentee carries complexity and intricacy where minor adjusting can make a difference and bring positive emotionalisation. In this article, I will use one example from my recent experience as a mentor to reflect on the challenge of providing written feedback for the staff HEA fellowship application and suggest an Aristotelian approach to creating a connection with mentees.

2. Study Group Fellowship Scheme and an Aristotelian approach

In the UK, Advance HE awards Higher Education Academy fellowships in Associate, Fellow, Senior and Principal categories to teaching and learning professionals to recognise their commitment and contribution to professionalism in higher education. Designed to help teaching and managing staff achieve professional recognitions, the Study Group Fellowship Scheme 2022-2023 offers such opportunity for staff throughout the network, which includes 28 studying centres in partnership with universities in the UK, Europe and North America. This scheme is structured into building steps from workshops and peer-reviewing to guiding for its applicants.

Microsoft Teams is an official channel of communication as well as the primary space connecting a mentor and a mentee. A typical teaching staff throughout the network often deliver a high number of teaching hours and sees the scheme as self development with support from their mentors, via workshops and written application feedback. As such, the major communication and mentoring happen through written feedback from reviewing submissions, either in the outline of evidence format or a draft of one area of Activity or a full reflective essay. In reviewing the submission, written feedback initiated further conversation on teaching practice, showcasing evidence, and demonstrating impact. This is the part where thinking about the what, the why and the how of a written piece of feedback can be physicalised to help staff reflect and positively emotionalise the process of getting recognised for their teaching practice.

In doing so, I combined Aristotle's rhetoric principles (Bartlett, 2019) with the discourse interpretation in educational policy (Ball, 1993) to centralise the feedback receivers and create a space for them to unleash a hidden mentor in their mind. Many years ago, Aristotle proposed the triangular principle of persuasion, focusing on the importance of ethos, logos and pathos.

- Ethos – the credibility of the speaker, writer; in this article, mentor
- Logos – the logicality of the information; in this article, the feedback content
- Pathos – the ability to connect and to make the listener, reader; in this article, mentees, to see themselves in the message communicated

Aristotle argues that to convince people, we need to provide critical information on who is speaking (ethos) what (pathos) and how (logos) - at the right time (Kairos). It depends on specific information to be ethos-centric (to emphasise the reputation of speakers/writers/mentors), logos-centric (to emphases on the content, its coherence, and logic) or pathos-centric (to bring up the enthusiasm and empathy of the message receivers). In interpreting discourse, Stephen Ball (1993) reminds the education analysts the importance of "*who can speak*" (the policy actors) and "*where, when and with what authority*" (the context of policy making).

3. The explored principles of written feedback

For written feedback from a mentor to a mentee, all three elements of ethos, logos and pathos and the intended discourse should be considered carefully. The other side of the message can be another staff member, in a similar professional position as the mentor or a colleague in a more senior position. As such, written feedback for the mentee, in this case, does not limit to suggesting what should be changed but also how to do so without being patronising and giving a chance for the mentees to use their inner teacher to decide. In doing so, I try to downplay the ethos (*who can speak with what authority*) and give space for the pathos and logos in writing feedback for mentees.

To eliminate the ethos-centric feedback – *I'm your mentor. This is what you should do as I say so,* I use the open-ended questions, "*What do you think about…?*". There are two reasons for this feedback style. First, according to Howard Becker (2008), open-ended questions are beneficial in taking the conversation anywhere in the emotional territory, especially when people are anxious about the answer. If comparing the written feedback process with the conversational process, telling the mentees what to change is somehow like pointing to the right and wrong mentality. On the contrary, asking open-ended questions can be compared to the logic that *you have been listened to and what do you think about such and such?* The second reason for the use of open-ended questions in providing written feedback for the mentees is that reading is seen as the form of inner speech (Fernyhough, 2017) and studies have found that the voice-sensitive areas of the auditory cortex in our brain are activated more when reading direct versus indirect speech (Yao et al., 2011). The question format closely links to the direct speech in conversations and dialogues. Our brain will react as it is hearing an actual person speak: "*Your reviewer said, "I enjoy reviewing your application, but I wonder about the positive impact. What do you think about revising the…?*", but not so much in "*Your reviewer said he enjoyed ...and wondered…so you should…*"

Here is one example I used in my written feedback, from my initial intended text to three other options demonstrating the Aristotelian adjustment, see table below.

Table 1: The explored principles of written feedback

Original feedback	Pathos-centric feedback	Logos-centric feedback	Ethos-centric feedback
To provide my suggestion	*To provide my suggestion and <u>create the connection with my mentee</u>*	*To provide my suggestion <u>focusing on the feedback content</u>*	*To provide my suggestion <u>emphasising my power and credibility as a mentor</u>*

Take out – it doesn't link to your practice.	How does this link to your practice? Will it help?	I understand your intention here, but you should take it out as it makes no difference to the impact of your practice.	I have reviewed many applications of similar nature, and this is a typical mistake. You should take it out.

4. Expected impact and implications for academic development

With the Aristotelian adjustment in written feedback, I noticed the change in the feedback reception manners. I categorised these into 3 groups

- The acceptance: Accept the feedback without seeking clarification or continuing the discussion
- The inquisitive: Tend to seek clarification and/or extend the discussion
- The laissez-faire: Prefer to be told what is right and wrong as they do not have to think for themselves.

With the acceptance and the laissez-faire, either the logos-centric or ethos-centric feedback can easily put an end to the thinking flow, "*I take it as what is written*", "*This is easier for me, I can just take things out*". On the contrary, with the inquisitive, open-ended format of pathos-centric feedback, staff have space and agency to think on and think back on the feedback questions that they receive.

Staff expectations might vary. However, in most cases, the feedback process does not necessarily end after one submission or conversation. The logos-centric approach might be feasible and useful for the inquisitive-styled staff, in particular, for the staff with the willingness and the time capacity to reflect and work on their development.

On the contrary, for open-ended questions, staff mentees might find it too broad to navigate. In that case, the specificity of a close-ended question will be useful in directing them in the right direction. As such, the implication of an Aristotelian approach for the academic development is situatedness and the flexibility of a pathos-centric, logos-centric, and ethos-centric feedback, depending on intended messages to be delivered, to be authoritative (ethos-centric), logical (logos-centric), or sympathetic (pathos-centric), in either the written or other communication format.

5. Conclusion

There is no single formula for a good piece of written feedback for its situatedness and complexity. However, an Aristotelian adjustment to the text and a suitable insertion of open-ended questions might bring up the intended effect for the feedback writers, in this case, mentors. In addition to formulatting feedback for the staff mentee, this approach can be used in various context depending on the intention of the feedback providers. For example, in the formative assessment format where students and staff are encouraged to exercise their thinking agency. However, the open-ended nature of this approach might generate the ambiguity and confusion for the feedback receivers.

In many cases, the feedback expectation is to know where things go wrong and what to do about them, in stead of extending the thinking and questioning process.

6. References

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