

The Writings of Guy Bensusan

By GUY BENSUSAN

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Many of us have followed the writings of Dr. Guy Bensusan for a long time. Others are just discovering him. He is a frequent contributor to the DEOS listserv, and freely shares his rich experience and philosophy. Over the years, Ed Journal has published a number of his articles. He has given his kind permission to publish these each month starting with his writings of about five years ago.

His philosophy and practice have continued to grow with the advent of new technology and the acceptance of distance learning as a viable and effective alternative to traditional methods of teaching. He is the master teacher, leading us into new paradigms of teaching and learning. Through these writings he will take us on a journey of exploration and discussion. He will show us how to motivate students and achieve results with anywhere-anytime collaborative learning that are the envy of most classroom teachers.

The Bensusan Method is enriching the lives of tens of thousands of students. Ed Journal is grateful to have Dr. Bensusan present this series of articles each month so that you, your colleagues, and your students can enjoy and benefit from his experience.

Chapter B-3

Organize a multi-level, collaborative feedback system

By Guy Bensusan, Ph.D.

How do students know if they are "doing okay?" Teacher-centered and content-centered teachers would answer by saying they would judge based on the points accumulated, allocated by predetermined percentages for such things as attendance, quiz and test scores, essay content, essay style, extra credit reports, and so on. In any model centered on the teacher as provider of information and assessor of

learning, this approach is traditional, legitimate, reasonable and "in the order that things should be." These traditions not only are ancient, they are believed and condoned on both sides of the podium, and in administrative offices --- "the teacher should read and evaluate student work submitted for credit, assigning appropriate grades."

How students are doing in their courses is resolved in these cases by hierarchical authority, with consequences. Students tell me they usually have few clues as to why they get a particular grade or what the grade actually means about their learning and performance. I have been shown many an essay bearing a number in red ink, with no other written comments whatsoever. As a teacher I have difficulties with this, since I am more existentialist than autocrat, more andragogue than didact, and desire to help students learn both how they are doing and how to self-assess with some degree of objectivity, balance and accuracy. This outlook is not a contradiction for a learning-centered teacher, especially in a world where networks and collaboration are becoming more central and important than simple linear autocracy.

The way the university curriculum is structured, I must give grades as part of my contract to teach. I have some discretionary power, based on the rite in our culture called academic freedom. While teachers determine the grade of the student, they can also DETERMINE HOW THE GRADES SHALL BE DETERMINED. I think it is my responsibility to help students learn how to learn, as well as learn to perceive how effective they are being and becoming. After all, if we do not learn how to judge our own work with some objectivity, will we not always be dependent upon the judgments of others?

My professorial authority is never questioned when it comes to a grade. Students will often ask why they received what they got, and when I offer an analysis on the depth, breadth, quality, substantiation and number of interpretative levels to be found (or not found) in their work, they will usually agree. I will sometimes conclude I was wrong and raise the grade as a result of interacting openly with the student --- it was a feedback process, through retrodution. The point is that if a student does not understand why a particular grade has been awarded, then the grading is useless for learning, serving only as a control mechanism. I do not want that.

I now believe that when a student's work is graded frequently and only by the professor, the learning is hindered rather than helped. The act of judging someone's work stops the cumulative collecting and creative flow, and converts energies from process to product. But the feedback is from one source, the teacher, who is grading many papers, perhaps competitively, which focuses upon the grading. We need instead to focus on the learning --- though it does mean we should make no assessment. We do not here need a judgment, but rather a non-judging assessment that can contribute formatively to learning.

After many experiments, I have found two types of activities that help this: self-assessment and small-group mutual assessment. These can be used in-class and out-of-class; early in the course I usually have these begun in class, in order to get students started while I am immediately available. Mostly, they complete the activities when they get together

after class. Both types of assessments seem a bit awkward at first, since students are more familiar with debating the idea of right and wrong than of balancing pros and cons, and setting up priorities for the different levels of significance. Neither of these activities need be threatening, and both can be learned where everyone is graded on growth and there is no limitation on the number of top grades to be given.

In self-assessment, students read their own essays, look at their artwork or designs, watch their videos and photomontages and other items they have created. They then role-play by stepping outside of themselves to examine the work as if someone else had done it. I find referring to The Ladder helps get them started; what can you say about reaction, about components and technique, about cultural context, and so forth? This way we also reinforce our Ladder ideas from class and students get more practice making applications rung by rung. Everything leans on everything else.

In small group assessment, students read each other's essays and then begin a longer process of seeking out common ground. I insist that they exercise great care in being gentle with each other, because all are not equally assertive, and it is a cultural taboo among some of our students to be critical, along with various other verbal and non-verbal practices. Nonetheless, in order to make small group work productive, I suggest they use the lingo of communications --- "What I understand from reading this is A and G; is that the intent?" I find this to be far more productive than, "You didn't explain that clearly." In Spanish it is polite to say, "Me explico bien?" (Did I express myself well?) rather than "comprendiste?" (Did you understand?) Students seem to get the point that self-reflection does not hurt others.

An example from Hexadigm essays might be useful here. Each of the four students has selected a topic, such as dance, architecture, weaving and foods, and has written an initial essay from their logic and imaginations on how Cultural Sequences, Mutual Influences, and so on, will have affected their topic. Having read each other's essays, they now get together and compare what has been said for each of the categories in order to gain the vision by art form, as well as by culture. In their discussion they will have seen parallels and contrasts in the contexts for the arts, and will also have helped each other flesh out the essays with broader thoughts from mutual input.

When they go to the library for the second essay, they get together again to compare notes: what dance, architecture, weaving and foods have in common in what the library has provided for them on the Cultural Sequences. They find, for example, much more information about the Indians and Spanish, and less on the Africans, who also contributed cultural skills. The next obvious question becomes, "Why is that?" Students then have to set up their hypotheses: Is it that Africans are fewer and less important in Mexico than in Cuba or Venezuela? Or does government policy emphasize the Indian heritage and not the African? Or is it that they are regionally but not nationally significant? Or has our library simply not purchased books on that topic? These are matters that students can dialogue over in assessing the availability of their materials. Here lies another area of common ground in research, while also foreshadowing the essay on author and publisher bias.

It is important to continuously encourage students to work on a procedure of method for getting into their peer evaluations. They should, for instance, work up their own five- or six-part model to help them. In the case of reading someone's hexadigm essay, these could be:

1. What is the central idea? (Put it into a simple sentence)
2. Are all of the parts of the Hexadigm equally well developed?
3. What substantiations are used? Are they equally spread?
4. What implications are mentioned; how well are they developed?
5. Is the essay clearly explained all the way through?
6. What would you like to have more information about?

Naturally, these are six suggestions that I make as the teacher, and if I offer them, many students will slavishly answer them. I expand the number to ten or twelve questions, providing options from which to distill five or six to use.

Again, this is an observation from my experience; when I offer an idea, students are conditioned into picking up on it and following the lead. Doing that does not teach them or help them learn how to think for themselves, which is the goal, or one of the goals, of the learning principle. In different words, "Here, don't let me fish for you, let's figure out how you can learn to fish for yourself." If we think of the swimmers, they must teach themselves to feel when they are in the proper floating position to swim effectively! They cannot see themselves, their body position; the teacher verbally and physically coaches them into an optimum position, always asking how it feels, while the students practice finding that position through the feel of it.

Another tactic I have learned is that it is easier to get students into group assessment after they have done at least one self-assessment, in part so that they will go beyond the euphemistic, "that was good, I liked it" level. But as a teacher I must have patience, and remember that they now face two unknown tasks. One is that they are going beyond the first rung; having dealt with judgment criteria in their own work, they can now discuss elements and components in the work of someone else. The more they practice doing it, the more comfortable they become with it. They become more detailed in their inquiry, more constructive with each other, and more confident in making evaluations and in talking about such things in class.

The second factor, however, is that they are reluctant in interpersonal class discussion. Many think that criticism is negative criticism, and that it hurts, and will make the other guy-gal angry with you for being unkind in public and "trashing" the work. It is not easy to deal with a public analysis of one's work, even for veteran professionals. However, it is important to help students see and comprehend the difference between that kind of criticism which tears down (which we do not want), and that which helps, builds and improves.

In that sense, class sessions on constructive criticism can be set up as simulations --- allowing the student to practice on a model. One example here comes from my Mexico course, with a verse I wrote twenty years ago called "Past and Repast." Since I am the author, I can read some of it to them, and then encourage them to use a two-fold approach. First, I

tell them to write out what they think is really awful about it and say it in a negative way. Then I ask them to tear that page out, ask for a volunteer to collect them, mix them up and read the most demeaning.

This goodly dose of Bensusan bashing, read aloud, while the recipient acts through the antics of being heartbroken, irate or wounded, provokes laughter, which is the best way to open things up for real learning that I know of. Then I say, "Let's take the constructive approach. How can you turn what you do not like into a constructive and helpful statement, one which will inspire authors to think about how the suggestion can effectively be incorporated?" For instance, with the verse's rhythm, someone said it was boring, because it was always the same. How could we turn that around into a useful and productive thought?

Some student suggests, "Is it your purpose to have the rhythm constantly the same, and if so, why?" We will talk about this and the effect upon the author for a while, and then someone else will suggest rephrasing it into, "What would happen to the rhythm in your verse if you changed it here and there?"

Bingo! We now have two student suggestions in a positive manner that can be compared by using The Ladder. We will ask, for instance, "Is one of these questions kinder to the author than the other?" Which question challenges the author; are there consequences to that? The session continues on useful levels; students say it helps them in small group critiques.

Learning and changing is clearly a process that is fraught with dangers and charged with the inevitable emotion of reaction. None of us is immune --- my dear editor-wife will often blue-pencil a paragraph I have slaved over and am proud of. She will write something like, "Do we need these many notes, Mozart?" and follow it with a smiley-face. My heart dips, and I sigh when I see it, not because I am so much hurt, but rather because I now have some more work to do! And I also know that she is right, because she always (almost) has made what I write read more smoothly. When I truly have a favorite phrase I want to use, I will ask, "I REALLY do like this part, is there a way to use it???" And we find a way --- perhaps elsewhere in the essay.

The point I make to the student is that the writer is not the reader and that implication is different from inference. Therefore, if you really want to know the effect of your work, ask the reader --- and be willing to listen and talk about it. The reader, on the other hand, also has a responsibility to be helpful and not merely dump dismal dirt. We spend time here because it is doubly useful --- the work gets better and the working conditions of interaction become better greased and more productive. To those colleagues who say to me, "That was an interesting session, but you did not cover much course content," I will often reply, "We did cover some in the examples, but more important, we opened doors for an improved discussion over how to be helpful to each other."

At the same time, I should state that by turning all these evaluative matters over to the students, I am not shirking or avoiding my duties; I am not substituting student self- or group evaluation for the evaluation given by the teacher. On the contrary, I am adding other evaluations to mine, and I am training their abilities. I do not want evaluation of any type

to become a kind of ruling which blocks the creative constructivist flow of learning. I want the student to practice having his or her work evaluated in various ways. I prefer to see several evaluations play a role in helping the student understand, learn and see additional viewpoints, while also arriving at a conclusion from more than one source. I like the idea of that type of multi-pronged accountability, since as teacher, I need a check or balance on me, too.

Thus, I ask that all these assessments and group evaluations be used for learning, for helping learners and for self-learning, and that each example be placed in the portfolios to become one part of the whole conglomeration of work which they will turn in to me AT THE END OF THE COURSE. Actually, I collect the portfolios about the fourteenth week, so that I will have two full weeks to read them all. I use those two weeks in class, so students can present their projects and discuss what we have accomplished over the weeks. One of my tactics in talking over what they have learned in the evaluation and assessment facet is through another display for the front of the classroom that says in big letters,

We talk about whether this is really true, or whether it is a humorous stereotype about students created by professors. In several years of doing this, I have found that in most cases the students are far more demanding for themselves than of their peers. As they will themselves admit, they blandly praised or condemned early in the course, but later became more adept at seeking out their own strengths and weaknesses. Apart from the occasional blowhard, self-gratulator and con-man/woman (who usually get deflated by their peers in the classroom), I find their self- and peer assessments to be very reasonable, extensive, and mature. I wonder if the self-fulfilling prophecy is at work here? Having been given responsibility and liberty of choice and development, may they be rising to the occasion?

I would like to sum up with the commentary of one student:

Dear Dr. Guy, I hereby present to you the sequence of the evolution during this course of the successive questions I asked about the quality of my work. 1. "How will I know how I am doing?" 2. "I understand what I am supposed to do, but I don't know if I am doing it right." 3. "I know how well I am doing, but I don't know if YOU know how well I am doing." 4. "These are the conclusions I have come to in my project and the reasons for my doing so." 5. "Based on my growth as seen in what I have written in assessments and my notes about those, and the six essays and my personal assessment of improvement, plus the progress my group members have written about, and knowing that I must consider the number of elements which I can now perceive and discuss, I conclude I have earned a very solid A."

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