Focus on the What:
Critiquing with Compassion and Rigor

Fellow writers often ask me to comment on their work in progress, and I'm always looking for ideas about how to do it better.

So at the huge AWP conference in Seattle a few years ago, I made a point of attending a workshop called "Poetics of Generosity: The Fine Art of Constructive Praise," which promised to help me encourage my fellow writers to do their very best work. The five panelists – all writing instructors at Grub

Street, the New England-based creative writing center – presented an approach to critiquing that was new to me and very exciting.

Listen to how these compassionate writing instructors describe what they do:

"Focus on the what," said Ron MacLean. "What shines? Your aim is to tell the writer, 'Here is what is already good. Here's what I loved – even if I can't say why.' You want the writer to go home thinking, 'How can I do more of that?'"

Lisa Borders told us the "what" principle forms the foundation of her novel-in-progress workshops. Participants bring 10 or 15 pages to class and read them aloud while others follow along. Discussion focuses on the question: "What is this novel about?" Often the writer is utterly surprised by how fellow classmates perceive the work. And that's the point. "The comments connect the writer to the beating heart of the book," Lisa said. "It's more work for the instructor not to let people go for the jugular," she said. Nonetheless, she insists on keeping the emphasis on what is working, not on what isn't.

"The point is engagement rather than passing judgment," said Ron. "Imagine yourself into the writer's vision. Rather than fixing problems, try to mine and discover possibilities. Help the writer recognize where the power lies."

Christopher Castellani agreed. Rather than trying to figure out whether a piece is good or bad, and why, he aims to state what he sees happening in a story. "Description, not evaluation, makes all the difference," he said.

As writers, we've all experienced others kind of feedback – the crushing criticism that makes us want to put a piece of writing in a drawer rather than

try to make it better, or the empty praise that offers support but not much else.

I began to feel a little uncomfortable, though, as the session went on. Doesn't becoming a serious writer involve severity, strictness, even a kind of violence? (Faulkner's famous "kill your darlings" came to mind.) Isn't it the job of writing teachers, and others, to let the writer know when a work falls short of being publishable – and to point out exactly how?

Not so fast, said Ron. The "editorial board model," he said, may not actually help the writer to improve. "Is it our job to stamp out bad writing," he asked, "or to encourage what's great, what's fresh?"

Ron described a writing workshop he once attended in which the first five minutes were called "happy time." For those five minutes, the participants talked about what they liked about a piece. Then the "real" work began, as they got down to what they didn't like, what wasn't right.

That's all wrong, Ron said. In his view, "happy time" is the real part.

Yet the point of constructive praise, these teachers said, is not to be "nice." Just the opposite, Ron said. "Constructive praise is the most rigorous way of all."

"I think it's cruel to be *only* kind," Lisa agreed. "*Just* being nice is not kind."

All the panelists acknowledged that the "what"-based, praise-based approach can be more difficult, and more time-consuming, than focusing on the flaws.

“Most writing teachers don’t have a critical framework for praise,” Christopher said, “and we have resisted developing one.”

What do we gain when we focus our attention not on judgment but on engagement and understanding?

As I walked out of this provocative session, that question was ringing in my ears.

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