A narrative approach to giving feedback OR Everything I know about feedback I learnt from The BFG

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Abstract

Background: It is undisputed that feedback is essential for learning and there is a considerable body of literature on providing feedback effectively. Recent literature has focused on the importance of learners being proactive in seeking feedback in order to improve learning outcomes. Furthermore, feedback is an interpersonal interaction between learner and educator and should not be mechanistic or one-way.

Objective: This article proposes a new framework for giving feedback, without supplanting any current theory. It proposes that a narrative approach establishes a better working relationship between learner and educator, with feedback consequently being more effective.

Method: A novel approach is taken. Roald Dahl's story of The BFG provided the inspiration to reflect on the interaction between learner and educator and to elucidate the important aspects of feedback and how they relate to a narrative approach. The article then examines how these aspects and a narrative approach play out in a case example.

Conclusion: The essential elements for giving feedback are: firstly, establishing a working relationship between learner and educator (achieved by a narrative approach) and secondly, using challenge and support (each in the right measure) to extend the learner. The educator's intent and good communication skills underpin the learner-educator interaction.

Keywords: feedback; narrative; literature; education; humanities

Giving feedback and The BFG
Even though Roald Dahl wrote for children, his stories also appeal to adults because, like any good literature, his themes are universal. His book, *The BFG* (Dahl, 2016), is about a child overcoming the adversities of an adult world, a theme that runs through much of Dahl's writing. In the story, the BFG (The Big Friendly Giant) captures dreams by day and at night he wanders the streets of London blowing selected dreams into the bedrooms of sleeping children. One night, Sophie, an orphan, is unable to sleep. She leaves her dormitory bed and goes to the window because she is curious to see what the street looks like at 'the witching hour'. She spies the BFG peering into houses but before she can run back to the safety of her bed, the BFG dashes to her window and snatches her away to the land of giants. There, Sophie learns all about the BFG, his world and his strange powers.

Sophie accompanies the BFG on a dream catching expedition and it is here, at about the middle of the book, in the magical chapter entitled ‘Dreams’ that Sophie learns more about the dreams and what the BFG does with them. Upon returning to his cave from the expedition, the BFG busies himself putting the only dream he managed to catch into a jar and then labeling it. Sophie reads the label.

*THIS DREAM IS ABOUT HOW I IS SAVING MY TEECHER FROM DROWNING. I IS DIVING INTO THE RIVER FROM A HIGH BRIDGE AND I IS DRAGGING MY TEECHER TO THE BANK…*(Dahl, p.91)

As an aside, it must be noted that the BFG's literacy is a little off the mark! Sophie's curiosity is aroused.

*‘Tell me honestly,’ Sophie said. ‘If you blew this dream into my bedroom when I was asleep, would I really and truly start dreaming about how I saved my teacher from drowning by diving off the bridge?’* (Dahl, p.92)

He tells her:

*‘You would be dreaming,’ the BFG said, ‘that the morning after you is saving the teacher from the river, you is arriving at school and you is seeing all the five hundred pupils sitting in the nearby assembly hall, and all the teachers as well, and the head teacher is then standing up and saying, ’I is wanting the whole school to give three cheers for Sophie because she is so brave and is saving the life of our fine arithmetic teacher, Mr Figgins, who unfortunately was pushed over the bridge into the river by our gym teacher, Miss Amelia Upscotch. So three cheers for Sophie!’ And the whole school is then cheering like mad and shouting bravo well done, and, for ever after that, even when you is getting your sums all gungswizzled and muggled up. Mr Figgins is always giving you ten out of ten and writing Good Work Sophie in your exercise book. Then you is waking up.’* (Dahl, p.92)

Sophie likes the dream. Receiving top marks in her schoolwork without any effort is any child's fantasy!

One might ask, what is the connection between Dahl's narrative and feedback? If we consider this story as a metaphor for giving feedback with Sophie being the learner, Mr Figgins the ‘ability to do maths’ and the BFG as educator, the connection becomes apparent. Though not overtly expressed, the dream captures quite succinctly two things that are at the core of giving feedback: challenge and support.

Firstly, challenge. Sophie is an intelligent girl (it is perhaps no accident that her name is derived from Sophia, the Greek word for ‘wisdom’). She knows that getting full marks from the teacher, even though her sums are wrong, is satisfying only at first. The same applies to learners in general. They usually know their strengths and weaknesses. Feedback that focuses only on strengths and downplays weaknesses leads to a false sense of security (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Eventually, like Sophie, the learner will "wake up" and the challenge therefore is, what is
Sophie/the learner going to do [about her maths]? 

Secondly, support. In the dream, support is presented in the form of the maths teacher being rescued, the subliminal message being, ‘You are brave. You have the strength. You can rescue your maths’. Learners don’t need to be told ‘you have performed poorly again’ or ‘you could have done better’. Such statements only serve to demoralize them and they may already believe that they cannot overcome their situation. Support has two purposes: firstly to assist the learner to comprehend the evaluation of their performance and its implications and secondly, to affirm the learner’s ability to succeed. (Hattie and Timperley, 2007) 

An important element behind this dream/feedback is the relationship between Sophie/learner and the BFG/educator. The relationship has been developing from well before the Dreams chapter, despite the obvious differences between the BFG and Sophie. The BFG is clearly much bigger than Sophie and, as an adult, more knowledgeable and more experienced. Sophie is a little girl who finds herself in a strange world that she knows nothing about. However, despite Sophie’s youth and inexperience, a connection develops between the two. Sophie is a very curious girl and, even though afraid of the giant, she asks questions in order to learn. Not all learners are curious or questioning like Sophie. They are often hesitant to ask questions. 

For his part, the BFG is tolerant and approachable. He doesn’t assert his ‘authority’ or power as a giant. He finds some of Sophie’s questions odd but he doesn’t discourage her. He responds willingly and does his best to explain patiently what she doesn’t understand. As Sophie learns about the BFG’s very different world, she comes to understand and appreciate him. The same occurs for the BFG. The relationship between them gradually changes and fear is replaced by mutual trust and respect.

‘I believe you,’ she said softly. 

She had offended him, she could see that.

‘I wouldn’t ever be fibbling you,’ he said.

‘I know you wouldn’t,’ Sophie said. But you must understand that it isn’t easy to believe such amazing things straight away.’

‘I understand that,’ the BFG said. (Dahl, p.37)

At the same time, the BFG doesn’t present himself as ‘all knowing’ (Dahl, p.66). He admits that he is self-taught. How often do educators admit that they don’t know something?

‘I is full of mistakes. They is not my fault. I do my best.’ (Dahl, p.92)

Sophie reproaches him sometimes for muddling up his words. He replies, What I mean and what I say is two different things (Dahl, p.41), implying that it is his intent that really matters. She is also unbelieving as regards the new and strange things of his world. They consequently have disagreements and while the BFG is patient with her, he sometimes resorts to being firm with her.

‘You is a lovely little girl, but please remember that you is not exactly Miss knoweverything yourself.’ (Dahl, p.92)

The BFG challenges Sophie to open up her mind and to broaden her awareness.
‘The matter with human beans,’ the BFG went on, ‘is that they is absolutely refusing to believe in anything unless they is actually seeing it in front of their own schnozzles.’ (Dahl, p.91)

Sophie was silent. This extraordinary giant was disturbing her ideas. He seemed to be leading her towards mysteries that were beyond her understanding. (Dahl, p.94)

In the ‘Dreams’ chapter, we see the relationship between Sophie and the BFG becoming almost equitable but still one of mutual respect. Following this chapter, the roles of educator and learner become reversed. The BFG learns from Sophie and they work together to resolve a very serious problem facing Sophie’s world and with the solution being to their mutual benefit.

Narrative and giving feedback

The story of the BFG affirms several aspects of feedback which are fundamental to the process, namely: the importance of the relationship between learner and educator (Moorhead, Maguire and Thoo, 2004; Bok, 2013), the learner being proactive in the feedback process (Bok, 2013; Boud and Molloy, 2013; Crommerlink and Anseel, 2013) and moreover, that educator and learner working together towards a common goal (the improvement of the learner) (Ende, 1983). These ‘fundamentals’ are also found in narrative (Launer, 2002). In listening closely to the illness narrative, the doctor strives to develop rapport and understanding and then, through shared decision making, to work with the patient on a plan towards recovery (Launer, 2002; Charon, 2006).

A narrative approach to feedback would therefore start with the learner’s perspective (Ramani and Krackov, 2012). The learner is heard (Launer, 2002; Ramani and Krackov, 2012) and, in doing this, is immediately positioned as central to the process. The groundwork has thus been laid for a working relationship to develop and one which will also address the power imbalance between learner and educator. This will be the key to the learner’s active participation in the feedback process, to following advice and being proactive with respect to their learning and also to seeking feedback in future.

Table 1: A narrative approach to giving feedback

- Developing a relationship of mutual trust and respect.
  - Learner and educator voice their perspectives, starting with the learner’s perspective.
  - Sharing information.
  - Arriving at a common understanding of the issues at hand.
  - Working together to create an action plan.
- Challenge and support, each in the right measure.
  - Challenge, for the learner:
    - In the dissonance between what was intended and what was actually done.
    - To improve and to extend their abilities.
  - Support:
    - For the learner to recognize and understand the issues
    - Of the learner, in the execution of the action plan.
    - Being mindful of how the learner is receiving and reacting to the feedback.
- The educator’s intent with respect to the aims of the feedback and what is in the learner’s best interest. The focus is on improvement for the learner.
- Good communication skills, which are fundamental to any interpersonal interaction.
A narrative approach to giving feedback entails (Table 1):

- **Communication**, or, as Launer says, a conversation (Launer, 2002). Information is shared (Moorhead, Maguire and Thoo, 2004) and perspectives discussed in a spirit of trust and mutual respect, (Ramani and Krackov, 2012; Boud and Molloy, 2013) with the intent of understanding each other and ultimately, working together to achieve negotiated goals.

- **The learner’s perspective** (narrative) (Launer, 2002). What is their experience? What do they perceive the issues to be? How do they feel about their situation? What are the obstacles to moving forward? The educator’s task is to elicit the narrative, to listen to and understand the learner’s perspective (Moorhead, Maguire and Thoo, 2004; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Ramani and Krackov, 2012). The learner is less likely to engage if they are not heard.

- **The educator’s perspective** (narrative) (Launer, 2002). What is the information to hand? What do they perceive the issues to be? What do they believe needs to be done? What is the purpose of giving feedback? The educator’s task is not only to communicate their perspective but also to assist the learner to understand the issues (Moorhead, Maguire and Thoo, 2004; Hattie and Timperley, 2007) because then they are more likely to comply with suggestions for improvement.

- **Working together** on a plan forward (creating a new narrative) (Launer, 2002). Learner and educator working together (Ende, 1983; Hattie and Timperley, 2007) to negotiate a realistic plan of action with defined goals (Ende, 1983; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Archer, 2010; Ramani and Krackov, 2012). The educator empowering the learner to strive and providing them with the appropriate support.

Two things underpin the narrative approach. **Good communication skills** facilitate and enhance the engagement of the learner and increase the power of the feedback (Ramani and Krackov, 2012; Bok, 2013; Boud and Molloy, 2013). Good feedback however, doesn’t have to be complex or sophisticated. What drives the feedback process is the educator’s intent (Ende, 1983). Nothing is achieved when the intent or the aims are misguided, even with excellent communication skills. The power of the relationship between learner and educator should never be underestimated because much can be accomplished when true connection has been achieved.

For change to occur, challenge and support are required together.

**Challenge** comes firstly in the cognitive dissonance that is created between what the learner intended to do and what was actually done (Ende, 1983; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). For various reasons, the impetus to change doesn’t necessarily come automatically from the learner (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Boud and Molloy, 2013). The learner, for example, is not always aware of what could have been done better. The educator’s task therefore is to reveal this to the learner by being direct and honest and, importantly, by informing why. Feedback is also best provided in a way that challenges the learner to extend themselves (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Archer, 2010), to think more deeply and broadly, to explore and discover and to arrive at solutions for themselves, as it were (Epstein I, 2003; Dennick and Spencer, 2011). Feedback that simply gives them the answers, without thinking for themselves, can be counterproductive (Hattie and Timperley, 2007) because there is no challenge to improve.

**Support** is weaved throughout the feedback process in the form of guidance with respect to exploring the issues, assistance to understand the issues and problem solving (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Another aspect of support is in addressing any unintended results of feedback (Ende, 1983; Moorhead, Maguire and Thoo, 2004; Archer, 2010). For example, in presenting the cognitive dissonance to the learner, the learner may become overwhelmed and feel...
that they are not good enough. The educator must therefore be continually mindful (Epstein, 2003) of how the learner is receiving the feedback and putting appropriate supportive measures (Archer, 2010) in place so that the learner is made to feel that they are capable of improving (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

Support and challenge are integral to a narrative approach, especially when trying to effect change (Launer, 2002), and the right balance needs to be struck between the two. The degree to which each is required will depend on the learner's abilities, needs and the context. High performing learners can be challenged more but still require support. It should not be forgotten that they also have their weak areas. Weaker learners, on the other hand, require more support and less challenge.

A case example

Table 2: "Alison"

| Alison is a General Practice trainee. Having worked for 6 months in one training practice, Alison decides to move to a different clinic because she wants to broaden her experience. After three months of working in this clinic, her Supervisor tells her that several patients have made serious complaints about her. He lists the complaints but doesn't elaborate on them and doesn't ask Alison for her perspective. Furthermore, he says that he is seriously concerned about the standard of her clinical skills and that he will be referring the matter immediately to the Remediation Officer (RO).

The RO, having been contacted by the Supervisor, arranges a meeting with Alison. He asks Alison to relate what happened. Alison says that she is perplexed by her Supervisor's feedback because he had not raised any concerns with her before and so she had been of the belief that everything was going well. Her Supervisor in the first training practice had been very happy with her clinical skills. She is now very upset and feeling as though she is incapable. The RO asks Alison for her perspective on the specific issues that her Supervisor had raised. He then asks her what she thinks about her clinical skills and whether there is anything with which she is having difficulty. Alison responds that she finds certain patient presentations challenging but she doesn't believe that she is as bad as her Supervisor says. The RO explores Alison's concerns further. The RO says to Alison that from the information at hand, it is difficult for him to determine whether there are indeed serious concerns regarding her clinical skills. He asks Alison whether it is acceptable for him to observe some of her consultations so that he can decide for himself. Alison agrees. After observing several consultations, the RO gives Alison feedback with respect to her clinical skills. He believes that there are some issues but not as serious as her Supervisor has said. In giving the feedback, the RO is mindful of Alison's reactions and thoughts on what he is conveying to her. She concurs with the issues that the RO has identified and agrees that she would like to improve her skills. They then discuss how this might be brought about. |

Table 2 relates the case of "Alison". If we consider this case in the light of the story of the BFG and of narrative principles, as outlined above, we see the following:

- The relationship between learner and educator. Alison's supervisor has simply imparted information. He has acted purely on his concerns and hasn't sought to hear Alison's perspective and therefore to engage her. The Remediation Officer (RO), on the other hand, has taken time to listen to Alison's concerns in order to gain her trust. He has also tried to be unbiased in his appraisal of the issues at hand by observing Alison's consultations himself. He has also involved Alison in the feedback process and in developing the plan of action. Alison's
relationship with her Supervisor is in question following his encounter with her. Alison will need her Supervisor's assistance to improve on her clinical skills. It is difficult to see how this will happen when the relationship is tenuous.

- **Challenge and support.** Alison’s supervisor has not been supportive in how he approached the situation. Apart from delaying in saying anything to her, he has challenged her profoundly by saying that her clinical skills are such that the RO has to be called in immediately. The RO on the other hand has been supportive in that he has been mindful of Alison's feelings and opinion throughout and has tried to present an impartial and balanced perspective. Furthermore, having conducted his own assessment, he doesn't believe that Alison's skills are "that bad". At the same time however, Alison has been challenged to consider her clinical skills objectively and to rise to the challenge of improving them. The RO indicates to her that she is capable of improving.

- **and intent.** The Supervisor's intent may have been to address the issues that he was concerned about, however it wasn't communicated effectively. The message that Alison received was that she was "no good". The RO's intent, from the outset, was to assist Alison. By engaging Alison (listening to her perspective) the RO was able to gain a better understanding of the situation, sympathise with Alison and then shift the focus from Alison's 'grievances' to sorting out the issues. Having achieved this, the next task was to develop a realistic plan of action with Alison and which would assist her to achieve the defined goals.

### Summation

The intention of this article isn't to supplant the extant theory on the principles of giving feedback (Ende, 1983; Kurtz, Silverman and Draper, 2005; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Ramani and Krackov, 2012; Boud and Molloy, 2013; Swanwick, 2014) but instead, to present a new framework for those principles. The article has taken a novel approach in using a literary text as a means of examining 'what matters' as regards giving feedback. Parallels have also been drawn between narrative principles and the principles of giving good feedback to highlight, once again, ‘what matters’, namely: the relationship between learner and educator and the learner's perspective. When these two elements are given their due attention, the groundwork will have been laid to a path forward, towards change and the improvement of the learner. To achieve this goal, challenge and support are provided, each as appropriate for the context. Fundamental to any interpersonal interaction are good communication skills and, underpinning everything, is the educator's intent. By ensuring that proper attention is paid to all these things, feedback will be more effective in the end, even in difficult situations. (Table 1)

### Some final words

As feedback, the dream that the BFG presents to Sophie is succinct and powerful. Indeed, if the BFG had been a psychiatrist, he would have been in the mould of Milton Erickson (Haley, 1993) who used unorthodox methods to resolve some difficult and complex problems. By reflecting on *The BFG*, it is not being suggested that all feedback should be given in this manner. Giving feedback in the expert manner of the BFG is perhaps a skill to be aspired to and this can certainly be attained through practice but also by participating in suitable professional development workshops (Archer, 2010; Ramani and Krackov, 2012).

Only one question remains to be answered. What to do with the gym teacher, Miss Upscotch, who pushed poor Mr Figgins into the river? In order to answer that question we should first read Roald Dahl's handbook on
professionalism, namely, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

**Take Home Messages**

**Notes On Contributors**

Dr George Zaharias is a GP and Medical Educator working in General Practice Training and with extensive experience in the field of remediation.

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Appendices

Declarations

The author has declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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