That way madness lies: Doctoral dispositions to critical feedback

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Dispassionate Receptivity to Feedback: The Crux of Doctoral Research

Successful doctoral researchers must adopt *dispassionate receptivity* to critical feedback. “Dispassionate” is *not* the sum of its parts; its contextual meaning with regard to critical feedback is not merely the sum of its grammatical decomposition into dis- (prefix), passion (root), and -ate (suffix). *Passion* is vital: it is the doctor’s *principium*—her umbilical source of sustainable nourishment. Therefore, a *dispassionate* scholar is one for whom critical feedback is eagerly sought: As scientists [should] conduct research in hopes of disproving their hypothesis; just as mathematicians prove theorems by subjecting their conjectures to *proof by contradiction*—literally supposing their conclusion is false, doctoral researchers should submit their work to peers and faculty earnestly craving discovery of its flaws.

Truth-Seeking and Humility: The Quintessence of True Scholarship

The true doctoral scholar’s passion for their studies remains undiminished by negative feedback because they remain objectively remote; their personal feelings, self-confidence and identity are all totally divorced from the severity of peer and faculty feedback. As this essay argues, the true scholar is overjoyed by discovery of flaws. The doctoral researcher’s reaction to negative feedback through peer-review, incisive faculty feedback, or rejection of a thesis proposal is dependent on whether they have the mindset of a true scholar.

Since the true scholar is only interested in *the truth*, if harsh, critical feedback reveals flaws, she is jubilant—she sees these flaws as opportunities to improve; she is grateful to learn she is wrong because she knows the obverse of a fault is a fixture; thus, the true scholar’s ego, self-image, and confidence are all categorically impervious to feedback of any variety, be it positive or negative—no affecting emotional reaction is triggered because a doctor is not
personally tethered to her research; instead, she is impartial, objective, and has adopted the humility so sublimely articulated by Cassius in *Julius Caesar*: “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings,” (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, lines 140-141, 1599/1972).

**Taking It Personally: The Reaction of a Novice**

Too often, novice doctoral researchers lack the self-confidence to embrace this impartial mindset (Noonan, 2015). Their relative insecurity and lack of assuredness causes the burgeoning doctoral scholar to erroneously conflate their need for positive affirmation with the feedback they receive on submitted work (Noonan, 2015). When this feedback is critical; when students receive a low grade or when their theses or claims are trounced, novice doctoral researchers take this feedback personally (Noonan, 2015). By contrast, true scholars accept feedback—especially harsh, critical rebuttals—with convivial equanimity (Noonan, 2015).

**Feedback Receptivity and Doctoral Identity**

Desiring personal validation through positive feedback on submitted work reveals the scholar-in-training has not yet hurdled the pupillary stage of their identity development cycle from student to doctor (Emmioğlu, McAlpine, & Amundsen, 2017). Table 4 of the 2017 study by Emmioğlu et al. empirically validates the spurious, confounding conflation of researchers’ self-esteem and positive feedback (see the bottom of page 79 of the study to view the table). Emmioğlu et al. (2015) found a staggering 93% of participants correlated positive feedback with “feeling like an academic,” (p. 79). This statistic may explain the staggering 59% attrition rate in PhD programs reported by Huang, Smith, Byers, Dickerson, & Shields (2015).
Conclusion

The successful doctoral researcher enthusiastically thirsts after criticism: they crave harsh, critical, vigorous rebuttals; they perceive the main objective of their research is to prove it wrong. Indeed, the aforementioned analogy to scientists is apt: Philosophy is the mother of science; thus, educational scholars and particle physicists are homoplastic—they share many common traits. Thus, the superordinate goal of any researcher should be the same as any scientist: to attempt to disprove their thesis.

Critical feedback helps expose flaws; without it, improvement is impossible: Researchers [should] gain nothing from empty praise; yet, the above-cited research studies by Noonan (2015) and Emmioğlu et al. (2015) strongly correlate self-regard and doctoral identity with the relative positivity or negativity of received feedback. This faulty correspondence of personal feelings and critical feedback is quite troubling; it portends doctoral attrition; it is an ominous threat to the objectivity, quality, and reliability of doctoral scholarship. As the deposed and exiled Lear says to Kent, "That way madness lies," (Shakspeare, King Lear, line 1823, 1606/1972).
References


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