

Transcript: Grad School Confidential, Episode 4

That Sinking Feeling: On Dealing with Criticism

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Suman Varghese 0:02

So it was my first week of grad school; it was a Master of Arts in journalism. And they had us writing these newspaper articles every day just to get us in the habit. In those first days, they used to take examples of student work and put it up in front of the class and really critique it. But I was feeling pretty good about myself. I was a pretty good writer, or so I thought, and I had done well in undergrad. So on about day three of the program, they put up an example of a student's work that was particularly poorly written. And they proceeded to completely tear it apart. And much to my horror, it was mine.

So they went on to talk about how it was sourced poorly, it was written passively, it wasn't in journalistic form. And as I slumped further into my seat, kind of dying of embarrassment, I even started to wonder if I had made a mistake in coming to this program.

Rob Desjardins 1:10

Grad School Confidential. A podcast about the unglamorous, and sometimes bewildering, life of the graduate student. That was Suman Varghese, our advisor and guide in this podcast series. Her story about absorbing tough feedback will sound familiar to grad students. That sinking feeling; the jolt of self doubt. Today on Grad School Confidential, we ask, what do you do in that moment? How do you bounce back from criticism?

I'm Rob Desjardins, here with Suman, and we're talking today about an experience that just seems to come with the territory in academic life.

Suman Varghese 1:51

Yeah, I'd say grad students are always under the microscope, from when they first start applying to schools and competing to get in, all the way to their defense. And so there's a lot of feedback along the way.

Rob Desjardins 2:01

And as your story shows, even when the feedback is useful, it can be bruising -- really throw you off your game.

Suman Varghese 2:11

Yeah, I definitely felt caught off-guard, to say the least, when I got that critique. And I think it was especially hard because I was new in the program, and I had these assumptions that I was a good writer. So there was a pretty big gap between my expectations and reality, which kind of made me want to forget that ever happened.

Rob Desjardins 2:28

Well, a lot of what we're going to talk about today is that moment. I remember one of my own experiences with a tough critique. I'd been working on a collection of essays that I eventually hoped to bundle together as a book. After a few years on this project, I summoned the courage to go out and speak at an international conference.

This was really something. It was a conference in France, in a second language, in front of a group of specialists I'd never met, but who are leading in my field. So I was nervous and terrified. And it turned out that the conference was, like, a triumph. People said, those are interesting ideas. You know, I felt like a hit; I had done really well. So I came home, full of energy and excitement. And then, just a few weeks later, I opened up an email from an expert that I consulted, and it was a comprehensive critique of my writing project.

And it was like a punch to the stomach. I felt paralyzed for a few moments. I was like, all my confidence just drained away. And imposter syndrome flared up. And I started to ask, Can I do this? Is it worth even trying this project? Have I been wasting my time all these years? Now, the irony in this whole thing is that at the time, I was working as a graduate writing advisor. I was advising writers on how to absorb and deal with feedback exactly like the feedback I'd just received. You know, I was giving them advice on, you know, take stock of your criticisms, organize them, use them to improve. Take some time away from the project. Don't let it get you down. And here I was, devastated. A so-called expert, frozen, and, you know, I guess, completely thrown.

Was that a common reaction to tough academic feedback?

Suman Varghese 4:42

Yeah, definitely common to feel lost or confused after you get feedback like that, especially because you had invested so many years into that project. I think it's really common when we get feedback and

criticism to feel threatened or attacked. And as a result, a kind of protective response kicks in. And that tends to be the fight or flight or freeze response, and that's the same mechanism that comes into play when we're feeling stressed, when we're feeling anxious, when there's a threat in front of us. The fight response might look like lashing out at people, getting really angry, being really defensive; the flight response might be avoiding dealing with it altogether, running away from it, not telling anybody about it. And the freeze response would be more that feeling paralyzed, deer-in-the-headlights kind of feeling.

Rob Desjardins 5:28

I think my reaction might have combined a little bit of the freezing and a little bit of the fleeing. And we heard of an example of what was distinctly more of a fight response in a story from Kevin Haggerty. He's one of the authors of "57 Ways to Screw Up in Grad School."

Kevin Haggerty 5:46

So this is a student who'd submitted a paper for reviewing. He got the reviews back, and they were fairly biting. And he disagreed with the assessment of the reviews. And so he came stomping into my office with a -- he'd written a response to the editor, and it was just this biting kind of response, in terms of, like, you don't know what you're talking about. The reviewers are idiots. How, you know, how could you possibly get reviewers who are this stupid? And I just thought, Oh, my God.

Rob Desjardins 6:18

I think I can relate to that reaction too, to be honest. So why, why does this criticism feel so threatening in the moment?

Suman Varghese 6:27

Especially for grad students, right, where your work is such a key part of your life, it can be really hard to separate ourselves from it. We feel like we are our work. In a lot of ways, our work becomes our identity. And then sometimes it's even hard to separate our worth and value from that work. So then a critique of our writing or our project or our thinking suddenly becomes a judgment on our value as a human being. So it can often lead to some really negative thoughts around not feeling good enough, not feeling like you belong in grad school, maybe triggering that imposter feeling like you mentioned. Some people might feel like they're failing. So it can be really easy to personalize it.

Rob Desjardins 7:07

And this may be especially true because grad school, for many of us, is really a new environment. Kevin Haggerty talks about the effects that this can have on many people.

Kevin Haggerty 7:20

So I think that part of this is about a transition from undergraduate education to graduate education, where most people who end up in graduate school have had academic careers that have been defined by a great deal of success, a lot of encouragement, a lot of people giving positive strokes about how good you are, you know, your papers are the best or close to the best, and all this kind of stuff. And you find yourself in grad school in a very different environment. Most of the people there, they've also had careers defined by success, they've also been at the top of their class.

Rob Desjardins 7:57

So as Kevin makes clear, grad students often aren't conditioned for these kinds of tough critiques.

Suman Varghese 8:05

Yeah, the analogy that comes to my mind is it's kind of like going to the Olympics. You might have been a top performer your whole career, but when you're suddenly surrounded by a bunch of other Olympians, the standards are just that much higher. So I think the same could be said for grad school. It's also important to recognize that everybody has a different sensitivity to criticism. So sometimes that's just based on our personalities, some people are more sensitive. But it can also be really dependent on just what we've been through in our lives. So if we've gotten a lot of constructive feedback, we might be really skilled at handling that. Whereas feedback and criticism can be a lot harder to handle if we've had some rough experiences with it in the past. So if we were criticized really harshly or punished for things we did, or mistakes we made, especially from people in positions of power, feedback can feel extra threatening, more painful, very rejecting. And it becomes really easy to interpret all kinds of feedback negatively even if it wasn't intended that way. So a good point of self reflection is to step back and just even ask ourselves where our sensitivity might be coming from. And it's also really important to just acknowledge, everyone's different and had different experiences. So the same feedback can feel very different from one person to the next.

Rob Desjardins 9:18

And the thing is, even if we're not prepared for these critiques, we're almost always going to receive them. They're sort of like a rite of passage for academics. We talked to two recent PhD graduates who have bounced back from tough critiques and are now flourishing in academic positions.

Hayley Morrison 9:37

My name is Hayley Morrison. I'm an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. My dissertation -- so it was a paper based or an article based dissertation. And before I actually defended, I was submitting those articles for publication. And so I received some feedback from a peer

reviewer on one of those articles. The reviewer suggested that social occupational theory would have been a better theory to ground this type of research in. Followed by the associate editor saying that they suggest that the author strongly considers reviewer two's concerns related to the theory used to guide the study, as well as the research methods.

So you can picture me, grad student, getting ready to defend their thesis. Has been working for four years, using the theory that I've been using, to only be told that I should go back to the beginning and use a different theory completely. I didn't even know what to say back to that, other than, well, that's not possible. So if that's the case, then I guess this work's not going to be published. So it was initially a huge blow for me, because I'm like, that's like, everything you've been working towards, for so long. Someone was just like, yeah, you should probably scrap it. So I really didn't know what to do or where to go with this kind of critique.

Jenna Lorusso 11:16

My name is Jenna Lorusso. I'm a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences at the University of Limerick, with a secondary affiliation in educational policy and leadership at the University at Albany, SUNY. So in a public academic setting, where I was sharing some research, somebody disagreed with me, a well established concept I was using in my research, and they prefaced their comments with, quote, I am going to hammer you. So it was really quite shocking. And really, there was no question in the comment; it was about a 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 minute rant, I would say, really railing against, that this has no value. You know, anything you do, doesn't matter that your work was so rigorous, because it's founded on this concept, it is without value.

I think it feels like that moment where you're like, I'm not sure I'm breathing. I think I've maybe, you know, I've just paused. And, you know, you're like, you do that body check where you're like, okay, am I still...what's my facial expression? Am I still smiling? I think that's what I ended up focusing on. And I maybe even tuned out for a moment into what they were saying, because I was thinking, you know, make sure you're not, your chin isn't on the floor. Yeah, it was really shocking. I think actually, the comments weren't as bad as some of the unprofessional language, like I'm going to hammer you. Things like that I was almost more hurt by, because, you know, it was really said with the intention to hurt me, right, rather than to get across a concept.

Rob Desjardins 13:26

I don't know what I do if someone told me at a conference that they were going to hammer me. That's some grace under pressure from Jenna. Listening to their stories, Suman, there's a big difference between the types of feedback they actually received, right? Like one was aimed at the work, and one was aimed at the person.

Suman Varghese 13:48

Feedback can be constructive or destructive. So if it's constructive, it's really aimed at helping the person -- you know, making their product better, helping them learn. So it's really useful. Whereas if criticism is destructive, it's really more aimed at hurting or embarrassing somebody, kind of like what Jenna encountered. And a lot of times, it's not even true. So if you feel like you're being bullied or unfairly targeted, I would say, it's really important to get other people involved because that's not okay. And it's really damaging. So you may even need your department or faculty involved. But hopefully most of the criticism we encounter will fall in the constructive realm, even if it doesn't feel great, or even if we don't agree with it.

Rob Desjardins 14:28

Hopefully. And the good news is that both Haley and Jenna did recover from the shock of their critiques.

Hayley Morrison 14:38

I kind of started to second guess my entire, like, research project, which we don't think is good because I had been working on it for so long. I was sad. I was devastated that that was something somebody was suggesting. And then initially I was kind of mad about it, because I'm like, I think that that's not a fair suggestion. But after talking to my supervisor about this, who ended up being, like a key point of realization: oh, guess what, you just have to maybe go back and justify why you chose the theory that you did, explain it. And once I started to rethink that and go back to the work and actually look at what I had written, I realized it wasn't as clear as it could have been.

Jenna Lorusso 15:30

The room was tense. For sure. So yeah, everyone looking around, who's in, who's tagging and who's tagging out. So many people rallied around me that were there. Nobody, let me, you know, sit in it alone. People in positions of power stepped in and in ways that they could, either immediately at the time or afterwards, and did something about it. So I think for me, a huge takeaway is how many other people are there to lift you up to support you in whichever way that they can. Because I had had one previous experience like this. And so I kind of had that to say, you know, I don't spontaneously combust after this. You know, I can learn from this. And so that was kind of a nice thing to say, this is going to be so awkward and so painful. But I can get through this, I'm sure.

Rob Desjardins 16:35

So for both Haley and Jenna, that moment of impact where they absorbed the initial shock of the critique was tough, but they they both navigated it well. Suman, can you tell us more about how to deal with those types of situations?

Suman Varghese 16:52

Yeah, it's almost like we have to learn to deal with the feedback in the moment and then figure out what to do with it. Author Joseph Grenny actually came up with a neat acronym that I think helps. So it's CURE: collect yourself, understand, recover and engage. So the collecting yourself is really, what do you do in those initial moments? So for Jenna especially, I mean, being in front of a bunch of people and kind of being attacked, it's pretty difficult to know what to do. So taking a deep breath can actually be a good first step. I know it sounds like a bit of a cliché, but we know deep breathing really tells your body that you're okay, that you're safe. And it can help turn off that fight or flight response that we talked about off the top. The second piece, understand, is really just try to figure out what is this person trying to tell me, so you can be curious, you can ask questions, look for clarification. Then you really want to give yourself some time to recover. So you might want to think about it, if you're in a conversation, maybe walk away, or if it's an email, just put it aside for some time. And that'll give you time to reflect. And then finally, you want to engage the feedback. So you want to take a look at it critically. And just like Haley was able to do, like, you want to look for, is there any truth or substance to it? Maybe it's super helpful, maybe only part of it is. If you can find that kernel of truth, chances are, you can use that to make your product better, or like Haley, it allows you a chance to look at your work more critically, and maybe just explain yourself in a different way.

Rob Desjardins 18:18

So if someone is having a hard time separating themselves from the critique, what could they do?

Suman Varghese 18:25

As always, it's helpful to look at our thoughts in these situations. So if we hold a lot of unhelpful beliefs or negative thoughts around being criticized, chances are, it's going to be harder to deal with it. So for instance, some negative thoughts might include: criticism means I'm stupid, or they don't like me, this is embarrassing, I'm a failure. Or maybe it's more about the other person, they're stupid. So look for the false assumptions, challenge them, try to be more objective in how you're looking at it. Feedback is part of life. It's definitely part of the grad school experience. So actually learning to face it in a constructive way is a necessary skill.

Rob Desjardins 19:02

And I imagine there are some dangers if we start to fear criticism.

Suman Varghese 19:07

For sure. It kind of makes sense that if we start to fear feedback or criticism, that we might not take the risks we usually would. And that's exactly what the research shows. So if we have a fear of getting negative criticism, studies show that it reduces learning, it reduces academic self esteem and academic

success. And this idea of risk taking is a big part of it. So when students are willing to take risks, they're more likely to participate, enjoy learning, be motivated, overcome difficulties, be experimental in the process. But if you're kind of fearful, chances are it might be easier to play it safe or not participate, not engage. So we definitely know, like, being able to take feedback in a positive and constructive way is super important in the learning process. And I can definitely attest to that through my own experiences, you know, in that story I told off the top. It was really tempting to just kind of ignore that critique or defend myself, but I think in the end, I can see the accuracy of it. And it really shaped the way I learned how to write and communicate and in the end was super helpful.

Rob Desjardins 20:11

This is a good place, Suman, to come back to my own story, because the criticism I received was constructive, like Hayley's. It really wasn't devastating, you know, despite what I felt at first. And after I'd had some time to process it, I started to take the feedback on board, right. And that involved doing what I was often telling other writers to do -- you know, things like, you take charge of the critique, you group criticisms into categories; that lets you kind of analyze and make sense of the critique, kind of be able to tell the whole story of what the person is asking from you. And what I did from there is, I developed a plan. And when I did that, I could feel a lot of the stress really melting away. There was, I don't know, something about, like, the concrete activity of putting things in order that felt empowering. And I think, really, I think what helped me most of all, was talking about the plan, right, with a few trusted colleagues.

And in the end, happy ending, I was able to publish the portion of the project on which had received the critique, and I knew it was much better than before. Like, the critique had forced me to kind of pull away from the emotional investment I had in the project, back away to look at it from a new perspective. It gave me distance.

And that's it for another edition of Grad School Confidential. We'll have helpful resources on dealing with criticism on our website: uab.ca/gsc. If you have feedback or would like to suggest a show topic, contact us at gradschoolconfidential@ualberta.ca. Grad School Confidential is a production of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research at the University of Alberta.

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