

# LIFE IN THE MARGIN: THE HIDDEN AGENDA IN COMMENTING ON STUDENT WRITING

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"The quality of writing instruction is today seriously compromised" because of the "excessive reliance on marginalized faculty," warns the Conference on College Composition and Communication Executive Committee (329). While we, as instructors of developmental writing at George Washington University, have long agreed that the heavy reliance on part-time and temporary appointments within most composition programs may be "the worst scandal in higher education today" (330), we agreed not so much out of any feeling that students are being short-changed, but more because of the inequalities created within the teaching faculty by the two-class system. Even though we bring training, experience, publications, good student evaluations, and a commitment to teaching to our jobs, we are expendable, ill paid, and little respected for what we do.

Three years ago, after our first staff meeting of the fall semester, we began a self-study that initially was conceived as a way to analyze our commenting theories and the pedagogies of our developmental writing course—English 9. What we

discovered was that our commenting pedagogies had more to do with ubiquitous political ramifications of being marginalized part-timers or temporary appointees than we would have liked to admit. Indeed, we discovered that often our professed theories did not govern our commenting so much as did a *hidden agenda* aimed at winning acceptance from those above us and at protecting our jobs.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Efforts of the Directors of Writing**

During the time most of the authors of this paper have taught at GW, approximately eight years, there have been four directors of writing. Although only two of the four have been tenured members of the regular faculty, they all campaigned long and hard to improve in a substantive way the lives of the composition instructors. The directors, often on their own initiative, authorized part-time staff to help determine the curriculum and to interview job applicants and hire staff. Due to the directors' efforts, positions of course directors were created in 1982 and were opened to part-time instructors. The positions became sought after because of the extra pay, added responsibility, and increased opportunity for professional growth and development.

Even though the directors of writing, through these actions, demonstrated respect for the instructors, many other administrators and many full-time, tenured or tenure-track literature professors who hold the purse strings too often see composition instructors as a kind of academic underclass—nonprofessional, uncommitted, and transient. Year after year, the directors of writing plead with the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences for the small advancements and modest increases in pay that are finally granted. The good news for us is that finally some changes are being made, owing to the sympathetic activism of a new Dean and also of an energetic English Department Chair. The bad news is that at this writing only five full-time positions for teachers of writing have been created, for which 45 part-time instructors and a number of outside applicants vied. Moreover, these five appointments are for a limited term of only three to five years.

## The English 9 Instructors

In spite of the working conditions, our marginalized group in English 9, an intensive-writing developmental course primarily for those students with the lowest verbal test scores among entering freshmen, has had an esprit de corps that may have resulted in part from the ego boost provided by our being selected from wider composition staff to teach in the English 9 program at compensation a bit above that for other composition courses. In a job with few tangible rewards and constant reminders of low status, such recognition is important. Because each section meets five hours a week, compared with three for the regular composition courses, and the work is often relentless, we turned to each other for support, strengthening the ties within the program, seemingly improving instruction, and, in any event, providing rich opportunities for testing and evaluating the many different ideas and approaches that we shared.

Even though our group's small number encouraged us to share instructional materials and ideas, we rarely interacted in one area—the evaluation of student writing. On the few occasions when we shared graded papers, the papers tended to be carefully selected ones, probably not representative of the work of the typical student; whole groups of graded essays were almost never shared. Partly because of our job insecurity, we harbored a fear that commenting practices might expose us as less than fully competent. Perhaps we just bought into the system's apparent view that we were surely less than competent professionals, or else we would not be involved in such a lowly occupation as teaching composition. There certainly hovered about us some nebulous fear that our actual words and comments on students' essays might allow someone to compile evidence that could be used against us. Our positions were so tenuous and our self-esteem so low that there were some lines we couldn't cross, some risks we couldn't take.

Since our pay was pitiful, since we received little or no professional recognition, and since just keeping up with the paper loads in these so-called part-time jobs took all of our time, we did what we thought we were hired to do—prepare classes and grade papers. It seemed clear that we weren't being

paid to publish or stay current with theory and practice in our field. Money, as a rule, was not available to allow part-timers to attend professional meetings or to present papers, so we had limited opportunity or pressing need to examine or defend our views and practices. We were only a dull reflection of the group that Sarah Warshauer Freedman calls "today's enlightened teachers and researchers [who] agree that response includes more than the written comments teachers make in the margins of their students' finished piece of writing" (4). Lacking the time and opportunity to test our practice against emerging theory, and thinking we lacked the freedom to let our own theories evolve into something deeper and richer, we ran in place as fast as we could, trying to do what we thought was expected of us in order not to lose that little niche we had for ourselves. But we needed something. We needed to learn that we were not working in a vacuum, and we needed to explain to ourselves and to each other the thread that united our practices and goals. We needed to start thinking about what we were doing in our developmental program in terms of our responses to our students. What did we actually say to our students and what were the implications of those words?

### **Purpose and Definition of the Study**

Our self-study—which allowed us to face the deep structures, the baggage, and the hidden agenda of our commenting and to start evolving toward new theories and pedagogies—was conducted under the assumption that commenting is, at least to a degree, individual and subjective. Nonetheless, we all agreed that we should be able to articulate a specific purpose in commenting and to utilize a method of commenting that was consistent with our own theoretical and pedagogical values. We were especially interested in learning whether the students thought our commenting encouraged and helped them. As a first step, during one semester we individually monitored our commenting processes by writing preliminary comments describing the nature and style of, and rationale behind, our comments. Next, each member of the study group photocopied approximately ten graded essays from one class,

composed during the same time and in response to the same assignment, and gave them to a colleague to be reviewed. Without having consulted the other colleague or the colleague's preliminary statement, the peer-reviewer then wrote an analysis, based on the graded essays alone, of the colleague's "apparent" methodology and philosophy in regard to commenting. We also asked students to write about their reactions to our comments. We studied our responses to both the peer review and our students' reactions in relation to the growing body of theory dealing with commenting. Over a two-year period, we agonizingly reevaluated and repeatedly revised our initial statements.

During our self-study we looked again and again at our commenting practices, at our explanations for what we did, at student responses, and at theoretical paradigms. Until about mid-point in our self-study, we would have described our commenting practices as conscientious, theory-based, and student-oriented. Conscientious we were, but we came to see that we had engaged in practices that were inconsistent with the realization of the most positive student attitudes, the best possible student writing, and our own intellectual and professional growth.

### **Initial Findings in the Self-Study**

Our mixed messages on students' papers often ended with the words "Please do not be discouraged by these comments." After dealing with problem after problem on essay after essay, we were naively appalled when our self-study revealed excessive concern among our students about sentence-level issues and correctness and a widespread pattern of confusion and discouragement seemingly caused by our profuse commenting.

Wrote one colleague in our group:

Commenting on me, one of my students stated, 'My professor comments on every paper. Whether it is for grammar, punctuation or spelling. I believe she is looking for the perfect college paper.' This remark and others like

it revealed to me that I have, oxymoronically, been guilty of gross fastidiousness, wanting my students to love perfect word choice and niceties of the print code, although I know that the perfect word only surfaces when meaning demands it, and that the print code cannot possibly be the servant of hollow ideas or false conclusions.

Another colleague reflected on the realization that her commenting practices discouraged her students:

Following the writings of Donald Graves, C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, and others, such as Cynthia Onore, I have wanted to promote authority and increased competence in the student's rhetorical decision-making. Yet, oblivious to the obvious contradiction, I commented painstakingly and voluminously on line after line of a student's final essay. My peer reviewer suggested reducing the number of comments, adding that 'thoroughness' of my commenting might not show the students a hierarchy among the problems. What he did not say, but what seems clear to me now, is that the sheer weight of my comments was what discouraged the students.

Another colleague reflected on the issue of ownership of a text:

Nancy Sommers' statement that 'the teacher appropriates the text from the student by confusing the student's purpose in writing the text with her own purpose in commenting' (149) mirrors my primary concern that my comments were judgmental. Although they were often framed as questions to indicate that the student was the authority, I was actually saying, 'I am the doctor and you are not.' I was trying to show the student that he or she needed the course and, as a consequence, me. I viewed my comments as visual evidence that I actively read student papers.

As we read students' responses to our comments, we were

often surprised that our comments had not only hurt students' feelings, but had also elicited at times almost a self-hatred or a contempt toward their own efforts. One young woman said, "My professor's style in commenting is on grammar and errors in syntax. My impression is plain with no feeling except a feeling of disgust with my paper." Often, as we reread past comments on student essays, we were dismayed at the tone we had used. One colleague wrote:

I discovered that often my comments were mean-spirited: framed as questions, they also allowed me to be quite rude under the guise of seeking the student's consent for my being so. For example, 'Are you sure that your reader will understand the complexity of your argument if you reduce it to such terms?'—with appropriate parts of the text underlined, circled, or in some way brutalized—translates as 'Simpleton!'

One colleague had tried to follow a course-wide curriculum and text, but found he was unable to evolve in his theory or even to experience the same success within the classroom as he had in the past. However, as a compliant part-time instructor, he did what he thought was expected of him, irrespective of whether it seemed to work. He wrote:

Our self-study has made me see how much of what I used to do has been swallowed up by real or imagined departmental expectations. I have cut down group work to fit the textbook into the schedule. The workshop is now something I sometimes do in my class; it used to be the class. My written comments have changed. I am more prescriptive these days. I will even tease, perhaps provoking one or two lazy voices. Perhaps this need to control has to do with frustration at the manner in which I teach.

Our students were confused about what was most important in writing and lacked the broader perspective, a world view, a top-down or hierarchical approach that we thought we had advocated. We thought we were eliminating barriers, but

instead, we were erecting additional barriers that too often prevented our students from taking chances and making discoveries. Although our mistakes seem so obvious in hindsight, when job insecurity, low pay, and low status define a program, the effects are far-reaching. Wrote one colleague:

The bottom line is that my comments are not meant solely for the student. Behind each paper is the specter of the chain of administrators: Course Director, Director of Composition, Chair of English, Dean. I appropriate texts in a confused effort to justify my position as instructor. In the end, I realize that the problem is not print code versus message; it is the message I send when I comment. I need to banish the administrators and be my own doctor.

As a result of our self-study, not only were pedagogies changed, but old theories evolved, and some theories were discarded altogether. Wrote one colleague:

Sam Draggia in his essay 'The Effects of Praiseworthy Grading on Students and Teachers' concludes that less skilled writers may prefer traditional essay grading over praiseworthy grading because they rely 'on the teacher's identification of errors to determine the revisions they would make, seeing the eradication of these errors as the single way to improve their writing' (47). However, I am now prepared to adopt a new strategy. I want to model my future commenting on the praiseworthy grading method.

The colleague who found she had been guilty of "gross fastidiousness" now vowed that "my students and I will swing recklessly into the arena of ideas and argument; in so doing, we stand a chance of breaking through the barriers of shallow thought and assumptions that are acquired without experience."

Stating a determination common to many of us, one colleague wrote that she is going to "give more time and energy to working in groups or individually rather than attempting to accomplish so much on a mass basis in the

classroom." Also she is going to work "to reach students in terms and images they use in their lives." She added that, "As one student stated very clearly: 'I like it when you talk about patterns in writing being like patterns in basketball. Then I understand.'"

We all understood that the changes we wanted to make went beyond pedagogy. We were committing ourselves to a theoretical base that allowed for evolution and growth within ourselves as well as within our students. We knew that, rather than passively accepting our status as members of an academic underclass, we had to find, or make, time to reflect, to do research, to write, to try to give papers and to publish. In order to do all of these things, we had to find ways out from under the load of papers. One colleague began making changes while the self-study was still underway. He wrote:

I tried a variation of Richard Haswell's technique (165-66), whereby all editorial mistakes are indicated only by a marginal checkmark. I made no comments on the text and attached a coversheet with one overall comment. I frequently remained descriptive rather than prescriptive, again with the purpose of drawing the students' attention to what they themselves presented. The students soon learned that they were responsible for making and keeping commitments to readers.

Like the other members of the study group, this colleague was concerned about the time he spent writing comments on student papers. With this in mind, he wrote, "Maxine Hairston's 'On Not Being a Composition Slave' was a major impulse behind my commenting strategy. My time on each paper was cut almost in half, and I no longer felt like a slave to the stacks of papers."

### **Constructing Ourselves**

In our writing program, instructors have been asked to submit several graded essays to the course director, who in turn evaluates the work of the instructor and attempts to ensure that

consistent and appropriate standards are maintained throughout the program. Of course, we instructors have attempted to choose those essays that reflect best upon us. We perceived these to be the papers with many comments and an average to low grade. Indeed, we had sometimes been advised by faculty members in positions of authority to "mark everything" on an essay. Comments from other departments about the low quality of student writing would also reach us, suggesting that the university expected us almost singlehandedly, with little or no help from our colleagues across the university, to transform our diverse student population into a cadre of skilled writers. However, the comments about low-quality writing often had more to do with comma chasing than with the making of meaning.

How similar we were to our freshman students who were trying not only to become acclimated to college life, but who were also trying, as both Richard Beach and David Bartholomae suggest, to "construct" themselves. Bartholomae says, students are "invented" by academic discourse, and Beach says, "Students must therefore learn to approximate the discourse conventions of their prose that defines their roles or persona within the classroom or wider academic context" (130). As composition instructors, we too were unsure of the conventions, unsure of the rules of the game and of the role we were expected to play. Margaret Himley, in her essay "A Reflective Conversation: Tempos of meaning," included in the collection *Encountering Student Texts*, describes insights much like those gained in our English 9 self-study that she and her writing-teacher colleagues gained in a group evaluation of student essays at Syracuse University. She says that "we, too, as teachers in a rapidly changing program, were in transition, moving between paradigms, straddling two worlds, and sensing our vulnerability to the same charge of naivete as [a] new freshman writer was" (11). Like Himley's instructors, we, the English 9 staff, answerable to so many, "constructed ourselves" (12).

## The Hidden Agenda

Gradually we came to realize that our ill-defined, vulnerable positions had more to do with the way we evaluated student essays than we once might have admitted. Each of us in English 9 had to admit to at least two items on a hidden agenda—*acceptance* and *protection*. As composition instructors we were easily caught up in the longstanding more-is-better school of commenting that for too long has been shared up and down the academic hierarchy. Therefore, in order to show our worth and be accepted and rewarded by all levels of that hierarchy, we were forced to conform to the notion that status, or at least validation, partially rested on our competence at "grading" papers, which translated means "copious commenting."

We were not unlike the "good girl" of the case study in Sperling and Freedman's "A Good Girl Writes Like a Good Girl" who writes "to make the teacher happy," writing "in ways that reveal how compliant one is to the demands/desires of the teacher-authority" (357). Similarly, we gave lip service to the view that students should not attempt to adhere to some ideal text we instructors carry in our minds, but all the while we tried to determine the ideal text of whoever was above us in the pecking order, too often wondering what "they" might think of our responses to student writing.

If we followed our own instincts and tried to keep marking to a minimum so as not to overwhelm and discourage our students, we left ourselves unprotected. Should a grade challenge arise, then the main concern would become whether we had justified the grade with a multitude of comments. Often challenges that become contentious are adjudicated by chairpersons who do not teach composition or by deans outside the department. The instructor has reason to worry that these people may not support a part-time instructor or a junior member whose few facilitative comments may indeed fail to provide full justification for a grade, even though that grade may have been determined through a careful, lengthy, and detailed evaluative process. Louise Wetherbee Phelps, in "Images of Student Writing: The Deep Structure of Teacher Response," would call such an attitude a

*closed* conception of the student text [in which] the reader treats the inscribed text as self-contained, complete in itself. Though there may be a history of previous drafts or even the expectation of future revision, the reader addresses the text as a discrete discourse episode to be experienced more or less decontextually. (49-50)

Phelps, whose essay is included in Chris Anson's collection *Writing and Response*, explains a theoretical evolution that takes place when teachers reflect and analyze the frameworks or the baggage they bring with them in responding to student writing. She argues for "thoughtful reflection[,] . . . the careful observation of meanings in behavior and its consequences" (61) in reading student writing as the most important way to make theoretical implications clear.

What is clear from our self-study, besides a certainty that the process we have gone through should be a model for other writing faculties, is that commenting must echo the individual classroom and give voice to the often unspoken theory that informs the instruction. Commenting as a "compliant good girl," because we fear that any deviation might adversely affect our status within the department and university, undermines the relationship we have with our students and often renders us ineffective.

## **Conclusion**

The process of requesting scrutiny from students and colleagues and then analyzing those responses has allowed each of us to take stock of our beliefs and then to be thrown back into a continuing examination of how best to allow our practices to reflect those beliefs. Jim Berlin suggests that such a study is "the test of one's competence as a composition instructor" (59). We are like Himley's teachers "moving between paradigms," as we immerse ourselves more fully in theory in order to understand its power and potential, and also as we attempt to participate more fully within the Academy, claiming a rightful place, not as eradicators of error, but as

educators who are aware that, as Mike Rose reminds us, "current theory and research [allow] us to see that writing is central to the shaping and directing of certain modes of cognition, is integrally involved in learning, is a means of defining the self and defining reality, is a means of representing and contextualizing information, and is an activity that develops over one's lifetime" (348).

Our experience bears witness to Chris Anson's assertion that "there is no domain more private, more unscrutinized among teachers than response to writing, perhaps because we are concerned about 'intruding' on the academic privacies and freedoms of our colleagues." What Anson fails to assert and should recognize is that until teachers of writing are empowered with full-time, permanent appointments, the status quo of responding to writing and teaching writing will seldom be challenged by the enormous numbers of expendable and ill-paid instructors. As a result of our study we have been "shaken from our complacency, awakened to a more reflective intellectual attitude" (359). Most importantly, we have been awakened, perhaps angrily, to how marginalized status compromises us in the classroom and in the academic community, as well as compromising our students' education. We know that we have more to give to our students' intellectual lives than we can accomplish as part-timers or temporary appointees. Moreover, we are resolved that we will no longer be Composition Slaves and, above all, will no longer honor hidden agendas.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Although *hidden agenda* differs from the *hidden curriculum* discussed in curricular studies, both concepts explain the unstated purposes behind pedagogy. See Henry A. Giroux and Anthony N. Penna, "Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum," *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (Grandby, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), 21-42.

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