THE ARTIFICIAL ART OF EVALUATING WRITING

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One morning several years ago I was returning to my office from a freshman composition class when I came across the following words on a brass plaque in a newly landscaped area of the campus:

> The rock gardens through which these steps ascend owe their existence to the inspiration and generosity of Elsie Irwin Sweeney (1888-1972), of Columbus, Indiana, whose friendship toward Indiana University and whose concern for the beauty of this campus are hereby gratefully acknowledged.

As I paused by the plaque, my arm tiring from the weight of several dozen three-to-four page student essays, it struck me what a complex thing was my understanding of that simple sign. My surprise came not so much from what I was aware I knew "grammatically" about the sign as from the other levels of language competence it required. There was no denying that I had to process its syntax, from embedded clauses to the final "agentless" passive. But I had to be skilled as well in a host of other, equally important comprehension strategies just for simple literacy.

There was, for instance, what we understand intuitively about the semantics of verbs that usually take animate subjects: the gardens didn't *owe* their existence to Mrs. Sweeney or her inspiration and generosity. Even if her money paid for someone to nurture the flowers and shrubs from seed, *gardens* included inanimate things; and so I had to know that

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"existence" meant not life but whatever makes up rock gardens. I had to know — again, as part of my competence — that the sign was a certain kind of dedicatory speech act which at once announced the gardens' existence, expressed gratitude to their benefactress, and memorialized her in metal and stone. In other words, I had to know that the plaque *did* something, and did not just *mean*.[1] I had to know, too, the conventions that underlie such a speech act: that Mrs. Sweeney's inspiration and generosity came not from her work with shovel and hoe but from the signing of a check; yet nothing existed in the message alone to tell me this. I had to know that the sign relied wholly on its context to make much sense — that it was referential beyond itself, since neither *these* nor *this* is textually anaphoric. At the same time, I had to be a part of this context, both in the rock gardens and on the campus.

Beyond my simple understanding of the message hid all kinds of esthetic possibilities: the words' rhythm and sound, or the choice not of *descend* but *ascend,* which points upward toward heaven, praise, and light. In short, the plaque required even for the rudiments of sense several interrelated levels of language knowledge in addition to its "grammar."

As I worked through the stack of essays later that evening, my mind kept returning to the plaque. The essays were, in effect, not unlike the words on the plaque; they too were in English, and used the same rules (if not always correctly) of syntax, morphology, etc. But as I turned the pages one by one, never once did I have the impression of seeing (not to mention enjoying) whatever "gardens" they referred to, nor of thinking much about the people whose being they etched. I shrugged and continued. After all, I was grading papers, not reading *Time* or touring a museum with guidebook in hand. I have, however, thought a good deal about the plaque since that day, and am now convinced that it is the degree of this discrepancy between evaluation and communication which makes or breaks the success of our teaching, and which it is my purpose to discuss here.

Much recent work in composition theory has focused on the dozens of choices writers have available to them (and need to make) as they compose.[2] On the reader's side, a great deal of insight has come from knowledge of comprehension strategies, including those from cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence.[3] The outcome of this research from both points of view has been to establish

various psychological models of reading and writing all the way from the most minute details of language to knowledge-

At the same time, however, little attention has been paid to the more specific reading process of teachers as they evaluate students' prose — a process which for the bulk of us is undeniably different from our reading prose in the "real world" beyond the classroom. If, as so much theory seems to imply, writing can be treated globally whether it takes place in a composition class or a busy newspaper office, it ought to follow that teachers' reading processes as they evaluate essays hold true to the currently established notions of text-frames, schemas, and inferencing. It is safe to say that we now know more about how people comprehend and produce various kinds of discourse than ever before.

comprehension. We know from intuition, however, that this is not the case; otherwise we would hear far fewer complaints about that hair-pulling task of grading papers. Of course, communication is a two-way street, and no one will deny the effects of incoherence, dullness, and poor usage on a reader's patience. My real interest here, however, is not so much what we see glaring at us from the sophomoric muddle of the prose we often face, as what we *don't* see. Consequently, we often evaluate those elements in our students' prose least important to it as a potential device for communication between people.

In every day written communication, language use can be broken down into three basic perspectives: the *textual,* the *contextual,* and the *pragmatic.* The textual perspective refers to all the purely linguistic aspects of the message: its syntax, phonology, morphology, graphemics, etc. The contextual perspective refers to the text's "situation" and medium: a billboard along a highway, a legal notice in a newspaper, the moving dots of an electric publicity sign in a crowded mall. The pragmatic perspective involves the relationship between the writer and reader, and the text's purpose: to persuade, to inform, to dedicate, to accuse, to eulogize, to condemn, to delight with verbal play. Clearly, the perspectives depend on each other, and things happen between them: a child's roadside lemonade sign can err textually, yet by virtue of its context (a hot day along a busy road) be quite successful pragmatically. An automobile mechanic's invoice might be textually unblemished, yet contextually inappropriate (e.g., spray-painted on the side of the customer's Mercedes), leading to a breakdown in pragmatic

function. The perspectives, then, are not as exclusive as they seem; many so-called textual elements such as coreference relations go beyond the text into the reader's world-knowledge.

If we think of student writing in similar terms, several problems arise in the contextual and pragmatic perspectives. Some of these problems may, in fact, partly explain many teachers' reluctance to deal with these two perspectives at all. First, the context of student writing appears fixed; the students almost always write essays from a limited set of essay-types. Usually they are double-spaced, with margins for comments. They are written variously at home, in the cafeteria, or in the classroom, but regardless of where they are composed, the imagined "setting" is usually the same both for writer and reader: the classroom. Pragmatically, the students write for a single, known audience in order to reach a level of proficiency such that they can at last put behind them their odious writing requirements. ("Purpose" is sometimes more complicated than this within the class, e.g., when students try to figure out what most impresses the teacher stylistically, or when they must apply a concept such as "topic sentence" to their prose. Communicative function then becomes a matter of overtly demonstrating something to the teacher.) It is no wonder, within this framework, that both context and pragmatics are ignored, especially (and most damagingly) in evaluation.

If writers continuously make choices governed by the interaction of these three perspectives, then teachers have correspondingly complex choices to make in their evaluations — even a duty to do so. Figure 1 illustrates schematically some of these choices in terms of the three perspectives.
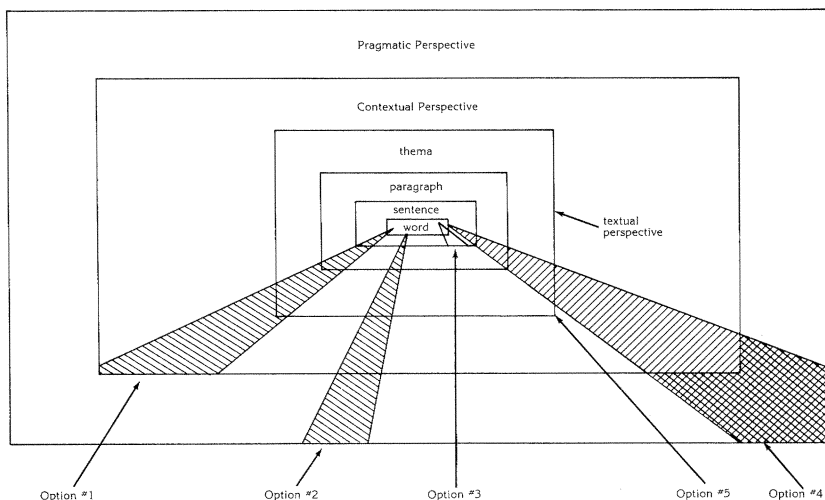
Fig. 1: Some Evaluative Options by Perspective

The textual perspective is often discussed at four levels: word, sentence, paragraph, and thema (overall textual organization). The word level might include references to lexis, graphemics, or morphemics (e.g., past tense forms). At the sentence level, matters of syntax are popularly discussed, as well as "print-code" conventions such as punctuation. Mention of internal logic, demonstration, evidence, and detail are favorite references to individual paragraphs, and the thema level finds in it comments on point of view (strictly as a matter of language), mode of discourse, or the writer's response to experience. From the textual perspective, in other words, writing is analyzed as an artifact of language, removed from context and purpose.

The contextual perspective will partly depend on what kinds of assignments students complete. For instance, inventive teachers often have their students write argumentative or persuasive letters to real readers. A taxonomy of elements within this perspective is, however, quite possible, and includes shared context (e.g., within the school, community, classroom, or region); the nature of the task (open or closed; self- or other-directed; etc.); and the situational orientation of reader and writer (cultural, geographic, academic). Comments within this perspective might address the teacher's knowledge of the student's

progress in the course or his past work, the focus of class-room instruction, or the specific assignment and what it called for.

In the pragmatic perspective, the ultimate purpose of writing for a grade can be suspended, and the teacher can refer to the text in light of its professed communicative function. Such comments might include the text's functional orientation by field (the nature of the social interaction), by mode (transactional, poetic, expressive), or by tenor (whether it is for the community, self, teacher, class, editor, public, or specific recipient).[4] The pragmatic and contextual perspectives can clash in evaluation; if we "pretend" that the essay functions in the real world, what right do we have to refer to the student's work the week before on paragraph development? The pragmatic perspective, however, need not ignore completely the essay's location in the classroom. Rather, there seems to be a "dual perspective" pragmatically which interacts in a complex way with the essay's context. For instance, a student's anticipation of having, say, her argumentative letter shared with the class on an overhead projector — which adds a new dimension both contextually and pragmatically — might alter subtly her composing of the text itself; she might be for the moment more concerned that the class will denounce her views on banning abortion than in expressing her true feelings to the senator who is her intended reader. These problems are not easy to solve; however, little can come of ignoring them in the evaluation.

The "slices" in Figure 1 illustrate some of the evaluative choices teachers have. Option #1, a selective focus within a single perspective, is that choice we make when we comment on various things from the textual perspective without referring to the others. Option #2 crosses perspectives, and might include comments about how the intended reader would react to an especially garbled sentence, and whether the writer had hoped for such a reaction. A teacher who makes comments only on sentences, words, spelling and punctuation opts for #3, a selective focus within single levels of a perspective. Some teachers choose to let one perspective dominate their comments, e.g., word-choice and so use Option #4. The final option listed, #5, may exhaust some teachers, as it refers to a full focus within a single perspective or level (e.g., trying to comment on every single matter of punctuation).

With all these choices — and others not shown — which

ones do writing teachers commonly make, and, further-more, which one seems to be most productive in improving students' writing? For some insight into the first question, we turn to a sample assignment and student essay (with ac-companying evaluative comments). These samples I chose randomly from course materials I have collected from in-structors of composition at Indiana University since 1979. The materials were developed two years ago for an intro-ductory (freshman) course in composition, and were used at about midpoint in the semester.

The essay was written in response to the following assignment:

Paper #3: Using the process of "Report, Analysis, Evaluation," write a paper discussing a value-related issue, or an issue related to value systems.

And here is one student's final essay, together with the in-structor's marginal comments and summary evaluation:

Eighties Racing Challenge

In the late 1800's and early 1900's bicycle racing was the number

one sport in America. Young boys of this era had dreams of growing up

and becoming bicycle racers and riding at Madison Square Gardens in New

York City in the six day bicycle races.

NO ¶
BREAK

The racing at this time was brutal and sometimes devastating to

PASSIVE   *SP*

these aspiring athletes. Many deaths occured from riders riding their

THIS SHOULD BE AN ADVERB, NOT AN

hearts into oblivian trying to please their frantic cheering fans. *ADJECTIVE*

NO ¶
BREAK

The public, business world, and press all knew what an exciting,

WEAK &
CLUMSY
PHRASING

fast sport cycling was. The bicycle racers of this time were the highest

paid athletes in the world.

WITH THESE REASONS, WHAT IS SO MYSTERIOUS ABOUT THE NONEXISTENCE OF RACING?

Mysteriously by the late 1930's bicycle racing had become virtually

TRITE

nonexistent with the onset of World War II and the scarcity of rubber for

bike tires. Hundreds of bicycle racing tracks were destroyed around the

country in order to make room for urban growth.

WORDY

Recently through enthusiastic American bicycle racers' efforts and

AWKWARD

SP   *IN*

Olympic team support people are rediscovering the benifits cycling has on

America. Major United States companies are increasing their advertising

HOW DOES THIS SENTENCE FOLLOW THE ONE BEFORE, OR LEAD INTO THE ONE AFTER?

coverage of bicycle racing in order to sell the American public on the

WORDY

outdoor natural image. Movies, are being made such as Breaking Away to

AWKWARD | WORD CHOICE
promote the sport of cycling. These efforts are starting to create an   WHAT IS THE
                                                                          LOGIC OF YOUR
interest for cycling again in America.   ARGUMENT?

        The United States Cycling Federation is the governing body for bi-
                        REDUNDANT
cycle racing in the United States. The membership of this organization

has risen from 1500 in 1961 to over 50,000 members by 1980. These sta-   ⎫ WORDY
                                        CLICHÉ   ⎬
tistics clearly show that bicycling racing is on the rise again within   ⎭

the United States.

                                    TENSE   SP
        The new generation of racers are being trained properly from early
WORDY /
       / ages. Speed means everthing to today's young racers. These racers are

using their resources in turning their legs into efficient pistons. New

training techniques are being applied and the results have been tremendous. PHRASES
THIS & IS WORDY   SUCH AS
& CHOPPY &   In the past four years Americans have claimed twelve worls champion- THESE ARE COP-
COULD BE   CUTS FROM
WRITTEN IN   ship medals. Before 1976, Americans had only two medals in forty years REAL DE-
ONE SENTENCE.   USING   IT
IN FACT, THIS of racing. The results are not coming from the veteran racers, but from TAILS READER
INFORMATION   MAKES THE CONFIDENCE
SHOULD HAVE TOPIC the teenagers of the sport.   LOSE ALL WHAT YOU
BEEN THE FOR THE   IN SAY.
SENTENCE FOLLOWING The racer of the 1980's has more going for him or her than any of
                 the predecessors of the old days of bicycle racing. The United States

has some of the world's finest training facilities for cyclists in the
      REDUNDANT
world. New bicycle designs have revolutionized the sport. Instead of

the old one-speed balloon tires clacking across dirt and pebblestone

roads, glistening light alloy bicycles with silk tires are swooshing a- WORDY

cross our nations highways.

        Todays racers are faced with the challenge of giving back to the "OR COUNTRY"
                                                                          "OF OUR COUNTRY"
people of America a tradition that is a part of the history of our country. "OF OUR SPORTS"

Modern cyclists are truly lucky to have the opportunity to be a part of
                      YOUR TOPIC IS EXCELLENT, AND YOUR
the rebirth of cycling. FOCUS IS WELL UNDER CONTROL. BUT
2 PROBLEMS TURN UP SO OFTEN THAT, AS A READER,
I WAS DISTURBED AND EVEN ANGERED. FIRSTLY, YOU
SEEM TO HAVE NO SENSE OF A STRUCTURE NOR WHERE
TO DIVIDE AS SECONDLY, YOUR WRITING IS FULL OF
CLUTTER. YOU HAVE TOO MANY POORLY WORDED PHRASES
AND SENTENCES, TOO MANY UNNECESSARY WORDS & PHRASES
TOO MUCH CONFUSION. WHY DO YOU ALLOW YOUR WRITING
TO BE SO DIFFICULT? YOUR TOPIC IS SO GOOD, BUT YOU
UNDERCUT IT WITH YOUR SLOPPY PRESENTATION. BOTH
OF YOUR PROBLEMS - UNORGANIZED AS AND DISORGANIZED
SPEECH - COMPROMISE YOUR IDEAS TO LOW LEVELS.

To characterize the evaluative focus of this sample, I tallied all the marginal and inter-textual comments, including corrective marks such as the paragraph symbol, according to the perspective or level to which they applied. All spelling references, for example, were included at the word level in the textual perspective; all references to punctuation were included at the sentence level; and so on. Some comments, such as "redundant," seemed to lie between levels, and so were classified accordingly (i.e., word/sentence).

The results of my tally are as follows:

Perspective	# of Comments	% of Total in All Perspectives	
Textual			
Word Level	18	58.1%	
Word/Sentence	3	9.7	= 87.2%
Sentence*	6	19.4	
Paragraph	2	6.4	
Paragraph/Thema	2	6.4	
Thema	0	0	
			= 100%
Contextual	0	0	
Pragmatic	0	0	

*One comment has an accompanying reference to the "reader," but here reader quite clearly means teacher.

Two-thirds of the evaluative summary focuses on phrasing, words and paragraphs. Of the remaining third, most concerns "topic" and "ideas" — predominantly at the thema level. Almost all of the final commentary is thus directed, like the marginal comments, toward the textual perspective, and only one passing comment might be considered to enter the area of pragmatics or functional perspective. No reference to the essay's context — the nature of the task or the way the writer has handled it, for instance — is included. The profile of this evaluation, then, is a selective focus within a single perspective, with two levels (word and sentence) predominating.

A great deal can be said about the student's essay in light of this instructor's evaluation — far too much, in fact, to include here. I will therefore highlight a few points.

First, it is clear that this paper's author has considerable control over his essay's direction — enough control, I believe, to have guided his use of short, easily read paragraphs. The nature of the topic, itself "racy" and fast-paced, may partly justify these short paragraphs, which move the reader

through the text at a brisk clip rather than dragging her down with excessive detail and elaboration. More important, however, is what the writer seems to have in mind as his "imagined" context. This is the kind of essay that approaches in style the sort of trendy historical sketch we might see in a popular magazine. Any issue of *People, Reader's Digest,* or *Time* will show paragraphs very much like these in length and focus. The instructor may be justified in criticizing the student's paragraph divisions, but only in reference to a context clearly spelled out in the assignment, i.e., the context of the traditional "classroom essay," which contains fully-developed paragraphs identified by separate topic sentences that support a clearly-stated thesis. On the other hand, if the teacher was willing to "let slide" the student's straying from the assignment, why couldn't he also have allowed the student to get by with the short paragraphs and fast-paced style? Reference to these matters might have shed considerable light on the student's awareness of what he seems to have done unconsciously.

The evaluation ignores not only the essay's context but its purpose, which for the writer is to inform and, perhaps, entertain the general reader with a short, vivid history of bicycle racing in the United States. In addition, there is a slightly persuasive quality about the essay — the kind of quality frequently seen in special interest magazines that share with the reader the mutual excitement of some sport, hobby or opinion. The instructor's comments, however, assume implicitly that the text functions primarily as a demonstration of topic, paragraph and sentence control. Whatever aims originally guided the writer, in other words, are ignored in the evaluation. Enough re-directing of this kind could very well inhibit those communicative strategies at the heart of the writer's developing abilities — that is, the attempt to share new knowledge with the reader, the attempt to couch the information in the language of "popular prose," and so on. Instead, he will worry at each turn of thought about details more effectively delegated to revising and proofreading.

One further comment should be made about the essay's evaluation, and concerns not its perspective but the number of corrective vs. the number of constructive comments. Almost all the comments are corrective in nature (28, or 90.3%), meaning that they indicate errors without identifying causes or making suggestions for improvement. Addi-

tionally, many of these corrective comments ignore the error's sentential context. In the phrase "frantic cheering fans," for example, the writer may have imagined the fans to be both frantic and cheering, which at most would have required a comma between the two adjectives. As such, it is ambiguous. Probably the writer did not puzzle much over the correction as it stands, but a comment pointing out the ambiguity might have taught him something about the graphemic separation of semantically linked adjectives. Many such corrective comments in the sample seem to waste both the instructor's and the writer's time, since either the work has been done for the writer or else the corrections themselves are as "vague" as is that marginal comment.

The paper, however, is not without its limitations, which brings me to the second question and my final point: what is a more productive evaluative method?

The answer to this question varies with the task design and the focus of instruction. An evaluation of a short essay assigned after classwork on audience awareness might focus on the writer's choices and decisions in terms of her imagined reader. But even if the evaluation is skewed toward the pragmatic perspective, it cannot ignore textual matters because these too have an effect on the intended reader. In other words, the three perspectives are so closely interwoven that they *demand* equal treatment, which is why many teachers' obsession with surface details is so puzzling. By the same token, enough is known about students' behavior that a *complete* and *equal* treatment can be as damaging as no treatment at all. The most productive evaluative method, then, is to use the red pen sparingly but constructively, referring to all three perspectives but especially the relationship among them. Furthermore, placing oneself in the "average reader's" position will help greatly to re-direct the writer's attention away from the classroom and toward that imagined but eventually quite real environment for his prose — the world of communication.

NOTES

[1]For a taxonomy of speech acts, see John Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts," *Language in Society,* 5 (1976), 1-23.

[2]Janet Emig. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1971) provides an excellent discussion of the complexities of the writing situation. See also James Britton, et al., *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (London: Macmillan Education, 1975). For a briefer summary, see Britton's "The Composing Processes and the Functions of Writing," in *Research on Composing: Points of Departure,* ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1976), pp. 13-28.

[3]The research in these areas is too plentiful to list here. For an excellent resource text, see *Psychology of Reading,* John Downing and Che Kan Leong, (New York: Macmillan, 1982).

[4]These are terms borrowed from linguists interested in the functional aspects of communication. On field, tenor and mode, see M.A.K. Halliday and Ruquaiya Hasan, *Text and Context: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective* (forthcoming). For the functional categories in composing, see Britton, et al., *The Development of Writing Abilities.*