

ENLISTING THE WRITER'S PARTICIPATION IN THE EVALUATION PROCESS

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All writing courses eventually reach the moment of truth when the instructor turns judge and must pass sentence on her students' work. However, as our understanding of the role of revision in the composing process has grown, many instructors, even entire writing programs, have come to rely upon a method of evaluation called "semester grading" or "portfolio grading." In such a scheme of evaluation, the student writer submits her work to the instructor and receives, instead of a grade, suggestions about how to improve the writing through rewriting. These suggestions may take the form of written comments, tape-recorded advice, or one-to-one conferences with the instructor or one's peers in class. At the end of the course, the portfolio is submitted for a grade with the writer selecting her most effective revised pieces of writing for evaluation.

This approach to evaluation reinforces the value of revision as an integral part of writing because submitted work is treated as drafts in progress rather than as finished essays — at least until the writer identifies the drafts as finished. Additionally, a more productive relationship is established between student and teacher, who are no longer defendant and judge but instead writer and editor.¹

But a problem exists for the instructor-turned-editor functioning in a course which employs semester grading since the role of an editor is a more challenging one than that of a judge who merely voices an opinion and explains it

briefly. The instructor's editorial function requires her to make intelligent and useful comments so that students can actually work to improve their writing. Nancy Sommers has reported that "teachers' comments can take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers' purposes in commenting" (149). Can composition instructors read as "dumb readers," in Walker Gibson's apt phrase, ignorant of the intent of their student writers, and still hope to avoid making the kinds of inappropriate comments Sommers describes? Can an instructor "be a guide who doesn't lead so much as stand behind the young explorer [the student writer], pointing out alternatives only at the moment of panic" (Murray 142) if the writer's initial intent remains buried in a heap of impenetrable freshman prose? Will students take advantage of the revision opportunities in a semester-grading situation if the instructor's comments are too directive or too obtuse? Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch argue that "it is precisely the chance to accomplish one's own purpose by controlling one's own choices that creates incentive to write" (159) and further argue that student writers ought to be consulted about their texts before the editor comments. Brannon and Knoblauch are concerned with the students' right to their texts, but the issue also extends to students' right to have their texts evaluated fairly. That editor will eventually metamorphose into a judge. If the suggestions the editor has been making are not useful, they may lead the student writer to inferior revision which may subsequently lead to lower evaluations (i.e. "bad grades"), making the instructor complicitous in bringing about that poor evaluation. The question then is how can instructors know their students' intentions before commenting on their drafts, and the answer is to enlist the participation of their students in the responding process.

The student-teacher memo is one method of enlisting that participation. In this approach, the instructor makes an assignment for writing and simultaneously makes an assignment for a student-teacher memo: a brief, informal not-to-be-graded communication written to the instructor by the student who comments on the draft in question. Although the students have the option to write these memos in any form they choose, the instructor makes the assignment in the form of a series of open-ended questions such as "Who is your audience in this piece of writing?" "How did that audience affect what you have written?" "What do you want the audience to

get out of this piece of writing?" "Which parts of the essay seem to be the least successful in achieving your goals? Why?" "Which parts were most successful? Why?" "What do you want me to comment on in particular in the paper?"

With the information provided by the student, the instructor need no longer be a "dumb reader." The instructor becomes less likely to push the student into writing an essay the instructor wants instead of writing what the student wants. I would like to examine a student draft, its accompanying memo, and the subsequent final draft of the paper to illustrate how the student-teacher memo can help instructors respond to student work effectively and subsequently evaluate it fairly.

The only stipulation for this assignment was that the students were to write an expository paper. Lori, a first semester college freshman, submitted the following first draft:

HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION

As a student attending Central High, the quality of my high school education was not one of my major concerns. However, after attending Miami University for several weeks, the matter strikes me in an entirely different perspective. I have found myself inadequately prepared for college and feel that I can offer useful insight and suggestions to help other students have opportunities that I did not have.

Typically a teenager is not likely to exert any more effort than he needs. In all probability he is not going to consider the fact that eventually he may seek a post high school education and that the education he receives during high school will largely determine his success. A typical teenager needs to be guided in the right direction. Many times during high school, I received little or no direction. Basically I registered for classes and was permitted to take whatever courses I wanted regardless of what value they did or did not serve me.

I have spoken with other students at Miami and have learned many useful ideas utilized by other high school guidance counselors. For instance, several students felt that questionnaires concerning post high school plans, interests, and possible career interests were very useful in choosing classes particularly when their guidance counselors helped them to choose classes in relation to their answers on the questionnaires. Also many students had participated in a job simulation program which allowed them an opportunity to consider their interests and skills. Most students had taken an aptitude test designed to evaluate their skills and interests. These programs allowed the students to take classes that held some value for them. The majority of the students with whom I spoke felt that the programs were very helpful to them.

Under-qualified teachers is another area with which we should be concerned. For instance, when questioning the proper usage of the pronouns who and whom, one of my English teachers once told me not to worry about it because she had never really understood how to use them herself. In an algebra course I took, we couldn't complete

our lessons trying to compete with the chaos in the classroom. The teacher simply had no control. I have also had teachers who displayed flirtatious and highly unprofessional behavior in the classroom; I do not feel that such actions are conducive to learning.

Perhaps the requirements for teachers at Central High are too lenient. A strict screening committee or a strict personal evaluation of the teachers would help. Also increased classroom observations by administrators could check the problem.

The final area which concerns me is low graduation requirements. The requirements at Central High include one year of math, three years of English, one semester of health, one year of physical education, two years of social studies, one year of science. I do not feel that these requirements create a well-rounded individual. Students who I have spoken with were surprised at such lax standards. Most were required two or more years of math, four years of English, three years of social studies, and two years of science. Such standards not only benefit college bound students but also help to create more responsible citizens.

I feel that these areas deserve genuine consideration. New programs need to be started and old ones need to be updated. These actions will help many people.

If I had to comment on this paper without benefit of the accompanying memo, I would focus on my uncertainty about its intended audience and the problems that creates in the voice of the paper. The opening paragraph, especially the final sentence, led me to infer that Lori was writing to her fellow students in our class. However, in the fifth and sixth paragraphs she focuses her criticism squarely on her own high school, a matter hardly of interest to the majority of her classmates who did not attend Central High. In fact, her conclusion is vague enough to leave unclear whether she wants to assist her poor former classmates still languishing at Central High or whether she wants to assist other "inadequately prepared" students at the University. Also puzzling is that when she sketches out alternative programs that might remedy some of the problems she has identified, she presents her ideas too off-handedly. At this point she also seems to be addressing an audience powerful enough to implement those programs. Her classmates would hardly have that power. Finally, who is the other party in the "we" she uses in paragraph 4: her current classmates, her former Central High classmates, some third unidentified group?

Since Lori seems most concerned with her own high school and with improving the quality of education it offers, I would have suggested that she make her criticisms more pointed (what was the "highly unprofessional behavior" cited

in paragraph 4, for instance?) and that she become more vigorously persuasive about her proposed solutions.

However, I did not actually make these comments because Lori also submitted a student-teacher memo with the draft. She chose to use the questions I had asked as a launching pad for a free-form response. Here is what she wrote.

In this paper I want the reader to realize that Central doesn't have good guidance counselors; Central doesn't have high enough graduation standards; Central doesn't have very strict requirements for their teachers. However, I kept in mind that this letter is supposedly to my former high school principal and therefore, I wasn't as forceful as I really felt I should be or could be. I wanted my voice to be constructive not demanding. I'm not finished working on this — I still feel that I'm not really creating the picture I want the way that I want. One problem I see with my paper is that I could have used my examples more effectively and I did not. The actual writing of the paper isn't giving problems — the ideas are basically there, they simply aren't in a finished form yet. Tell me what you feel when you read this paper. Do I sound as if I'm pointing a finger? If you were my high school principal would you take offense? Am I being argumentative enough? Can I take a stronger stand without creating the wrong impression? Sometimes I think this memo helps me as much as it helps you. This paper has been easier than the rest, but I have that feeling that it's just not finished yet. If I didn't get to rewrite it again, I still probably would because I think it can be done better.

In her very first sentence Lori has answered one of my central questions by identifying her purpose; her interest, she says, lies in focusing on Central High School's deficiencies. Her following comment, however, may be the most significant one in the memo; it came as a surprise to me that she had been writing this paper as a letter to her former principal. I now understood the "we" in paragraph 4 of the draft; I understood her recommending specific programs for implementation; I also understood why she had not presented her proposals more vigorously. Lori had been quite sensitive to her audience, as the rest of her memo illustrates when she attempts to cast me in the role of the principal in order to receive the feedback she needs, guiding my responses by asking me specific questions. I did feel that she was pointing a

finger, especially in paragraph 5 as she oversimplifies the complexities of teacher evaluation; I also felt that the principal would be likely to take offense. Her final two questions were more difficult to answer. I could not be sure. When I actually commented on the paper, I made certain to address these concerns of Lori's. I told her my reactions as a pretend principal of Central High, including my uncertainty about her final two questions. I did not, however, advise her to make her criticism more pointed nor her proposals more persuasive.² Lori then went back and reworked her paper, later submitting a final version in her portfolio which I was to grade:

HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION

In college, I find myself repeatedly experiencing the same sort of difficulty in many of my courses. I am continually grasping to learn the fundamentals of a given course while the majority of the class has already learned or at least been exposed to that material during high school. Therefore, I feel that a great deal of my difficulty stems directly from specific deficiencies in the educational process at Central High School.

For one thing, Central is not particularly strong in its sciences. Being a nursing student, I need a great deal of science courses. Some of my college class requirements include zoology and chemistry. Central, unfortunately, does not offer either of these sciences. I now struggle a great deal with the basics which most other students learned in their high school science courses. These students can devote their time to the more complex aspects of zoology and chemistry while I attempt to grasp both the simpler as well as the more difficult ones.

In addition, many courses that I did take did not cover a great deal of the material for which I am now responsible. When I registered for my college classes in August, I consulted the placement guide in the University Catalog. "One year high school algebra . . . MTH 101-102." I chose to take Math 101 and, indeed, that was a wise decision. I would have been entirely lost in Math 102 — I was in Math 101. The first class meeting, the professor simply reviewed. His review, however, included things that, up to that point, I had yet to "view." Most of the students who I spoke with after class were familiar with the material that the professor had covered. My high school algebra course had covered only a small portion of the material that the professor expected me to know. And then there is my English course. I am doing fairly well except I must spend too much time checking and rechecking grammatical points when I could be writing or revising. My high school English teacher was not concerned with grammar. In fact, she totally dismissed the importance of learning the proper usage of the pronouns who and whom. She said that she had difficulty understanding them herself and did not want to bother trying to teach them to someone else. And so I find myself spending time with certain fundamentals, such as grammar, that most other students learned in high school.

Finally, Central did offer some courses that might have been beneficial to me in college but that, unfortunately, I did not take. This is

basically a result of poor guidance counseling. Teenagers cannot be expected to make class choices on their own. When I was in high school the only criteria I considered before taking a class was would it be fun or was Kim taking it. Guidance counselors go to college and receive degrees so that they will be educated in helping students make the right class choices. Rarely, if ever, did a guidance counselor offer any assistance or advice in choosing classes which would be helpful later. For instance, Central offered a course on study skills for college. I should have taken it but it certainly did not seem like an enjoyable class to me so I did not take it. Some person should stress the importance of taking a given course and insist that you take it. From the title, I would assume that person to be the guidance counselor.

Ultimately, I feel that college would have been easier for me had my high school education been more helpful. My courses would not be nearly so difficult. And I could devote my time to the major concerns of most of my courses instead of worrying with minor ones.

Here Lori has clearly abandoned the principal as her audience; she has decided against trying to reform the system at Central High, and instead has decided that her strong feelings of frustration should be the focus of her essay. In her opening paragraph she now identifies the nature of her problems, which she makes a recurrent theme throughout the paper, returning to it in each of the subsequent paragraphs. The hesitating, weak voice of her first draft — caused by her concern at offending her principal — has been replaced by a more natural voice, an authentic voice, one even able to be humorous about the situation as her play on the words “review” and “view” in paragraph 3 illustrates. She has pruned out the accusations of “unprofessional behavior” and instead concentrated on the inadequacies of the actual instruction in her high school. And she is confident enough to show her anger at the do-nothing guidance counselors while being mature enough to acknowledge that she is in part to blame for her problems by not selecting the proper courses (paragraph 4).

My point is not at all to argue that Lori’s final version of “High Quality Education” deserves an A or a B or even a C; my argument instead is that without having enlisted Lori’s assistance in commenting on her paper, I would have been urging her to make her first draft more consistent in addressing its implied audience: someone with the authority to change things at Central High. In other words, I would have been pushing her to keep the essay in the form of a letter to her principal without even being aware that that was what I was doing. Instead Lori guided me so that I could respond to what she felt was significant, allowing her to clarify for herself the best approach to her material. There is no question in my mind that

her second paper is better, but there is also no question in my mind that she never would have written it if I had made the comments which I had originally planned to offer.

Where then would that have left Lori? She would have been struggling with the paper I wanted her to write instead of the one *she* wanted to write. She would have submitted "High Quality Education" for a grade, and I might possibly have graded it lower than I would have the second version which I have reproduced here.

Brannon and Knoblauch conclude their discussion of students' rights to their texts by observing that evaluation is the "natural conclusion of the process of response and negotiation, carried through successive drafts," stressing that when the teacher responds appropriately, he can foster incentive in the student to re-write her paper meaningfully. They add,

By negotiating those changes rather than dictating them, the teacher returns control of the writing to the student. And by evaluating, the teacher gives the student writer an estimate of how well the teacher thinks the student's revisions have brought actual effects into line with stated intentions. By looking first to those intentions, both in responding and in evaluating, we show students that we take their writing seriously and that we assume they are responsible for communicating what they wish to say. (166)

By looking first at students' intentions, instructors also demonstrate that *they* are responsible evaluators, that they plan to judge the student's ability to write rather than her ability to please. Perhaps the worst comment instructors of composition can hear from their students upon returning graded papers is, "Well, I didn't know what you wanted." The student-teacher memo allows instructors to ward off such comments by providing the insights necessary to offer useful commentary on student writing. Actually, as readers of student texts, writing instructors could just as often say to their students, "I didn't know what you wanted me to respond to." For equitable and meaningful evaluation of student writing, this mutual guesswork at intentions must be replaced with genuine communication about that writing. If Brannon and Knoblauch have convincingly answered the question "Why is student participation in the process of response and evaluation vital?" the student-teacher memo is an equally convincing answer to

the corollary question, "How can we enlist that vital student participation?"

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NOTES

¹Nancy Sommers comments that "Theoretically, at least, we know that we comment on our students' writing for the same reasons professional editors comment on the work of professional writers or for the same reasons we ask our colleagues to read and respond to our own writing." (148).

²To support my hypothetical response: I used this essay in a workshop I ran with two colleagues, Donald A. Daiker and Mary F. Hayes, at a conference on composition pedagogy. After the workshop participants had read the first draft, without seeing the memo, they discussed their likely responses to the student. They made the same sorts of comments I have sketched out here. After supplying them with the memo, I then led a second discussion about the paper; it showed the same shift in focus of the response that I have described here.

WORKS CITED

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