2 Growth-Biased Assessing of Writers—A More Democratic Choice

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Like most citizens, teachers typically fall into one of two camps—those who see democracy as a finished product and those who see it as still evolving, as still in progress. I belong to the latter group, for soon after I started teaching, I realized that the "democracy" practiced in schools could use some work. Schools denied students and teachers rights protected for most citizens. Not only were teachers restricted to campus, even when not teaching, but our personal lives were also scrutinized carefully. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press were widely curtailed, with textbooks and student publications censored extensively, and teachers were fired for letting students read books that had not been approved. Teachers controlled students in the same way that administrators controlled the teachers. Students had almost no freedom of movement while at school, being required to sit still without speaking except during four-minute breaks, at which time they had to get supplies and tend to physical needs in addition to making their way from one building to another. Students could not even go to the bathroom without a signed pass or bury themselves in a book when a lecture was uninteresting. To make matters worse, they were punished for any expression of discontent with their loss of physical and intellectual freedom, often by being denied further access to school. It was an all-or-nothing proposition. My school—love it or leave it—so to speak.

As a sixth-, seventh-, and eleventh-grade English teacher, I grew increasingly frustrated over the years. Traditional schooling stripped school writing (and reading) of the rewards for which writers and readers write (and read) outside of school, thus undermining students' desire to write well and siphoning off their willingness to work hard. The result was that, regardless of ability, students who wrote well on leaving my class were typically those who had already written well when they entered it. For the most part, their families spoke standard English, and many of them were confident of attending college. I had little impact on the lives of others, whose continued poor writing would limit them to entry-level jobs. When that realization dawned, near the end of my first year of teaching, I set a goal that has shaped the rest of my career—making instruction work for every learner I teach.

Obviously, I've not pursued this goal in isolation. The work of dozens of others influenced my attempts. Change has swept writing instruction for almost three decades (Hairston), promising to democratize educational hierarchies in which the affluent are most likely to succeed. An alternative mind-set about schooling has attracted advocates for well over a century (Applebee; Dewey; Hearn; Mearns), but only recently have research-tested applications been described with enough clarity and detail to offer teachers at all levels a clear philosophical choice between traditional teaching—which co-occurs with widespread failure—and approaches that, skillfully used, offer success to all (Atwell; Calkins; Murray; Nelson, *At the Point*; Shaughnessy). In recent years, as connections between assessment and failure have become clearer, I've come to understand that my choice of approach for assessment functions as a vote either for or against democracy.

In traditional assessment, testing follows teaching, with teaching adapting itself to the kind of testing used. In this model, teaching and testing are discrete, but both focus on what students can't do or don't yet understand well. Deficiency-focused testing leads to teaching that is reductive, preventive/corrective, lockstep, and structured to cover content for everyone at the same time, at the same speed. It is also exclusionary, pitting students against each other in such a way that all but a few will eventually lose, and it sorts them into tracks that limit access to advanced study for all but a few. By contrast, in fully realized whole language classrooms and writing workshops, assessment is integrated into learning and teaching, making reciprocal influence possible. In addition to written products, teachers assess attitudes, the behaviors (and avoidances) those attitudes produce, and

how their own teaching enhances or inhibits growth. This holistic kind of assessing—which rarely takes the form of tests—molds itself to the shape of learners' development, in turn shaping whatever practice further growth requires and focusing teaching/learning/assessing at the point of need. These integrated approaches are interactive and incidental; terms like *emergent, growth-shaped,* and *growth-biased* refer to them.

Growth-shaped assessing follows a positive principle, emphasizing what students are working on or can already do well, rather than zeroing in on errors and deficiencies. Informed by teacher observation and learner introspection, growth-shaped assessing is formative as well as summative. Its skillful meldings of teaching/learning/assessing rely on teachers and learners to map progress together so that writers' goals can individualize activities.

Characteristics of Growth-Biased Teaching/Learning/Assessing

The negative assessments that I did early on in my career gave me biased data about learners' abilities. Because those "objective" data convinced me that most students can't write well, I did not see how the grades I assigned forced capable learners to fail. Never having been exposed to another way of thinking, I had no idea how unfair the grades I gave students were. Nor did I spot the undemocratic assumptions on which they were based. After researching classroom practice for twenty years, however, I now opt for more democratic teaching/learning/assessing that allows anyone willing to work hard to succeed and that is remarkably good at getting all students to try hard. Figure 1 summarizes the features of a growth-related approach.

Growth-shaped teaching/assessing is *openly and positively biased.* It looks at the data analyzed by traditional thinkers—spelling, transition, grammar, clarity, organization, style—but it emphasizes strengths rather than weaknesses and reaches different conclusions about the meaning of the data used. Growth-biased assessing looks at other data too—writing attitudes and behavior, to take one example, not to mention *improvements* in writing and *changes* in attitude. Instead of subtracting points from a perfect score or measuring deviations from a "norm," growth-focused judgments are *additive* and *individualized.* Teachers begin by assessing the impact of prior instruction, document everything they can find that writers are doing well, and then inform learners so that they can build confidently upon these

Openly biased	Focused on whatever factors may be affecting development
Positively biased	Integrated and indivisible
Additive	Individualized
Balanced	Incorporates multiple perspectives, including peer review and learner self-assessment
Objective	Honest
Sequenced	Shaped by learners' perceptions of needs
Nonjudgmental	Rewards problem-solving activity, even when it fails
Emergent	Comprehensive
Emotionally supportive	Biased toward the formative
Advocacy oriented	Relies on rewards inherent in the activity learned
Asks rather than tells	Incorporates a shifting scale of concerns
Relies on measured response	Developmental
At the point of need	Improvement-based
Developmental	Has responsible self-assessment as the ultimate goal
Predicated on trust	

Figure 1. Traits distinctive to growth-biased assessment.

strengths. They look at effort, quality of writing, and progress made, and they offer suggestions for improvement at the point of need.

Growth-biased assessments are more *balanced*—and therefore more objective—than the negative (subtractive) deficiency-focused approaches for which "objective" claims have traditionally been made. Growth-biased assessors offer *sequenced response* in *nonjudgmental* ways. They define errors, and they view weaknesses as being no worse than strengths; together, in fact, the strengths and weaknesses learners become aware of structure an *emerging, individualized curriculum*. But writers arrive in growth classrooms scared and bleeding from past assessments, so teachers and peers begin each term by pointing out only strengths, leaving writers to deduce weaknesses through comparison with what they read and the work of their peers. They start by noting grammatically and mechanically correct passages— even ones that express, in clichés, superficial or boring ideas. They exclaim over passionate commitment to topics, ideas, or causes— whether or not early drafts are neat and well organized. They turn the spotlight on powerful images and honest feelings, even when early drafts lack audience awareness or precise vocabulary.

Growth-biased instructors teach writers to tell classmates, friends, and family members exactly what kinds of responses they need next on their work, encouraging them to comment first on strengths (to build confidence), to ask nonjudgmental questions after that (to learn where to add information or to clarify unclear parts), and finally, near the end of the discussion, to offer one or two specific suggestions for improvement, framing their comments *constructively* and trusting the writer herself to decide which suggestions to use and which to ignore. Trusting developing writers to make decisions is crucial, for feedback they can understand, use, and retain will never be more than a subset of the improvements most pieces need. (If it were, these writers would not be "developing.") The problems writers can solve and remember how to solve are the problems they can spot on their own or recognize once they've been pointed out. These self-delineated areas of weakness, clustered around the expanding edges of competence, serve a function that is critical to writers' growth. They indicate the areas where focused instruction will "take." In fact, in growth classrooms, both teachers and peers quickly learn to "follow the kid" (Nelson, "Bridging"), to ask what a writer is attempting in a piece (Murray, *Learning*), to offer help at what the Britton research team called "the point of need" and Krashen referred to as "the ideal instructional level." In other words, teachers and peers focus instruction within Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development." Unlike preventive/corrective teaching and assessment, which identify what an entire age group should know and then "cover" all of it whether or not students retain it, *need-focused* assessing makes teaching and learning efficient by offering instruction where there's somewhere for it to "stick"—around the edges of existing competence.

Giving *balanced and sequenced* responses helps teachers stay in the advocacy role by adopting a consistently *supportive* stance. So does *asking* (rather than telling) learners what help they need. Asking helps teachers discover what learners are able and willing to learn. Unlike deficit models that measure distance from adult standards (see Tchudi and Mitchell), *advocacy-focused* assessing adopts a different goal—the facilitation of individual growth. It avoids comparing students with one another, the only comparisons being with writers' own past performances. While assessing is *comprehensive*, response is *measured*, and only a few errors get attention at any one time. And so as not to undermine budding confidence, learners select these themselves, thus taking charge of their own growth. Doing so requires them to become skillful at *self-assessing*, which of course develops critical-thinking

skills and is dependent upon high *mutual trust* in the classroom community.

Growth-biased teaching/assessing is *integrated and indivisible* and relies on a shifting scale of concerns, one successful writers use to cope with writing's complex demands. From fluency, to global issues like clarity, organization, and voice, to the fine-tuning done by poets and copyeditors, growth-biased teachers are constantly *upping the ante*, bringing writers along as far as they can come and encouraging them so that they can go even farther. Unlike traditional grading, which achieves "objectivity" by isolating traits, holding them constant, and assessing all the same way, growth-biased approaches *individualize*, broadening the scope of attention from finished products to include any factor affecting development—like attitudes, life experiences, current strengths, prior instruction, effort expended, and the degrees of responsibility writers take. Teachers observe the risks writers take when revealing weaknesses and study differences across writing processes, *integrating* assessing into the rhythms of learning and into individual patterns of development.

Growth on a Shifting Scale

Figure 2 shows the shifting scale of concerns that emerges when one abandons a preventive/corrective mind-set to examine all factors affecting growth. To determine what kinds of help individual writers require, so as to offer instruction at the point of need, teachers (and peers) gradually shift attention over time. As fluency, quantity, trust, effort, risk taking, and other early emphases become established, teachers up the ante, expecting more as the term progresses. They look for quality, aesthetic features, improvement, surface-level control, and other qualities that develop with experience. From fluency-building activities early in the term to more global, control-focused revising, to the honing and polishing of surface-level features that move to center stage as publishing deadlines draw near, growth-oriented teachers shift the teaching/assessing focus to whatever problems the writers they teach are struggling with, adopting the *shifting scale of concerns* on which professional writers rely (Cowley; Plimpton).

Several things contribute to the knowledge and know-how writers pick up naturally at the point of need in classrooms that use fully realized workshop approaches. One is the *honest response* which all writers need for improving. Well-meaning teachers and students rightly proceed with caution out of concern for others' self-esteem, but

1. Developing Sanctuary and Fluency

Getting to know each other
Learning not to undermine others' self-esteem
Working to build trust in the class
Working together to help each other improve
Learning to give positively phrased criticism
Writing a lot
Experimenting with topics to see which ones motivate more writing
Abandoning false starts in search of these better topics
Experimenting with different genres
Learning to keep learning logs
Getting comfortable with word processing
Sharing folders with writing partners
Meeting in permanent (or long-term) groups
Listening thoughtfully
Taking risks with writing

2. Giving and Getting Advice

Reading writing in class
Asking for needed help
Giving honest but kindly advice
Using process logs to direct your own growth
Working productively in small groups
Helping to solve any problems that arise in group
Writing more than you ever have before
Caring about your writing
Revising over and over again
Learning to find and correct your worst errors
Letting others know when you're having trouble so we can help

3. Revising and Editing

Breaking the revision barrier
Taking one or two pieces through several drafts each
Learning to judge whether your revisions are working
Noticing how other writers get their effects
Experimenting to find out what works for you
Asking others for help when you run into problems
Editing many times
Editing for one kind of error at a time
Developing an essay about ideas you care about
Letting group members know what kind of advice you need
Keeping your tutor posted on your progress and that of the group

4. Getting the Writing to an Audience

Choosing the pieces you want to publish
Working with others to design and print the class book
Copyediting your piece(s) for publication
Securing copyrights
Submitting favorite piece(s) for publication
Organizing your portfolio to reveal progress you've made
Celebrating getting your work into print
Anything else that affects the progress you or others make

Figure 2. A shifting scale of concerns for teachers of writing.

data suggest that honest response is also essential to improvement. Weighing and balancing feedback from *different perspectives* informs self-assessment—which must also be assessed along *a shifting scale*—by meeting each writer wherever she is and by focusing more on whatever goals she's identified and whether she's honest, takes risks, and works hard, rather than whether she's at the same place as others (Nelson, *At the Point*).

For groups to take the risks significant learning requires, each member must experience (and contribute to) sanctuary. When teachers require (and demonstrate) caring but honest responses, disallowing hurtful comments and body language—name-calling, prejudice, put-downs, eye rolling, exasperated sighs—writers learn the positive interactive skills necessary for collaboration to succeed. In my classes there's only one rule, but I take it seriously: Each of us must protect the sanctuary everyone needs in order to take risks. Noncompetitive behavior and attitudes are also *best assessed developmentally.* Continuing improvement is the goal.

Integrated teaching/assessing offers a framework within which all growth-focused learning traits fit. In the growth philosophy, *comprehensive assessing* focuses on factors that play out inside writers' heads, factors that are seen in small- or large-group interactions, and factors that show up in written drafts. Another characteristic is a de-emphasis on grades, along with an increase in *formative assessing*—assessing that helps individuals improve in specific ways. A *formative bias* helps teachers *individualize* teaching/learning/assessing, thus increasing reliance on writing's inherent rewards. All of these are features writers must learn to assess for themselves, and as the ability to self-assess grows with practice, it too must be assessed developmentally, over time, in terms of progress from multiple starting gates, rather than in terms of the distance from a single finishing line.

Responsible self-assessing is, of course, the goal, but getting there is a process that takes time. When first asked to assess their efforts, most students act paralyzed. They must motivate themselves. They must also learn to trust others enough to take risks—to trust that revealing weaknesses (and claiming strengths) need not lead to punishment or censure from teachers or peers. Self-assessing means setting one's own standards. It requires meeting the rising expectations one develops when exposed to the rapidly improving work of hard-working peers. It also involves unlearning error-avoidance strategies and entails looking honestly at where one has not worked as hard as one might have.

One Teacher's Application of Growth-Biased Principles

Growth-biased assessing takes many shapes, but its truly distinctive features have no external form. They consist of philosophical beliefs capable of reshaping writing behaviors and attitudes. Because growth-bias is a mind-set, not a method, it plays itself out differently in every classroom, adapting with seemingly endless flexibility to teaching personalities and contextual constraints. In my efforts to enact it in three universities and, somewhat earlier, in small colleges, I've been helped most by the examples of mentors—Dan Kirby and Ken Kantor, then at the University of Georgia; Bernie and Martha Schein at Atlanta's Paideia Middle School; Sandra Worsham at Baldwin High in Milledgeville, Georgia; and Chris Thaiss, my colleague at George Mason University. These teachers helped me dislodge the default model's dominance in my mind, allowing me to look at my work in new ways. With further help from over one hundred colleagues in teacher research, I've been adapting the strategies I learned from these mentors for years, and though no end to the evolution of my practice is in sight, I hold a fairly clear vision of what I'm working toward.

My alternative to grading individual pieces of writing is one chosen by many writers and artists who teach. (Other approaches, shaped by a similar mind-set, can be found in the final section of this book.) I give only the grades I'm required to give—one grade per writer per term, and from day one I assess writers' growth. I tell them they'll succeed if they attend to the Truthfulness, Thoughtfulness, Thoroughness, Timeliness, and Supportiveness of all aspects of their participation in the course. (Thanks to Dan Kirby for the first three of the four T's.) I give more extensive response early in the term, when writers accustomed to using regular deadlines and grades to force themselves to write need to know that the teacher reads all of their work carefully. I focus first on writing processes, pointing out signs of growth in their folders and also doing so publicly, and look for symptoms of intellectual and creative abuse—like negative criticism or an early emphasis on structure. Responding weekly to drafts and process logs, I highlight strengths, underlining what I find interesting, powerful, funny, well crafted, or thought provoking. I respond mostly to content, asking dozens of questions, offering opinions and memories of my own.

Once writers relax and write with less anxiety, I start suggesting strategies they might try—lopping off stiff introductions to bring dramatic lines to the fore, or adding dialogue, narrative, feeling, and

detail. I invite writers to relax and write more freely, circling spelling and mechanical uncertainties as they go so that they can find them easily should they decide to revise or to work on that error for an individualized assignment. If the writing bores me, I assume they're bored too and ask if they care passionately about the subject, reminding them that should they ditch this piece for a more heartfelt topic, they should save every scrap they've done for their portfolios so that they can see how much they've improved at the end of the term. My comments individualize, offering support and critique at the point of need, and serve as nonnumerical records of development, providing data for a quick, end-of-term review by me. Later, paging through comprehensive portfolios, I refresh my memory about effort and improvement, skimming in sequence my responses (and their "process logs"), looking for signs of growth.

The "lesson plans" I use for growth-shaped teaching/learning/assessing are jot lists of authors and titles made while responding each week. I focus the first half of the following week's three-hour class on any strengths that emerged in writers' work the week before. Back in class, list in hand, I invite those who did something well to read excerpts aloud to the class from think writes, drafts, or process logs. On occasion, I encourage writers to read whole pieces, but I never offer praise to build self-esteem. That undermines expectations for quality, and growth in self-esteem *relies* on expanding quality. I therefore let unmotivated writers struggle without interference, knowing that my stepping in postpones their taking charge of decisions about their work. Hoping they'll work through instruction-induced writing blocks on their own, I wait until midterm to suggest that they might improve. My research with forty other teacher-researchers (Nelson, *At the Point*) taught me that writers more than make up for lost time once they break through because self-sponsored breakthroughs to writing resistance are more powerful. Students do not struggle in isolation, however, for I spotlight breakthrough writers, inviting them to share prebreakthrough anxieties and the rewards they experienced after taking the breakthrough risk. I foreground improvements in partner, small-group, or whole-class work and focus regularly on breakthroughs in attitude that pave the way for breakthroughs in the structure of writers' work, kicking off upward spirals of motivation and success. Confident of a "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" pattern that five research teams and I documented repeatedly, I ignore weak writing—and writing that never gets done—even while leading

brainstorming discussions in class to solve whatever problems writers are willing to discuss.

For that rare writer who doesn't catch on fire by midterm despite being put in charge of decisions about her work, I address the issue in her folder, revising a short note repeatedly until any temptation toward a guilt trip, to coerce, or to cajole has passed and until I'm certain I have stayed in an advocacy role. Writer's block is a problem even professional writers face. Because, for beginners, its source is so often counterproductive instruction, I'm very nonjudgmental in my response, even when students have done almost nothing for the first half of the term. Leaving each writer at choice about her work, I express my concern that she may not be meeting her goals and affirm that "weak" and "strong" writers alike are entirely capable of A work:

> Jane, I'm getting worried about your work. You're capable of writing wonderfully and working hard, and under normal conditions I'd expect A work out of you, but you've done almost nothing and it's already midterm. I'd hate to see you not get credit for this course.
>
> Has some circumstance I don't know about kept you from writing this term? Or have you been struggling with writer's block (something even professional writers struggle with)?
>
> There's still time for you to earn an A if you start at once and work like crazy until the end of the term. Is there some way I can help you accomplish your goals for this course?

I keep a photocopy in case I'm challenged about a grade, but I never have been. Learners who practice self-assessing grow realistic. In the twenty years since I started developing this approach, I can count on one hand the writers who did not respond and ended up getting less than a quality grade. Nor do I hesitate to give "Incompletes," which puts responsibility back in the writers' hands. The week of exams I tell students, "I only give A's and B's and Incompletes. If you'd rather have a lower grade than an Incomplete, put that in writing to me and sign your name." I don't think I've ever given more than two Incompletes per term, and the time I save averaging grades more than makes up for the inconvenience they cause later. Since I stopped using grades to control them, most of my students work harder than a very few did before.

Because students learn as much from each other as they do from me, I invite them to share in the large group the best advice they've had from peers, newfound strategies for self-discipline, and pieces they're struggling with. I brag on those who write a lot, inviting them

to explain how they motivate themselves. Once they've seen a few breakthroughs, I ask if anyone had a breakthrough during the past week. I structure class so that *they* compare their writing and work habits with those of others, but I never make comparisons part of the grade they get from me. I also hold a "disaster" workshop near mid-term. I don't remember the name of the writer from whom I stole this idea, but students always share pieces they care about but can't make work. Buried by insecurity, these so-called "disasters" often lead to breakthroughs, the term "disaster" apparently making vulnerable writers feel safe enough in sharing to take the breakthrough risk.

After four or five weeks' practice giving and getting supportive response, the second half of each three-hour class is devoted to small-group work, the expectations for participation being determined by classmates in a repeat of a first-night-of-class activity. We do a think-write/read-around in which everybody describes the kind of atmo-sphere they want their group or class to maintain so that they can learn more in this course than they've ever learned before. And this part is critical—they enjoy doing it. Around midterm, when fluency and self-discipline have expanded and the time I spend responding has increased, I begin responding in writing only on alternate weeks. Increasingly skillful at giving and getting effective response, writers trade folders with writing partners the rest of the time.

From the start, writers guide my responses by including in their folders weekly notes describing the kinds of response they want from me, and by midterm, most are quite astute about what they need. I respond as requested and note every improvement I see. I comment on growing engagement and seriousness, congratulate the growing con-trol of usage and mechanics that comes naturally when preventive/corrective pressures subside, and compliment all whose participation has somehow improved. The hardest part for me is to remember to leave them at choice about whether to use suggestions. I try, but don't always remember, to use noncontrolling expressions like "Have you thought about trying *X*?" or "If this were my paper, I might do *Y*."

If they haven't all given themselves "individual assignments" by midterm, I suggest one or two based on patterns in their work—from contributing more in the large group (if they are shy) to speaking less and drawing out others (if they are not); from working with a list of words they misspell to paying special attention to strong verb forms; from weeding out double negatives from their prose to check-ing out and practicing semicolon rules. For students who've never experienced intense involvement with learning, finding topics they

care about may, even this late in the game, be the most important thing for them to work on. Since those who care passionately revise draft after draft and enjoy working on their papers, caring is one of "the new basics" we need to teach. After a few weeks, I start referring class-mates to each other for help. "Why don't you check with Amy about quotations," I write on Keith's short story. "She's the resident expert on punctuating dialogue." Writers work on these projects indepen-dently and in small groups, the goal being not to master every rule in the book, but to develop confidence that with the help of friends, they can teach themselves whatever it is they need to learn.

At the end of the term, writers turn in organized portfolios that include every scrap they've written so that I can quickly assess the total amount they've written and scan evidence of progress rapidly. They place all drafts together, latest on top, in clearly marked sections reflecting the diversity of their work: process logs, poems, memoirs, essays, songs, comic strips, stories, false starts, think-writes, letters to editors, cathartic free-writes (sometimes stapled shut for privacy), individual assignments, artwork, at least one camera-ready piece for the class book, other finished products (three in all), final self-assess-ments, and the like.

In addition to the quality of the three finished products, we assess their overall output (practice makes perfect, you know) at how many throwaway efforts they produced, at how many drafts they wrote on the topics they cared most about, at risk taking, at genres attempted, at amount of—and care with—revising and editing, and at improvement in attitudes, behavior, or successive drafts. I skim my past responses, looking over process logs to refresh my memory about participation, group and partner work, sensitivity to others' needs, applications of others' advice, and increasing commitment and confi-dence. Feedback to others shows up in their comments on partners' portfolios. I also consider how much unlearning refugees from com-petitive classrooms have had to do before motivation and self-disci-pline could kick in.

Writing notes here and there to remind me of specific circum-stances, writers bring these portfolios to the last class along with a "final experience think-write" on eight or ten questions. We do a read-around with these to celebrate each other's growth. Following are typ-ical final experience questions:

> What were you like as a writer when you came into this class?
>
> What are you like now?

What was the most helpful aspect of this course?

What was the least helpful?

What are you most proud of in your work?

What are you least proud of?

What are you working on in your writing currently?

What would you do differently if you could to it again?

What advice could you offer me?

What advice would you give my next class?

Is there anything else you'd like to say to me?

In recent years, the balance has shifted even further from assessing others to assessing my teaching.

Another self-assessment piece follows the read-around. Students go quickly down a one-page, two-column list of attitude, behavior, and writing traits discussed in this essay, giving themselves a check, minus, or plus on each one (for "Appropriate," "Less Than I'm Capable of" or "My Very Best Work"). They summarize, using the same check system with the following:

Truthfulness	Participation
Thoughtfulness	Effort
Thoroughness	Improvement
Timeliness	Overall Quality

Because first impressions are more accurate, I allot only five minutes for this activity. They then put the grade they deserve and their phone number (or e-mail address) at the top. After skimming portfolios, focusing on my responses and their process logs, listening to the read-around, and examining their checklists, if I disagree with the grade they've given, I schedule a conference, but I long ago learned deficiencies are more often in their documentation and not in their work. The final "exam" is a "reading" (planned by a committee) to celebrate the publication of their class book (produced by another group). This photocopied collection is one of two texts writers purchase, the other being a well-known writer's discussion of the writing process.

Hardwired for Failure: The Schooling Hierarchy

This new paradigm in writing instruction is nonhierarchical in that it allows all who work to succeed and, just as important, creates classroom conditions under which motivation to work hard is widespread. Unfortunately, however, hierarchy structures education and most

other modern institutions—church, family, government, industry, sports, and military. As a result, our choices are not as clear-cut as they first appear. Pyramid-structured hierarchies—like schools and colleges—which have fewer and fewer positions as one approaches the top, must eliminate contenders at each level if they are to perpetuate themselves. Whether or not the people who work there hold elitist views, hierarchies operate economies of scarcity: At every level there are more applicants than jobs. That is why, unless teachers intervene consistently, evaluation and testing acquire a negative charge. Grades are curved, for example, when too many succeed, or points are subtracted from a hundred, a so-called "perfect score" that bears little relation to the sum of what may be learned.

Hierarchy's structural imperative, in other words, is to eliminate contenders for slots at every level, restricting access to power and resources to those at the top and keeping control in the hands of a select few. To mask the elitist nature of the enterprise, those in control have defined negative bias as "objective" in a verbal slight of hand that seems reasonable—until we unearth the discriminatory assumptions on which it is based.

The structural competition on which hierarchy relies tends to limit assessment to what can be measured numerically, even when such measurements isolate and distort, for hierarchies value reliability more than validity, or, in everyday language, consistency more than accuracy. Such assessment privileges those in power, who rarely seek feedback on the process from those assessed. After all, the goal is not to help everyone succeed; in the hierarchical mind-set, assessment must sort and rank those whom it tests. When we accept traditional guidelines for what data to examine, for how to interpret them, or for which standards to uphold, our classroom procedures hold inequities in place. For this reason, growth-biased teaching can attract disapproval from above.

But threats to growth-biased teaching come not only from the top. Hierarchies place all people in competition with each other, undermining their ability to trust, so threats to such teaching come from grade-addicted students, from peers insecure about change, from parents who want their children to "win" the race to the top—in other words, from throughout the hierarchy of nested hierarchies that structure postindustrial society. Politicians who play on public nostalgia and fear also put teaching and learning in jeopardy. But if they mean what they say about raising standards in schools, about reducing dropout rates, about keeping kids off the streets and developing a

more sophisticated workforce, growth-biased teachers' professional judgments need greater acceptance—from students, colleagues, parents, supervisors, and public servants, and especially from those unfamiliar with the field.

Because hierarchy permeates society, even in caring classrooms students learn negative lessons unless teachers take deliberate steps to neutralize them. In school, many students learn to fear grades, develop low self-esteem, dislike learning, and resist authority. As the brains of the system, however, teachers are at choice. We can continue teaching lessons in hierarchy, or, with student cooperation, we can start to neutralize them. I suggest we put our money where our collective mouth is and shift part of our teaching/learning/assessing buck away from credit for basic skills and finished products and toward the behaviors and attitudes successful writing requires. We now have teaching approaches with which all learners can succeed. If that's what our society really wants, schools need to shift from ability-based to *work-based* economies.

By shifting the basis for grading from "ability" to effort and improvement, growth-biased assessing holds "gifted" writers responsible—for working hard, cooperating, and improving—rather than letting them jump up and down on what they already know. Growth-bias offers "basic" writers equal grades for equal work—whether or not they end up being the best writers in class. And it liberates learners whose "deficiency" is anger—at an elitist, hypocritical, power-driven system which punishes the honesty writing well requires. Growth-biased teaching rechannels the energy of resistance into writers' own and their peers' development (Nelson, *At the Point*).

I view the future with growing optimism. A holistic mind-set is transforming education. The theoretical foundations, backed by research, have been laid. Democratic practice and theory are converging, and field-tested principles we can trust have emerged independently across fields—psychology, linguistics, education, management. If we reject the hierarchical goal of progressive elimination, opting instead for a growth goal—to help all learners succeed—we have a new criterion for assessing assessment (and its objectivity)—the degree to which it facilitates every learner's growth. My own and others' research suggests that this is realistic. I still struggle, but the struggle is one I believe in now, the struggle to keep both feet—teaching and assessing—firmly planted in the growth paradigm.

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