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## 4 Response: A Promising Beginning for Learning to Grade Student Writing

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Teaching in an undergraduate English education program carries a double responsibility with regard to grading. Not only must I assign a course-ending grade for each student, but I must plan instruction and model my practice in such a way as to help students understand the purposes and possibilities of the grading system. There's no point in "teaching" future teachers that student writing should be evaluated in ways that promote the growth of writers if I don't follow that advice myself. They, as students since the beginning of all time, will learn what I *do*, not what I say. If I want student teachers to experiment with alternatives to grading their students' writing, I need to ensure that they have experienced some of these alternatives in their own undergraduate classes.

Since the very beginning of my career, I have always known that I hated grading student papers, but that I loved reading them. It was fun and not particularly time-consuming to read through a set of papers. In a sixty-second deskside conference, I could read and respond to a typical eighth grader's paper. For a long time though, I accepted that it was my responsibility to grade each and every one of those papers. So I struggled with the normal mix of students: those who wrote grammatically correct but voiceless papers; those whose work bubbled over with voice and style but lacked mechanical polish; those who cared mostly about grades and those who weren't motivated at all by grades; those whose writing was uneven and sporadic;

and those who wouldn't do all of my writing assignments but were brilliant when they did.

Theory and many years of experience have given me no evidence that the grading—which I still hate to do—has helped my students become better writers. However, I have frequent evidence that responding—which I love to do—has encouraged and motivated my student writers and has also helped them improve their writing. Discovering one day that the words *response* and *responsibility* share the same etymology—*spondere*, to promise—gave me a new way to think about the response techniques I had been *using* in writing workshops and not *teaching* to English education majors. I had assigned readings on ways to respond to student writing. I had given nongraded narrative responses to their writings. We discussed response in class and brainstormed ways to respond without premature judgment, ways to respond instead of grading papers. I realized, however, that my English education students had never experienced what it was like to respond nonjudgmentally; what's more, they very seldom received that kind of response to their own writing.

Accordingly, I decided to rethink the emphasis in my methods courses. Instead of stressing the many ways to grade student writing and practicing with sample student papers, I decided it was more important to involve future teachers in response activities that were focused on one another's writings. I reasoned that suspending judgment on a paper initially would not only focus attention on the complex processes of writing, but it would also acquaint students with all the affective and rhetorical factors involved in making a summative evaluation. If I could help them learn to respond fully to writing, I wouldn't be worried about their ability to assign grades when the time came. That perceived need to *correct* another's writing, which often obscures any impulse to *respond* to it, can be examined and modified when teachers learn to respond and experience response to their own writing.

### **Learning the Difference between Evaluation and Grading**

Undergraduates preparing to teach English are nervous about their ability to grade student writing—an uneasiness which reflects their perception of the role of evaluation in the classroom. Juniors in my EN 324: "Teaching and Evaluating Writing" course usually feel confident about their ability to teach writing. After all, textbooks like Kirby, Liner, and Vinz's *Inside Out* and Zemelman and Daniels's *A Commu-*

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nity of Writers and resources like NCTE's *Ideas Plus* present more than enough ideas for designing writing lessons. Thinking of writing instruction only in terms of assignments is typical of preservice teachers, and it does carry a built-in security. Fill a notebook with surefire writing activities, and you're set for life, or so they think.

Learning to grade student papers is another matter, however, one tied to their own development as writers and their uneven experiences with academic evaluation systems. As often as not, grades have at some point generated tension and divisive feelings among students and created barriers between students and teachers, as well as between students and their own writing. Just as Peter Elbow notes, grades provide too much encouragement to successful students and too little to unsuccessful students ("Ranking" 190).

English education undergraduates tell of high school and college papers returned with sarcastic remarks or with a grade and no marks or comments, good papers given low grades and average papers given A's, plagiarized papers undetected, and papers turned in twice receiving different grades from different teachers. As a community, they have experienced the full range of teacher subjectivity, with all its variance in standards, methods, and outcomes. While some English education students even look forward to the transition from grade getter to grade giver, most are troubled by the complexities and responsibilities of the grading system. They've heard about the competitive pressures from parents and students, and they've read newspaper articles about the grade inflation that is eroding standards of evaluation. They worry about their ability to weigh effort and achievement in an individual student's work and to encourage writing as well as to reflect performance. Most of all, they wonder how they can be fair to all their students and still stem the tide of incorrectness they've read about in the popular press. They seldom doubt that every bit of student writing must be graded by the teacher, and they enter EN 324 expecting me to teach them, in no uncertain terms, the mysterious rites of paper grading. The title of the course, "Teaching and Evaluating Writing," does seem to promise just that, for at the beginning of the semester they believe grading and evaluating mean the same thing.

After an initial exploration of attitudes at the beginning of the course, I introduced the active writing and responding strand which is the heart of the course. Adapting the National Writing Project's principle that in order to teach writing well, one has to be a practicing writer, I reasoned that in order to respond to the writing of others, one would have to have experienced response to one's own writing. I wanted my

students to learn to give nonjudgmental response, and I knew that that learning had to involve them both as readers and as writers. I wanted these future teachers to experience response that “dramatized the presence of a reader” (Sommers 148) and thereby helped them to become questioning readers themselves. Ultimately, of course, it is this active responsive reading that will help them to understand evaluation standards for their own and others’ written work. As Scholes writes in *Textual Power*: “Reading and writing are complementary acts that remain unfinished until completed by their reciprocals” (20).

Similarly, Robert Probst reminds us that transactional theory has helped teachers change their reading habits with regard to student texts. In classrooms where both teacher and students are engaged in the pursuit of meaning, response to student writing is just as important as response to published literature. The teacher becomes the “manager of a small interpretive community” instead of the “judge and executioner” (70).

Louise Wetherbee Phelps (1989) describes how teachers’ response practices evolve, in tandem with theory development, from closed-text evaluative readings to contextual readings that consider the language and socially constructed circumstances of student authors. Teaching response procedures in English education classes can jump-start the growth processes that are necessary in order for teachers to understand and practice effective ongoing evaluation, rather than ineffective short-term grading.

Peter Elbow defines the differences between ranking and evaluating and creates an important third category that he calls “liking.” Ranking, he says, “is the act of summing up one’s judgment of a performance or person into a single, holistic number or score. Ranking implies a single scale or continuum or dimension along which all performances are hung” (“Ranking” 187). Elbow’s definition makes ranking synonymous with grading, a word derived from *gradus*, a step, degree, or rank. When we grade, we classify hierarchically, according to quality, rank, and worth. We grade eggs and meat. We separate students by grade levels. When we graduate, we literally “make the grade.”

Elbow defines evaluating as “the act of expressing one’s judgment of a performance or person by pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of different features or dimensions....Evaluation implies the recognition of different criteria or dimensions—and by implication different contexts and audiences for the same performance” (188). Thus, evaluation points to the process of determining worth. Etymo-

logically, it is linked to value, from *valere*, to be strong. Over the years, value has been associated with the idea of intrinsic worth. When we value something, we hold it in esteem. We do not necessarily rank it according to a formal rubric.

A grade is a product, expressed in a number or letter whose meaning is determined by its place in a hierarchy. Evaluation, on the other hand, is often expressed in a narrative which represents the standards and values of the evaluator. Evaluation need not result in a grade. It can be ongoing, with opportunities for revision built in to the process.

Elbow's third category of "liking" student writing reminds us that "only if we like what we write will we write again and again by choice—which is the only way we get better." More than that, he notes that "the way writers *learn* to like their writing is by the grace of having a reader or two who likes it—even though it's not good" (200). By creating private, nonevaluative zones for writing, a teacher gets to know students better, and they get to practice writing in a supportive context. "Let's do as little ranking and grading as we can," Elbow urges. "Let's use evaluation instead." And finally, "[L]et's learn to be better likers; liking our own and our students' writing, and realizing that liking need not get in the way of clear-eyed evaluation" (205).

Instead of giving English education students the "free fish" of a perfect grading system (which isn't mine to give anyway), I teach them to "fish for themselves" by creating a context for peer writing and responding that provides the opportunity to sharpen their awareness of how to read and value another writer's work.

## Attitudes of English Education Students

Teacher education students are in a unique place, shaped by images of teaching and learning that they experienced during their formative years and at the same time developing within the influences of current pedagogical theory. Connors and Lunsford note that, from the 1880s onward, "the idea that the teacher's most important job was to rate rather than to respond rhetorically to themes seems to have been well-nigh universal" (201). Paul Diederich, in *Measuring Growth in English*, wrote that "my predominant impression has been that (writing classes) are fantastically over-evaluated. Students are graded on everything they do every time they turn around" (2).

Written remarks on student papers often do little more than justify or mitigate the teacher's ranking. These remarks combine generic

praise (“Nice idea...,” “Interesting thesis...,” or “Clever treatment...”) with a defining “but” clause (“...flawed by diction,” “...lacks coherency,” “...fails to develop”). A graduate student told me that, when faced with the assignment of “critically marking” a peer’s paper for a class in critical theory, she imitated generic comments from her own undergraduate papers. She wanted to sound professional, but had no idea where to begin and no basis from which to respond to the paper.

Early in the semester, I asked students in EN 324 to complete Nancie Atwell’s “writing survey” (270), which probes attitudes, habits, and beliefs about writing. In response to the question “How does your teacher decide which pieces of writing are the good ones?” students wrote comments that revealed the confusing messages from their own experiences:

I’ve found the majority of teachers I’ve had put on a letter grade without any response or commentary....(Sally)

Usually the teacher makes a pile ranking them according to other students in the class. (Jane)

Through preset categories of writing factors such as clarity, development, mechanics, etc. (Rob)

I still haven’t figured that out. I can hand in the identical essay and get an A in one class and a C in the other. There are no hard, fast rules for writing. (Bob)

Possibly by personal reactions to it....(Chuck)

Perhaps originality? (Arlene)

Their scanty experience in either giving or getting responsive feedback to writing causes them to confound response with judgment, criticism, and, even, proofreading. In their established belief that *ranking* or grading is what ultimately matters, all their responses tend toward a simplistic formula: Say something nice to the writer and then find every mistake or weakness so it can be fixed in time to generate an appropriate grade.

Students are not the only ones lacking confidence in this area. In 1982, Nancy Sommers commented on the general lack of understanding for “what constitutes thoughtful commentary or what effect, if any, our comments have on helping our students become more effective writers” (148). Chris Anson, in his introduction to *Writing and Response*, acknowledges that “response to writing is often difficult and tense. For the teacher, it is the schizophrenia of roles—now the helpful facilitator, hovering next to the writer to lend guidance and support,

and now the authority, passing critical judgment on the writer's work..." (2).

Response procedures are seldom taught formally, even when the pedagogy involves peer writing groups. Usually, at most, a checklist may be provided to guide students' feedback to one another. In *Sharing Writing*, Karen Spear gives examples of three such guides, one of which features a list of forty-two specific rhetorical and mechanical features (48). Students who merely answer yes or no to each dichotomous item on such a list may quickly complete the task without understanding the rhetorical terms involved and without experiencing the meaning of the paper in question.

When they enter their first teaching experience, then, students quite naturally mimic the response and evaluation procedures which they have directly experienced. As a supervisor, I have observed student teachers using effective classroom methods to evoke interest and growth in writing, only to undermine the process by premature and overzealous grading of papers. *Everything* had to be graded, they assured me. Otherwise, "the kids just won't do the work." Or, "I have to have two grades a week for each student. It's a school rule." Commonly, student teachers talk about the many, many hours they spend in grading papers and in adding or averaging summative grades. Although they "love" reading students' work, they "hate" assigning a grade to it. They often report with amazement that grades of B, C, or D, with careful comments, do not lead to improved writing, and they agonize over their students who want higher grades than the ones they're receiving as well as the students who seem totally unmotivated by grades.

My problem in EN 324 has been to find a way to fit the ambiguities and demands of evaluation into the context of learning. Rather than letting the need to grade drive both curriculum and pedagogy, I believe student teachers should assert what they know about learning and human development. I want them to plan meaningful evaluation that will provide insights into their students' thinking and learning habits, promote the development of writing abilities, and involve their students in developing standards for evaluating their own work.

## Learning to Respond

The textbooks for EN 324 included Kirby, Liner, and Vinz's *Inside Out*, Zemelman and Daniels's *A Community of Writers*, Dunning and

Stafford's *Getting the Knack*, and Spear's *Sharing Writing*. The syllabus asked students "to establish a schedule of regular personal writing":

Most of the texts for this class include writing activities which sound great. Guided imagery, memory writing, people photos, mad/soft talking, wordshaking...the list is endless. Make these activities come alive by doing them yourself. For instance, choose one of the Kirby/Liner/Vinz activities, or one of Dunning/Stafford's poem starters. Begin by writing the name, brief description, and source of the activity (e.g., "What *color* do you feel like today? Talk about why you picked that color," from p. 46, Kirby/Liner/Vinz). Then spend about 20 minutes writing the activity yourself. Conclude with a five-minute evaluation of the activity. What was it like for you? Did you generate writing which you would like to continue working on? Can you imagine what it would be like for students? Can you think of specific ways in which you might use this writing activity in the classroom? Etc.

Students were to do one of these writings in their journal for each Tuesday meeting. Modeling the philosophy of teacher as co-learner, I would write every week too. In class, we exchanged journals and wrote responses to one another's work. My instruction in responding was brief, using three favorite prompts appropriated from a Stephen Dunning workshop years ago: "I notice . . .," for making global observations about the writing's impact, mood, and effect; "I wonder . . .," for asking questions about information not included in the writing; and "What if . . .?" for making suggestions regarding the form or content of the writing. The real instruction took place when I modeled response and in the metacognitive discussions I initiated after responding sessions. Throughout the semester, I described additional ways of responding, such as those given by Peter Elbow in *Writing with Power* and by Elbow and Belanoff in *Sharing and Responding*. Finally, I requested that all writers choose a different response partner each Tuesday, so that we could experience a full spectrum of individual responding styles.

The second stage of the process took place in Thursday's journal, when each writer was to reflect on the response process from the point of view of both a writer and a responder. I asked students to consider their own responding techniques and also their reactions to the responses they received from others. "What did the responder do, and how did it work?" were the guiding questions. More specifically, "How did you respond to \_\_\_\_\_'s work?" and "What was your reaction to \_\_\_\_\_'s response to your work?"



Students began the semester in confusion, not quite sure of what was expected of them. "I must admit that I find it difficult to *evaluate* other people's writing," Sarah wrote, despite my stress on response as opposed to evaluation. During week four, Jack wrote: "I am still confused as to what I am doing as the responder. Is my response purely affective? Am I suggesting structural changes? Specific word changes? Asking for clarifications or expansions?" After each Tuesday's journal exchange, we identified responding techniques and talked about how they worked. Some of the methods which students liked best were

- circling or underlining strong word choices or vivid phrases, with a note in the margin;
- asking questions about the content;
- relating personal associations or connections to the content;
- noticing a theme or mood which informed the writing, often without the author's awareness; and
- comments which treated the author as a writer, and the writing as a work-in-progress.

"Each time a teacher or fellow student reads and reacts to a student's paper, the social and interpersonal dimensions of the classroom come fully into play," write Anson and his colleagues (34). Hidden insecurities and tensions emerge. Sensitive feelings are tapped. Although rich, helpful responses greatly outnumbered the weak or generic responses, nearly everyone did receive a response which disappointed in some way. On the other hand, nearly everyone *wrote* a response which disappointed someone else. Feedback was immediate. If two writers miscommunicated in their responses on Tuesday, they had a chance to discuss it on Thursday, with the implicit realization that both reading and writing were active meaning-making processes. Very quickly, several truths were established: Every writer wants response, and every writer resents the generic "nice work" kind of comment that substitutes teacherly judgment for honest specificity. Comments in the Thursday journals reveal the spectrum of reactions:

I had my feelings hurt a bit today. Okay, I know I am not strong in poetry, but I really did like my poems about Buddy & Zippy a great deal....My feelings were hurt on the line, "Now that you practiced a few, do you think you could do better?" Somewhere in that statement is an unstated, "This really isn't that good."  
(Helen)

I liked the way Alan summed up my story of child abuse by calling it a story of the killing of creativity. I enjoy someone

being able to make an analogy of a story I told. It makes me feel as though my message got through. (Arlene)

One thing that she wrote to me was the word "Nice." I guess with that response I felt like I was being patronized because she just agreed with me. It was just kind of a non-response. (Arlene, about Sally's response)

Rita's response showed me that I was able to achieve my desired effect. Specifically, Rita pointed out a word choice which I was unsure of—her comments showed me that this is the correct word, that it does work....I have noticed from responses I've received images, moods, word choices that I had not thought to be especially effective are pointed out by the responder as being effective. (Jack)

She wrote her response in the margins and would draw lines around the parts that she commented on. I can't help but wish that she had been more specific. Did she like the word choice? The omitted punctuation? (Sally, about Tammy's response)

Here's my reaction to what is on the left. Either he's too busy to write this reaction, he's under the impression that he has to spew out "writing knowledge" to the teacher or me, or he just didn't get my objective. (John, about Chuck's response)

Response from others makes me focus more on "Am I getting this across? Am I saying what I mean?" A lot of times I feel I'm saying what's in my thoughts but I'm not! Also, response has encouraged me to write more—I've gotten positive response about the images I can doodle with words....It makes me feel good. (Lee Ann)

I know that two times I have been a little disappointed because I didn't feel a connection being made to my writing. Therefore, I feel that part of my writing purpose is lost. (Karen)

Students experienced a rich spectrum of response, but it did not come quickly. Always, they had to separate out their habits as responders and their expectations as recipients of response. When they received what they viewed as poor response from a classmate, they would take a closer look at their *own* responding habits. Likewise, when they received a helpful response, they would attempt to pass this on by imitating the techniques of the helpful responder. As writers, they had to consider whether a response showed them anything new about their work. They could evaluate their work on the basis of the response it evoked in a given reader.

At least six weeks passed before I felt that honest response had replaced judging or hypercritical suggestions for improvement as a

primary reaction to a classmate's writing. For one thing, the weekly writing, mostly expressive, sparked community interest. Instead of talking about teaching and evaluating writing, we were all writing and talking about our writing.

When Lee Ann tried the Kirby/Liner/Vinz "life map" visual (54) one week, the response went beyond her partner that Tuesday. Karen wrote: "Pardon me, but this is just the damn coolest thing!! Everyone was eyeing this up as I brought it over to begin looking at. Your doodles are great." In following weeks, three other writers tried the same prewriting activity. Throughout the semester, there was active imitation of both writing and responding styles. Although writers only shared work once a week in class, they shared informally outside of class.

A "golden rule" of responding emerged. "Respond unto others as you would have them respond unto you" was echoed in these comments in the fourth-week journals:

With responses that I am not comfortable with—such as psychoanalysis—I can see that I do not want to respond in this way because it may turn writers away from writing. (Helen)

The responses which I find most useful are those which encourage through specific comments about what was good in my writing and challenge me to do more through questions and suggestions. So I try to respond in a like manner....(Jack)

I wanted my responses to make the writer think more about their entry and expand on it. I feel that I am getting better at responding. When I respond I try to respond in the same ways that other people have responded to my log entries that really made me reflect on what I wrote. (Lisa)

Audience awareness grew alongside metalinguistic awareness of reading and writing habits. Because writers had a different response partner every week, they experienced a variety of writing styles and a variety of responding styles. When I asked them to describe "a good responder," the following characterizations emerged:

Alan responded well....I liked how he commented as if my writings were literature, like "Good imagery!" It made me feel like a real writer. (Lee Ann)

I also like to know the feelings that are generated by my responder, instead of just they like it or don't like it. Helen...is a good responder. (Rita)

With Sally's response techniques, I like the way she underlined words—this made me more aware of my own statements and the effects that these statements had on her... Sarah is so personal when she responds—I really like this. She asks me questions and makes observations which show me that she really is interested in what I am doing. For example, her comment, "I suspect there are many stories to be told about St. John's Church. . . ." There are! (Helen)

I was pleased to find that Karen at least pondered over the things I did: Were they intentional or not? They were, and although she really didn't know what they were for, neither did I, I guess. The point is that she didn't hold back. She wasn't sure of what was going on in all cases. So she wrote what she knew and she asked about what she didn't. That is very important—to not be fake, but sincere (really sincere) in your responses. I think I was happiest when she said she wanted more, wanted to know what came next (I wasn't finished). (John)

Students worked at improving their responding habits. The assigned textbook chapters on conferencing and peer writing groups took on an immediate relevance because they could be directly applied. For instance, Arlene noted that Sarah's response questions "reminded me of the responses given on pages 148 and 149 in the Spear book." Sarah's use of Spear's "challenging feedback questions" and Arlene's notice of it added relevance to an otherwise routine reading assignment. Overall, the initiative and energy which students applied to responding reminded me again of that etymological connection between *response* and *responsibility*.

EN 324 also included a teaching component, where students were to involve classmates in a ten-minute mini-lesson. This activity began in the fourth week of the semester, and students were asked to write a response to each presenter. Naturally enough, they used the same techniques they had been developing in journals, discovering that honest, specific feedback applies equally well to oral or written products.

As a full participant in the writing and responding, I not only had an unusual window into my students' growth, but I learned a great deal about my own habits and about the symbiotic relationship between responding and writing processes. Ruth's reaction to the experience of exchanging journals with her professor was fairly typical:

As for last Tuesday when you and I traded, I was a little nervous about that. I wanted to be as good a responder as I want

responded to. (I always do.) But how was I supposed to respond to *your* writing. So I finally decided to just respond like I would to anybody else's writing—as a *reader* who is also a writer. And I enjoyed reading and responding to your writing. (By the way, I was driving in today and I was thinking about your description of the “little man” Mexican boy. Have you considered turning that one little vignette into a poem?)

What I treasure in that note is the fact that Ruth thought, and talked to me, about my writing (a narrative about an incident in Mexico) two days after she read and responded to it. Like any writer, I appreciate genuine interest in my work. Her suggestion that I consider condensing my story into a poem was a valuable writer-based response. I saw evidence of that kind of personal connection among all twenty-two of the students in the course. They were observing and thinking about one another as practicing writers, giving and acting upon one another's advice, and constructing their own standards for writing and responding. And it went beyond the minimum requirements for coursework. Not for whimsy alone did they name the final publication of their writing, “We're All in This Together.”

### **Practicing What I Teach**

One of my goals for EN 324 was for students to learn to like their writing. I planned to achieve this goal through a program of regular non-graded writing which received active and nonjudgmental peer response. I hoped that, by learning to like their own writing, they might be able to see their students' writing as more than a deficient text in need of improvement. I hoped that they would want to replicate our class's experience with community-developed standards in their own classrooms. I knew that I would undermine all these hopes and efforts if my own evaluation system failed to reconcile my pedagogical theory with the institutional demands for a semester grade.

In the syllabus, I published a description of my 100-point grading scale. The dialogic writing journal, which I consider responsible for most of the learning in this course, counted for 25 percent of the final grade. A writing portfolio counted for an additional 50 percent, a demonstration lesson for 15 percent, and overall oral participation for 10 percent. In order to minimize the risk and also to demonstrate my belief that not all writing need be graded or even revised, I offered an automatic full credit of twenty-five points for each completed writing journal. Although I did read and respond to these journals, not ranking them saved me time and anxious decisions. Students contributed

their favorite work from the journal to a class anthology that we published at the end of the term. In addition to the dialogic journal, students compiled a portfolio that included a writer's autobiography, an article on teaching or learning to write, and a teaching unit. For the preface to this portfolio, they described the writing, peer feedback, and revision processes they had employed in each piece, and they discussed their own strengths and problems as writers.

At the end of the term, each student wrote a self-evaluation, complete with suggested points for each category of evaluation, and brought it to an individual conference with me. At this conference, the student and I compared our point estimates, discussed rationales for the estimates, and negotiated a final grade.

I never did teach my students how to grade papers, but I think I *showed* them some valuable alternatives. My hope is that the responding voice which they developed in EN 324 will enable them to see student papers as individual texts in process rather than products to be judged, and to understand evaluation itself as a complex process rather than a formulaic product. After all, awareness of their own reading and writing processes and how those processes function in the valuing of student texts is a worthy preparation for learning how to grade papers.

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## Interlude

Has anyone read Alfie Kohn's Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes? Kohn raises some crucial questions about how and why rewards stifle intrinsic motivation and often encourage tedious, routine class work, whereby students are constantly being led to get something (external reward) if they do something. "Do this and you will get this." That's the constant refrain in the classroom. So rather than hearing students say *\*what\** they learned, we more often than not hear them say what they *\*got\**. They are taught to lose sight of the learning and to focus on the outside carrot or stick. And so many times, whatever they do, what they receive is never good enough—thus they receive the punishment of not being good enough.

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