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EXCLUSIVELY POSITIVE RESPONSES TO STUDENT WRITING¹

ABSTRACT: An in-class research project was conducted in two sections of EGC 100—Introduction to the Writing Process, for native and non-native speakers not ready for Freshman Composition—to explore different modes of responding to student papers. In one section, the usual range of positive and negative comments, advice, criticisms, and corrections was used. In another section, only praise or acknowledgement was offered for what worked or moved in the right direction. Results of the project showed that no significant differences existed in performance between the two classes. Further, while students in the “regular” section often merely followed the teacher’s comments or corrections in their subsequent drafts, students in the “positive only” section frequently initiated their own changes or corrections, and seemed to gain greater authority over their writing.

In May, 1986, a note arrived in my mailbox. It was from Peter Elbow, and read:

Fran, can I talk to you sometime about the possibility of your doing an experiment with one section of 100? Lots of freewriting, sharing, and working up to feedback—but restricting the feedback to what you might call ‘believing’ feedback: trying to understand and hear what the person is saying, and praising what you like. I.e., *no* evaluation or

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criticism. Both with peer feedback and from you. (This means training them *not* to give evaluative feedback.)

We suspect this might be close to what you already do. But we'd like to try it out. And collect all the writing. And one of the grad students (or you?) might be able to look at it carefully and write up the results. See what we can learn.

Let's talk. No pressure. (No hurry)

Peter

The course referred to in the note was EGC 100, Introduction to the Writing Process, a fourteen-week transitional, nongraded basic writing course offered by the Writing Programs at SUNY/Stony Brook, designed to give additional writing experience to freshmen prior to entering EGC 101, Freshman Composition. The classes of fifteen are composed primarily of foreign students and non-native speakers who either completed the most advanced writing course in ESL or scored two in the Stony Brook English Placement Test.²

For the five years I taught EGC 100, fluency was my primary goal. Students wrote a great deal in class, both freewriting and frequently more experiential and personal essays than exposition. I also required every student to hand in a piece of writing each week, and planned class activities around the idea that practice makes progress. The more students wrote, the better they wrote. If I could help them separate their "writer" from the "critic," they would be able to generate more text more readily. When we began to work on revision around midterm, I almost naturally assumed one of the cornerstones of an English teacher's faith: after students had worked on several drafts of their paper in groups and with me, I would help further by marking, correcting, and writing comments.

For the most part, my approach seemed to work: by the end of the semester, students were writing longer, more meaningful, and sometimes powerful essays, with only one or two mechanical errors in their final draft. At the end of the term, students selected their best work for publication in a class anthology.

After the note arrived, Peter and I talked about trying the experiment as an in-class research project in two sections of EGC 100.³ The idea seemed simple enough. In one section, I would mark, correct, and comment—let loose the full array of written responses, both positive and negative, that I ordinarily made. In another section, I would restrict myself to writing positive comments only, and exclude all marks, comments, or corrections of mechanical errors.

My initial impulse was to say that I didn't want to participate in the project. After all, how could I deny students the help they

clearly needed and asked for, and also betray one of the deepest articles of faith I held true for myself as a teacher of writing? Still, I began to wonder if student writing improved for reasons that had little or nothing to do with what I wrote on their papers *per se*. Further, I asked myself what kinds of responses to writing *do* effect changes? And what kinds of changes result? I knew I was spending vast amounts of time and energy correcting errors, making remarks in margins, and writing summary comments. I wondered if all my correcting, commenting, and advice-giving accomplished anything. I continued to have my doubts about the project, but I finally agreed, and began to explore new modes of responding. What follows is a record of this inquiry.

September, 1986. By random number, I selected five students in each of two sections. On the students' papers in the Regular class, I moved through my usual array of responses to the text. In the Positive Only section, my responses followed a different pattern. At the time, I did not analyze carefully the kinds of feedback I gave. Nor did I think through precisely what I meant by positive and not positive. But looking back at the actual papers, the comments I made in the Regular class seemed to fall into the following general categories:

First, I used a quick and effective shorthand mode of responding which seemed consistent with my goals. I put wavy lines under text that was strong, effective, or vivid, text that pleased me, or that worked. Then I began the written comments with what can be called positive responses: *Praise*: "Three pages. Good for you." "I notice you included a conversation here. You handled the quotations well." *Encouragement, Support, or Appreciation*: "I can see you spent a lot of time on your draft. Keep at it!" *Approval*: "I like that you risked writing about a dream. Inventive." "I like the way you contrast the happiness with the sorrow. We see you had mixed emotions." *Observations*: "I see you used lots of adjectives. They make the nouns more specific, precise, so the reader can see them more clearly." "I see here you show the reader with an example. This works well." *Human responses*: "I enjoyed reading the dialogue. Witty." *Neutral Descriptions of the text*: "I notice you have seven paragraphs on a single page."

In addition to those above, I also made the following kinds of responses. *Questions*: "Can you tell us about this in more detail?" "Can you add more information here?" "Did you leave something out here?" *Suggestions*: "Try to be more specific." *Advice*: "Watch out for verb tense shifts." "Read and fix." And finally, *Negative Comments*: "Using the third person isn't working for me here." "Confusing." "I don't understand what you mean."

I corrected spelling and pointed out problems of all kinds by underlining the plethora of tangled sentences and grammatical errors. Occasionally, I made remarks about them in the margins as well.

In the Positive Only class, I was to make only positive responses, but initially I wasn't quite sure what that meant. Positive as contrasted to negative? I assumed my comments, especially in this section, were designed to reinforce metastrengths, moves in the right direction without "evaluation" or "criticism." Thus, in the Positive Only class, I made the same kinds of positive and neutral responses to the texts as I did in the Regular class: *Praise. Encouragement. Support. Approval. Observations. Human responses. Descriptions of the text.*

But, in the Positive Only section, I did not make suggestions. I did not ask questions, give advice, or point out problems. And I did virtually no correcting. The mechanical and grammatical errors were legion, at least in the first drafts, but in the Positive Only class, despite my apprehensions I deliberately avoided noting, marking, or fixing any of them. Perhaps here it might be helpful to focus on one student writer from each section, including excerpts from their writing, to provide further examples of the kinds of comments I made in each group:

In the Regular class, Savath begins by telling us: "High! my name is Savath. I originally came from Cambodia, the tiny spot of land between Thailand in the west and Vietnam in the East. I was born in this cancerous, murderous and chronic-bloody country in 1965, the year that gave me bad fate. Willing to overcome my suffering, and stagnant life, I decided to leave my family in 1978, the time that Vietnam invaded Cambodia . . ."

Savath was thirteen years old when he left home, and eighteen when he finally arrived in the U. S., direct from a refugee camp in Thailand. In Savath's first paper, a barely understandable description of a room in the library, I put wavy lines under what I liked or thought worked, and made comments as, "I like that you give specific details here." Or "I like your use of analogy here." That was all.

At midterm, Savath wrote about his "turning point," the day he flew out of Bangkok. The story is told in two overlong paragraphs, riddled with every kind of error imaginable. I put in every missing word, corrected every problematic verb form, and fixed each spelling error, a tedious and time-consuming endeavor. I wrote, "I don't understand what you mean here." "All one paragraph? Break it up." "Then what happened? Is something left out of the story here?" "Can you explain this more clearly?" "Can you tell us more

about this?" I did not direct the students' attentions to these kinds of problems or make these kinds of responses in the Positive Only class.

When he revised his paper, the major changes he made had to do with making meaning clear, and were in response to my comments. For example, I had written, "All one paragraph on this page?" And, "Then what happened?" Here is a bit of his revision: ". . . my mind was shocked by the clamour of the gigantic explosion. Soldiers were in the town supressing the rebellions attempted by the people who wanted to express their feeling toward atosities by the government." Then, Savath looks out of the airplane window as he leaves his homeland: ". . . my mind flipped off and flew back to my poor family that I left behind in Cambodia, the land of war. I was so depressed that I flew away from them to the unknown and far away world without saying any words of 'Goodbye.' I was told they had a funeral for me because they thought I was killed in the fighting. They don't know that I am still alive. I had been saved from the bloody flood in the darkness of hell in which life was like a piece of dirt. That was my turning point. I realize that I am out of hell and in heaven and I hope my life is going to change."

At the end of the semester, Savath's achievement peaked. He wrote the story of how he experienced discrimination when he applied for a job at an engineering firm on Long Island. He handed in his first draft of "Last Straw But First Taste," a two-line introduction, a two-line conclusion, and two long paragraphs in between. I gave Savath advice: "I want to know everything that happened, see it, hear it, and feel it and even smell and taste it as you did. Try to include some dialogue and tell us more about your friend John." On the second draft, I simply wrote, "We want to know more." On the third, I underlined the spelling and mechanical errors and wrote, "Almost there. Fix." for his final draft, Savath turned in a four-and-a-half page, typed, double-spaced paper, and most of the spelling and mechanical errors were gone.

In her introductory letter to me, Mildred in the Positive Only class wrote, "I am a Puerto Rican and I'm really proud to be one. I faced a lot of discrimination at the high school I attended here on Long Island. People would laugh as they heard me talk because they supposidly couldn't understand what I was saying."

Mildred's first paper described the serenity of a duckpond, which she used as a springboard to a reflection on a dying aunt—a two-paragraph paper, with a one-sentence conclusion. The writer contrasted the "beautiful" scene outside with the sad reality of her feelings. Her final paragraph was an apology: "I know I'm not

supposed to be writing about my feelings but this is what's inside of me and i have to let it come out someway."

The only spelling errors were *rhthm* and *enviroment*. I didn't correct the spelling, nor note the one fragment. My comments on this first paper of the semester: "The peacefulness made you introspective and reflect on this . . ." and in response to her apology I wrote, "I'm glad you did (write about your feelings). Touching."

By midsemester, Mildred had doubled her content to one-and-one-half pages of typed text, which began: "Memories are like boats that navigate on the river of my mind." Once again we witness a flashback, to the moment the writer had to leave Puerto Rico for the continental U. S., and then there is a flashback *within* the flashback. She thinks back to when she left Puerto Rico, and then looks back from that time to the years preceding her departure. The transitions are clear. I write: "I like the way you contrast the pain and sorrow with your excitement and happiness through the whole piece." "I like the way you handled the flashback. The reader understands your time sequence here." "I see you used an analogy, or comparison. Good idea. Analogy enriches the image for the reader." I commented only on the paper's strengths; I didn't correct any of the spelling or grammar errors.

The last paper of the semester was only four paragraphs, considerably shorter than the previous ones. It was developed from a journal entry on the painful discrimination she suffered at her Long Island high school, culminating with someone delivering a book to her with a note about the "foul-mouthed, oversexed, garishly dressed Puerto Ricans." The paper resembled an outline, but it was clear the writer was involved with her subject. My response: "Painful events!" "I like when you include lots of specific details, as you did here."

I reviewed Savath's and Mildred's papers at the end of the semester. Savath's improvement was continuous over time; each of his succeeding papers was better than the previous one. Mildred's improvement and change was most notable at the beginning and in the middle of the semester, but seemed to plateau and even regress a bit at the end.

Still, comparing papers written at the beginning and the end of the semester, both students' writing had improved significantly. These two patterns recurred in the papers of the other eight students in the project, in both sections, suggesting that at this level of development, improvement takes place constantly but sporadically as a result of increased writing experience over a period of time. Despite the differing modes of commenting, the more students

write, the better they write, but not necessarily in evenly spaced increments.

At about midterm, I asked students in both classes: "Do you think your writing has changed since the beginning of the semester? What has had the greatest influence on your writing this semester so far?" No one in the Regular class mentioned anything about the comments on their papers. However, the following responses were written by students on papers in the Positive Only section.

(1) "The most influence on my writing is the common on the paper. Everytime I got back the paper, I could read that over and saw what's wrong in that paper, what I needed to write more and knew what do the reader like or what they don't understand."

(2) "After I read the comments, I had more ideas which could rebuild my composition . . . the comments have helped me to figure out what I missed in my story. I like these comments because it helped me to feel more comfortable with my composition. I wish my teacher can give me more comments . . . I appreciate these comments . . ."

(3) "Through Fall Semester, EGC 100, all we recieved was positive feedback on our writing. From my own experience It helped me a lot. Recieving a positive feedback made me think that my writting was very, very good and it made me try to do better and better everytime. In fact, it made me have a competition towards myself. I wouldn't hand in anything that I didn't think was good enough."

This last response was written by Mildred.

Part Two—the Log

Throughout the experimental semester I kept a log. This was a periodic record of my perceptions and reactions, and speculations on how strange, even alien at first, my behavior felt in the Positive Only section, followed by my growing pleasure as the semester progressed. Some of the material in the log may echo statements made in other parts of the text, but it is a quite different thing to record experience as it takes place than to reflect and write about it at a later time.

The original log was over sixty pages, written without consideration to audience. I have made extensive cuts, indicated by ellipses, and have tried to improve the prose by leaving out words, sentences, and paragraphs, but otherwise (have) left the entries exactly as they were written. The writing may occasionally sound excited and enthusiastic, sometimes even a bit "preachy" but it

reflects a reasonable record of my emotional and intellectual involvement at the time.

Week 1. When Peter first told me about his idea for this experiment, my first response was NO! . . . FZ begins to wonder about the experiment . . . how to proceed . . . My goals? Whatever I thought would be “generative” and would help the student help herself to produce “good” writing . . . I wonder how we even describe what we, as writing teachers, are trying to do here?

Week 4. I now go over papers from the Regular class first—so when the impulse to “fixit” and “changeit” occurs, I can give in to it and indulge in a teacherly activity—albeit in the back of my mind already a little voice is saying, “Do you really think that will change x’s writing?” One answer says YES! because he will see the way it looks correct, and in his mind, will register that way and imprint it on his MINDDISK for next usage time. The other side says NO! *Seeing* it is not enough—he has to *hear* it, *say* it, *feel* the words and the sounds and the rhythms in his mouth and also write it, so his hand gets acquainted with the new form . . . I still think students can improve their writing by *listening* to their texts, *hearing* their words. Will someone comment, help me with this? It is an ongoing question, which hasn’t to date, been resolved to anyone’s satisfaction.

Week 5. I am now reading some revisions (from both classes) . . . and am much encouraged to see that so many of the students have really improved and progressed and I tell myself that they will survive and maybe even shine in 101. In the Positive Only group, I merely told them to take the papers home and make them better . . . that’s all. And they came back better. Longer, typed neatly, cleaned up of surface errors to some degree. They have added a great deal of new information to these papers . . . they have the right idea . . . they’re on the right track.

—Then another set of papers will come in and all hopes are dashed, and I despair and doubt that they are learning anything at all.

—I am a bit disturbed, re: the Positive Only class. Without any formal copyediting, how will we clean up the papers? How will we do revisions? How will they . . . get rid of surface errors and mechanical problems so we can publish papers? egads!

Week 6. It’s so much harder like this, in the Positive Only class. It requires a great deal of thought, focus, and concentration—to NOT direct, NOT point, NOT give instructions or suggestions . . . I’ve become more sensitized to praisable features—and . . . respond to more of them . . . that’s easy, and fun. Still, it’s more difficult and problematic with the Positive Only section . . . I have to . . . limit

myself to . . . positive feedback . . . it's an act of self-discipline . . . it's difficult . . . it results from feeling you're giving the students gifts . . . nothing but good . . .

Week 9. On these clean drafts . . . I shifted from pen to pencil to write my margin notes—to mark and note softly and quietly, lightly, so as not to disturb the text, the effort, the integrity of these well-thought out, well-planned, and carefully executed pieces . . . This is the last draft before publication, so now I will *mark*, not correct, places where corrections need to be made. Up to now, I have not done so—just told *them* to fix up the mechanics . . . I see now I am doing a closer reading . . . and observing things I neither noticed nor noted before . . .

—On the matter of spelling, grammar, mechanics. I am getting the sense that my correcting students' papers is making me feel effective, that I'm doing something to help . . . Whether or not it's helping the students, I don't really know.

—All things turn out to be equal. Fascinating. In the Positive Only class, I marked the mechanics not at all, all semester. However, the moment before publishing our anthology, I marked (did *not* correct) the errors left by that time, which weren't many . . . It appeared that the errors on the papers of the "stronger" writers, were mostly cleaned up, and those on the papers of the "weaker" writers, remained, even after they were marked . . . In the Regular class, where I marked and corrected errors all along, but not all of them, most of the ones I noted were cleaned up, and most of the ones I did *not* underline or correct were left unchanged!

. . . My conclusion about mechanics. It seems to me not to make any difference whether we mark them or we do not mark them. If anything, I tend to believe that we do better not marking the errors or fixing them on the drafts, at least until the final revisions. In short, both ways seem to work and not work fairly equally. There was change in both sections, but my hunch is that in the Positive Only section, where the students had to figure out how to correct by themselves, they probably learned more than the students in the Regular class, who simply copied my corrections . . .

Week 10. In the Positive Only class, the . . . responsibility for correctness was theirs, not ours, and they met it.

—If we fix too much, will we homogenize the piece? Or does it depend on what we mean by fix. Pat Belanoff's comments today at the staff meeting related to that point. Do we . . . really know what we mean when we talk about errors? Exactly what are we referring to . . . what is it exactly that we want our students to fix or change . . . we need to be careful.

Week 11. Students learn, and not necessarily because we teach

them . . . we need them to teach, but they do not need us to learn . . . a humbling thought that came out of Peter's *Writing Without Teachers*.

—These kids (in both classes) were talking like WRITERS today and I told them so. They came up with their own questions about the text: “Will it work better if I put this paragraph here instead of there?” “What do you think about this ending?” “Do you think I need more description here?” “Will more reasons strengthen my argument?” It was . . . exciting! They had come a long way from the first week of class when they were concerned mainly with the surface “correctness” of their work . . . and comments like “tell me what’s wrong with this . . .”

Week 13. I’m going to encourage them to do lots more talking . . . In fact, they prefer . . . to make their own decisions on what changes to make . . . of course, they’d like us to find and fix (errors) for them, but . . . once we make up our minds, that the authority and . . . the ultimate responsibility for their own writing rests with them . . . we free ourselves of a huge, heavy burden . . . the bonus is that the students take real pride in becoming and being authorities over their own work. It’s a situation where student and instructor both win.

(The log for Fall Semester, 1986, ends here.)

During the following semester of Spring, 1987, I again taught two sections of EGC 100 and limited comments on papers to Positive Only in both sections. The following entries were written in the log during the first two weeks of that semester. I include them here as they touch on another important outcome of the previous semester’s work.

Week 1. After last semester’s marathon . . . the idea . . . of (only positive responding) is recharging my batteries in a big way . . .

—Just control yourself, f.z. Squiggle line under what you like and make one positive comment at the end of the text. Even on the weakest of papers? But aren’t I giving a false impression that the paper is good, and I’m being patronizing? No. The comment can be about the subject, a response to meaning, or an *I notice* comment.

—I see that the responses have fallen into a pattern, and I’m trying to be consistent. 1) wavy lines under what I like, what works, what sounds good. 2) comment at the end in response to what the text says, or meaning, and 3) one short comment at the end about structure. “Oh, I see you already know how to paragraph a text.” “Your conclusion really does reflect back on the text, etc.” Like that.

—Responding, going through texts like this, in this manner is more . . . interesting, and quicker because I know clearly what I am going to do, and how. And I don’t have to agonize over the plethora

of awful things going on—that tend to discourage, dismay, dishearten, and disappoint.

—Yet, at a meeting of our composition discussion group, Sheryl Fontaine raised a relevant question: “What you’re saying then, is that it all came down to about the same amount of work, and the results were about the same, so why should we do one and not the other? Didn’t you just bring out that it really doesn’t matter what we do?”

Answer: . . . At least part of the point doesn’t have to do with what the “method” does for the student, but what it does for the teacher. The “Positive Only” has a regenerative effect . . . it relieves (us) of those dreary and draining feelings we get when we go on and on marking and correcting and underlining and “red-pencilling” in our own individual ways . . . if we’re happier with our teaching, we’ll be better teachers, and our students will benefit . . .

But, this is easy to hold to, because . . . the positive reinforcement and praise I give my students about what is good about their writing has boomeranged . . . the positive responding is rewarding me!

Week 2. —Some papers—very difficult, almost impossible to find a positive feature. Seem hopeless. Work harder. All kinds of patronizing comments come to mind. Work harder to find an honest comment about the text or structure. Try . . .

Now I feel I know what to do and how to do it . . . The process is terrific, energizing . . . Now . . . I know ahead of time . . . there is no need to obsess about mechanics and respond to everything . . .

—Some papers really tax creativity and responding skills. They take your breath away when you read them, and would ordinarily be so depressing to read and think about And to work on . . . collectively those sets of papers grind us down. Set by set. Semester by semester. Year by year.

—I’m happier than ever now . . . I think my teaching is better. And I think the students are learning just as much, if not more.

—It’s late . . . I’d better close . . . writing these reflections about teaching has been a high . . . END OF LOG

Reflections

It is over two years now since the original project with positive responding was completed, time enough to let all of the “carried away” writing in the log settle and to reflect on the experience. I find I still do not have definitive answers and cannot completely explain exactly what happened as a result of this inquiry. But I can

make a few observations about student writing and writing teachers and raise some questions that might suggest future lines of research:

First, there were no significant differences in performance between the two classes despite the different modes of responding. The writing of the students involved in the project in both sections improved. The papers at the end of the semester were better than they were at the beginning. They were longer. They contained much more information and specific detail. They were livelier, with more figurative and descriptive language, and they included dialogues. The papers were more focused, more interesting.

What puzzles me is not that the Positive Only class, with all the positive responding, didn't do so much better than the other, but that the Regular class, for all the suggestions and advice they received, didn't do better. Yet the writing in both groups improved.

After cataloguing my comments, I was quite surprised to discover more possibilities than I was previously aware of for making positive and supportive comments on student papers. Once I began to realize that the students' writing would improve from either mode, I began to recognize more and more choices for comments on their papers, and more ways to talk to students about their writing and what it was doing. I had less need to suggest, give advice, or make corrections.

Still, I am left with some perplexing questions. The project left me wondering whether writing comments on student papers is useful at all. Nancy Sommers' findings in her article "Responding to Student Writing," confirm what I think many of my colleagues and I experience. She writes, "More than any other enterprise in the teaching of writing, responding to and commenting on student papers consumes the largest proportion of our time. Most teachers estimate that it takes them at least 20 to 40 minutes to comment on an individual student paper. . . ." I wonder if we could be just as helpful by doing less, or by using our time and energies in more productive ways. I now feel ready to see what would happen by eliminating *all* written comments on students' papers.

I wonder, too, if all the "helping" in the Regular class, the giving advice and suggestions and the fixing of errors, is just another way of establishing our own authority over our students' papers and thereby maintaining control of their texts.

Errors somehow speak louder in a text than positive features. Because they don't belong, they stand out—demand we take notice. And for the students, errors drown out considerations of anything else about the paper. Thus it's a lot easier to deal with them than to look for something to praise. But marking and/or correcting the

grammar errors in the Regular class was of questionable value. The papers from both classes were mostly error-free before publication.

This outcome reflects Connors and Lunsford's research⁴ which shows that the more writers focus on making meaning more clear, the fewer errors s/he makes. In both sections, students made multiple revisions of each paper in the effort to clarify their meaning and purpose and to find their own voices. By the final drafts before publication, most of the tangled syntax, spelling, and mechanical errors were gone.

Another outcome of this project was its effect on the writing teacher. It was more difficult responding in the Positive Only class. Making only positive and supportive comments and refraining from giving advice and suggestions required a great deal of resourcefulness and restraint. My impulse was to point out problems, make suggestions for change, and to correct errors. In the Regular class, where I was free to indulge those teacherly activities, I felt more related and more connected to the texts; I felt more effective.

About midterm, I noticed that the way I related to the papers, and ultimately to the students, was changing. The project began with an idea, and at first I wrote positive comments in response to it. But soon I found myself commenting positively in a much deeper way. New habits took over. It became habitual, a part of me, and deeply satisfying to look for and find even the smallest bits that worked even in the weakest papers, and praise them. The more I did it in the Positive Only class, the more I found myself doing it in the Regular class. I felt energized and rejuvenated by the process. I was happier. Perhaps one of the important outcomes of this research project was the discovery of an antidote to teacher burnout.

I couldn't help but think, too, that if I were a more enthusiastic teacher, my students would do better, and if I were more supportive and more clearly focused on their strengths, they would develop greater control and authority over their own writing, becoming more effective writers and more responsible for their own learning.

Notes

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at: Pennsylvania State University Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July, 1987; Basic Writing Conference, St. Louis, September, 1987; and Conference on College Composition and Communication, St. Louis, March, 1988.

² All students admitted to Stony Brook are required to take the English placement test. Students who score 3 are placed in EGC 101, Writers

Workshop, the regular freshman composition course. Students who score 2 are placed in EGC 100, offered by the English Department, and those who score 1, register for ESL, in the Department of Linguistics.

EGC 100 is graded S/U—no letter grades, and students receive three credits towards graduation upon its successful completion. It is liberating to not have to assign grades in this course. It allows me to establish and maintain a clear and unambivalent relationship to the students in a community of trust and support. I don't have to perform the complex and intensely uncomfortable shift between the roles of coach/ally and judge/evaluator. Thus, I am free to try to create a culture of learning in a cooperative setting. In a culture of support, each student can be given the gift of ongoing and continuous possibility for improvement and change. Positive responding contributes to achieving this goal. In addition to the regular assignments, students are required to write two pages daily in their journals; the journal writing is private: I count pages for credit, but do not read or comment on it.

³ For a discussion of how teacher practitioners create knowledge about writing, see North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, and Goswami and Stillman, *Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change*.

⁴ Robert J. Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford, "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research." *College Composition and Communication* 39.4 (Dec. 1988): 395–409.

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