
Seeing Beyond the Student to the Writer: Disentangling the Writing Teacher's Conflicting Roles

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Writing teachers despise grading. They delay it. They avoid it. They strive to minimize its impact and importance, speaking to their students as if it didn't matter (when, of course it does). But in the end they are faced with it and do it, usually alone, with trepidation and a lot of second guessing.

Last semester, we decided not to grade our students' portfolios. We opted out of the whole dilemma and in the process, found a way to provide students with a more valid assessment of their work. What grew out of a simple frustration with our roles as evaluators, eventually revealed hidden complexities and subjectivities inherent in grading.

We had long been aware of evaluation of writing as a process riddled with doubt. "Is this really an A, or am I too aware of the fact that this is her sixteenth draft, am I too sympathetic to her struggle?" or conversely, "Is this really a D paper, or am I only reacting to his snide posturing, his bragging to classmates about how quickly he can 'slap something together' before class?" No matter how objective we try to be, these uncertainties remain.

Some writing teachers embrace this subjectivity. Tom Romano (1985) writes, "Evaluation of writing is necessarily a subjective act. Objectivity is impos-

sible... who the student is helps determine what grade I give, what response I make. It cannot be otherwise... A paper of similar quality may be a C for Mary, an A for Max" (113- 14). While not all teachers would subscribe to this extreme viewpoint, most would acknowledge some subjectivity in their grading process. Lad Tobin (1993) writes, "Every time I read, respond to and grade an essay, I am also reading the student who wrote it; I am reading my own associations into that text; and I am reading the relationship I have and am trying to establish with that student. In other words, while I am reading the text on the page, I am also wondering how hard this student worked on this draft, how capable she is of revision, [and] to what extent my own biases are shaping my responses." (67). He lists 13 factors unrelated to the quality of the text which at different times "play a significant role in the grades that [he] ultimately give[s]" (66). These include questions such as "What grade does this student expect? ... What might my colleagues say if I give her a grade that is much higher than they gave her? ... What do I know about this student's personal life that would explain why he did not do as well as he could have?"(65- 66).

All teachers face the dilemma of weighing the quality of the writing against subjective influences. Tobin resolves this conflict by "openly acknowledging the subjective, interpersonal nature of assessment..." (68). This acknowledgment, he feels, "frees [him] to do [his] best, knowing that in the end, it is all [he] can do" (69).

But is this all we can do? We found ourselves uncomfortable with the way subjectivity has been embraced as a value. Student writers need and de-

serve a true assessment of their work. We asked ourselves if there were a way to minimize subjectivity so that writing could be evaluated, if not totally objectively, at least fairly. But how can we act as objective evaluators without jeopardizing the caring relationships we must have in order to be effective writing teachers? Noddings (1987) notes that in grading “we are asked to look at the student as object— as a thing to which some measuring stick can be applied... This is demeaning and distracting. It violates the relationship” (194).

In the teaching of writing, perhaps more than in any other type of teaching, the essence of learning is in the relationship. Writing teachers build relationships with their students as they look together at emerging drafts. Workshop and conference teaching emphasizes relationship, creating a safe place within which writing can be nurtured. As students generate the text of the course through their writing, the way that text is handled becomes crucial. Teacher and student-writer work closely together as a team, that is, until grading time when “suddenly, grindingly, [the teacher] must wrench herself from the relationship and make her student into an object of scrutiny” (Noddings, 195). This creates resentment on the other side of the desk. Chiseri-Strater (1993) notes that often students feel betrayed after writing teachers have led them, through positive feedback in conferences and on papers, to believe that they are doing above average work, only to receive a C-.

To avoid this breakdown of the relationship, Noddings proposes a radical solution, that “if [grading] must be done, it should be done by external examiners, persons hired to look at students as objects” (195).

Noddings herself recognizes that many problems are inherent in her proposal. While we would certainly not recommend further intrusion of outside authorities into the classroom, we did find the germ of an idea in the concept she puts forth. What if student work could be submitted for grading, not to a hired authority, but to a trusted colleague? Could this be a way to preserve the teaching relationship, give students a more objective assessment of their writing, while, at the same time, continuing to promote those values which we espouse as teachers of writing? We decided to exchange for grading our students' mid-term and final portfolios.

Obviously, this type of cooperative venture would only be possible for teachers who share similar philosophies and values about writing and the teaching of writing. We were fortunate in that we had worked closely together over several years. We first met in the spring semester of 1993 when Maribeth began her graduate studies as a student in Meg's course on teaching writing. Maribeth felt an immediate affinity with the process philosophy which Meg explained in the class. In the spring of 1994, Maribeth worked as a graduate intern in Meg's composition class. As part of this experience, we spent many hours evaluating portfolios together, discussing criteria and the subjective factors which entered into our evaluations of student papers. In the fall of 1994, when Maribeth began teaching her own sections of writing 101 at New England College in Henniker, much of what she had learned at Plymouth State was reflected in her syllabus. Thus, our plan was facilitated by the many similarities in the way our classes were set up. More specifically, our grading structure was virtually iden-

tical. We each required a midterm portfolio containing three student-selected pieces, which would receive numerical grades. These grades, however, would not count towards the final grade. This would give the students an indication of their progress in relation to the quality of writing we expect of first year writing students, and encourage the students to further revise their pieces for submission in the final portfolio. The final portfolio, which would count for 40% of their final grades, would contain five pieces, along with supporting material.

By exchanging portfolios, we hoped to separate the role of teacher from that of evaluator. As teachers, we try to work with students, to encourage and support them in their attempts, much as a good coach would work with members of his team towards a common goal. Yet as evaluators, we need to provide an honest assessment of their work. We hoped to avoid, or at least minimize, the conflicts inherent in these dual roles. The actual effects of our exchange ranged far beyond this initial limited goal.

Our grading system involves an analytic scale in which specific writing traits (focus, language, mechanics, information, etc.) are awarded zero to five points each. While our scales were similar, we had not synchronized them, thus there were minor differences in our grade sheets. However, this did not present major difficulties as, through past collaborations, we had evolved shared definitions of terms.

At midterm, we passed huge piles of colorful folders off to be graded. Although we didn't express it at the time, we each felt reluctant to merely hand them over without explanation to help the reader understand our students and what their work had grown

out of. It was a strange feeling.

The strange feelings grew as we each sat at our own kitchen tables and worked our way through stacks of folders filled with papers written by students we had never met and would never know.

While Maribeth overcame her dread and jumped right into the task, Meg procrastinated, perhaps out of past negative associations with the grading process. Yet, the more we got into the task, the more surprised we were at how much simpler it was. We had begun by trying to read papers as we always had, trying to read the person behind the words, the history of the paper, looking for clues to help us to gauge the author's expectations and intentions. We soon discovered that to do this would be overwhelming, requiring us to imagine students' entire history as writers and as people. We gave up and settled for looking only at the works before us.

The work of grading became cleaner, simpler and quicker, with unintended benefits. We were much more aware of when we were becoming fatigued and needed to take a break from grading. When we had graded our own students' works, the tendency had been to press on, because we knew the works and the students well. We could fool ourselves into thinking we could get by with a less focused reading. However, in this new situation, every paper clearly presented itself as a new challenge.

As we worked through the stacks of folders, an unaccustomed confidence in our grading criteria developed. Unencumbered by the normal plethora of subjective considerations, we were able to view the works more clearly. While we still occasionally wondered about the student behind the words, the futility

of such speculation soon caused us to abandon these musings.

We were each aware that the grades we had given were somewhat lower than we were accustomed to giving, and so it was with some trepidation that we returned each other's folders. Trepidation gave way, in some instances, to shock as we reviewed the grades our students had received. Each of us began to see the other as a ruthless critic, incapable of recognizing the true value of our students' work. We each set to reading certain students' papers over with the intention of proving the other wrong in her assessment, and making the necessary adjustments. However, in this reading, we could no longer hide from ourselves the subjective factors which would have influenced our own evaluation of the writing. We were forced to accept the validity of our colleague's assessment.

While this experience was sobering, and somewhat disconcerting, we realized that we had done what we set out to do. In our post-portfolio conferences with our students, we were able to maintain our supportive teacher/coach role, as we looked at the results together. Many students were pleasantly surprised that their writing had held up under the scrutiny of a distant reader. Of course some grades did not meet students' expectations. However, this no longer could become a personal issue. No longer were we forced to justify/defend the evaluations. We could work together to assume the perspective of the distant and anonymous reader. This triangulation was easier for us, as teachers, and therefore we were able to use this opportunity to guide students in viewing the work from a more distant perspective. Perhaps because we felt so confident in the fairness of the evaluations, and

had prepared the students for the process, no one complained about the procedure itself. The fact that the midterm grades would not influence the final grade greatly facilitated this process. At the same time, we were motivated to work toward the preparation of the final portfolio.

Reading the final portfolios was considerably easier than even the midterm had been. Our initial experience gave us more confidence in the validity and value of our venture. We moved rapidly and confidently through the folders on our kitchen tables. The significant improvement that we saw in the writing, and which was reflected in the grades, was clearly unrelated to any wish-fulfillment, ego-involvement, compassion or other subjective considerations which might have influenced our grading in the past. In many instances, we were touched by the writer's words, or impressed by his or her skill. For the first time, we could be confident our students were writing in a way that reached real readers.

Paradoxically, in eliminating much of the subjectivity that comes of having our students' faces present before us as we read their work, personal subjectivities were revealed. In our discussions of our reading/grading experience, we became more aware of particular prejudices, certain topics about which we found it difficult to be objective. We both found some subjects offensive, such as drinking escapades, sexual conquests and glorification of drug abuse, and there were other topics which one or the other found especially distasteful. Maribeth found it hard to sympathize with John's hunting escapades, while Meg was angered by Susanna's hero worship of her absent father. By the time we read over the final portfolios,

we had become aware of such prejudices and thus were able to provide a check on undue bias.

This process made us painfully aware of how often we, as writing teachers, read the student, rather than the work before us. In grading each other's portfolios, we were able to assume a different role. We didn't know or care how often the student had shown up late to class, how many revisions had been made, or how attractive and likable a person he was. This is not to say that effort and motivation should be ignored in a student's final evaluation. However, we do believe that somewhere in the evaluation process, a place must be created for an honest assessment of the writing and the writer. No matter how great a leap a student has made in the quality of her writing, and no matter how much we might be tempted to reward that effort, her move from an F to a C does not equal an A. Perhaps writing teachers have known that all along. The difficulty lay in knowing how to disentangle our conflicting roles, and in seeing beyond the student to the writer.

References

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