

Giving Grades, Taking Tolls: Assessing the Impact of Evaluation on Developing Writers

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This article uses one basic writer's experience with assessment as a vehicle to explore whether the assessment practices struggling writers encounter on their essays effectively usher them into academic discourse or simply scare them away from that ambition entirely.

I want to believe that I always account for my audience when I write, especially when commenting on my students' essays. Yet each quarter as I find myself gently trying to explain to a handful of students that they are struggling writers for whom writing may never come easily, I worry that I may have missed my mark while assessing their writing: in trying to offer concise responses, did I forget my own audience and, in effect, sabotage my own efforts to help them develop as writers? These students may not earn As, or even Bs, in my course. I want to hand tissues to these students—some who are second language learners, others who work closely with our Disability Resource Center, and yet others who have been “flagged” as basic writers by the English Placement Test—and hope that my comments could make the difference. Unfortunately, after I read consecutive essays that lack original thinking, an organizational strategy, topic sentences, or even a clear focus, the patience I need to articulate my response effectively within this rhetorical moment wears thin—especially if some of those essays have little to offer me as a reader or may even disappoint me as an instructor. And I'm not alone in such responses.

Because instructors don't always have time to pause before responding to an essay, we push through that stack, potentially giving each subsequent essay feedback harsher in tone than the previous ones. As we evaluate, our purpose has not changed, but our approach can shift in ways detrimental to our student audience. In my mind, these issues become most significant when we respond to student essays that are, to be blunt, *badly written*. Yet these same essays are often written by those students who work the hardest, or who have the most to lose by being told once again (this time in a college course) that they are poor/bad/struggling/remedial/basic writers. To better understand the effect assessment can have on a student writer who needs direction and guidance to succeed as a writer in college, I will explore one student's encounter with assessment from the student's own perspective.

This student in question, Paul,¹ was forced to use what he regarded as “mean” and insensitive feedback to revise his essay. His experience with assessment and revision has raised a series of questions for me: What happens when a student text meets an instructor’s authoritative and evaluative text? Furthermore, what happens when that student text is, put simply, poorly written? If these struggling writers choose to engage with evaluative comments, can they use the feedback to assess accurately their own ability and potential as writers? Which assessment practices provide students with the necessary evaluative tools to enable them to take responsibility for determining which rhetorical moves to make when, where, and why, thereby becoming functional users of academic discourse?

Paul’s experience with assessment became a vehicle for me to explore whether the assessment practices students encounter on their essays effectively usher them into the conventions of academic discourse, or simply scare them away from that ambition entirely. I understand that I am not the first one to ask these questions,² but I believe I am aware of a significant moment of writing assessment that should not be lost. Because I can draw from Paul’s reaction to this moment, I do not have to work from a detached heuristic to examine the rhetorical situation surrounding writing assessment. I hope to avoid what Jane Mathison Fife and Peggy O’Neill identify as a problematic area in response studies, wherein comments are analyzed as a “*text* apart from the classroom *context* which gave rise to them” (301; emphasis in original). I do not want to study Paul’s essay or its evaluative comments “in a vacuum, disconnected from other teaching practices and their collective effects on student writing” (Fife and O’Neill 300). In effect, I can determine with some accuracy how one student began to reinterpret both the working relationship he had established with his instructor and his (in)ability to write for a college audience.

As I enter my third year as writing director at California Polytechnic State University (San Luis Obispo), I can attest to the fact that evaluating student writing is the issue most frequently discussed by the lecturers and TAs who teach almost all of the sections of our first-year writing courses. Although many of these instructors have been evaluating writing for years, they remain insecure about the subjective nature of assessment. I believe instructors are still attempting to address what Chris Anson identified in “Response and the Social Construction of Error” as a “pressing need [. . .] to become more reflective of the conditions, nature, and sources of their response to error in students’ texts” (17). As composition scholars, we study the theories and the rhetorical traditions that must be coupled with the teaching of writing, yet we can still overlook the sensitivities of the struggling writers in our classrooms. While instructors may have only the best intentions as they fulfill the time-intensive requirement of giving feedback, I will demonstrate that the comments we make on student texts can exact a toll.

A Case Study

Throughout the first half of his spring semester, Paul had not complained too much about his composition course, so I was somewhat surprised when he sought

me out for help. As Paul and I spoke on the phone, I could hear defeat in his voice: “I don’t even care what this guy wants anymore. I don’t even know if I should revise.” Since we were speaking about the essay over the phone, and I was unable to look at it, Paul described it to me: “[The instructor] used red ink, so it looks like my paper is on fire. I am so mad right now . . .” I remained silent as he read the end comment justifying the essay’s C-/D+ grade:

For a thoughtful person your writing exhibits an almost *stunning* thoughtlessness—hurried, slang-filled, and well-nigh disrespectful to the principles of logic and succinctness. Consider the C- a gift. (Emphasis in original)³

As Paul read his paper, it became clear that the issue was not the grade; a C- seemed appropriate to me. Furthermore, he could—and did—revise for a better one. But we could not begin to discuss revision until his anger and hurt feelings were addressed. He first needed validation; he wanted to be acknowledged as a thoughtful, committed student.

Understanding the repercussions of an evaluative moment requires a thorough consideration of the classroom context surrounding a student essay. While I will not attempt to identify the instructor’s underlying motivations—doing so would be uninformed conjecture⁴—I am committed to understanding the chain of responses that made up this evaluative moment: the class as described in various course materials; the writing prompt students responded to; the instructor’s response to this student’s text; and the student’s response to the instructor’s text.

To understand this rhetorical situation, one must have some background: During his first semester of college, Paul was required to take a Writing Skills class, a remedial course intended to prepare students academically who either scored below an 18 on the ACT English usage section, or earned less than a 2.50 in high school “language arts courses.” Paul entered the Writing Skills class with some degree of confidence. As an avid reader who struggled with writing, he found the class to be “helpful somewhat, but I basically knew all that [the instructor] was telling us . . . It helped to refresh some skills, but I knew most of it.” Paul received an A in this course and moved on to the next required composition class, English 101: Thinking and Writing.

In its academic catalog, Paul’s college describes English 101 as emphasizing “the development of expository and argumentative writing skills through the processes of effective reading, clear thinking, organization and expression, with appropriate emphasis on grammar and mechanics.” The workload for English 101 was ample, but not unusual for a writing-intensive course. Paul completed a total of four formal essays, one extra-credit essay, and a major research paper. The class also completed daily reading assignments, including Peter Elbow’s essay “Freewriting,” excerpts from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and poetry from writers such as e. e. cummings and Emily Dickinson. Included in the syllabus is an inspirational thought from Henry David Thoreau: “The best that you can write will be the best that you are.”

For the purposes of my argument, I will refer primarily to “A Fool’s Dictionary,” an out-of-class essay Paul wrote after taking the class for about six weeks, to

which the instructor offered detailed responses. To fulfill the “Fool’s Dictionary” assignment, Paul was given a list of ten quotations from well-known figures including Maxim Gorky, Pablo Picasso, and Albert Einstein, and was asked to

[s]elect one of these ten statements and compose an imaginative yet succinct and convincing argument in which you debate the merits and/or demerits of your quotation. You are more or less free to organize your paper as you see fit, but you must take into consideration the following guidelines:

1. Avoid glib, off-the-cuff attempts to be overly clever at your author’s expense.
2. Direct your argument to the specific language of the quotation and to its logic, explicit or implicit.
3. Select a factual experience from your own life and explain how its circumstance(s) confirm the truth of what you are now arguing in this essay.

Paul chose to write about a quotation attributed to Napoleon—“*Impossible* is a word in a fool’s dictionary”—because Napoleon’s was one of the few names with which he felt vaguely familiar and he thought the quotation was easier to decipher than the others. Yet it’s important to keep in mind that an eighteen-year-old basic writer can only be so profound when “confirming the truth” of what he argues in an essay about a quotation—especially when the passage is removed from its historical context—in a two-page essay.

Considering the Case

Paul’s instructor seems committed to eliciting thoughtful responses to his assignments (which could explain his directive that students “avoid glib, off-the-cuff attempts to be overly clever”), and believed Paul’s response did not fit that criterion—“For a thoughtful person your writing exhibits an almost *stunning* thoughtlessness [. . .].” If we read it charitably, we might note that this end comment *did* call Paul “thoughtful,” suggesting that his instructor took the time to get to know his students enough to recognize when he believed they were not living up to their intellectual potential. Not surprisingly, Paul was unable to focus on this more generous aspect of the end comment. Furthermore, if Paul’s response to the assignment really was less than thoughtful, he needed a more overt explanation of the weaknesses in his paper to understand what a thoughtful paper looked like. In “The Genre of the End Comment” Summer Smith places end comments within a specific genre of writing, one that “forms in response to ‘a recurrent rhetorical situation,’ a situation which consists of the relationships between teachers, students, their papers, and the educational institutions that sanction and encourage the interchange” (250). In my mind, the relationship manifested here is that of an adult reprimanding a child.

As we write comments on student essays, we must not lose sight of an observation Elbow made two decades ago: “in *using a discourse* we are also tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student’s place and mode of operation in it. In

particular we are affirming a set of social authority relations” (*Embracing* 146). The version of reality Paul encountered vis-à-vis the comments on his essay neither invited him to join a new discourse community, nor motivated him to improve his essay. When he read that one sentence, the only conclusion he came to was that his instructor “was thoughtless, too—a jerk.” Paul could not see that the communicative fissure between him and his instructor was largely textual and not personal. From this student’s perspective, however, a written evaluation of his essay apparently collapsed the boundaries between him and his writing, leading him to believe that located within that evaluation was a commentary on him not only as a student but also as a person. Paul, who never believed that his essay was “thoughtless,” thus understood the comment to be directed at him as a person. And, as far as he was concerned, the remarks further convinced him that he was a lost cause who would never learn to write—or, for that matter, think—on a college level. It seems unlikely that students like Paul, who enter our classrooms dragging along with them baggage created by labels like “basic” or “remedial,” or the baggage created by a lifetime of negative and perhaps even hurtful feedback, will improve as writers if they do not learn to regard themselves as people who can (perhaps with great effort) develop the skills needed to write.

After I examined many of the texts Paul produced for English 101, it became evident that he regularly sorted through comments he could use to revise and comments that adversely affected his learning and his self-esteem. On another paper, a research project, the end comment had described his logic as being “as slippery as spit”—a glib comment that failed to help Paul determine the flaws in his thinking. Composition instructors and scholars have argued that end comments and marginalia can open a dialogue between a student and his or her instructor; yet, as Smith has argued, they can also create a private space where instructors can assert authority in ways that can debilitate student writers: “[T]he teacher possesses the institutional power in the [student-teacher] relationship and can use comments to motivate, educate, or chastise her students” (250). For example, I continually encounter colleagues who brag about the rough tenor and tone of the responses they write on their students’ papers, feeling that certain students deserve and learn lessons from such feedback. I see little consideration of the repercussions of the feedback. The assumption seems to be that if the instructor writes it, the student will learn from it. A “tough love” approach to assessment may be effective for some students if a specific rapport has already been established, one where students know to brush aside or even laugh at biting critiques—in other words, the “slippery as spit” comment may work for the right student, but the potential for alienation seems high to me.

Though Paul’s instructor felt comfortable with such colloquial vocabulary, he deemed Paul’s own discourse—described in a marginal comment as “slang”—as inappropriate for academic writing. Paul knew his language was not in sync with his instructor’s expectations, but he had never been formally introduced to academic discourse and had only an elementary understanding of the relationship between audience and rhetorical choices. Because academic discourse has a “ten-

gency simply to avoid the everyday or popular in language” (Elbow, *Embracing* 145), instructors can assert their institutionally mandated authority and expertise through the language they use when communicating with students. Students are well aware of the alternative, elevated discourse of the academy and often attempt to use it in their papers to gain entrance into this unique speech community. They hope to have their ideas and modes of expression validated by a learned instructor.

While some students learn the finer points of academic writing, they may experience a pressing need to become fluent users before they are prepared, especially when such elevated language creeps into the comments they receive on their papers. Paul found his instructor’s discourse obscure and intimidating. For example, the end comment’s phrasing—“well nigh” and “logic of [...] succinctness”—is not usually found in a basic writer’s vocabulary. Moreover, Paul explained that such discourse was not used in class. In other words, he perceived a disconnect between the persona behind the evaluation and the one presented in the classroom, and didn’t trust either one. Once I conveyed to Paul the intended meaning of these comments—and made it clear that these phrases were important to understand as he wrote in college—he could use them, and even asked me, when working on later drafts, if his “writing was more succinct.” Even granting that one goal of first-year writing is to help students expand their vocabulary, this objective is not best met by assessing students’ writing with words they do not understand. If Paul couldn’t even understand the critique of his essay, how would he ever improve as a writer? In students’ minds, written feedback basically informs them of whether or not they write “properly” for college—and even if they don’t, they needn’t be shamed into accepting this reality.

In addition to unfamiliar language, the instructor’s use of questions also led to misunderstanding. For instance, as a thesis statement, Paul wrote, “These are the questions that I will answer in the following paragraphs.” Next to this statement, the instructor has posed a question, “Too mechanical sounding—perhaps argument?” While a question mark appears here, Paul did not feel as if he were actually being asked to discuss his text; rather, he felt as if he had been given a directive. Statements masquerading as questions are odd, yet common, occurrences in assessment. These “questions” may have more than one meaning, each of which may trigger a very different reaction: the instructor is genuinely unsure of the assessment and wants to negotiate with the student, or the question mark provides the student with the illusion of having options. Yet these questions are not mere suggestions; they are not *real* questions, a fact that Paul understood because he had become accustomed to negative feedback and low grades. It seems doubtful that Paul has understood the comment as the instructor intended.

Often, the question is preceded with criticism (e.g., “mechanical”), implying that the question provides an answer or solution to the noted error. In fact, Paul’s instructor frequently softened his directives with question marks: “Odd phrasing: under?”; “Literally?”; “Why shift tenses?” Paul’s translations: “Use the word ‘under’”; “You don’t really mean this”; “Stop shifting tenses.” Finally, one of Paul’s sentences—“Nothing is ‘impossible’ because eventually it will be possible, maybe

not now, but eventually”—elicited the marginal comment/question that baffled Paul most of all: “An explosion in a print shop will settle the type into Shakespeare’s plays?” This comment seems to convey both too much and too little information at the same time. This question raises issues about intent, randomness, and even fate: topics that did not aid Paul as he revised. Could this comment help Paul address the larger errors in his logic and grammar? And now I am using question marks to disguise directive statements, for the answer to my questions is “No.”

There are thirty-three lines of text in Paul’s two-page paper. Only seven remain unmarked. In the margins and within the text itself, the instructor refers to *The Blair Handbook* (Fulwiler and Hayakawa) sixteen times. Students were expected to go to the reserve desk in the library, look up their mistakes in the *Handbook*, learn why what they had done was wrong, and then cease repeating the mistake. At my urging, Paul referred to the manual as he revised, but he became overwhelmed with the number of grammatical mistakes he had to look up. He chose to focus only on his essay’s content as he revised.

From Case Study to Self-Study

While serving as writing director for two years, I have learned that this evaluative technique of denoting handbook pages to “explain” grammatical errors is more common than I had realized. Sometimes students are left with dozens of errors to look up. While style guides could feasibly make clearer an instructor’s expectations regarding grammar, I believe such guides become more effective tools when used while the students and the instructor are in class together—not outside of class on the students’ own time. After locating a proper page and trying to decipher the explanation, Paul still struggled to apply the grammar lesson to his actual essay. As writing instructors, we need to “accept the domain of error, in all its indeterminacy, instead of expecting other people or other mechanisms (handbooks, online writing labs, writing tutors, etc.) to do it for us” (Anson 18). At this very moment, I am working to discourage my new TAs from taking this approach when assessing student papers because, of course, citing page numbers is so much *easier* than actually seeing the error as an important teaching moment.

The instructors and TAs I work with and train seem to fall into two camps: those who see grammar as the most important element of effective writing, and those who deal with error only when student work dictates it. Yet if we, as Anson argues, “accept the domain of error” as being part of our work, then we are compelled to explain to students the connections between content and grammar, or what I prefer to call “style” in my own courses. Paul did not think carefully about *how* he expressed himself—the words he chose, his punctuation, his tone. Stylistically, Paul’s essay is not very sophisticated. Yet highlighting Paul’s stylistic and rhetorical shortcomings by continually citing external authorities like a handbook did not help. It may be easier to respond to grammatical matters where there are, in some respects, clearer lines between what is right and what is wrong. However, as Ronald Lunsford observes, “If we attend to error or to the form of our students’

writing rather than responding to what they have to say, we may well cause our students to write less” (91). When students look at their texts and must literally look behind the instructor’s comments to locate their own writing, they may feel alienated from the process they need to learn and the discourse community they need to enter. Paul certainly did.

Without question, Paul’s essay is flawed. Unfortunately, critiques that would have helped him revise were missed. For example, Paul’s logic is off: he argues that one trait of successful people is that they think the “impossible” will always become “possible”; yet he also explains that Napoleon’s downfall was due to the fact that he *did* think anything was possible. Paul also neglected to fulfill the assignment when he failed to relate a “factual” experience from his own life to the quotation. The grade seems fair, but I question both the language used to appraise the essay and the choice to make mechanics the focal point of the assessment.

A primary objective of any first-year writing course should be developing the “ability to assess one’s own writing” (Huot 20), yet we must give students room to learn this skill. We need to determine whether our methods of evaluation encourage students to acquire the self-assessment skills needed to develop the writing ability and literacy preferred by other disciplinary audiences within the academy. In this regard, when Paul looked at the assessment of his writing and felt insulted, angry, and stupid, the instructor’s comments, and perhaps even his good intentions, ceased to be relevant for Paul, whose motivation to learn how to write for his college courses was waning.

Paul had a few options while navigating through these issues. He could disregard the instructor’s comments and keep the C-/D+ grade. He could focus on his own assessment of his paper, reconcile it with his instructor’s evaluation, and create a text suitable to both of them. Or he could put aside his sense of ownership of his paper and follow his instructor’s directions exactly. In my experience, this final option is the one most often chosen by weaker writers who want to revise for better grades, but simply lack the skills to direct their own revision process; Paul, for example, was not a strong enough writer for that option to be viable. Paul’s newly acquired perception of revision had nothing to do with writers reenvisioning both their writing and their ideas. When I tried to talk with him about revision, the only thing he wanted to know was how to do exactly what his instructor asked; he had relinquished his original investment in the writing project.

The intersection where instructor and student texts meet should be seen as a space where instructors can constructively alter a student’s impression of his or her work. However, if instructors regard their position as marker of errors, they may consider their assessments *successful* if students decide they are inadequate and drop the class, or, more likely, learn to follow obediently every suggestion made to them in order to earn desirable grades. Both of these scenarios indicate the need to rethink the notion of “successful” assessment. What does a successful evaluation look like? Moreover, where do student responses to that evaluation fit into the definition?

Other Options

The evaluative moment I discuss in this essay illustrates what Anson refers to as “an obvious need for more robust research exploring the social dimensions of error in response to student writing” (6). Anson argues for more sustained reflective practices that “place greater responsibility on teachers to investigate, theorize, test out, and refine their teaching decisions” (14).

Earlier in my essay, I indicated that I thought Paul’s instructor took a “tough love” approach to assessment. Here I would like to explore other, more effective, options. Actually teaching people *how* to assess student writing is still not a common occurrence in many writing programs. For instance, in my three weeks of a teacher preparation seminar as a graduate student, I read very little assessment theory as part of my training, and I never actually looked at or responded to student essays until I received them from my own students. I never thought this was odd. I completely bought into the idea that assessment was something learned “on the job.” Anson explores this lack of training:

For many teachers, the domain of error remains untheorized and without such reflection. Response to error—how much to identify, what to say about it, where it fits into the larger cycles of instruction and production of text—comes from inherited practices, local conditions (class size, large-scale assessments, etc.), or beliefs about the expectations of other faculty or future employers. (4)

The role of “inherited practices” in assessment seems inevitable. Instructors not only learn by doing, they also learn by reading the evaluative comments they have encountered as writers. The difference, of course, is that most writing instructors are confident enough in their writing that they can handle and may even crave harsh critiques, whereas the basic or struggling writers in our courses cannot approach their own writing with the same mindset. In other words, I have often learned a great deal by thinking through unsympathetic critiques, but I am a different kind of writer from the ones I frequently teach. What works for me as a writer will probably not work for them.

Instructors need opportunities to interrogate their own evaluative tendencies in an environment where theories of assessment can be questioned and examined with a student audience in mind. In my TA-training course, for example, instructors are required to submit a teaching portfolio at the end of the quarter that contains, among other materials, evaluated student essays and a teaching philosophy. I am often struck by how frequently the philosophy and the evaluation practices conflict. For instance, a TA may describe her class in very Freirean terms—problem posing, antibanking, students and teacher learning from one another. But an entirely different persona manifests itself within evaluative comments, such as, “This is the worst sentence I have ever read,” or “You have got to be kidding me with this!” or “Did you actually think when you wrote this?” Something happens to some of us, something we may be unaware of, when we respond to student writing—especially *bad* student writing.

Anson argues for critical reflection as a key component of evaluation, one that can help instructors identify and address error constructively: “A capable teacher who chuckles at an especially puerile statement in a freshman paper may respond with appropriate and respectful language. Someone less reflective may end up demoralizing or infantilizing the student, with unhelpful or damaging results” (16). The key component here is reflective assessment practices. Instructors who respond to student writing with the knowledge that they will subsequently be reflecting on individual moments of evaluation may serve their students better. The most common opportunity for such self-reflection may well occur in one-to-one conferences with students. But there are other opportunities to reflect on one’s own assessment practices: in class with students, with colleagues in other departmental venues, by reading students’ own reflective “writer’s memos,” or even in less-conventional means of assessment, such as with recorded comments. The objective of each approach is to reposition assessment as a focal point of the course.

With colleagues: To make assessment a focus, it must cease being a private act, something instructors do in isolation from an audience. Perhaps we need to hold regular meetings with colleagues where we share our assessments and ask for feedback on our tone, language, and audience awareness. While I don’t believe my colleagues’ impressions should overshadow my own assessment of the essay, my own peers help me better understand how my student audience could react to my evaluative practices. I have presented my own colleagues, for example, with essays written by students in a first-year composition course I had taught the previous year. Together, we identified elements of the essay that I had failed to address in my comments, as well as comments I had made that were unhelpful to my student audience. The TAs, of course, came up with a number of different approaches to the essay, and I am grateful for the feedback I received.

With back talk: In *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, Kathleen Yancey addresses the relationship between reflection and evaluation in her own classroom; she encourages students to “talk back” to her. She argues that talking back, as a form of “reflection-in-action,” gives students a space to “negotiate their texts with their teachers. They can ‘talk back’: summarize and agree and disagree and set their own agendas” (40). Using this approach to foster a dialogue with students about the relationship between our assessment and their writing requires students to position themselves as writers who have a stake in the responses their writing elicits. Talk-backs ask students to respond to our responses, and can serve as a corrective to commentary that hasn’t served the intended purpose. Such an approach requires that the instructor be willing to take critique and apply it to future assessment moments, just as we ask students to apply our feedback to their own future writing projects.

With writers’ memos: Maintaining a classroom focus on assessment can be accomplished by asking students to reflect on how our assessment practices aid their writing processes. With this goal in mind, I require my students to include a detailed “writer’s memo” with each draft of their essays. Within the memo, students critique their essays (thereby developing self-assessment skills) and give me—or

their peers, depending on the stage of the writing process—direction as I assess their writing. Without fail, they *know* where the essay is weak, which saves me the time of simply confirming their suspicions. When they hand in a revised essay, the new memo addresses my comments and indicates how they worked with—or why they disregarded—my suggestions. It is within these memos that I can see writers like Paul achieve the most. When they explain that they have tried to use semicolons, but may not have done so successfully; that they tried to write an introduction using a technique new to them; that they *know* the organization isn't working but are unsure how to fix it—I *know* how to best help them and I know that they are engaging with their texts.

With in-class assessment: In observing courses taught by my own colleagues and TAs, I am struck by how often these instructors hand back papers at the end of class as students are walking out of the room, so that the students react to the grades and comments while walking down the hallway. In these instances, assessment has become a private act—something students attend to on their own time, as though it is unworthy of the actual classroom. When I ask these colleagues why they return papers this way, they sometimes admit that the grades weren't very high and they feared that some students would be angry or would even cry. They were trying to avoid a “public scene.” In my classroom, the discomfort and tension I feel as I watch students read and absorb my comments is productive; it's nearly impossible to forget my student audience if I know such a moment will occur. In this moment, my assessment practices are the focus of the course.

With evaluation outside the box: While assessment scholars have consistently sought new approaches to assessment, most instructors (me included) continue to resort to the typical pen-meets-paper approach. In fact, I am almost uncomfortable reading a student essay without a pencil in my hand. Yet scholars like Jeff Sommers, who has argued for spoken responses, continue to push assessment studies in more dynamic directions. In “Spoken Response,” Sommers argues for a method of assessment wherein an instructor records responses to the students' essays; “asides” take the place of margin comments, while end notes are replaced with “terminal” comments (176). I have to confess that while I had been peripherally aware of this mode of assessment, I only recently came to appreciate it when I experienced recorded assessment myself. In response to this essay, Sommers e-mailed me an audio file containing his spoken reaction; he also synthesized the reactions from the other reviewers. It was one of the most useful and thorough responses to my writing that I have received in quite some time. Listening to his tone of voice and his inflection communicated more to me than words on a page ever could have. One of my future assessment goals is to use this tack with my own students. In effect, I want to hear my evaluative voice, which I firmly believe will be influenced by my awareness of the students I am speaking to. I tend not to raise my voice or use inappropriate language or tones when speaking with people. However, I have worked with students who, when reading my comments, perceived a tone or pitch I didn't intend, whether it be anger, sarcasm, or frustration.

My point here has been to show that some assessment practices can simply be more effective in communicating with a student audience than others. In looking back at the list I have devised, I can see two patterns emerging. First, I am arguing for strategies that promote self-reflective assessment practices and require instructors to call into question and critique their own evaluative tendencies. Approaches like colleagues' reviews and talkbacks would serve this purpose. Second, I am advocating a more humane and generous mode of assessment, one that never forgets its student audience. Such a mode is furthered through approaches like conferences and writer's memos, moments where student and instructor see evaluating and composing as a collaborative effort.

Regardless of whether comments are negative, positive, or a balance in between, students and instructors need to identify effective models of assessment that usher students into academic writing without destroying their confidence and optimism. I regard the opportunity Paul provided me as an occasion to develop a method of assessment that accounts for what happens when student and instructor texts collide. If we look at this one student's experience and simply shake our heads in incredulity, we have not really learned anything. Nor should we use Paul's experience to reassure ourselves about our own grading practices. As writing instructors, we must work to denaturalize our own ideologies in the classroom by refusing to take advantage of the private space written assessment allows. Furthermore, as Fife and O'Reilly argue, "in our pedagogies that increasingly value students' abilities to evaluate their own texts, conversations about their reflective assessments can offer important forums for teachers to validate and encourage the development of the complex self-awareness that is so necessary for good writers" (316). Giving assessment such a critical role in our classrooms will inevitably affect our abilities to assess student writing fairly, honestly, and constructively. In addition, students will be held accountable for recognizing and gauging the effectiveness of the rhetorical choices they make when writing for an academic audience. ◀

Notes

1. Paul is my younger brother, and a basic writer. Although some of my colleagues have questioned my decision to discuss Paul's experience with assessment in such a public arena, I argue that Paul's paper—including the evaluative comments—belongs only to Paul, and he has chosen to make his experience available through my scholarship.

2. See, for example, Anson; Tobin; Straub and Lunsford; Phelps; Huot; and Lynne.

3. I have secured permission from Paul's instructor to quote his evaluative comments.

4. However, I do have some underlying principles to work from. After reading a draft of this essay, Paul's instructor explained: "Like the parent who chastises his or her child when the latter makes mistakes, if the teacher can

indicate that he truly wishes his student to succeed in the verbal arena (which, after all, is what the long and tedious business of learning in a college is), then sharp critiques are appropriate and helpful. Current students are much more hypocritical than their older counterparts, fashionably cultivating profane hard-heartedness yet crying out for sympathy when their teachers deign to indicate that their prose either stinks outright or betrays their own better purposes. The underlying consciousness has, therefore, to be affection for their improvement, and because many teachers genuinely dislike both teaching and words, they don't necessarily bring this all-important sensibility to the task of teaching and of correcting papers; and thus they and their students grow intellectually flabby and can't write a simple sentence with the integrity and charm that all good writers from time immemorial have taken pride in personally accomplishing and in arguing others should cultivate."

Works Cited

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CALL FOR PROPOSALS

The Conference on English Leadership (CEL) is calling for proposals for their 2007 conference, "Charting the Course: Leadership Strategies and Practices for Twenty-First Century Literacies," to be held November 14–20, 2007, in New York City. The Conference on English Leadership's mission is to support the development of new and experienced leaders. The 2007 Conference is designed as an interactive collaboration where participants will learn from and about each other and their leadership experiences. The presentation strands are: Leadership; Reading, writing, and . . . sharing what works; Multiple literacies; Standards, testing, mandates, initiatives; Teaching and learning. Questions may be directed to Dr. Alyce Hunter at ahunter@nac.net. Submit program proposals by **May 1, 2007**, using the submission form at <http://www.ncte.org/groups/cel/featured/123161.htm>.
