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Why I don't Grade Papers

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The first classes for which I had complete responsibility were four English classes I taught at a boarding school in Massachusetts less than a year after I graduated from college. During the first week of classes I bought school supplies. I don't remember everything I bought—probably folders and legal pads—but I know I purchased a red pen. I had thought a good deal about what kind of teacher I wanted to be—before my Teaching Fellow stint the previous summer I thought about why my favorite teachers were effective and what I could do to imitate them—but I don't remember thinking much about why I needed a red pen. I suspect I just thought it was part of a teacher's equipment. I didn't think about the significance of red: the color that says STOP. Do Not Enter. Wrong Way. Don't smoke. No food or drink. Stay off the grass. Don't use excess words. Don't end sentences with a preposition. Don't use contractions. Don't write in colloquial speech. Don't say I in an academic paper. No comma splices, split infinitives, or vaguely worded introductions. Like many first time teachers, I unthinkingly mimicked the conventions of teaching with which I was familiar, convinced that, as an educated person, I was an expert on education.

I call this presentation “Why I don’t Grade Papers,” and I intend it to be provocative.¹ Let me also say, in no uncertain terms, I am not hoping to convince all of you or any of you not to use letter grades. If you choose not to use grades, you need to integrate whatever system you choose into the work of the course. I would argue, however, that you should think just as hard about how and why you use letter grades as you would about not using them. My goal is not convince you to do things the way I choose to do them, but to articulate WHY I do what I do when I read and respond to student writing. I hope that you will find some of what I say applicable to your own teaching practice. However, I won’t be doing my job if all I offer you are DON’Ts. I’d just be brandishing the red pen.

I may be sufficiently confident about my own writing that I can apply productive criticism, discount unproductive criticism, and recognize when criticism is not applicable. Nevertheless, when I was beginning my dissertation, I more or less stopped talking to two professors because I could find nothing positive in what they said to me about my project. What I needed from them were comments that helped me see what in my own work was workable and helped me continue with my work in productive ways. It’s not enough to

¹ “Why I Don’t Grade Papers” was first presented as a lecture during the Summer, 1998 session of “Teaching Writing,” the six week course required of all new Graduate Student Instructors in Cornell’s First Year Writing Seminar Program. At that time, the weekly meetings consisted of a lecture session followed by a discussion section. (We eliminated the lecture component in 2003 and have taught it as seminar sections ever since). I presented slightly revised versions once or twice during subsequent sessions of “Teaching Writing.” Since 2000 or 2001 it has been included in the course-pack distributed to participants in “Teaching Writing.” By the time it was included in the course-pack, I had incorporated writing produced by a student in a summer pre-freshman writing class I taught in 1999, and appended excerpts from course materials. To prepare for the piece’s 2008 migration from course-pack to web site, I have made a handful of minor edits to the body of the article, updated the list of sources, and added some explanatory footnotes.

tell students what they are doing wrong. They need to understand what they are doing right, and more importantly, what is right about it. They need to understand not only what doesn't work, but why it doesn't work, and what they can do to make it work better. One of the reasons why I find Nancy Sommers's article on revision so valuable is because she articulates—I include all of us in her category of “experienced writers”—how our relationship with writing is radically different from our students' relationship with writing (“Revision Strategies...” 195).² Writing defines us as professionals or apprentice professionals within a particular discipline. For most of our students, writing is a chore, part of the routine of school with few applications outside of school.

I would like my students to think about writing as a process through which they discover ideas and communicate them to other people. As Sommers points out, “experienced writers” see revision as a process of discovery. It is hard to discover, to explore, to take risks, if the goal of your paper is to receive a grade. At the core of my teaching is the belief that the most important thing I can offer a student is respect. I do not believe that all my students are equally gifted. I do not believe that all my students are capable of analysis or abstract thinking when they enter my class. I do not believe that all, or perhaps any, of my students will become great writers, in the course of a semester or in the course of their lives. But I believe my students have ideas to communicate, ideas which are worthy of interest, ideas which may teach me something,

² All references in this article are to readings assigned as part of “Teaching Writing” at the time this article was presented as a talk. As this was presented as a lecture during a class devoted to “Responding to Student Writing,” it was incumbent upon me to engage with the week's readings as well as the week's topic. I have provided references to these texts when possible, and to related texts if the originals are not available. Fortunately, many of the published articles have been included in T. R. Johnson's Teaching Composition.

ideas which they can probably communicate more effectively if they are encouraged to work at it.

I also believe that if I think of my students as children, and treat them like children, they are more likely to act like children. If they I treat them like adults, like potential colleagues, they are more likely to become colleagues eventually. The way I talk to my students in class and in conferences, the kinds of things I say to them and write to them, and, hopefully, the way I talk about them to others, is premised on the idea that they deserve my respect.

Before I get to my list of reasons why I don't grade papers, I would add that language matters. The language we use to talk to students and write to students matters. The language we use to talk about students matters. And the language we use to talk about what we do matters.

With that in mind, let me explain why I don't grade papers.

- I don't like judging students or their work either relative to each other or relative to some idea I have about what their papers should be or do. Sitting down to grade papers is the worst part of teaching. Reading student work and seeing thinking develop and writing improve is the best. For me, thinking of what I do as "reading" rather than "grading" or "correcting" makes what I do infinitely more pleasant.
- Any course in which I had nothing to learn would be unbearable. Grading to me suggests a system in which I possess knowledge and they receive it. Reading suggests to me that I have something to learn. I like reading the Hjortshoj articles included in the

course packet, especially “Being in the Classroom,” because they remind me of some of the ways that teachers can learn while they teach.³

- Students at Cornell are under enormous grade pressure, some of it self-induced, some of it family induced, some of socially induced. They feel as if their lives and futures are tied up in their grades, and sometimes they are. I don’t want them attaching that kind of weight to the papers they write for my class. I want them to feel free to experiment, to take risks, to make mistakes, to write for the sake of writing. I’d like them to have one class where they don’t worry that if they muck up one assignment they won’t get into medical school and they won’t be able to live the kind of life they envision for themselves.
- I want my students to write about things they are interested in because they are interested in them, not because there is a credential at stake. I’d rather they be motivated by interest and engagement than by fear.
- The presence of a grade makes it more difficult for either the student or the instructor to focus on comments and potential areas of improvement. Often the grade is what the student notices and the grade is what the student wants to talk about.
- I don’t want to spend time, in either comments or conferences, justifying a low grade.
- About grades as ranking, Peter Elbow writes, “They quantify the degree of approval or disapproval in readers but tell nothing at all about what the readers actually approve or disapprove of. They say nothing that couldn’t be said with gold stars or black marks or smiley-faces” (190). Because grades on writing assignments tend to measure approval or

³ In 1998 our course packet included several short essays on teaching written by Keith Hjortshoj in the course of his work with Teaching Assistants at Cornell. Much of the material included in these essays has since been incorporated into The Elements of Teaching Writing, a book he co-authored with Katherine Gottschalk. Elements... is now the central text for “Teaching Writing” and for the parallel course taken by Teaching Assistants who work in courses affiliated with Cornell’s Writing in the Majors program.

disapproval, the most reliable way to get a good grade in my class is to write what I want to read. Learning to write for me may be a useful skill but it is a skill with limited applications.

- Most things students are likely to write after college are likely to be collaborative, ungraded projects where they cannot assume a captive audience. If they realize this now, they might be more likely to realize, first, that writing may have some purpose outside of school, and second, that writing well may be a source of power for them. This may, in turn, make them more interested in learning how to improve their writing. It's very hard to teach someone writing (or anything else) if she or he doesn't want to learn.
- It's hard to get students to take collaborative work seriously if they believe they are in competition with other students.
- I want my students to realize that writing is a process. It's hard to do this when they are focused on the score they receive for a final product.
- Grades can be, as Sommers points out, a thinly masked way to express hostility to individuals or their ideas ("Responding..." 379). I don't want to be tempted to judge a student's work based on animosity or my anger at the world.
- Grades are a valuable means of behavior enforcement, of discipline. I would rather not build my class around discipline.⁴

⁴ This statement now strikes me as ironic given my affiliation with a Writing in the Disciplines program. In 1998 my PhD was less than a year old and the program that employed me did not yet include "Writing in the Disciplines" in its name. David Bartholomae's landmark article, "Inventing the University," which I read for the first time when I first participated in "Teaching Writing," points out that the discourses of disciplines themselves define what it is possible to say within a given piece of academic writing: "the discourse with its projects and agendas...determines what writers can and will do" (7). My teacherly self of ten years ago, just liberated from graduate school, apparently wanted to believe he could avoid the teacherly job of disciplining behavior. Perhaps he should have known that it's not so easy to disentangle the constructive power of academic disciplines from the teacher's discipline enforcing responsibilities.

- I do not pretend that no power differential exists in my classroom. I have more power. They have less. But I would rather avoid making that power differential the basis of my relationship with them.
- I teach in a program that makes it easy for me not to give grades.

I would like to conclude by saying a few things about these last two items because they are concerned with the place of a student and a writing instructor within an institution. Because most of my classes are taught in the Writing Workshop—where all courses are graded Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory—it is easy for me not to put grades on papers. When you teach First Year Writing Seminars, you are balancing your own academic and pedagogical goals with the expectations of the Writing Program and the expectations of your home department. You are also, necessarily, interested in finding ways to teach a course so that it doesn't consume all your waking hours. One of the expectations of the Writing Program is that you will give your students grades at semester's end. Nevertheless, I think it is worth thinking about what those grades mean, what purpose they are intended to serve, and how they can facilitate the writing process. Do you grade every paper? Every draft? Do you grade participation? Attendance? Informal writing assignments? Their comments on other students' writing? How do you communicate your grading policy to your students? As an example of how I deal with some of these questions on a practical level, I have given you an excerpt from my syllabus from a writing class in which the students did not receive grades on papers but

did receive a final grade based on all of their work in the course.⁵ I also refer you to Elbow's "Ranking, Evaluating, Liking..." particularly those sections where he outlines some practical approaches to evaluating rather than ranking student writing (393-397).

As graduate students, you have an odd place in the university: you are instructors who are also students; developing professionals who may not be treated as colleagues by other members of your profession. If your graduate school experience is anything like mine and most people I've ever talked to, you have at least moments when you are frustrated and angered by your apparent powerlessness within the university. Those moments sometimes last for months.

Those of you who are familiar with speech act theory may recall that in How to do Things with Words J. L. Austin explains that in certain contexts words function as actions. For instance, if I were to say, right now, to two people sitting next to me, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," the words would have no meaning because they are spoken outside an institutional context by someone with no authority to make the words mean something. Try this experiment: ask a student why they do what you tell them to do and, after they answer, ask some follow up questions. Eventually you will get this response: "Because you give us a grade." When I've had this conversation with my students, I then remind them, as I remind you, that by rights, I should preface every assignment with the words, "By the power vested in me by Cornell University and the State of New York, I command you to write a 750 word response to His Girl Friday."

⁵ I still teach Expository Writing, the course referenced here, on a regular basis but the theme of the course has changed several times since 1999. Although the statement of course requirements changes at least slightly every year I still use a version of the grading system described in the appendix.

In closing, I'd like to offer you an excerpt from a self-evaluation written by a student in my pre-freshman writing class last summer.⁶ At the mid-point of the summer term, I asked my students to respond, in their journals, to the following assignment, which is included in full in the appendix:

In your self evaluation I'd like you to write honestly about what you've done well during the first half of the course, what you think you've accomplished, and where you think your work could improve. This might be a place to set some goals for the second half of the semester.

I close with this passage from a student's self-evaluation because it suggests that the course, and the grading policy in particular, have helped her think about her writing in ways I would like all of my students to think about their writing.

I should preface this passage by noting that it is, of course, possible that this student took my measure accurately and wrote this piece—one of the few things she wrote last summer that was not automatically read by other students—as flattery. But it's also true that any student astute enough to flatter so accurately would also realize that, in a course graded S/U, such flattery gets you hardly anywhere.

From this course I think I have established the sense of writing for a purpose. I was at first unsure of what level of writing was expected from me and what my abilities were.

I had always wrote my papers based on the given topic for a grade. In this particular course no grade was given. To me it was mostly a self-assessment.

⁶ The self-evaluation assignment and the response to it were drawn from my section of "Introduction to Writing in the University" offered during Summer, 1999. The summer version of this course is part of the Pre-Freshman Summer Program. The PSP, run by the Learning Strategies Center and the Office of Minority Educational Affairs, provides a transitional experience for incoming students whose education is supported in part by Federal and State Educational Opportunity Programs.

At first I was very frustrated, I left my conferences feeling as if I had just wrote the worst paper in the world. I was particularly astonished when Elliot asked me, where do I plan to take my paper. This was the strangest question I thought a writing teacher could ask. This was because I was just writing for a grade. Therefore, the paper was already where I wanted it to go which was to be graded. However this was not the case. It took me several conferences to realize the importance of this question.

I realized that writing is not just words on a sheet of paper. I had to set a goal for my reader, a storyline, something that they would take with them after they finished reading. This is the reason for taking my paper to another level which I think makes it more interesting.

I am now trying to write my papers with that level I want to reach already in mind. I think that by not getting a letter grade I am inclined to work harder....

Appendix

excerpted from syllabus for English 289 "Inventing Non-Fiction" Spring 1999

Course Goals:

At the end of this semester, I want each of you to be more accomplished, experienced, confident writers. I want you to have a stronger sense of how you can put information and ideas together and present them to an audience.

For any writer who wishes to improve, no matter how experienced he or she might be, there is no substitute for reading, writing, revising, and researching. I will ask you to produce a substantial amount of writing during the course of the semester and do a substantial amount of revision. Most of your writing during the second half of the semester will be devoted to producing a project which will involve some combination of research, observation, and revision. As part of this project, I will ask you to produce a minimum of 20 pages of writing, which may include revisions. Because you will choose your own topic, I encourage you to start thinking now about a topic that might interest you. I will also encourage you to work with one or more classmates in the research and writing phases of this project. In preparation for this stage of the course, we will engage in regular examination of student writing, in both small and large groups.

During the final weeks of this class, each of you will present some portion of the work you have done during the course of the semester. These presentations, which may be collaborative, will probably be around 10 minutes long, followed by time for questions and discussion. More details later.

Course Requirements:

- Attendance is required every day. This means you must show up on time, with your reading and writing done, ready to participate. Missed classes, chronic lateness, or inattention during class will hinder your chances of passing this course. If you miss more than 3 classes **for any reason** your grade will suffer.
- You are required to complete assigned reading and writing assignments on time. This includes reading and commenting on your peers' papers and keeping a writing notebook.
- You are responsible for contacting me if you miss anything because of absence or lateness or if you need more time to complete a project. Talk to your classmates but talk to me too.
- You are required to meet with me at least twice during the course of the semester. I will encourage you to confer with me at particular times but you are ultimately responsible for making sure you have met with me. More conferences are, of course, welcome.
- **Unless otherwise specified, all papers should be word-processed and laser-printed or ink jet printed. If this presents a problem, please let me know. Please put your name, my name, and the date on the first page and staple the paper in the upper left hand corner. Please, no cover sheets or plastic folders.**
- Please keep copies of all your written work.

- Because I want you to write not just for me, but for a larger audience which will include, at the very least, other members of the class, I will not grade individual papers. If you fulfill the requirements of the course and do good work, you will receive a B. If you fulfill the requirements and do excellent work you will receive an A. If you fall short in any aspect of the course, your grade will suffer accordingly. While I will not tell you what grade an individual paper would have received, I will be happy to tell you, during the course of the semester, more or less what grade your overall performance merits.
- It is crucial that the members of the class read and discuss each other's written work. This is valuable both for the writer of a piece, who should receive useful feedback from the reader, and for the reader, who will get a better sense of what his or her classmates are working on. It is a requirement of this course that you demonstrate a serious commitment to peer review.
- I will expect that you read and understand this and all other hand-outs I give you. I am, of course, available by phone, e-mail, and in person to explain any assignments.

Excerpted from assignment for Writing 134: Summer 1999

Journal Assignment

Today marks the end of the third week of classes, the mid-way point of the summer semester. I'd like you to include in your journal a self-evaluation and a course evaluation. These can be separate entries or you can combine them. You may find it helpful to write these as a letter (or letters), addressed to me, or to yourself, or to other members of the class, or to someone else.

In your self evaluation I'd like you to write honestly about what you've done well during the first half of the course, what you think you've accomplished, and where you think your work could improve. This might be a place to set some goals for the second half of the semester.

In your course evaluation I'd like you to talk about both the strengths and the weaknesses of the course. This is your chance to tell me what we've done that you think is effective, what we've done that you'd like to change, and what you would like to do that we haven't done.

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