GRADING AS A PROCESS TOWARD GROWTH: DEFERRING GRADES ON WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

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Student freedom versus the impulse to control expression

I try to encourage preservice teachers and graduate students to be creative when they write. Modeling the process of writing in my classes has been a valuable tool in preparing them to teach writing. Often I have drawn on Peter Elbow's idea of the "teacherless class" in which he encourages us to teach writing students to respond to each other's writing so they can see the effects of their ideas on others. In this way, the students become the audience and the writing becomes a way to affect that audience. Joy Ritchie suggests teachers listen carefully to students' voices to the extent that these voices become part of the discourse community of the class. This empowers students to create a specific rhetorical context for themselves, one in which they can feel free to express themselves. Implicit in Elbow's and Ritchie's idea of open discourse is the idea that the teacher must find a way to balance out the freedom with gentle guidance. Dan Kirby, Dawn Latta Kirby, and Tom Liner, three prominent experts on the teaching of writing, suggest young writers need to construct personal versions of the world around them. In 2004, the Writing Study Group of the Executive Committee (WSGEC) of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) pointed out that "a correct text empty of ideas or unsuited to its audience or purpose is not a good piece of writing" (p. 5). Therefore, there is

a necessity for both student freedom and necessary control of expression in composition classrooms.

I have discovered in my own classrooms that grades, perhaps my attempt to control expression, can get in the way of the creative process, the students' expression of freedom. Any time I put a percentage or a letter grade on a paper, the writing process seems to stop. My students will sometimes get so caught up in what is needed to receive a certain grade that they are not as creative as they might be. Some students throw papers away as soon as they get a grade, thinking they are finished with the assignment. Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, in a comprehensive meta-analysis of more than 40 studies on classroom assessment, conclude that if given grades alone students do not benefit from the feedback on their work. Students who get low marks have gotten low marks in the past and expect to get low marks in the future. Because students at all levels do not seem to want to continue to work on a piece of writing once the teacher stamps it with a definitive mark, I have avoided putting such marks on students' papers.

But soon, a student asks me, "Well, Dr. M., all this creativity is well and good, but what happens when we have to turn grades in? How are we supposed to grade something that is so subjective?" Richard Stiggins has been working on this question for more than ten years. He has said that keeping students posted all along the way about their progress and building open and honest assessment systems are two of the most effective strategies for addressing the issues of classroom assessment (5). I have developed a system that uses these very strategies by avoiding grades on individual students' papers, while at the same time allowing for formative evaluation. The system also encourages growth over time as students look at their writing as a body of work. Teachers need only place grades or percentages on the body of work when absolutely necessary, or when the grading period is over. Students can, however, still track their progress at any stage of the process. However, they must have at least two pieces of writing to compare since the system evaluates growth, not grades.

Although following this system in a prescriptive way is not a good idea, it is necessary to adhere to the inherent concepts of student involvement, progress over time, and analytic evaluation.

Grading as a process not a product

Teachers must integrate grading into the writing process of students in order for it to be most effective. The integration of the process and the evaluation of the product occur because "professors...consider the relationship between the grading process and a grade" (Speck 1). The process of grading starts when students first begin developing a writing assignment and continues until the teacher assigns a grade, whether on an individual assignment or a group of assignments. If teachers allow students to be a part of the process of grading, teachers can minimize conflicts over grades. Sharing the criteria with students, the professor helps them to evaluate their own and each other's writing (Speck). These criteria can be shared by using specific rubrics (or scoring guides) not only to help students to understand the grading system, but also to foster fairness on the part of the professor who becomes the final arbiter. If teachers use these scoring guides as a way for students to improve in their writing, they become even more valuable. "Wise teachers use the classroom assessment process as an instructional intervention to teach the lesson that failure is acceptable at first, but that it cannot continue...[and] we can use student involvement in the assessment, record-keeping, and communication processes [to teach this lesson]" (Stiggins 8). Professors can model the best ways to respond by writing directly on the scoring guides (attached to each paper) and by engaging in a dialogue with students. Teachers can give the students opportunities to revise based on positive feedback. Students then see grading as a process, and the use of specific scoring guides defers the assignment of a grade as long as possible (Speck).

However, the use of scoring guides alone is not enough to help improve students' writing. There needs to be a distinction made between evaluations and grading. Teachers can make this

distinction by having students engage in an ongoing process whereby teachers provide students with detailed information concerning what teachers expect on each assignment (Andrade). Specifically this detailed information can come in the form of comments given on scoring guides attached to student papers. Then the process continues as students revise and resubmit papers based in part on the teacher's comments. Interventions by the instructor along the way must address specific problems, not just the general criteria provided by the scoring guide. Thus, these scoring guides can be crucial interventions and a part of a total program of focusing on the writing process of students (Andrade). By deferring grades the teacher still has an evaluative role (by using the scoring guide) "but [the] primary role is to teach the students how to evaluate, how to read their work, and how to ask critical questions" by having students look at the scoring guide as a suggestion for improvement not a final step (Graves 28). Therefore, grading is a process that involves the use of scoring guides, which can help to ensure fairness on the part of the teacher and understanding on the part of the students. This grading process becomes part of a rigorous and worthwhile evaluation of writing.

Involving students in the process

I have developed a writing evaluation system that defers grades but still allows for assessment and evaluation that is meaningful for students. My system begins with an understanding of a six-trait writing model (Metzger). The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratories (NWREL) developed this model in the mid 1980's. However, it is more important for students to understand concepts than for teachers to use a particular nomenclature, so the professor may need to brainstorm with students on what they believe to be the qualities or traits of good writing. Once that list is broken down into main and subsidiary categories, students and teacher can use it as a basis for evaluation. The brainstorming list (figure 1) my students developed shows a thoughtful process of establishing reasonable criteria for evaluation. Since students are

involved in the process of developing the criteria for assessment, they can then move onto the next step of the system, goal setting. The scoring guide uses the traits (figure 2) as an example of the criteria established by the students for assessment and evaluation.

Figure 1: brainstorming list of what students decided were traits of good writing

Characteristics of good writing 11:00-12:15

Stimulates intellect
Good transitions
Spelling/grammar
Entertaining
Comprehensive
Well researched
Sentence structure
Evokes emotion
Well thought ideas
Perception of audience
Illustrate ideas effectively
Fluency of topics
Clarity
Creativeness
Good vocabulary
Wit
Supportive ideas
Gets point across
Short precise statements
Grammar
Reader conscious (thoughtfulness)
Audience appropriate
Content
Organization
Revision
Interest
Complete thoughts
Good information
Precise and to the point
Makes sense
Detailed
Good conclusion
Grammar
Well executed

Figure 2: scoring guide based on the traits of good writing model

SCORING GUIDE FOR WRITING
English 103 11:00

MUCH EVIDENCE	SOME EVIDENCE	LITTLE EVIDENCE
5	**3**	**1**

1. Ideas

- Well thought out ideas
- Illustrates ideas effectively
- Ideas are supported with details
- Thoughts are complete
- Makes sense

2. Technical aspects

- Has good transitions
- Spelling and grammar are acceptable
- Sentence structure helps with understanding meaning
- Fluency of topic is consistent
- Clarity is strong
- Good vocabulary is used
- Organization helps with comprehension
- Uses short precise statements where appropriate
- Has a good conclusion

3. Conscious of the reader

- Stimulates intellect
- Entertaining
- Evokes emotion
- Uses wit and humor where appropriate
- Generates interest
- Uses creativity
- Gets the point across
- Is appropriate for audience

4. Preparation of paper

- Content has substance
- Topic is well researched
- Information is high-quality
- Purpose of the paper is clear

This compilation of the model created by students in my composition 1 class is reduced to one page so that students can attach it to each piece of writing. Once I help students establish the traits, they can use them as a model to set their own goals for

the semester. Teachers can use a form like the one in figure 3 to help students begin to set goals specific to their own writing.

Figure 3: individual goal setting sheet for students

Educational Goal Setting
Name:
Semester:
Class:

Goals for the semester related to reading and writing	What I will do to accomplish this goal	What I will have to show at the end of the semester to prove I have met this goal
#1 **example:** I want to be able to express my ideas more clearly, so others understand what I am saying.	I will get feedback from my peers and teachers as to how well I am able to express my ideas.	I can show peer evaluation sheets I have had done. I can also show papers from the beginning of the semester and ones from the end that show improved ratings on the ideas and content category.
#2		
#3		

Specific goals students set based on the traits they helped develop and influencing their revisions come from Cody and Josh. Josh said in his reflective writing, "I improved when I actually took the time to go in and fix the problem. I always felt it was easy to fix mechanics, organization, and content, but the style, tone, and effectiveness was very difficult for me because I never wanted to change the whole paper. I think I can improve on style and tone by simply thinking through my paper before I start writing. In addition, the effectiveness will change. I also think I need to start thinking outside the box." Conversely, Cody stated, "Mechanics is my Achilles heel. Therefore, when this category pulled my grade down, I wasn't terribly surprised. Traditionally I often have to revise my works several times before they are publishable (to a degree I am willing to put my name on them). My hope is one day I will reach a point in my life where mechanics is one of my strong suits. This isn't likely; however, because as

my skills as a writer progress my mechanics improve at a much slower rate. To combat this problem I hope to focus more on structure and punctuation more than I do on content and flow. The gamble here being that I don't want to sacrifice my strong suite to only marginally improve my weakest; if this improves the way I am hoping it will, then I think within a year I will be drastically improved over where I am now."

Once students have set goals, they can begin to work on the process of writing and assessing in a teacherless class. In methods classes students begin by explaining to me in a piece of writing why they have decided to become a teacher, what events in their past have influenced them to become teachers, and what research will or has influenced their classroom practices. I call these paradigm statements instead of educational philosophy statements since many times philosophy implies what we think instead of what we do, and I want students to focus on what they will do or have done in their own classrooms. Once students have had a chance to practice the writing process, I have them respond to each other's writing in a way much like Peter Elbow's "movies of the mind." Sitting in a circle with authors reading each piece aloud one at a time, the members in the circle listen and then respond according to what was happening in their minds as the writer read. Students who do not see but only hear the writing tend to be less distracted by structure and usage. Because students at this stage need to focus on context and content, they need to focus on the purpose of writing, to communicate a particular message to an audience and to evoke a particular response. In this movies of the mind exercise, writers get to hear what type of response their writing evokes. If this response is not the desired one, then the writer has an opportunity to revise the writing to evoke the desired response.

Since I do not have students write down responses, I will recall one example in a methods class. Megan was reading her paradigm statement in which she discussed how a personal experience led to a change in her own educational experience, therefore changing the way she wanted to teach. After she was done reading, she

responded to another student's response by explaining in more detail how the personal experience was connected to the educational experience. Jenna then spoke up and said, "That was one thing that confused me in the writing. I wasn't sure how the death was connected to your reading, but then when you explained it just now, it made it more clear. Maybe you could put that in the paper." After hearing Jenna's response, Megan was then able to go back and revise her paradigm in order to clear up this confusion.

Students complete peer evaluations on which they make specific comments based on written guidelines. An interesting example of this process comes from an evaluation session between Morgan and Bethany. Morgan suggested Bethany give the paper emotion, making it more compelling for the reader by explaining more how fixing the issue could help and not just why the issue should be fixed. Bethany responded during revision by changing many words, attempting to keep in mind her audience. At the same time, Morgan learned while evaluating Bethany's essay how to incorporate sources into an opening paragraph. Thus, peer evaluation can be a two-way street from which both the evaluator and the evaluated can benefit.

When students believe they have a "publishable" paper, they attach a scoring guide and turn it in to me. I then make short, concise comments next to each trait and give them a rating of 1-5. In order to get students used to the idea that a paper is never really finished, I use the term "publishable" rather than "final." When students get the papers back with my comments, they can rewrite as many times as they want to with the goal of improving their ratings for each of the traits. All students rewrite each paper at least once, so that they can chart their own course for improvement. For all the papers (approximately five per semester) from all my students (grades 7-graduate level) most of the time students *choose* to improve their own writing. I say choose because there is no grade or points attached to the rewrite. However, they know that if they rewrite, they get better ratings and, in the end, a better grade. They know this because I have explained to them

the process of filling out the progress chart. Even my lowest achieving classes of at-risk high school students chose to rewrite their papers 65% of the time. This takes into account that in this group some students choose not even to write a paper. In contrast, in my high achieving composition 1 class students all rewrite their papers at least once and a third revise them 3-5 times. After students rewrite their papers and receive their improved ratings, they record their scores on a progress chart (figure 4).

Figure 4: progress chart for recording ratings on papers over the semester

[Page 1]
Progress chart for characteristics of good writing
Name:
Hour: 11:00-12:15
Semester:

Rating for each assignment *Characteristics of good writing*	Assignment #1	Assignment #2	Assignment #3	Assignment #4
1. Ideas				
2.Technical aspects				
3. Conscious of the reader				
4. Preparation of paper				

At the end of the semester, explain how you have improved on each of the characteristics or why you stayed the same. If you need to improve on one of them, explain how you might do that.

Why:

How:

[Page 2]

Formula for grading: each characteristic is averaged, all these ratings are then added together, multiplied by ten, divided by the total number of characteristics, and added to 48 to get a percentage.

Example:

5	4	3	4	4
4	4	5	5	4.5
3	4	5	5	4.25
4	4	5	5	4.5

$$\frac{17.25 \times 10}{4} = 172.5 = 43.125 + 48 = 91.125\ \%$$

At any point during the semester, students can figure their grade by averaging ratings on their papers. They can then arrive at a sum of all the averages not based on scores on individual papers but on improvement from paper to paper. Students begin to focus on growth over the semester not on a grade on one piece of writing. "Student-involved record keeping brings students into the process of monitoring improvements in their performance through repeated self-assessment over time" (Stiggins 8). This record keeping is also tied to the students' goal setting sheets since they have set goals based on the traits of good writing. Students also continually evaluate their progress throughout the semester by looking at the progress charts and writing reflective pieces on their development of each specific trait. One Chinese student offered the following reflection:

> I did not do a good job on the "Mechanics" category. I think mostly it is because my English is not good enough and I still don't know how to use a word correctly, like the word tense and some phrasal verbs. I will work hard on it. For the first category, just having brain storming before writing papers, and pay attention to sentence and paragraphs' structures; for the second, find strong and enough evidence through research; for the third one, I should pay attention to the paragraphs' length, it can affect the persuasive tone; for the fourth one, do not limit the sources on the Internet, but use libraries for more information; the improvement of the last category is most important for me, because I am not good at it. I will learn more English words and pay attention to the American culture. I think that can help me.

This response is based on the unique scoring guide developed by this student's class. Also, I spent time with this student during the semester on the essays until they were polished examples of research work. Just as Peter Elbow says, a much broader view of assessment and evaluation is reached by using such a system than by relying on grades alone. The teacher and the student arrive at a

consensus on the value of the student's progress in writing. Writing and rewriting throughout the semester, filling out the goal setting sheets, and writing reflections form a solid basis for formative evaluation.

Summative assessment as growth not an end in itself

The summative evaluation comes at the end of the semester when students calculate the sum of their averages on the traits of good writing. Calculating scores in this way helps students to see that what counts is improvement from paper to paper. Arriving at the grade is only part of the process of grading because, "Instructors must recognize the difference between formative and summative evaluation and be prepared to evaluate students' writing from both perspectives" (NCTE Beliefs 10). The narrative portion as seen on page one of figure 4 gives an even broader view of assessment and ties the progress chart back to the goal sheet (figure 3). Students explain the traits in their own words, making the traits more meaningful. Then they write reasons why they have or have not improved on the traits. The students have practiced giving these reasons throughout the semester as they write their reflections. Finally, the students finish this narrative by explaining how they might improve on these traits in the future. This part of the narrative ties back to their goals since they had to identify their three goals based on the traits. By creating this narrative portion of the evaluation, students see how they can continue to grow in their writing beyond the semester at hand.

As I look back at the semester's work, I realize that students have responded to each other's writing and have been a valuable part of an evaluation team. My students as preservice and inservice teachers come with much hesitancy about how to grade writing. How can a teacher take something so personal and subjective and put a number on it? The system we use in class incorporates the crucial concepts of participatory evaluation. Although teachers must assign grades to students' papers at some

point, a system like the one we use can help ensure fairness of the professor who is the final judge of student writing. The concepts of student involvement, progress over time, and analytic evaluation are essential. A system such as this makes a distinction between evaluation and grading as students learn how to evaluate the body of work they create.

What students say about grading as a process

Inservice graduate students value allowing for time to evaluate, peer evaluation, and writing as a continuous process. In reflections they note the importance of students taking ownership of the process through the use of analytic scoring guides. These teachers of language arts will take what they are learning and apply it in their own classrooms. These master teachers will not only continue to lead the life of a writer but will nurture their students as writers. Because these teachers range in their teaching experiences from grades K-12, the applied principles of deferred grading have far-reaching implications. My own experience in five different states, has had the potential also of benefiting many classrooms.

Argentina, a student in my "Teaching of Writing" class, had this to say about her experience: "I think that through revisiting my writing more than once it helped me work out the flow of the papers. I usually do not write more than one draft of a paper. As Peter Elbow says in his book, I edit while I write. I have been doing this for years and I have written some pretty good papers. By giving myself the time to come back to it at a later date, it seemed fresher and I had already mulled over some ideas in my mind about it. The only downside I saw with going back and revising my work was that it was time consuming. The quality of the work is better but sometimes there just is not enough time to revise everything I write. I enjoyed writing these pieces so I really did not mind going back to them, but there are times when I could not care less for the paper I have to write and I just want it to be over." Clearly, Argentina has come to understand basic principles behind grade deferment that she will apply in her

classroom. First, the process of revising is valuable in itself because it is part of the movement toward growth. Secondly, taking the time to mull over ideas created gives writers a new view on what they are writing. Interestingly, both of these concepts are possible downfalls. Teachers need to allow for the time consuming task of involving students in the process of grading. In addition, if teachers do not allow students to select topics they are interested in, they will lose interest after awhile. An anonymous student in the same class wrote, "I, like many students, become attached to the words I have chosen, and am often reluctant to make changes. I learned that I am more willing to make those changes after some time has passed. The passing of time allows me to view my work more objectively, and be more open to revision." Again, the value of time is extolled, and the student sees applications to his or her own students.

Another student in the class, Joanne, said, "I think of writing as painful and rigorous work. It was an enlightening experience to go through the process I ask my students to go through because it was excruciatingly difficult to take my three pieces through them. It was helpful to receive feedback from my peers and allowed me to reflect on my writing and notice patterns in my writing that I now am conscious of when I write. Going through the process made me think about each trait individually and what it meant to me as a writer. I feel I am more knowledgeable about the writing traits and feel more enlightened when having to go through the process myself and using those traits to score points." Joanne has come to understand that writing is hard work and that "writing workshop" is therefore a fitting phrase. However, she can now more easily identify with her students and sees how peer evaluation helps to ease some of the burden of writing. In addition, the teaching of writing through the use of traits is most likely something Joanne will use with her own students.

I like what Joanne's classmate Heather had to say, "Writing is ongoing, unlike many other subjects we teach. *There are no goal posts, this is a journey.* It is fascinating to me, as I said before, how much a simple piece of writing can tell you about another person.

So many times writing is filled with so much emotion that you get captured. The thing that I learned most, and have already started to conquer is my ability to write and write more" [emphasis added]. Heather has exemplified the nature of writing as transcendent, cathartic, and longitudinal. The concept of writing as a journey is most likely an idea that Heather will find valuable to convey to her students and is a crucial component of understanding grading as a process. She has also seen the value of writing as a way to understand self as well as others, a value conveyed easily in the context of a classroom that emphasizes process and product. Also evident in her reflections is the view of writing as a continuous effort without a definitive end, something students will grasp if they view their writing as a body of work to be evaluated rather than a series of isolated assignments.

Finally, Jill, who was also in the class, speaks of the next step students take: "I believe that when I take ownership of a piece I am able to incorporate ideas and content in meaningful ways. I believe that these are reasons why I have stayed consistent in ideas and content as a trait. As I am able to step back and observe my thinking on paper, I can see what areas are weak and decide on the appropriate words that will create images that I intend the readers to visualize. Having someone else provide me with their mental image [Elbow's "movies of the mind"] also allows me to alter my words to exact language if necessary. The environment that was created in class invited me to explore options that I may have never considered previously." When students become part of the process of evaluation, they take ownership and their writing becomes more meaningful. In addition, teachers must emphasize the social nature of writing so that students become more aware of their audience and in turn their purpose for writing. It is not enough to take the principles of "grading as a process" and create activities around them. The teacher must foster a classroom climate of shared assessment and evaluation, of trust and ownership, of exploration and risk-taking.

Final thoughts

First, it is important for us as teachers to help our students to see writing as a process that is hard work. Secondly, writing is a worthwhile task of which our students can take ownership. Thirdly, we need to reveal to our students what our evaluation process is and share in it with them. Lastly, looking beyond the classroom, we need to help students see how writing can be a valuable journey on which to embark. Unfortunately, according to Richard Stiggins, "For students, increasing pressure to score high on tests, combined with a lack of focused opportunities to learn, can lead to a sense of futility-a feeling of hopelessness-that can cause them to stop caring and stop trying" (2). In our world of increased accountability and pressure to perform, we need a way to assess our students work in a compassionate and meaningful way. Grading as a process is the beginning of a call for compassionate accountability.

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