PROLOGUE

Probably most of our readers eagerly clipped from their Sunday Funnies the recent "Peanuts" in which Peppermint Patty tells how her father was adversely affected by a teacher's evaluation of his essay. It seems as if Patty's father once wrote an assigned essay on human relationships, and she recounts, "the teacher didn't like his essay because she wrote 'Fiddlesticks!' at the bottom." She continues: "Anyway, it hurt my dad's feelings, and he never got over it." Charles Schulz brings the story full circle. Peppermint Patty's own essay is returned shortly thereafter by her English teacher, and Marcie asks: "What did the teacher write on yours, Sir?" Disconcerted, Peppermint Patty blushes and then answers: " 'Grody to the Max!' I think I would have preferred 'Fiddlesticks.' " Language changes, but expository justice doesn't.

The comic strip elicited much discussion in and around my office. "Fiddlesticks" and "Grody to the Max" were seen by some as pure reader-based comments, much preferred to the more traditional "Three frags — D" announcement. Others questioned how an instructor's chairperson or principal would react to such an assessment of student work. "We really mark up those essays for our superiors, you know," another said. Some doubted that any teacher reaction to a paper would stay with the student writer "forever," or for that matter "five minutes." One cynic chided Schulz for inaccuracy: "Students don't write anything now, let alone essays on human relationships."

But as Peppermint Patty contemplated her teacher's reaction to the essay, I remembered one of my former students reducing his views of English education to a single and rather delightful line: "You never knew what you were eating in lunch nor learning in English." All in all he might have been right.

In the last fifteen years or so a fairly sizeable body of research has guided us in responding to student writing. Never before have we been so prepared to understand, to investigate, to respond, and even to appreciate error; never before have we been so prepared to question the relationship of evaluative marginalia to student improvement in writing. Yet however prepared we may or may not be to evaluate themes incisively and constructively, this evaluation

ultimately depends on the readiness of students to receive it. Beyond the pedagogy of the composition classroom, beyond the triangular relationship of writers, audiences, and messages, are the impressions, reflections, and nightmares students have of writing classes past, present, and future. I think that before any taxonomy of evaluative dialogue is effective, we must understand and accept how many students view us (the writing teachers) and the hidden and not-so-hidden messages we have sent them throughout their educational careers about writing, the writing process, and teacher-student communication. And more importantly, we need to change not only students' writing and writing processes, but finally their perceptions of us. If the traditional paradigm of teaching writing answers "the what" we are after and the new paradigm the "how" we get it, then we must argue for the classroom inclusion of the "why" behind our pedagogy, behind our evaluation of student papers, behind — finally — our students' stereotypes of us.

Although there are certainly those students who — like Emig's Lynn — have intuited composing processes and hence are well adjusted in the writing classroom, most plainly dislike writing, are bewildered by the writing process, and see the student-writing instructor relationship as necessarily antagonistic — one of unsure performer to an impossible-to-please evaluator.

We all know this, have felt the anger and worse the disinterest of our students. But when they express this anger and disinterest, they often make perfectly good sense — if we hear them. Read closely some students' insights into the writing classroom, what they most remember about their instruction, and the messages we must be inadvertently conveying:

> "English is really basic common sense — I guess. You're not going to write 'didn't,' 'can't,' 'ain't' in an essay or resume." The contraction "rule" lives on with a vengeance, overpowering all that gets in its way.
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> "By and large English classes do what they are suppose to, expose we students to the unfascinating world of grammer." It's nice students know what we're supposed to do. This one is obedient. At the end of his free write he apologizes for using "your and you and the general first person throughout."

"Composition is a boring class where rules are watched closely. Most English classes I've been in were cut and dry, right or wrong." How nice we give the impression that we are on top of our game, that writing is so algorithmic and inflexible, so formulaic and unexpressive, so simple to understand.

"When I think about English I often associate it with Oxford University, which is a college in England I think. I think that they might carry it a little too far. They are really picky about punctuation and proper form." FIDDLESTICKS!

"The rules are always different when you do something one way compared to another." What? No algorithms? Maybe there is hope.

"I usually associate an English class with diagramming sentences, parts of speech which always change, and the three types of sentences. Everything you learn in English keeps building so you can't forget nothing or you are in for big trouble." Maybe we would be better off if students forgot everything, and we started from scratch.

"I always wondered though, why we always diagrammed sentences and picked out structure. I never thought someday I would get a job diagramming sentences." He evidently doesn't want to teach English.

"Rules, rules, rules — you got to be kidding." Or have been kidded.

One instructor a few weeks ago asked her class to cube "composition teachers." She frantically ran into my office and breathlessly admitted, "I knew they hated us, but not this much." It was a good news — bad news kind of situation. The bad news was that — yes — they pulled no punches in their disdain for us. The good news was that most had wonderfully developed cubes, full of vivid concreteness and purpose. They finally had discovered thesis statements about which they knew something. No problem with student involvement here:

"English composition is for girls, nobody in their right mind likes English, it is boring, hard, malignent and trite."

"You can't get rid of the pain or the class, until it fades away."

"Anyone who could enjoy English enough to enjoy it is a machinist."

"If you're normal and sane English is tedious and not worth one's time."

"I know Hell is run by English teachers." GRODY TO THE MAX!

The pain of *teaching* English is evidently only surpassed by the pain of enrolling in English class.

The indictments don't surprise us. But embedded in these "blasphemous" questionnaire responses and cubes and prewriting on writing are rather shrewd insights by students that give credence to research done on evaluation by Cowen, Gee, Diederich, Maimon, and others. Students do remember things from the writing classroom. We generate impressions; they make connections, usually wrong connections.

In my research involving student writers and composition teachers from throughout the curriculum, K to college, I am struck by two disturbing notions. First, what student writers often remember and notice more than what their teachers explain to them in class, than what they read in texts, or observe in models, are those words written back to them indicating how someone else felt about their writing. The case of Peppermint Patty's father is not, I fear, that far-fetched. And second, those words are often contradictory, without an implicit context of language learning, poorly worded, rule bound, depersonalized, unimaginative, not very helpful, nasty, rubber stamped, and often unreadable. In other words, they are not meant for a real reader or a real writer but for the shop foreman as documentation of work completed.

We often undo with a quick and automatic evaluation everything we tediously tried to do in class. We often seek ingenious ways to decrease time spent on draft and product evaluation, even though our students see that particular work as the crux of the course — the "we write — they grade" process. And we sometimes — albeit hesitatingly — want to believe research that cites the lack of correlation between intensive evaluation of writing and student improvement in writing (I have Lois Arnold's 1964 *English Journal* article in mind here). What really may be germane is how our evaluation undermines student improvement and interest,

for instance the student looking at the grade and then tossing the paper into the waste can. She may realize what is said by the instructor is not really worth much.

We often drop all pretense of juggling the writer instructor's role of experiencer, reader, and examiner when we finally evaluate, and we often turn into something we later don't much like, that we can't control even though we know negative reinforcement or plain lack of response is never really purposeful or communicative.

Shaughnessy knew her students so well. She was of course right when she said that the inordinate emphasis placed by English teachers "upon propriety in the interest not of communication but of status has narrowed and debased the teaching of writing, encouraging a tendency to view the work of their students microscopically and to develop a repugnance for error that has made students feel like pariahs."

Many students have every reason in the world to believe that writing is rule-bound, that the teacher enjoys the privilege of having an endless arsenal of ammunition. Without providing a strategy for the defeat of error, at our best we note — as quickly as possible, in list form or in the margins — as many errors as possible: lumping surface errors with flaws in development or organization, failing to note even at what part the writing process broke down for the student. Thesis placement and control receive as much press as, perhaps, the dangling modifier or vague pronoun reference, or, in the case of that one student, contractions like didn't, can't, and ain't. It is not difficult to imagine a student staring at our evaluation as wild-eyed as we originally stared at his product. Too bad there has been little opportunity to talk in order for both parties to articulate their utter amazement and confusion and disappointment.

We often expect students to prioritize, to rank our criticisms, assuming perhaps that marginalia advising against contractions somehow weigh less than those jargon-laden frags, agr's, unities, and coherences placed in the margin as well. Not heeding our own dictums about well thought out descending and ascending order, we machine gun our criticism all over the paper. As Nancy Sommers has pointed out in the *Journal of Teaching Writing,* our interlinear comments often are text specific whereas marginalia demand rethinking and redoing, contradictory tasks to be sure. We expect the student to do mental gymnastics in order to improve her writing and to intuit what we want.

Even seriously considered teacher response is, more times than not, coded with editing symbols, handbook page numbers, abbreviations, circles, underlinings, and other doodles. The impression is clear: we evaluate writing not by communicating in writing but by noting errors in shorthand. Swiftness not communication is the goal; termination not continuance of the project is the signal. The latest *Harbrace Handbook* flyer says it all. "The problem is obvious" announces the blood-red (of course) flyer. As we scan the graphic of an evaluated four paragraph essay, we see our criteria-based shorthand at its most ludicrous: 15 different sections and sub-sections in the *Handbook* are cited; in addition, the anonymous evaluator notes in the margins of the essay that "the logic suffers," that "pronoun problems" exist, that there are "unclear and shifting references," and an "unwarrented optimism" (the sole reader-based comment and misspelled by the evaluator). There is a command to "define" elements, and a rather limp rhetorical question, "What are you referring to?" The solution is *not Harbrace,* as the flyer contends, but practicing what we preach: writing in response to student writings.

It is almost as if we are saying teachers don't need to follow their own advice and certainly don't need to write themselves. Our evaluations on papers are often just that — evaluations meant as justification of work done rather than as communication between student-teacher in the name of skill improvement. If our criticisms of student writing are frequently contradictory, our articulation in writing of those criticisms also sends mixed signals. Once we venture beyond the handbook shorthand, we flagrantly violate advice given to students moments before in the margins of, let's say, page two of the essay. Summary comments are fragmented, or at best expressed in short kernel sentences, even though we encouraged the student writer to subordinate and combine more, to improve his style, to vary his sentence patterns. Summary comments are vague and not text specific, even though we encouraged the student to recognize his audience and purpose, to develop his idea more coherently. Summary comments, as do the shorthand and editing code, close the door to communication, questions raised being obviously rhetorical, the grade denying any consideration of answers to the questions posed: a communication sham. And although we question the student about his or her audience, our evaluative comments are

often depersonalized, criteria-based, rubber-stamped from one essay to another. Are we really to believe that using the writer's name in the first sentence of the comments salvages rapport? Clearly the message we send is blatant: Unlike children, adults don't have to eat spinach if they don't want to.

And perhaps at our sloppiest is the undressed "C," staring at the student from the end of the page. No commentary nor constructive criticism needed, the grade stands for abilities already attained, or the lack of abilities exhibited: the final word, or in this case, the final letter. Even "Grody to the Max" would be better than this.

But what I appreciated most in the "Peanuts" comic strip was the irony generated from the teacher-initiated writing topic (Human Relationships) and the evaluative comment (Fiddlesticks). Such irony and contradiction have found their way too often to the bottom of my students' essays. It's not always easy to practice what we preach, and as I finish this sentence, I half expect the invisible composition teacher to stamp or scribble "cliche" or "diction" or 20C in the margin of this next to the last paragraph. Oh well, "Fiddlesticks" to my demon.

I'll see you at the Fall Conference in September. Thank you for your year's support of the *Journal of Teaching Writing.*

Ron Strahl