

THE MERRILLVILLE HIGH SCHOOL WRITING PROGRAM: A RESPONSE

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Having read "Let's Get Consistent: The Merrillville High School Writing Program" (*Journal of Teaching Writing*, Fall, 1982, pp. 179-187), I am compelled to write a response. The article outlines the Merrillville High School English Department's methods of achieving consistency in grading procedures, a point crucial to their program. The department offers two courses, Basic Composition and Intermediate Composition, one of which a student enters based on a competency exam. Teachers grade the students in each course according to guidelines established by all of them at an in-service workshop during which they arrived at a consensus about the quality of A,B,C,D, and F papers. The department has also convinced other departments in the school to grade the mechanics of papers according to its guidelines. This article includes appendices outlining the marks for mechanical deficiencies as well as content deficiencies for both courses.

The Merrillville High School English Department has put much effort into what it considers to be an efficient, consistent grading method for teachers. Their concern about the English teacher's grading burden is understandable. Having been a high school English and journalism teacher for eleven years, I can appreciate their need to streamline grading, to speed up the process, to be consistent in standards. My department constructed similar guidelines once, and I used this familiar method. However, my frustration in teaching composition increased despite

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the grading procedure I used, for following the procedure ignored the problem of teaching students *how* to write. When I finally realized that my students didn't change their writing technique because I was not giving them any instruction about how to do this, I knew that any grading plan, no matter how efficient, would ultimately fail.

Agnes Lynch and Christine Pavel, in giving us their version of grading procedures, offer a program which has been repeated often. Their standardized approach to grading, while *perhaps* making the teacher's grading task easier, provides the same methodology many of us have used for years. And the fact that their article deals with the problems in grading and not with the structure of their courses, the *how* behind their teaching methods, lends to the belief that their concerns lie with the product rather than the process of writing. They believe that "teachers must be persuaded that consistency in grading is a crucial step in the writing process." Further, they acknowledge their failure to inform a student of why his paper was evaluated as it was or "how to avoid similar problems in future writing efforts." These two points form the crux of the problem: the student is not being helped by the uniformity of a grading standard. Despite the teachers' best efforts at grading, their students are likely to commit the same errors repeatedly. I question how well the Merrillville program is working to give students the help they need in discovering, developing, and organizing their ideas.

One cannot deny the authors' contention that the English teacher's grading is burdensome. Requiring many assignments from 80-100 students weekly creates an overwhelming evening task for any teacher. However, why must every paper be graded after a single or even second draft? The quick-write routine our students have become accustomed to has given them the wrong impression about writing. We have rarely held them accountable for their words. This routine also denies students the opportunity to take responsibility for their work. Since our job is not only to be teachers of English but to be educators in a broader sense, we must help our students learn this responsibility for their writing. If they work on their papers only briefly and file them in the garbage after we mark them, we have not held them accountable. And the demise of their papers results in their never having defended or explained their ideas, never having reevaluated their writing. Our burden can decrease

through restructuring assignments, through the students' spending more time on one assignment, including the exchange of papers with each other, conferences with us, and rewriting. In this way, they will be writing as much as previously yet working to perfect their papers, assuming personal responsibility *before* we evaluate them. Our students are capable of self-evaluation; we need to give them the opportunity to do so, along with the tools they need. Thus, if we require more evaluation from them, we have less to do ourselves in the final grading. Perhaps then, consistency in grading will no longer be a primary concern. As composition teachers we must encourage student writers to participate more actively in their writing processes. The Merrillville program fosters a traditional regard for writing, one which has catered to the teacher and has not encouraged personal growth in its students as writers or as human beings.

Preoccupation with an efficient, consistent way to grade papers ignores the students' needs. Our consistency will never help our students eliminate or even reduce their writing problems. This program gives the teachers a precise method of grading their piles of papers yet ignores a crucial problem: students repeat errors. Telling them over and over that they have made the same mistake does not correct their performance. We cannot simply treat the symptoms, the surface errors. We cannot plug in programmed responses about content with standard remarks about unity, coherence, or development — “par lacks dev” or “no trans.” If a student has difficulty writing, it may be because he hasn't discovered what he wants to say. If we English teachers acknowledge this premise — that inability to formulate clear ideas, to decide purpose, leads to confused writing — we can then work on the cause of the frustration, not just the symptoms. The Lynch/Pavel article emphasizes a systems-approach through its concern with grading consistency. The success, or *lack* of success, in teaching composition to our students should show us that this method simply has not worked well.

The appendices at the end of the article outlining the grading marks present the objective, impersonal method these teachers use to evaluate papers consistently. If a teacher were to use these marks rigidly, she might find her task easier. Yet, the last comment of Appendix B negates all the objectivity and consistency the program claims to promote:

If a paper would be 'saved' by a good mark in mechanics, it is the reader's responsibility to mark the content grade sufficiently low so that a student will not be deluded into thinking that he has written a paper of passing quality.

This statement opens Pandora's box, allowing subjectivity to spill out all over the paper in red marks: The teacher who was so careful to follow the guidelines, to be consistent in grading, has fallen back on the traditional method of emphasizing mechanics, a method which ignores how the student got to that failing grade. This same teacher distorts the student's view of his paper. In effect, the teacher is saying, "The content is not great, the grammar is pretty good, but I can't let you pass, so your content is really bad." The student receives an inaccurate appraisal. The teacher has not been honest with him.

Any English program must have grading standards; that is not the dispute. However, the emphasis these teachers seem to be placing on grading consistency is out of proportion to the emphasis they place on teaching methods, at least by this article's intent. Consistency in grading is not the major problem in an English program. That students cannot write or fail to see the need to learn to write is more concerning. If we are to make them realize the need and give them tools to accomplish their writing more easily, we must change our philosophical ideas about standards in our programs. Where is the emphasis to be placed? Are we to spend our evenings grading single drafts comprehensively, knowing that few of our students will understand or, indeed, even *read* our comments, hoping they will do a better job next time? Or are we going to demand an active role of ourselves and our students while they are writing, assisting them throughout the writing process, minimizing that evening burden? Although the Merrillville program makes a stab at consistency, it is a jab students and writers have felt for years, a technique which considers the teacher first, the student second.

AUTHORS' REPLY

AGNES LYNCH
CHRISTINE PAVEL

The response to our article "Let's Get Consistent: The Merrillville High School Writing Program" is based on four misconceptions, the first of which is partly our fault: The title suggests a broad treatment, when in reality we deal with only our standardized grading of student themes. The original title, under which we presented a program in Boston at the NCTE convention in '81 and a repeat program at Indianapolis in '82, was "Let's Get Consistent: Grading Student Themes." That, certainly, would have been clear enough for even our critic to understand. Even so, it is an unfair assumption to accuse us of being more concerned with "the product rather than the process" simply because "the article deals with the problems in grading and not with the structure" of our courses. It was not our *intention* to present a course description (but be assured we have such descriptions for each of our English Department offerings); that was NOT the scope of our article. And we used the word *program* in the title because we had been invited to publish an article for the benefit of those teachers who had heard about our "program" in Boston or in Indianapolis, and had been unable to attend. An unfortunate and ambiguous word choice, and we accept the responsibility for misleading our critic.

The second and third misconceptions upon which two additional attacks were based were a result of misreading the text. She argues that "we acknowledge [our] failure to inform a student of why his paper was evaluated as it was or 'how to avoid similar problems in the future writing efforts.'" We make no such acknowledgment. Our article claims that this weakness is inherent in holistic grading (which we use *only* for placing a student in the proper course), NOT in our method. She further argues that because we insist that "if a paper would be 'saved' by a good mark in mechanics, it is the reader's responsibility to mark

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the content grade sufficiently low so that a student will not be deluded into thinking that he has written a paper of passing quality," we are falling back on "the traditional method of emphasizing mechanics." Don't you see that we are *fighting* that very problem? We are placing *equal* emphasis on content *and* mechanics by telling the student "the grammar is pretty good, but you haven't *said* anything relevant, so this is not a passing paper."

Finally, her misconception that this is a "familiar method" which has been "repeated often" and is destined for failure because it is not "student oriented" must be addressed. Have no fear about how well the Merrillville students learn to write under this GRADING method (please note this is *ONLY* our grading method, not our method of instruction: we actually *DO TEACH* the elements we look for in student themes). We were recently cited by Indiana University as one of the twenty outstanding high schools in the state in preparing students for college writing. What could be more "student oriented"? The fact that our students are graded fairly, regardless of which member of the department graded their paper, certainly makes this a "student oriented" program. And while our method may be familiar and oft repeated *ON PAPER*, it is seldom put into practice. That's why we need the inservice workshops! To paraphrase, not irreverently, from G. K. Chesterton: Consistency in grading has not been tried and found wanting; it has not been tried at all.