TRANSACTIONAL EVALUATION: THE RIGHT QUESTION AT THE RIGHT TIME

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Peter Elbow, in "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process," argues that "in order to teach well we must find *some* way to be loyal both to students and to knowledge or society" (338). To grade well, we must come to terms with these dual loyalties, too. Most of us, when teaching in the classroom or in our offices, have great sympathy for our students as individual people. Unfortunately, when grading at home, we tend to emphasize our allegiance to standards, or criteria (representing our society's or department's view of what knowledge is necessary), while downplaying our personal obligations to the people we grade. We may rationalize this by saying that we are cruel in order to be kind, for we know that the real world is unforgiving of those who can't meet the standards society has set.

However, as most of us now realize, it is not enough to define standards in our own terms and expect inexperienced student writers to live up to them simply because they are standards. As Richard Lloyd-Jones suggests, standards become the level of righteousness to which student writers (sinners) must aspire. We, then, become the "rectors" of "correctitude" in a strange, abstract, mystical theology. Because standards have no life of their own, but exist only as ideal forms obscured by our specialized vocabulary (Graderspeak) and the students' fear of our seemingly arbitrary, yet punitive judgment (correctitude), we risk alienating students from their own thoughts. We shouldn't be surprised, then, when most of our students think of the language skills we offer them

as features of an inaccessible and worthless code. Why want what you can't hope to have? Even if you could somehow get it, why learn to speak a language that cannot express your thoughts? Better (and easier) to simply give up on thinking.

The best students have a different problem. While they may learn to write according to our standards, their writing becomes more ours than theirs as we praise its criterion-based virtues. (We are indebted to Peter Elbow's *Writing With Power* for the distinction between criterion-based and reader-based responses, and we will further describe their importance later in this paper.) To these high achievers, as Leon Botstein points out, "Using language is a school-specific skill, a game to be mastered but to which they have little emotional or intellectual attachment" (22). They are rewarded for mastering the code, even if they don't see its use in their lives outside school. The transaction for these students is a written product molded by our expectations and exchanged for a high grade. If we have a conscience, however, we cannot shake the feeling that once out of our offices or classrooms, they become themselves again, with sharp, individual outlines, instead of this year's model of the model student.

Botstein suggests a partial solution to both problems: "There is no substitute for the regular writing of prose compositions which are corrected carefully, with attention to the interaction of content with the mechanics of language" (22). He offers journals, poetry, first-person narrative, discursive essays, and newspaper editorials as suitable forms for student writing. No one denies that requiring students to write in various forms leads to a less restricted view of writing's aims and possibilities. We also know of our duty to examine and evaluate pieces of student writing that may lead to finished conventional essays, and of our duty to show students how pushing an essay through successive drafts is a vital component of thinking about a subject. The standard five-paragraph essay, the tin cookie mold that has perfunctorily shaped so much half-baked cerebral dough, lies crumbled in the dustheap of discarded theory. But how are these various pieces of student writing to be corrected? What is to keep us from helplessly falling back on old standards for evaluation while simultaneously accepting Maxine Hairston's call for fresh, new approaches to writing?

The emerging paradigm that Hairston describes points towards a revised system of evaluation to match the new emphasis in writing

instruction. Hairston's new way of teaching writing "focuses on the writing process," "teaches strategies for invention and discovery," and "is rhetorically based" (86). Most importantly, teachers "intervene in students' writing during the process" (86). This intervention most likely includes some kind of evaluation, at least in the student's mind—for even our suggestions tend to be taken as (implied) judgments. Thus evaluation becomes part of the writing process for the student.

This paper seeks to suggest ways for the instructor to turn evaluation into an open-ended transaction with the student writer rather than a final pronouncement of merit on the student's writing. This may seem an overly obvious task; of course evaluation is transactional during the writing process. But if we continue to judge a dynamic process by static, codified standards, we squelch it. Every step in the process then becomes a product in itself, accountable to our standardized criteria. Clearly, we must develop criteria to fit the real writing situations we are likely to encounter if we are to have valid, human transactions with our students. Most important, transactional evaluation must reinforce our other instructional efforts to help students define rhetorical problems.[1] That is, evaluation must aid novice writers in their efforts to discover relationships between audience, purpose, persona, the assignment, meaning, and features of the text. In helping students set and solve rhetorical problems, then, such evaluation serves to remind writers that they are individuals communicating with another human being who needs to be respected.

THE TRADITION OF CRITERION–BASED EVALUATION: THE LAW IS THE LAW. YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER STANDARDS BEFORE THESE.

Most beginning teachers of freshman composition (usually beginning graduate students) are taught to evaluate student writing according to a clear set of standards. This makes sense because English departments strive to offer freshmen a uniform experience in their composition courses. Also, to be fair, such standards are consistent with a view of writing as a polished finished product. Students should "be graded as individuals against a clear standard of competent writing" (8). Instruction should "stimulate students to think critically and present their thoughts in essays that are fully developed, clear, precise, and graceful" (49). This clar-

ity, precision, and grace must be exhibited in four areas: content, organization, expression, and usage and mechanics. Adjectives matched to these criteria are "important" (controlling idea), "necesary" (steps that reveal a sense of symmetry and emphasis) and "varied and forceful" (sentences) (50).

We may, as English teachers, know exactly what we mean in these thumbnail descriptions, although veterans of group grading sessions can attest to our differing conceptions of the generalized standards. More to the point, as Elbow states in "Embracing Contraries," "terms like 'coherent' and even 'specific' are notoriously hard for students to grasp because they do not read stacks of student writing" (336). We are initiates, and our responses are automatic to us; to our students they are as foreign and as dead as Latin. Our terminology is particularly limiting when the current assumptions about writing are considered.

A recent NCTE pamphlet, *Measure for Measure: A Guidebook for Evaluating Expository Writing*, lists several assumptions about evaluation: "Evaluation involves both subjective and objective aspects"; "Evaluation should lead to action"; and finally, "thoughtful evaluation of students' writing is evidence of concern for students" (4). These are worthy assumptions which support the beliefs that writing is process and evaluation is transactional. However, the "criteria for good writing" read suspiciously like the traditional criteria described in the *Student's Guide*. Content, diction, sentence structure, and form are the categories that teachers should consider (3). Again, this view of evaluation is not so much wrong-headed as incomplete. How thoughtful can our evaluation be if we describe content as "vague," development as "general," organization as "illogical," and expression as "unclear"? How can our personal concern for our students as individual writers be communicated using generic responses? How can the subjective aspects of evaluation be made useful to students as guides to revision, rethinking, and rewriting?

READER-BASED RESPONSE: TEACHERS ARE PEOPLE, TOO.

When we read, we are first of all people, and we should take advantage of this institutional affiliation with the human race. As Elbow says in "Embracing Contraries," "even though we are not wholly peer with our students, we can still be peer in this

crucial sense of also being engaged in learning, seeking, and being incomplete" (336). We are entitled to our boredom as a starting point in our evaluations. The standard cannot be bored, just violated. Even when satisfied, the standard cannot smile, exalt, or roar with the pleasure of the new insight. It remains austere, unchanging, a stone-faced idol. If we are entitled to our boredom, it follows that we are entitled to a broad range of intellectual and emotional responses, almost as if our students are addressing us in the spirit of communication rather than placation. The aim of evaluation becomes transaction, not pronouncement.

Peter Elbow, in *Writing With Power*, a text used in second semester freshman composition courses at the University of Arizona, divides responses to writing into criterion-based and reader-based feedback (240-251). Elbow contends that "the crucial question about any piece of writing intended for an audience is not 'How does it measure up against certain criteria' such as good sentences, good logic, or good paragraphs, but '*How does it work on readers?*' " (242). If writing is to be "rhetorically based," then it *is* intended for an audience: We must always evaluate it as a member of that audience, a *reader*, as well as in our role as standard-bearer.

We do not intend to throw standards in the trash like last year's calendars. Standards still allow us to measure valuable skills. We do intend, however, to increase our options as evaluators, our flexibility in responding to student writing. The two continua below are meant to clarify the range of possibilities. They also further schematize Elbow's original distinction.

FIGURE 1

Continuum of Reader Roles

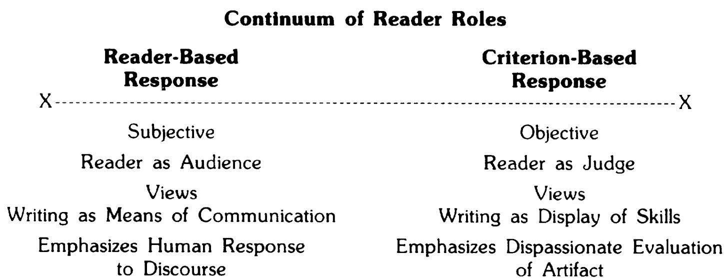

FIGURE 2

Continuum of Responses to Writing

Concrete, Personal Response	Abstract, Formal Response
X------------------------------------	------------------------------------X
(Interested, Emotional Audience)	(Disinterested, Critical Audience)
I don't like this.	This isn't correct.
I don't understand this	This isn't logical
I want to know more.	This isn't developed.
I'm excited by this.	This isn't conventional.
Boy, there are lots of ideas here.	This isn't unified.
I can't follow this.	This isn't coherent.
I get lost in this sentence.	This isn't grammatical.
I can't figure out this word.	This is misspelled.

We further contend that questions are more important to the proper evaluation of drafts than statements. Statements close off options; questions illuminate them. The following charts, like the continua, should clarify our options as evaluators. Figure 4 in particular illustrates questions on the plane of "rhetorical situation," which is different from the more usual plane of purely "compositional" elements. In the early stages of writing, we believe that questions of this kind are most helpful.

FIGURE 3

Reader-Based and Criterion-Based Questions for Elements of Composition

Elements of Composition	Reader-Based Questions	Criterion-Based Questions
Thesis	Do I really know exactly what this essay is supposed to be about?	Does the essay have a clearly stated thesis in its first paragraph?
Development: Quality of Thought	Do I feel that the writer is telling me what I need to know about this subject?	Is the thesis developed with concrete and vivid detail?
Development: Unity	Does the writer puzzle me by filling the essay with details that don't seem important?	Does the essay digress from its thesis by offering random unrelated details?
Organization Transitions	Am I ever confused by what the writer tells me at a certain point?	Is the essay ordered so that the connection between its parts are clear and logical?

Elements of Composition	Reader-Based Questions	Criterion-Based Questions
Expression: Sentence Structure	Do I have to read sentences more than once to get them to make sense?	Are the sentences varied and forceful?
Expression: Language	Do I feel the writer knows the meaning of all the words used in the essay?	Is the language used appropriate and consistent throughout the essay?

These are only possible questions. You may wish to rephrase and refocus them, or put more than one in a particular box. The nature of the assignment, the stage of the writing process the student has reached, and the skills you are stressing at the time will all help determine the effectiveness of the specific questions you ask.

FIGURE 4

Reader-Based and Criterion-Based Questions for Elements of Rhetorical Situation

Elements of Rhetorical Situation	Reader-Based Questions	Criterion-Based Questions
Purpose	What does this writer want me to do (think, feel, know)?	Is the writer's purpose made clear to the reader?
Persona	Is this person worth listening to?	Does the writer assume a tone appropriate to the essay?
Audience	What does this essay have to do with me?	Does the essay address a specific, well-defined audience?
Subject	Does this person know enough about this subject to really inform me?	Does the writer demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the subject?

As with most schemata, these oversimplify a complex, challenging task. In practice, we are rarely able to place ourselves at one end of the spectrum they define, although the thesis of this paper is that we err by building a throne near the criterion-based extreme. It is tempting to hide behind this throne; after all, we can say we are not responsible for the standards. We are also not involved in a transaction.

Ideally, we will find ways to dance gracefully along the continuum. Our students, in viewing our performance, will initially be confused. Since we have conditioned them to expect correctitude, they are bound to perceive our shifting evaluative role as just another English teacher's trick. When we insist to our students that writing is communication, and as such defines them as human

beings, they may tell us that we believe that only "because we're interested in English"! A redefinition of "English" may be the most valuable result of turning evaluation into a transaction.

FOCUSING THE TRANSACTION: THE DANGERS OF COGNITIVE OVERLOAD.

Earlier in this paper we noted that Linda Flower and John Hayes have outlined the difficulties facing novice writers attempting to define rhetorical problems. Even after successfully defining those problems, though, many novice writers freeze at the thought of developing solutions because they believe that they must attend to all parts of the problem (audience, purpose, content, persona, meaning, text) all at once. What results is cognitive overload, a short circuit in thinking. Writing, then, for these students becomes an unmanageable feat, and their initial panic may soon give way to despair.

To alleviate or eliminate cognitive overload in our novice students writers, we must help them focus separately on individual parts of rhetorical problems. They should understand that they do not need to generate and organize and develop and refine ideas while simultaneously editing for perfect spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. That is, they need to understand that there is a rational and humane reason for refraining from editing until there are enough well organized and well developed ideas to warrant editing. As we evaluate (not grade or correct) their writing—their thinking—we need to make the purpose of evaluation correspond rationally and humanely to time and season.

How can we guide our students through the process of writing with appropriate assessment of their writing at various stages as it progresses? At very early stages, as students begin to choose subjects for writing, we might help them with basics that any writer must consider. Whom is the student writing to? What effect does the student hope to have? As the student begins to write an early draft, we can measure how successfully he or she has taken these matters into account, and also begin to discuss what tone or "voice" might best work on the audience. A few concrete suggestions about specific language at this stage can help a student find just the right tone, and also pull together audience and purpose at the same time. Work on focusing purpose might be a good way to bridge the gap between first and second drafts; doing it earlier might make

a student "dry up," or run out of ideas through concentrating too intently on coherence. Comments on a second draft might suggest ways to organize the material better, while third draft comments might finally get around to matters of grammatical correctness.

The point here is that students need the right feedback at the right time. Showing their work to you while it is still in its embryonic stage is an act of incredible courage. How many other writers would do such a thing? If, say, Hemingway showed you the first draft of "Big Two-Hearted River," hot off the typewriter, would you criticize his grammar? Early stages need the most basic assessment: alignment or realignment of attitudes, selection of style, and so on. Final drafts are for "polishing"—grammatical refinements, tidying up of punctuation. Here's one rule of thumb: every time you comment on a piece of student writing, *viewing it always as part of a process*, try to give the student the *one* most basic piece of advice that will improve the piece of writing the *most*. Give the student a reasonable goal. When, a draft or two later, the student comes as close to achieving that goal as he or she is likely to, set another reasonable goal.

In teaching our own composition courses at the University of Arizona, we constantly coach students to break writing problems/tasks into constituents. To help solve the problem of coming to terms with a topic—one part of defining a rhetorical problem—we urge students to select/discover topics that have some familiarity and interest. In an attempt to follow this advice in one of our classes recently, one student selected a topic that he thought he knew and cared about.

He contrasted the *Star Wars* character Han Solo with the character Beowulf. As Duane Roen, his instructor, read a draft of the paper, however, he sensed that while the student seemed to know and care about Han Solo, he did not have the same intellectual or emotional investment in every English teacher's favorite Anglo-Saxon warrior. After reading the draft, Duane imagined himself to be Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*, saying to Phaedrus after the young Phaedrus had finished reciting Lysias' speech on love:

> . . .it seemed that the author was saying the same thing two or three times, as though he weren't capable of

saying a great deal on a single topic—or perhaps he wasn't especially interested in the matter. (13)

The marginal and end questions—not comments—that Duane wrote on that draft (in pencil since real people don't use red ink) all asked the student about his commitment to Beowulf. The written questions (evaluation) focused on the development of ideas. The questions attended to rhetorical rather than compositional concerns. They did not wander to editorial matters since the ideas did not yet merit/warrant editing. Duane did not follow the advice in *Measure for Measure* that, in addition to content, organization and diction and sentence structure and form receive attention (3). Despite their eventual importance, those other concerns had to wait in the wings.

In the subsequent conference between the student and Duane, the conversation focused on the desirability of contrasting Han Solo and Beowulf. After fifteen minutes of brainstorming, the student discovered that the two characters were *too* dissimilar to contrast and that he really didn't know the Anglo-Saxon character or story well enough. The student eventually discovered that a better choice than Beowulf was Fonzie, the character from the television program *Happy Days*.

The chat between this writer and this reader, a transaction, was an evaluation session. The two of them evaluated the quality of the topic the writer was attempting to grasp—the writing problem to be solved. Duane functioned as a reader who had questions about what the writer wanted to communicate to him.

Later, questions of standards were raised. The criteria of the *Student's Guide*, with which all University of Arizona freshman are familiar through class discussion, became relevant to the discussion only after the rhetorical soundness of the essay had been tested by Duane as a reader.

THE RHETORIC OF EVALUATION: HUMANIZING THE CODE.

Students should leave freshman composition with a working critical vocabulary based on a clear set of standards. That is one of the reasons the *Student's Guide* at the University of Arizona devotes three full pages to a discussion of grading standards. The bulk of this required text comprises sample graded essays, com-

plete with marginal and end comments which elucidate the essays' success or failure in relation to the standards. We hope that the acquisition of this critical vocabulary will allow our students to analyze not only their own writing, but the writing that surrounds them in their lives.

However, we cannot teach them this new language simply by speaking it. Many students never learn to speak Spanish through this method, mainly because only the teacher knows Spanish. Students know English, and they also know, by reading each other's frowns and raised eyebrows, that they continue to *think* in English, despite the teacher's strenuous commands that they think in Spanish. They could learn Spanish by living in Spain or Mexico, where their deficiency would be the exception rather than the rule.

In the composition classroom, we are the bilingual ones; we speak both English and a critical language foreign to our students. Our best chance to reach them is to speak to them in our common language, plain English, a language of thoughts and feelings, a language of human relations and reactions, rather than a language of fault-finding, full of critical and unforgiving words. If we demonstrate that we share their language, and that we *value* it, they are more likely to share and value our language by the end of the semester.

A critical vocabulary is a tool of the educated; our vocabulary allows us to speak to each other more easily. But we have been convinced that the critical conversation is worth having. Our students, however, have not been convinced.

We were not born English teachers, springing in full regalia (red pens, yellow pads, composition handbooks) from the skull of some celestial Director of Composition. Our love of the language and its possibilities led us to our vocation. Very few of us loved standards before we loved the way words made us feel. We must use these original emotions to mold a new ethos for ourselves in the composition classroom. If we wish our students to repeat our journey towards a love and respect for the power and efficacy of words, we must regress to a more innocent state. Only then can we hope to make them initiates, too. They cannot jump up to our level if we don't drop them a ladder; the ladder in this case is evaluation, which shouldn't begin by asking them to share all of our assumptions about good writing. We responded as readers

before we even dreamed of responding as critics. We owe our students, as well as ourselves, the chance to journey from immediate experience to critical enlightenment.

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NOTES

[1]See FLower and Hayes.
[2]See Diogenes, Roen, and Moneyhun. Figures 1, 2, and 3 appear here with permission of the editors of *The Writing Instructor*.

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