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RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING: TRANSPARENCY, MODELING, AND EMPATHY

As we cart home batches of essays midweek, mid-term, mid-month, mid-life, those of us who teach writing may wonder whether we are still impassioned by language and the love of learning, or have gradually morphed into something else. A colleague expressed her resentment toward the repetitive work of marking student essays: "The marking that I do in composition courses is not unique to me, nor is it dependent upon my teaching style or area of expertise. It could be done by anyone. It is time-consuming. It prohibits me from engaging in preparation time that could help me present more and better learning material for my students. It does help me understand individual student's specific difficulties but no more so than would recording a mark and then looking at the paper before returning it. In other words, I could be a better instructor if I had a marker to do some of this basic, tedious work."

The more I read of composition theory, and the more I reflect on marking, the more complexity I uncover. The question looms large: How do we balance our roles as encouraging coaches and critical judges? I offer some suggestions.

Unmasking Subjectivity

My experiences in marking sessions document that there is enormous variability in "standards," even among the most experienced composition instructors. For example, in a sample marking session, some instructors penalized students heavily for particular phrases such as "the author says," while other instructors did not. Some expected a "works cited" entry in an in-class summary, while others did not. Some docked heavily for quoted phrases in a summary, while others did not. And so the list went on. Even the same instructor would look for different things in different types of assignments.

The Complexity of the Response Situation

The response situation includes much more than the written comment. The most satisfying communication I have with my students is in my office, as I help them brainstorm about writing topics or consider ways to revise a draft. In a conference or classroom situation, I look at students' body language or into their eyes. I make choices about whether students need to be encouraged, questioned, prodded, challenged, or listened to in silence.

Sensitivity to Different Contexts of Value

Written responses occur within the context of several relationships—e.g., the relationship between student and instructor; between the student and her own writing; between the values of the student writer and the values of the academic classroom community, values that may or may not be aligned with the values of other parts of the institution. I find, for example, that some business majors resist my exhortations to provide multiple examples or in-depth information in their papers, for they may have internalized the PowerPoint model of communication that emphasizes brevity and bulleted points. Beginning writers often need help identifying and clarifying what matters in a piece of written work, and how they can make it matter to a reader.

Looking for Something to Like

As composition theorist Peter Elbow points out in his influential "Ranking, Evaluating, Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment," students write better if they learn to like at least parts of what they have written, and we can find things to like in student writing more easily if we actually like our students. As trained, discriminating readers, we can learn to find aspects of student writing that we can like and reinforce, rather than simply looking for things to criticize and then telling students to do something altogether different next time. That is, find something you like about a student's paper—sometimes an especially challenging task—and zero in on it. Encouraging students to do more of what

they have done in one place, however partially, is more effective than telling them to do something entirely new. For example, if we simply berate them to "organize," we may have the same effect as my husband's irritated shout for me to "relax" on a ski hill. Predictably, as my anxiety about falling becomes compounded by my anxiety about doing it wrong and looking bad, my muscles tighten even more.

Modeling Behaviors for Students

There must be congruence between how we communicate and what we ask students to do. We must model the kinds of respectful attention we want to see student writers give their readers. In our commentary, we can talk and write about our reading experience in a personal, almost collegial way, using the student's name, and writing in complete sentences: "I found myself really intrigued when you began writing about the potential problems with the system of discipline in the secondary school system." Or "I felt bogged down when you gave me so many details here that didn't seem relevant to your overall purpose." More helpful than praise or criticism is evidence that we have read carefully and respectfully. "I got confused when you contradicted your earlier claim that marijuana should be legalized." Ask questions to prompt thought: "Do you need to qualify your thesis early on, or put these caveats closer to the beginning of your paper?

Using Empathy in Your Response Style

We cannot know each student as well as we would like, but when they are in our offices, classrooms, or editing workshops, we can read their body language and facial expressions to get a better idea of how well they are grasping the information and/or process. If they are resistant or resentful, acknowledge their frustration, and then explain how and why you were confused. I often play a Socratic role: "Did you mean to say what it sounds like here? I wasn't sure whether you meant X or Y or something else entirely." After they explain, I express pleasure and relief. "I see. If only you had said that as clearly in your paper as you just did now, I would have understood much more easily." Teachers should practice deep listening.

Making the Best Use of Your Response Time

Customized feedback and authentic reciprocal responses are immensely time-consuming. How do we make the best use of our time?

• Provide more feedback at the early-draft stage. Sometimes students send me an emailed attachment of a draft; I highlight areas that need work, and they have to figure out what is wrong and how to improve it. I might make a few general comments, and typing these comments is faster than handwriting comments on their final draft.

• Ask students how much feedback they want. By asking students to think about their own learning processes and the feedback they find most helpful, the instructor provides opportunity for active student involvement. Students who invite detailed, directive commentary have more of a stake in following the suggestions they have requested.

• Give two deadlines for a final paper. The first, earlier deadline is for students who want extensive commentary. The second, more lenient deadline, is for students who want only a grade.

• Do not respond to or grade everything that a student writes. Ungraded pieces of writing provide opportunities for writing practice and help students uncover ideas. Free-writing helps students recognize and process their resistance to writing itself.

• Clarify assignments and criteria for assessment. Students have a right to know exactly what you are looking for, so give specific and realistic assignments—e.g., asking for too many sources in a research essay is an invitation to plagiarism. Asking for essays that blend the personal into more objective, informational academic discourse will make for more interesting reading.

The Zen of Marking

If we borrow the metaphor of "Zen mind, beginner's mind," we may see each student's foray into writing as a rhetorical, psychological, even spiritual challenge. What does this student need to know at this point in his development as a writer? Does she need some chastening of sophomore cockiness or encouragement or both? Does he need detailed commentary or just two or three clearly highlighted points? Will a letter grade of "D" provide a wake-up call, or does he or she need a chance to revise and one-on-one conference time?

In giving clear, honest, reader-centered feedback, we model what we want students to be doing in their own writing. We must be students again—studying our students, and deconstructing our notions of what we mean when we write, or speak, or respond to the writing of our students, one by one by one.

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