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No More “But What’s My Grade?”:  
The Writing Conference as Site of Collaborative Grading

Abstract

As a composition instructor at New Jersey City University, working primarily with developmental writers, I look for ways to engage my students in academic discourse, to find their voices and express their views as members of the university community. While students tend to focus on the objective goals and assessment measures provided by grades and exams, I want to place the emphasis on the process of writing itself. For writing is a social act, in which students must reflect internally upon the ideas presented in classroom discussions and enter the academic conversation. In an effort to demonstrate the centrality of conversation while providing feedback that displaces the perceived primacy of the grade, I have recently involved my students directly in my grading process – that is, they do the grading with me in one-on-one student conferences.

At several points during the semester, I meet with each of my students for a thirty-minute session, during which we sit together and read aloud his or her most recent ungraded essay. We then discuss the essay as writers before determining an appropriate grade. My developmental writing students enter these sessions with great trepidation but very quickly understand that I want their input on their writing, that I want to know them as writers, each with his or her own concerns. I want to hear them read aloud, stopping themselves and offering comments as they go, very much like I would do silently if I were grading alone. But involving students demystifies the grading process: students come to understand their papers’ strengths and weaknesses, are given a sense of which comments are most important, and are invited to respond to, even challenge, my comments. But the most beautiful thing about these sessions is that I do not need to convince the students of anything; when given the chance to examine their instructor, they view it through a self-reflective, critical lens. For more than anything, my struggling students welcome the opportunity to talk *as writers about their writing*, in a way that they had never been encouraged to before. And in the midst of all the talk, the grade, for once, becomes secondary.

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Imagine a student. Any student, in any class, at any college. What is the first thing that he or she does when the professor hands back a paper in class? Yes, you can see it. The student immediately flips to the last page to see the grade.

Now imagine the professor, it could be any professor, but let’s make it a writing professor. She spent 15, maybe 20 minutes, quite possibly longer – especially if it is a writing professor! – reading the essay, making thoughtful marginal comments, possibly filling out a grading rubric (that she probably spent an hour creating), then composing a note at the end that provides a careful balance of praise and criticism before putting that grade at the end of the paper. Yet the student’s first instinct is not to read the copious comments but to check the grade.

The student’s instinct is understandable, for grades count. Comments, no matter how thoughtful, are not what get calculated into the final course grade. They do not show up in GPAs or on transcripts. Yet, comments do matter. We all know they do – that’s why we write them. They provide feedback, both positive and negative, and offer direction for the student’s continued development as a writer. More than that, writing copious comments is our attempt to *talk* to the writer, not just about correctness but about his or her *ideas*. But what use are those comments if they are not read?

My challenge, as a composition instructor at New Jersey City University, an urban public institution in Jersey City, has been how to take the focus off of the grade and place it onto the student *as a writer*, onto the process of writing, onto the idea of each paper as an opportunity for a student to hone his or her skills. For I do not assign an essay as an end unto itself, with the ideal that it should be a perfect product, a culmination of all the student is and knows, but rather as a

step in the long process of developing critical thinking and communication proficiency, as well as confidence.

In order to convincingly convey this focus to my students, over the past few years I have increasingly jettisoned the process of handing back papers in class and have moved toward involving students in my grading process. For most of their formal essays, my composition students now do the grading with me in one-on-one conferences. Their focus has shifted from checking the grade to entering into a meaningful conversation about writing. But the benefits have not been on the students' end alone; my understanding of how my students compose, even how they learn, has deepened dramatically. And they see that I am just as interested in what is not on the page – the argument they think is irrelevant, the point left unsaid because they have run out of steam or just forgot, or the idea they cannot quite articulate yet is the unstated heart of their argument – as what is there. As we talk about the paper before us, we offer up anecdotes, ideas, anxieties, some profound, some mundane, but all equally important in establishing that writing is a social interaction that involves entering into a conversation and engaging with a community of readers and writers.

Each summer I speak at NJCU's Student Orientation about what writing looks and feels like in college. Rather than running through the list of requirements, placement tests, and assessments students will encounter – which would serve only to terrify the already anxious eighteen year olds – I speak about college as a space of probing, inquiry-based conversation, a place where learning happens and knowledge is created collaboratively, in discussion. The written word is an important vehicle for entering into that conversation. As professors, we want our students to engage in discussion of the ideas that matter to us. Most of us agree that we want lively classrooms, but sometimes we forget that we want lively papers too. And if it is easy for

the instructors to forget that, then surely our students have trouble imagining their essays as opportunities to catch our attention and speak up.

Writing is a social interaction from start to finish (albeit with extended spells of quiet writing time). We do not write in a void; we write for an audience, within the context of a larger discourse, and the most proficient writers seek input as they are writing from others about the words they are putting on the page. However, it is arguably even more important for less adept writers to engage directly in talk about their writing as they come to understand how closely yoked thinking and talking are, as internal and external versions of the same conversation. Collaborative writing specialist Kenneth Bruffee explains that “Reflective thinking is something we learn to do, and we learn to do it from and with other people. We learn to think reflectively as a result of learning to talk, and the ways we can think reflectively as adults depend on learning to talk as we grow up” (90). When we enter into advanced fields of inquiry, such as in college, we rely upon conversation with peers or mentors as a means to develop and make sense of our burgeoning new patterns of thought.

Writing center theorists have understood this conversational phenomenon since the 1980s, when in his confrontational groundbreaking essay, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” Stephen North explained how learning happens in connection with conversation:

The essence of the writing center method, then, is this talking. If we conceive of writing as a relatively rhythmic and repeatable kind of behavior, then for a writer to improve that behavior, the rhythm has to change – preferably, though not necessarily, under the writer’s control...By and large...we find that the best breaker of old rhythms, the best creator of new ones, is our style of live intervention, our talk in all its forms. (82)

In claiming that it is conversation that enables learning and thus writing, North took a stance that directly contradicts western society's prized notion of the reclusive writer. Indeed, as Lisa Ede explains, collaborative learning has been looked down upon for decades because it runs counter to our assumption "that writing and thinking are inherently individual, solitary activities" (104). Many professors, even composition instructors, support this assumption, expecting that while students may need help mastering the specific rules of grammar and usage, the ideas of a paper should come from within.

And yet, learning is not a solitary activity. Neither is writing. Both involve a constant social negotiation, requiring that a student express his ideas to his community using the written and spoken tools appropriate for that field. Thus, professors have much to learn from some of the collaborative techniques developed and honed within writing centers over the past few decades. Jeffrey Brooks describes his method of minimalist tutoring, which offers two critical benefits that arguably are also achievable by faculty through collaborative student conferencing:

In the writing center we have the luxury of time that the classroom teacher does not have. We can spend that time talking and listening, always focusing on the paper at hand. The primary value of the writing center tutor to the student is as a living human body who is willing to sit patiently and help the student spend time with her paper...Second, we can talk to the student as an individual about the one paper before us. We can discuss strategies for effective writing and principles of structure, we can draw students' attention to features in their writing, and we can give them support and encouragement. (220)

Even as writing center proponents like Brooks proclaim the luxuries of time and individualized attention that tutors, as opposed to professors, can devote to students, why should faculty not strive to provide their students similar opportunities for conversation about writing? Indeed, I

believe that we are uniquely positioned to do so – and that the benefits are even farther reaching than those of tutoring sessions.

Let me give one example. At three or four points during the semester, I meet with each of my writing students for a thirty to forty minute session. I schedule these around paper due dates, often asking the student to come prepared to hand in the paper at the start of the conference, so that we might read and discuss it together. We sit at my desk, talking briefly about the student's experience writing the paper (What came easily? What didn't? What was the process of writing like?), and then I ask the student to read her paper aloud. As the student reads, we both listen. We might stop and comment, or the writer might read through to the end without commentary. But whenever the student does stop reading, we talk. We talk about the ideas on the page, about the ideas that informed the student's thinking, about the new ideas that come to either of us in the course of the reading and talking. We review what is in the essay, what might be best taken out or recast, what might be added and where. Simply put, we talk as writers, about writing.

It sounds simple, but this can be a nerve-wracking experience for students, especially for first-year students learning to navigate the strange new world of college. I recall Priscilla from my developmental writing class last fall. She had taken the first appointment on the first day of conferences. When I got to my office, running a few minutes late and harried from the morning routine of getting my young children to school, she was sitting in the department waiting room, visibly nervous. I invited her into my office, and as she sat down, she confided, "I feel like I'm about to be interviewed." It was then that I noticed with surprise that she was dressed as if for an interview, wearing her most business-like black jacket. Until that moment, I had not truly considered how frightening the idea of these conferences might be for my students. Although the model of conferencing casts us as though we are peers, of course I am not their peer; I am the

professor. While I may see my role as that of teacher, as an ally and advocate who wants to help my students develop the skills to succeed, they never forget that I am also their evaluator, that I hand out the grades and dole out criticism. Priscilla was one of the hardest working, attentive students from her class, so it was particularly unsettling to see her so filled with trepidation about meeting in my office, apparently expecting to have her paper dissected before her very eyes. But why would she expect differently? Would she have ever had a teacher ask her to read her paper aloud before? And, if so, what would that teacher's intentions have been?

My first priority was to put Priscilla at ease. I guessed that she would have had great difficulty reading her paper aloud to me that morning, so I decided to read it to her. I wanted her to listen to her words, not to be tripping over them as she nervously made her way through to the end. I thought that most likely she would be ready to read later in the semester when the conferencing process had been demystified a bit. But she was not ready to do it on that day. So I explained that I wanted her to listen as I read her paper aloud, that I would ask questions and comment on things I noted, but that I also wanted her to ask me questions and explain what she was trying to say. That made sense to her and she calmed down, little by little, throughout the session as we focused, with care and thoughtfulness, on her writing and her ideas.

I spend a good deal of time in each conference, as with Priscilla's, settling my students' nerves before getting started and then explaining the process at various points along the way. I want to know my students as writers, each with his or her own concerns and ideas. I want to hear them reading aloud, stopping themselves and offering comments as they go, very much like I would do silently if I were grading alone. The critical difference though is that I am not alone; I am with the writer, and *together* we are evaluating the essay. As a professor, I gain a new perspective on the essay when the writer is sitting with me. A student might stop herself at an

argument that seems out of place and express frustration that she put it there. Or he might look embarrassed by an undeveloped paragraph, confessing that he was tired and hungry when he was writing that part. Rather than being upset with my students over moments like this (I can easily imagine they expect I will chastise them: *How could you let your hunger have that effect? Why didn't you leave time to go back and rewrite that section?*), I relish them because as writers my students are learning to view their work through a self-reflective and honest critical lens. These are the moments when my students are getting at the heart of writing, in which they recognize, if not during the drafting process itself then after, the work they need to do as writers. And I do not have to say a word!

The students of course are not so skilled (yet!) as to identify every inconsistency, weakness, or omission in their writing, so most often I raise the questions that cause them to reexamine their work. Even so, by performing the work of evaluating and commenting out loud and in front of the writer, I have de-mystified the grading process. On a traditional graded paper, all comments look to be of equal significance to the writer. Or perhaps the longer remarks look more important merely because they are longer. Students have little training in how to read professor's comments, in how to discern which ones matter most. Sometimes students literally do not even understand the grader's annotations or abbreviations, or cannot decipher the handwriting. However, when I talk through my response to a paper with a student, she knows immediately that I circled a misspelled word merely to point it out, with the gentle reminder to be more careful typing or to use a dictionary in the future, and that the comment "great insight here" in the margins, though short, is hugely significant to me, while the series of questions I scrawled at the bottom of the page are meant as food for thought, not necessarily to be answered one by one in a revision. She knows this because I have told her, and I can see whether she is

processing what I am saying because she is sitting next to me. But when I hand that same paper back to a student in class without that conversation, I cannot predict which markings will resonate as most important with the writer or whether my comments are even comprehensible in the first place.

To be sure, this method of conferencing, performed several times during the semester, is time consuming. I began experimenting with grading during student conferences a few years ago, out of desperation that the folder of papers in my bag was becoming unwieldy. So I multitasked, and pulled out the unmarked papers during my student meetings. As I whittled away at my stack, handing papers back one by one, I was amazed by the response I was getting from students. They were engaged in their writing, offering their own critiques and suggestions for revision, in a way I had never experienced in past conferences in which I handed back and talked through papers I had graded beforehand. Those past sessions were lifeless; as much as I tried to generate conversation, I was always doing all the talking. But with their unmarked papers in their hands, my students opened up because they knew I was listening and had not already made my mind up about their work, and in turn listened closely to my response. As Jeffrey Brooks clearly states, “Our message to students should be: ‘Your paper has value as a piece of writing. It is worth reading and thinking about like any piece of writing’” (221). When we read the paper with the same level of attention that we would devote to an assigned classroom reading, the student understands the respect I have for his work, and in turn begins to respect his own work more deeply.

Being able to convey the value of a composition by a developmental writer to that writer is immensely important. It assures the student that he deserves a place at the academic table, that he too has been invited to participate in the conversation. To illustrate the deep insecurity many

students feel about their own legitimacy in academia, I offer an example from last semester. In my fourth and final round of conferences, Natasha came to see me at her scheduled time, asking if she could meet with me the following day instead, giving one of those generic student explanations about having an emergency. It was the point late in the semester when everyone has an emergency of some sort, so I agreed without giving it another thought. The next day Natasha showed up at my office looking sheepish, explaining that she needed to cancel this second appointment because she had not yet written her paper. I immediately offered her a seat and asked her to tell me about her paper, the one she was struggling to put on the page.

Once again, as with Priscilla, I was disarmed by the lack of authority and entitlement that a developmental first year student like Natasha would feel. Even after a semester of meeting for six hours a week in class and three 30-minute conferences, she literally did not think she deserved to sit down for our scheduled appointment because she had come empty handed. To be sure, I need to see my students' writing in order to help them to become skilled writers, but it is even more important to me that they become adept critical thinkers. Although Natasha had not committed her ideas to the page yet, I certainly knew she had them within her. So she sat, and we talked. We talked about the assignment, about her ideas about the topic, about why she had dismissed her ideas as irrelevant or inappropriate, about how she might find connections between the reading and the examples that had come to her. We did not need a paper in front of us in order to have a meaningful conversation about Natasha's emerging paper.

Natasha was put at ease and she left thirty or forty minutes later with several ideas for her essay. She wrote the paper and handed it in the next morning, our last day of class. While it was not her strongest piece of writing of the semester, that does not matter to me. What matters is that she came to me, we talked through her hesitation and her confusion, and I was able to affirm that

her views, which ran counter to those put forth in the assigned reading, were indeed legitimate. And less than twenty-four hours later she had produced a paper that I have no doubt she otherwise would not have been able to write. Had I not set up these conferences, I would never have known why Natasha had not turned in her paper. She would have made up an excuse, saying she had not time to get to the essay, and I would have assumed she had simply dropped the ball. But that was not the reality at all. She had genuinely been at a loss as to how to respond to the assignment, thinking her thoughts had no bearing because they were different than everyone else's. What I hope Natasha took from our meeting is multi-pronged: that she *always* deserves to enter into the conversation; that I want to hear her viewpoint even if, especially if, it is different than most others'; and that when she is at a loss, the best way to find a way is by talking. One way or another, whether in writing or through speaking, I want her to find her voice and chime in.

Ultimately, conferencing about student writing completes the recursive conversational loop that begins in the classroom; becomes internalized through the student's reflective thought; articulated for an audience through the written assignment; then read aloud, revisited and pushed further in discussion with the professor; and finally re-presented through essay revision, classroom discussion, or both. Kenneth Bruffee observes that "Writing is at once two steps away from conversation and a return to conversation. By writing, we re-immense conversation in its social medium" (91). He is correct. The essay is neither the starting point, nor the ending point – it is just one utterance, issued at one discrete moment, within the complex discourse of a semester-long class. I know that my students will not always have a professor by their sides as they read through their writing, so the conversation will not usually quite as extensive for them as it has been in my classes. However, I trust that, as we engage in lengthy discussions about

their writing again and again throughout the semester, my students will come to understand how their words matter even when they are writing for an audience they cannot see and that does not talk back to them.

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