12 Seeing How Good *We* Can Get It

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For the past two years, I have taught English at Noble High School in Berwick, Maine. Amy Muentener was my student in English 10, a heterogeneously grouped class required for all sophomores, and "Literature Seminar," an upperclass elective. She was also a two-year member of my summer book club for students. With my recommendation, Amy decided to enroll in the senior advanced placement English course for the 1995–96 school year. That July she was writing one of her A.P. summer assignments when I gave her a call about the book club:

> "Hi, Amy, this is Ms. Chandler. I'm calling to get a head count for the book club meeting. Did you read the book?"
>
> "I'm not quite done, but I've been busy writing my *Catch-22* paper for A.P."
>
> "How's it going?"
>
> "I know it's going to be good."
>
> "How do you know?"
>
> "The ideas are there. I still need to ask myself some questions, though. Am I backing things up with text? Is it staying with the question? It's almost like you're here standing over my shoulder, saying 'Why? Explain.'"

When I hung up, the details of this five-minute telephone conversation seemed minor to me. I realized after some reflection, however, that it revealed a great deal about Amy's development as a writer. Without teacher assistance, she could identify the strengths and

weaknesses of a piece in progress and devise strategies to address the flaws. Having internalized the process for herself, she no longer needed a conference with me to move from a first to a second draft. Although she told me that she could hear my voice in her head, what she really heard was her own writer's voice. She had achieved Arthur Costa's "ultimate purpose of evaluation" by teachers: the student's ability to evaluate herself (Rief 45).

As I pondered Amy's progress, I wondered how she had gained this independence. What steps had she taken? What support had I given? I couldn't answer those questions alone. Further, as I considered the professional literature I'd read and the conversations I'd had about the assessment and evaluation of student writing, I realized that the piece missing from many of those discussions was the student's perspective. For this reason, I invited Amy to be my co-author for this piece, to share both her own story as a writer and her insights on assessment and evaluation.[1] As we considered these issues while writing this essay, we agreed that one-on-one conferences were the most powerful teaching and assessment method for Amy. The following pages explore the kinds of conferences that we had and the effect that they had on Amy's development as a writer.

"Big Picture" Conferences

When Amy walked into my classroom two years ago, I never would have predicted that she and I would become partners in a writing project. As she remembers, she "didn't like to write. I hated English. I dreaded going to that class more than any other." Poor grades and red pen bleeding all over her papers had convinced Amy that she was a poor writer. And, indeed, her technical skills were weak—her punctuation haphazard, her usage erratic, her spelling more creative than correct. Much of her previous writing had been graded harshly because of these errors in mechanics. No one had made it clear that her lack of control over surface features didn't make a text meaningless. I could tell from one of her early papers, a richly detailed descriptive piece about a barn, that she had something wonderful to say. Nonetheless, she was shy about saying it: reluctant to share her work, insecure about its worth, and convinced that she was a far better reader than she was a writer:

> I have always been a reader. I remember when my family would go on trips and I would pack bags of books, instead of clothes....My mother is the one person who really influenced

> my reading habit. She's also addicted to reading. Although I read a lot, writing was never one of my strongest abilities. It's something I need to constantly work on. I was never encouraged to try harder at writing until my sophomore year in high school.

Encouraging Amy was what those first conferences were all about. Because of her previous negative experiences, I needed to "deprogram" her, to use Zemelman and Daniels's phrase, from her expectation that her work would be evaluated for its correctness, not its content (227). I needed to provide her with an interested, supportive audience, to convince her to keep going when she was inclined to give up on a piece. According to Amy, "students want their teachers to listen to and care about their writing. I find that it means a lot more when the teacher wants the paper to be good, not just done." I had to convince Amy that I was one of those teachers. Consequently, I did not pick apart her early pieces of writing. Instead, as Amy recalls, those early conferences were focused on the "big picture" of the piece, "looking at the whole paragraph to see if it said what I wanted it to say, making sure I had all the elements of the paragraphs and of the whole paper—introduction, conclusion, thesis." I asked questions during those conferences, rather than giving instructions.

At the end of the first quarter in English 10, Amy's class had a portfolio share day. Students had selected three pieces from the term's worth of writing to revise and polish. Their portfolios, with accompanying letters of self-evaluation, were graded on their overall quality and on their improvement from first drafts to final drafts. Each student read his or her best piece aloud on the share day. Even though her piece about the barn had vastly improved from its first draft, Amy was still reticent about reading it in front of her peers. In fact, she refused to share it unless I read it. When I did, her classmates were unanimous in their praise—which Amy did not expect. "I was surprised that they liked it and that they thought it was good," she said. "I had never really shared a piece of writing before. It was neat that others also enjoyed something I liked."

Editing Conferences

About midway through that year, Mrs. Muentener called me to ask if I would give Amy some extra help with grammar and mechanics. Although she was pleased about her daughter's new confidence in herself as a writer and impressed by some of the pieces Amy had pro-

duced, she was still worried about how Amy would perform on upcoming standardized tests. I agreed to spend some extra time with Amy once a week on Thursdays. Instead of completing grammar exercises from the textbook (at which Amy was already quite good), we decided to work on her position paper, which argued that women should to be admitted to the Catholic priesthood. Although engaging and passionately argued, the piece was weakly organized and littered with errors. It had received a B- in English 10, but Amy knew she could produce a much better final draft.

At first, Amy remembers, she was motivated to work on the position paper merely because she "wanted to see how good we could get it, how many problems I could work through, how clean it could be." Her desire to fine-tune the piece is evident here, as is her expectation that "we" would do it together. By this time, she saw us as equal partners; I was no longer the authority and she the recipient of my knowledge. Amy says that "during that time we worked *together*, sharing ideas about how to make my writing better and ways for students and teachers to collaborate better."

After two weeks of tightening and clarifying the paper, Amy decided to apply to SEARCH, a discussion program for high school students sponsored by the University of New Hampshire. The SEARCH application required a writing sample that explored a controversial issue and took a stand. Once Amy decided to submit her position paper, she worked even harder in our conferences. "It was not going to be graded," she remembers, "but it *was* going to be judged, and that made me want to make it clear and finished." Because she had a real-world goal, she was able to sustain her initial desire to improve the piece for its own sake. She had also overcome her fear of allowing other people to read her writing.

From these conferences, I learned a great deal about teaching and evaluating skills within the context of a student's piece—something I'd previously preached but not really practiced. Paragraph by paragraph, we edited Amy's position paper, eliminating surface errors. Trying not to overwhelm Amy by pointing out all the errors she had made, I learned to focus on one skill at a time until it was mastered. For example, I sometimes selected a paragraph and told Amy that there were three comma errors in it but not what or where they were. She worked until she fixed them, reviewing rules concerning commas and ignoring any other errors she encountered. Another weakness we addressed was spelling. Amy's misspellings were often so bizarre that

the spell checker could not provide her with the correct choice. To remedy this, I showed her how to pay closer attention to initial sounds and to count syllables in order to better approximate the word. Her proofreading improved dramatically.

From these Thursday conferences, Amy mastered some specific strategies for improving the technical quality of her work. Because I modeled working on one kind of error at a time in our conferences, she began to focus her independent editing as well. She learned how to identify her own particular demons—inconsistencies in verb tense or omitted words—and how to isolate those mistakes when reading a draft. In time, she was able to self-correct a much larger proportion of her technical errors. She also learned the power of precision and accuracy in her writing when she was accepted to SEARCH and the adviser told me that Amy's essay was among the most impressive of the applications.

No Conferences

Amy and I continued this kind of intensive coaching the following spring when she took my course entitled "Literature Seminar." In the fall of her junior year, however, she was not my student. Instead, she was enrolled in English 11, a yearlong heterogeneously grouped course taught by another teacher. Amy did not flourish in this class; she earned an 82—the numerical equivalent of a C—for the third quarter, and once she even received a midterm failure warning. Amy's most significant criticisms of English 11 concerned assessment and evaluation. She particularly resented the teacher's practice of grading final drafts without having seen the previous stages. According to her, when he gave an assignment, "He didn't talk about it at all. There were no conferences about the paper. It was just due. A week later it came back with a grade on it."

Interestingly enough, Amy did not seem to question the teacher's basic fairness or his knowledge of writing. She was more angry about his lack of knowledge about *her*. She complained that "all he saw was the finished product, not what I did to get there. Probably if he'd seen what I started with and where I ended up I would have gotten a better grade." She believed that effort and improvement should be factored in with the quality of the product. She also wanted her teacher to be actively involved with her work in progress. As she

put it, "in order to really grade students' writing, the teacher needs to talk with the students and follow them through their writing process."

Although Amy views the lack of conferences in English 11 as a negative experience, I see a positive result. I believe that part of her ability to articulate the conditions she needs to grow as a writer came from their absence in English 11. Amy missed daily support as a writer so much that she pursued outside resources. "I found myself wanting and needing one-on-one conferences and seeking out Ms. Chandler just to talk about a paper or idea for my other teacher," she says. Amy came to appreciate—even demand—a process-oriented approach that included conferences only when she was denied it. She also learned how to get the help she needed even when it wasn't readily available.

I cannot condemn Amy's English 11 teacher, however, for his practices. I, too, struggled in English 10 to balance whole-class instruction with individual instruction, reading with writing, content with skills. In my writing program, I sometimes spent more time on brainstorming exercises and revision activities than I did on coaching students through a piece of writing. Although I never graded first drafts and structured conference time into my lesson plans, those conferences were neither frequent nor sustained enough. Most students in my English 10 classes were not getting the personalized attention that Amy had in our Thursday sessions.

In addition, my grading practices were inconsistent in English 10. I tried new techniques frequently but could not find anything with which I was completely comfortable. Sometimes I asked students to participate in the evaluation process; sometimes I graded their papers without their input. During some marking terms, I required students to keep portfolios; sometimes I graded individual pieces after they had been through a couple of drafts. On occasion, the students and I developed a rubric together to score an assignment; more often, I articulated the criteria for quality only to myself. Not surprisingly, my students weren't developing as writers as successfully as I wanted them to do.

When I saw how much progress Amy could make with regular coaching, I realized that I needed to spend less time on my couch with my comment pen and the student's paper and more time in my classroom with the student and the paper. The following year I began to explore a format for my upperclass elective, entitled "Literature Seminar," where I could replicate our tutoring time as closely as possible. Amy signed up for that course, and our partnership continued.

Analytic Conferences

The basic requirements of the literature seminar were simple, designed to provide maximum choice and individualization for students: each quarter, students read a minimum of four books of their choice, completed at least two polished papers or projects related to their reading, participated in conferences and discussions, and wrote weekly letters to me about their progress. At least half of each eighty-minute block was reserved as workshop time for the students and me to read, write, and—most important—conference. For the first time in my teaching career, I was able to give *all* of my students the kind of focused, personalized instruction I had given Amy on Thursdays.

In the course, Amy read novels such as *Sula, Cold Sassy Tree,* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* and then wrote several papers in response to her reading. Having established a relationship of trust with Amy, I was able to address more sophisticated issues in her work during that second year. Although she met with me at various stages of her writing process, depending on her needs, we usually sat down for a full-fledged conference only after she had completed a first draft. Then we critiqued her writing together in almost the same fashion that one would close-read a literary text. I call this kind of student-teacher interaction an "analytic conference," where the purpose is to analyze the piece for meaning on both the sentence level and paragraph level while making sure that the entire piece hangs together. Amy made big strides using this approach. As she explains:

> The course that helped me the most in writing was the Literature Seminar. The method that benefited me most was sitting down with the teacher and picking the piece of writing apart, not only looking for grammar errors but also questioning thoughts and ideas. This time was spent reading each line and asking, why was that put in? What is its importance? Does it make sense with the rest of the paper? I found that it helps when someone questions my ideas because that makes me think of a better way to justify myself.

By this time, Amy had learned to accept criticism constructively. She needed fewer "big picture" conferences for validation and more analytic ones for sharpening and polishing her pieces. She had moved far enough from her previous negative feelings about writing that she no longer took feedback personally. At this stage, Amy became more independent because she "could do the first draft on my own. I didn't need to talk to you all the time. From having had similar conferences

before, about the same kind of weaknesses, I knew what to do and how to change them."

Self-Evaluation Conferences

In "Literature Seminar," unlike English 10, I did not grade individual pieces of writing. In fact, I didn't grade anything at all, at least not on my own. Twice per quarter, students and I conferenced about their progress to that point and negotiated a grade for their midterm progress and quarter reports. Before they came to meet with me, students letter-graded themselves in four categories—reading, writing, use of time, and participation—that we had discussed as a class on numerous occasions. Then they wrote explanations for the grades they felt they had earned. In the writing category, students needed to address both process and product in evaluating themselves.

I completed the same procedure for each student. In the evaluation conference, we shared our sheets and converted our letter grades to numbers.[2] If there was a discrepancy, we negotiated it. This happened very infrequently; during the four sets of self-evaluation conferences I had with the twenty-four students in the course, I disagreed significantly with students on only three occasions.

When Amy and I met for a self-evaluation conference during the first quarter, our numbers differed by only one point. As she described it, "We didn't really negotiate. Our ideas were just about the same. You knew me, knew how I write, what I went through to get what I handed in." Because we had conferenced so frequently, I did know her and her work. I had been assessing her progress continuously throughout the quarter and giving her feedback. Final evaluation was not an abrupt stop in our continuum of teaching and learning; it was just another step.

These conferences allowed me to have a less adversarial relationship with my students. Grading was no longer something I did to them; it was something we did together. Instead of quibbling with me about how much a given assignment was worth or whether they could pass in long-expired homework, they were discussing themselves as readers and writers. When the grading process was demystified and they were consistently included in it, students could focus on their learning, not on "beating the system." With decreased anxiety also came increased insight about themselves as individuals. Like Linda Rief, I discovered from self-evaluation conferences that students

> know themselves as learners better than anyone else. They set goals for themselves and judge how well they reach those goals. They thoughtfully and honestly evaluate their own learning with far more detail and introspection than I thought possible. (47)

This was certainly true of Amy. In preparation for our first grading conference, she wrote a self-evaluation that was honest, fair, and critical in the best sense of the word. Giving herself an A for the quarter in writing, she described her improvement: "I have become more independent with my writing, knowing what you want and doing it, not just waiting until you tell me what the next step is." Other strengths she listed were backing up her points with specific text from the book and adding detail in subsequent drafts. She wanted to work on her weakness of "leaving my ideas too open-ended. I want to refine my thinking skills and complete my ideas." I couldn't have said it better myself.

Preparing for self-evaluation conferences forced Amy to articulate her strengths and weaknesses, her accomplishments and goals. She couldn't rely on me to tell her how she had performed during the quarter. She had to think for herself. I believe that this process was instrumental in moving her toward the self-reliant writer who talked to me on the telephone.

Conferences with Herself

Amy has demonstrated remarkable progress as a writer in the two years I've known her. Her first drafts are clearer and cleaner than they used to be, and she needs far less help to improve them. She says that she "now enjoy[s] writing about books and expressing my own thoughts and feelings for other people to read" and attributes that transformation to being questioned about what she put down on paper. Her eagerness to collaborate on this piece shows me how confident she has become about the worth of her ideas and her own ability to communicate them. Accepting the challenge of an A.P. English course is another indicator of her growth. I believe that Amy's story shows the worth of Susan Sowers's advice to teachers: "Ask questions you want students to ask themselves, so that they may have...individual conferences with themselves. What they can do with you today they will do on their own later" (140–41).

In the real world, writing doesn't receive A's and B's. When Amy leaves school, her work, like her SEARCH essay, will be judged,

not graded. She will no longer have a teacher with whom to conference, although I'm sure she will always seek people from whom to get feedback. She will need to be able to evaluate the quality of her work for herself, to decide if a piece is clear enough and clean enough for its purpose. I believe that one-on-one conferences are both the best way I taught her to make those decisions and the best assessment tool I had for determining if she had learned those lessons.

Notes

1. For the sake of clarity, I use the first person in this essay and quote Amy. Nonetheless, we collaborated on every aspect of the writing of this piece. According to Amy, "After Ms. Chandler suggested working together, I had the feeling that she would just be using some quotes from me to back up her thoughts and ideas. After we met to discuss the project, I saw that she was making me an author, too." Both of us wrote separately about a series of broad questions concerning writing, assessment, and evaluation. These musings became our raw material. Meeting twice before we could narrow down a thesis, we roughed out the general outline of this piece while riding a bus to a Shakespeare play. On my own, I wrote a skeleton of that draft, which we developed more fully in a marathon conference that incorporated elements of our "big picture" and analytical conferences. Several editing conferences later, we were finished. As Amy puts it, "This paper is the result of two people working in a partnership to produce a piece of writing that might help others who are distressed about their writing or teaching."

2. At that time, Noble High School reported numerical grades to parents each quarter. Because I was more comfortable with letter grades, which I considered broader and more holistic, I assigned arbitrary numbers to the letters at the end of the term. Since the range for a C was 78–84, a student who earned a solid C for the quarter would receive an 81 on her report card. A B was an 89, and an A was a 97. All my students knew how to do the conversions, and no parent or administrator ever commented on how strange it was that my grades were almost always odd numbers.

Works Cited

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Interlude

My seniors want grades...but they have been "side-tracked" to earn the rank of "Completion Attained." They were getting confused on what assignments they'd done, and what was left to do, so I got an elementary school sticker chart. They love it! I use (I can't believe I do it, but I do it) smiley-face stickers, a different color for each completed assignment. They read that *#$!$%& chart every day to see if they've got 'em all in, or who's done more. This took so much heat off grades! The goal is to turn in ten quality pieces of writing in one semester—I require certain types, and some are free choice—but completion = passing. They really work!

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