3 Writing Students Need Coaches, Not Judges

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I teach a beginning-level writing course in college. My students range from the reasonably competent to the hopelessly inept, but almost all of them hate and fear writing, a phenomenon that has been duly noted by many writing teachers. Shaughnessy, for example, points to their "confusion and lack of confidence" (10) and their "attitude of mistrust and pessimism" (Tate 180). My students, like hers, are generally negative about their abilities, fearful of exposing their clumsiness, and often emotionally distraught about having to perform. If these attitudes showed themselves in other settings (social life, family life), they would be regarded as evidence of major neuroses; and that, in fact, is what they are—neuroses born of traumatic experience. Every time these students sit down to write, their past miseries resurface as avoidance, depression, anger, rebelliousness, or grief. I don't regard myself as a psychologist and have no desire to act like one; like Macrorie, I say at the beginning of the term, "No psychiatrist works in this room" (272). However, I cannot ignore the very real impediment to writing that these strongly held negative attitudes pose. In fact, I see changing them as the only really effective means of improving my students' writing, and I see my most effective tool as minimizing judgment, otherwise known as grading.

Most teachers of writing would agree, I think, that the way to become a better writer is to write (Britton et al. 3). One can talk forever about style and word choice and syntax and flow, but improvement does not come until a student actually works with these abstractions in a paper he or she has constructed. Musicians do not talk about

phrasing, rhythm, and dynamics; they practice using them until they are an effective part of their playing. Improvement comes through application of the mind and the body to the instrument. The same is true of writing.

But students who feel incompetent at writing avoid writing. They do not practice. They do not get better. The truly traumatized, and I estimate that about 20 percent of my classes are in this category, will do anything to avoid the torture they experience when they are required to put pen to paper or finger to key. They may struggle through a writing course, put out a few scraps they are not happy with, make the changes the teacher demands, accept a C or a D or whatever is enough to get them past the requirements, and then rush out at the end of a semester, breathe a huge sigh of relief that that is over, and vow never to write again. Their experiences in a writing class and the C or D they receive for their efforts reinforce their belief that they cannot write and increase their determination to find future courses, and later, a career, in which they will not have to write. And when they find that they do have to write again, because physicists and psychotherapists and business people and even leaders of wilderness outings all have to write, they repeat the ghastly process over and over.

It is well established that positive reinforcement brings about greater change than negative reinforcement. If every time a child set out to speak he or she were graded and criticized about the effort, most children would have a much harder time learning to express themselves. Fortunately, learning to speak is accomplished during the early years under the guidance (in most cases) of loving teachers who smile at errors, expect success, and vigorously reward even the most lame attempts at communication: "Da? Da? He said Da! He must mean 'Daddy.' That's right! Da. Yes! Yes! Look, John, he said it again!"

Learning to write, however, coincides with a child's entrance into school, a place where humor is rare, expectations are low, there is little or no reward for bumbling effort, and most horrifying of all, there are grades: A, B, C, D; 95%, 85%, 75%, 65%; stars, bluebirds, apples, bells; excellent, good, average, bad. Well, I don't know about everyone else, but if anything I do is seen as bad, I don't find much incentive to repeat it. Even "average" doesn't provide much motivation. And even if the grading is held off until later years, until age ten, or twelve, or fifteen, the same feelings will arise. Just because we're larger doesn't mean our egos are any less fragile. No matter when it occurs, negative

feedback is demoralizing and demotivating. Low grades are negative feedback.

I first discovered I couldn't sing when I was eighteen and so told by a college choral instructor. I instantly quit singing. Only on long trips in the car with my family did I utter a note, and even then I prefaced every warble with self-deprecatory comment. Recently, to my utter surprise, my seventeen-year-old daughter volunteered casually, not knowing the amazement her words would generate, "You have a pretty voice, Mom."

Me? A pretty voice? Well, maybe I knew the words to that last bit. But that's not singing. What about my scratchiness, my lack of tone color, my inability to breathe right, my screeching on the high notes? No, she was just being nice. But because somewhere we all want to believe that flattery is true, I asked my husband.

"You sound fine," he said. "When you stay in tune."

I did? Fine? Well, was staying in tune something I could learn? I tried. Tentatively, at first. Yes. Actually, when I put some attention toward the problem, it was possible. And when I stopped being afraid, the tension went out of my throat, the cracking in my voice stopped, and something resembling a song emerged. I wasn't all that bad. When I believed that I might be able to sing, suddenly I was able to forget my self-consciousness enough to think about where the tune was going. When I allowed myself to feel the music, I experienced something akin to pleasure. I'm not looking toward a career in opera, but singing in the bathroom has suddenly became an uplifting experience again.

That is the kind of experience I want my writing students to have. I want to give students reasons to believe that they can do well. I want to reward them for trying. I want to flatter them a little. I want to abolish the twin ogres of judgment and comparison from the classroom, ogres that are symbolized by our grading process.

Ah, but what about healthy competition as a goad to success? What about being honest with students about how they are doing? What about being fair? Shouldn't the best students be rewarded for their effort? What about providing measurement tools for colleges and employers? What about standards?

In my opinion, none of the reasons that are advanced in favor of grading are sufficient to justify continuing the process. Grades do not convey truly accurate information either to the students or to those who use the marks to reward or punish them. Grades do not motivate the vast majority of students to succeed. Instead, grades serve prima-

rily to maintain a caste system in which the smart get smarter (and later richer) and the dumb get dumber (and later poorer). Instead of giving out grades, we need to give real information, and we need to offer help that does not humiliate.

Grades are a poor way to convey information to or about a student. How many students learn anything about their performance from a grade? If they know any more than that the particular piece of work is excellent, good, fair, or poor, it's due to the fact that the teacher has conveyed, either in writing or orally, some more information. So why not convey the useful details and leave off the overall judgment? It is more difficult, of course. Writing a B at the top of a paper is easier than commenting on the nice way a student introduced the topic in the first paragraph, mentioning the sentence fragments in the second, or suggesting that examples would help to get a particular idea across. But what can students learn from a B? They don't know what it is that they have done well or what it is that has kept them from getting an A. To be truthful, often the teacher doesn't really know either. I have wished on many occasions that I could just stick a grade on a paper that sums up my gut sense about it. But to expect my gut reaction to be accurately translated into usable information by the student is unreasonable.

Having to come up with a grade (and a rationale for one) puts the focus on the measurable aspects of writing—grammar, length, topic sentences—and often forces a teacher into an overly simplistic evaluation scheme. "That which is measurable drives out that which is important," says Edward White (*Developing* 111). And what do we measure? What do we emphasize? Counting the spelling errors may let students know how they spell, but it won't tell them how they convey meaning. Giving points for originality says nothing about how well those original ideas are organized. Giving points at all is an arbitrary process if one is evaluating anything that does not have right or wrong answers. While one may be able to assign a 78% to a math exam, a 78% on a composition is next to meaningless. Can we compare syntax, originality, flow, and quality of evidence? Should we have multiple scales with multiple grades? If not, how do we rank the different aspects of writing? How do we assign them a percentage? Small wonder that theorists on writing assessment suggest more holistic methods.

Grading is also not the best way to convey information about students. If colleges, employers, and administrators need methods of assessing student performance and ways to rank them, why not let

those authorities design them? Actually, we have a plethora of these tools. We have placement exams, we have SAT's, we have GRE's, and we have LSAT's. If we have national standards, we will have national exams. These all tell us, or will tell us, how students are doing and how schools are doing. Using classroom teachers' grades for these purposes is likely to confuse rather than enhance the evaluation process. A grade may be influenced or contaminated by everything from flattery to a teacher's personal preferences, to a desire to warn, to a fear of causing psychological harm, to a need to reward good behavior, to a need to meet institutional distribution requirements. Yet, despite this, once given, grades are treated as scientific, immutable, factual.

Frequently, there is little correspondence across schools or regions or even among individual teachers within a school system. An A from one teacher may be the same as a C from another. Colleges and employers know this and try to take it into account, but how much better it would be if they didn't have to do that at all. While narrative evaluations, spoken evaluations, or even a stray comment may be useful, a letter grade and nothing else is more apt to mislead than inform. White points out that assessment is favored by those in power (colleges and employers and administrators) but not by the teachers and students who are most directly affected by it (*Developing* 89). Why do we allow ourselves to be pushed around in this way? We have managed to keep football talent scouts away from our elementary school gym classes and the marketplace out of our textbooks, so why can't we keep the grademongers out of our classrooms?

A better alternative in my opinion is to let students know when they do well and to tell them specifically what it is they do well. We do not need an overall hierarchy of excellence. Teachers can praise good work wherever it is found.

Assigning an A+ to a good paper says it's good. It also says it can't get better. I have never received a paper that could not get better. I have never written anything that could not have gotten better. So how does the A+ help the student to learn? A grade of D says a paper isn't good, but it also doesn't say how it could be improved. It doesn't tell the student the one thing he or she needs to know: how to become a competent writer.

So let's point out the good parts of everyone's work. Let's offer suggestions for improvement to everyone. If one student writes much better than others, that fact very quickly becomes known. Students know if they're stars or apples. Isn't that reward enough? Do we have

to publicly compare our students, make them heroes and failures in the most visible of ways? Grades promote destructive comparisons among students and do not motivate the vast majority of students to succeed.

Students usually rated as A students have met a certain externally established standard or are perceived as being somehow "better" than B, C, and D students. I believe in standards. I think our standards are abysmally low. I am appalled at the quality of most writing I see, student and professional. I think we expect too little of our children and our adults. I think everyone should write grammatically, concisely, clearly, thoughtfully. But what do grades have to do with standards?

If students have mastered the material, why give an A? Why not tell them that they have mastered the material? And if students have not mastered the material, why give them F's, which will, with almost absolute certainty, turn them off learning it and probably off learning anything else. Why not tell them what they have mastered, praise them for what they have done, and thus keep them interested in learning more?

And even if we feel it is necessary to record achievement with a letter grade, why publicize these grades to other students who have not so achieved? Why bring such an instrument of comparison into the classroom? Do we fear that students will do nothing unless they have the carrot of an A or the club of an F? Why then do students learn to jump rope? Why do they investigate insects on their own? Why are they fascinated by dinosaurs? Why do they ask *why?* My answer is that they do these things because learning is natural to human beings. Maybe the problem is not that we need to motivate students, but that we need to stop demotivating them.

I personally come down on the side that says cooperation is better than competition, that healthy competition is an oxymoron, but I know some people who love competition and thrive on it. So, fine, let's not do away with competition entirely. But let's not make it the centerpiece of the school experience. For those who want them, there are contests everywhere: sports events, essay contests, spelling bees, recitals. Let our competitive students go for them. Let's add some more if we want to. But let's keep competition out of the classroom. Let's reward children for learning, not for being "better" than someone else. For every child who says, "I lost, so I'll work harder next time," there are fifty who say, "I lost, so it's not worth trying."

Teachers are not in the classroom to judge; they are there to help children meet the standards of the outside world. As Albert Shanker says in support of his campaign to establish national standards and a national curriculum:

> It's like the Olympics. There's an external standard that students need to meet, and the teacher is there to help the student make it. The existence of an external standard entirely changes the relationship of teachers and youngsters. . . . (18)

It changes the relationship from judges and defendants to coaches and team players. We don't need our teachers to be judges. We have more than enough judges in this world. Coaches, however, are something we don't have enough of. Coaches are on your side; judges are not. Coaches are friendly; judges are aloof. Coaches want you to do well; judges don't care. Coaches believe you can do well and show you how; judges lecture you on what you should be and are not. Coaches offer encouragement; judges offer—*judgment.* (Some teachers are even prosecutors.)

Coaches know what the game requires, what the standards and goals are. A good coach can encourage a student to practice by making him or her believe it is possible to reach the goal. Grading does not tell most students that it is possible. An A or a B says it is possible, a C says maybe but not so likely, a D or an F says it is impossible. So why, I ask, do we hand out C's and D's and F's to students who already feel there is no hope? Teachers should be in the business of offering hope.

A comment about a vivid phrase says its possible. Asking a student to tell you more about his or her ideas because you think they are original and interesting says it is possible. Pointing out how students might help others in areas where they have competence says it is possible. And all students are good at something—at humor, at rhythm, at metaphor, at word choice. I have never received a paper that could not be praised in some respect.

I believe in rewarding effort. If students request a grade in my class, I give them one. I evaluate their finished products, but I give most of the emphasis to their effort. A student who writes at a D level and goes to a B level (whatever that represents) can get an A in my class. You'd be surprised at how they all sit up and start paying attention when I announce that at the beginning of the term. It is as if they have suddenly been given a way out of their hopelessness. Not surprisingly, too, those who put in the effort also tend to make great strides in their competence. Often, they produce products that might

in themselves merit an A. However, I doubt they would have done so well had they believed that they had to produce an "A" product to succeed.

But what will happen to our standards, people wail, if we give A's to people who write worse than those to whom we give C's? Just because I may give high grades to students who may not be all that competent as writers doesn't mean I don't expect a lot from my students. I think all students should strive to write competently, and I think all of them should put effort toward their writing. But not all students start from the same place. If one writes a 95 essay on the first day of class, and another writes a 65 essay, and then at the end of the term the 95 goes to a 94 and the 65 goes to a 79, isn't it the 79 who is most likely to have overcome emotional blocks, to have made the greatest strides in skill development, and to have really learned something?

We need to recognize and reward such effort. As teachers, we are not looking for perfection—we are looking for improvement. How can we expect any more or any less? School is a place where we should value learning over status and encourage development over performance.

We have to accept, of course, that not all our students will opt to try to improve. And that is their choice. But I think we do have to do all we can to make sure that the decision not to try is something other than a hopeless acknowledgment of defeat, and we need to make improvement seem possible and desirable for those who do want to try.

We need to reward growth, both intellectual and moral. In his now famous analysis of college freshmen, William Perry discovered that most freshmen have trouble moving from the idea that there is a right and wrong answer—an absolute truth that the teacher knows and should impart, a stage of cognitive development that he calls dualistic—to the understanding that there are multiple ways of looking at an issue. Grading, however, fosters dualistic thought. Grades say there is a good and a bad, a right and a wrong. Particularly in assessing writing, this kind of black and white thinking is not helpful. I can think of many essays I have read on teaching, for example, which, because of the different approaches they took, could not realistically be compared. If we want to move students from dualistic to multiplistic thinking, we need to avoid grades.

Grades also encourage superficial learning and even unethical behavior. Most A students can tell you that they weren't in it for the learning. Their particular skill was to scope out the rules of the game

and play by them. This makes teachers happy. It makes parents happy. The students may or may not be happy. Some learning obviously occurs, but probably much less than would have occurred if it had been learning rather than a grade that the students had sought. Worse, however, are the attitudes that this kind of game playing fosters: winning is everything, I'll do just enough to get the grade, form is more important than substance, and the means justify the ends. At a time when we are decrying the lack of ethics in our world, surely we need to promote through our teaching those values that we want our students to demonstrate.

Grading leads to comparisons among students, another form of unethical behavior. If we are grading students to compare them, what motivation we elicit will be due to a desire to be better than someone else (or not to be worse). But to motivate through fear is bad psychology, as is to cultivate envy. As many have pointed out, there is only one at the top. For everyone else, grading is degrading.

In my experience, the people who push for grades are those who got good ones themselves or who want the vicarious triumph of having their children get them. "If I did it, so can they," they say, ignoring the fact that literature on environmental influences, different intelligences, cognitive development, and cultural impediments all tells us that not all others can. "Grades encouraged me to work harder," they say, or, "My son worked hard for that A. He should be rewarded." But the B and C students may have worked just as hard, or they may have been subtly discouraged from working hard by being told that they are not capable. And in most cases, the teacher is not grading the effort anyway—he or she is grading the product.

And what kind of a product can come from one whose native language is not English, who has had inadequate schooling, and who lives in a family that does not value verbal communication? How can this child's product be compared with the product of a child who has been surrounded by books since infancy, who has helped to name and describe and compare and generalize, and who has been told subtly from the day he or she was born that he or she will do well in school? If a college student comes to class unable to write a grammatical paragraph, how can we compare his or her initial products with a Zinsser essay or even with the best student in the class? And if he or she were to produce such a superior product, how much effort would that take, and how should it be rewarded?

As one of those who took the A's as my due and preened myself over my superiority, I would like to say right now that I apologize. I

am ashamed, for myself and for all those teachers who held me up as an example, who singled me out, who praised me, not for really putting in effort and striving to get better, but for being better, for doing something that came easily, for being lucky enough to be someone who was read to as a child, who came from a home where books held center stage and where my every intellectual move was noticed with approval. Often, issuing grades is like giving an award at a beauty contest. Most of the time the spoils go to those who had it in the first place and just learned to embellish it a little. "It's only fair to reward those who do better" really means it's right to keep rewarding those who are already at the top; but it's not fair at all:

> There is no difference between the child who learns slowly and the one who learns quickly except their rate of absorption and someone's judgment. The judgment is that one is better than the other. But such assessments have devastating effects. For the so-called slow or average learner, it is a commentary on his self-worth and does more to keep him where he is . . . first, because of the teacher's expectation that he had limited capabilities (which is subtly communicated to him and which he begins to believe about himself), and second, because of his own anxiety and fears of continued disapproval. Even the fast learner or honor student does not escape the pressures. He must continually maintain his "exceptionality" or otherwise face the repercussions of failing (getting a B instead of an A). In that game, he too is distracted by the anxiety of having continually to perform in order to be accepted and applauded. (Kaufman 77)

Of course, eventually the world will publicly compare our students. It will give A's and F's and stars and bells in the form of money and status. That is why children need teachers. They need teachers to help them be as strong as they can be when they finally have to face these tests. They need teachers to explain what the standards are and what will be expected of them. They need teachers to model the type of competence that will be required. They need teachers to tell them that they can make it—that all of them can make it. They don't need grades—they need information, and they need encouragement. They need coaching, not judging.

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Interlude

Writing should not be graded; it should be praised. Oh, don't get me wrong—I have to give a grade. I base grades on the student's self-evaluation. If there is a conflict in what I think is fair and what a student thinks is fair, we conference. (There is seldom a conflict because the kids set higher goals for themselves than I do.) In the conferences we look at use of the writing process, published pieces, etc. The students almost always get the grades they feel are fair. We do portfolios, but these are primarily used in our evaluation process and to show parents how we have progressed. Each writer comes to me with a different level of education, confidence, and talent. At the end of our year together, each kid knows how to write and feels confident that she or he can handle any writing assignment. I couldn't get them to that point if I graded their writing instead of their effort.

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