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Bridging the Chasm between Philosophies: A Novice Composition Instructor's Thoughts on Evaluation and Grading

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In my life and work, the metaphor of a bridge seems to stretch across everything. When controversy approaches, I can usually see both sides. I feel the urge to encourage reconciliation, to foster understanding and cooperation in the face of polarity. As a teaching assistant at an open admissions liberal arts university, I've found that this bridging instinct influences many of my choices as an instructor of first-year college composition. So when my department hosted a "Teachers Talking with Teachers" session focused on concerns about grade inflation, and when that meeting happened to occur during the same week as a university-sponsored workshop about developments in brain science and their application to pedagogy, I made time to attend both. The fact that the two encounters seemed to express opposite concerns was no surprise. And the ensuing conversation within my department, swirling around the tension between the structuralist/expressivist debate and its companion bugaboo, the teaching of grammar, was easy to predict. My inclination was, as usual, to find the common ground.

I've really been a quiet rebel all my life. When schools still allowed "corporal" punishment, my second grade teacher scared the freckles off me when she manhandled the mildly retarded boy who sat just behind me. I froze when she spilled the contents of a nearby messy desk out onto the floor, thinking mine might be next. When the wooden paddle came down from its perch above the blackboard and some other squirmy kid was called to the front of the room, I slipped into a wary dream

state and prayed to Jesus, Mary and Joseph that my feet would stay flat on the floor. And when the tallest girl in my grade got smacked across the head for stressing the right syllable in the wrong place on the chalkboard, I learned her lesson well: do what they tell you, and do it right the first time.

But while I was trying to be invisible, my will, like mineral compressed to gem deep within the earth, took refuge in the freedom of my mind. The jewels created there were an abiding sympathy for students, respect for the unique value of individuals, and an entrenched certainty that educational systems often operate at odds with their own ostensible purposes. Later, these ideas gleamed along my path as a home-schooling mother, and after that, provided the basis for my choices as a first-year college composition instructor.

My department's discussion about grade inflation and the university workshop dealing with new scientific evidence about learning raised familiar questions. The first meeting explored trends in grading, even examining statistical data regarding university and departmental rates and frequencies. We wondered whether teachers sometimes water down requirements in order to be able to pass students, and if an "A" today bears any relationship to the ones we ourselves sought to earn as undergraduates. Concerns that student evaluations may put career-building pressure upon professors and instructors, consequently complicating the previous questions, were voiced. It was pointed out that these issues had been discussed nationally as well as in a recent issue of our university's student newspaper. The emerging focus was on the end result of such practices – the presence in upper level courses of students who were not properly prepared to do the work.

As the discussion crisscrossed the circle of professors, there was clear concern about whether entry level composition coursework was appropriately focused and structured, and whether teaching assistants, like me, had sufficient command of the language to recognize and address our students' academic writing skills in a way that would

help them to improve sufficiently. As our conversation drew to a close, we commented upon our various senses of where a college instructor's responsibilities might lie, and how they could be prioritized. Is the university education perceived as a commodity today, where the customer is always right? Or are college teachers obligated to their subject matter primarily; must they ensure that the transfer of knowledge to the next generation is legitimately accomplished? Is there a responsibility to society that graduates gain certain skills and abilities? What about intellectual development? I left the gathering with lots to think about, to say the least. Given the polarity of some of these issues, I felt both glad and relieved that these experienced professors were grappling with them. Although there was not a consensus among us, there was a unified sense of the importance and immediacy of the questions.

Later that week, the workshop I attended spotlighted guest lecturer Luz Mangurian, Director of the Institute for Applied Cognition and Teaching at Towson University near Baltimore. Her opening statements included a gentle comment that, as a mostly Ph.D.-holding audience, we were all surely "lovers of truth, lovers of knowledge." She wryly coupled this high-minded sentiment with the observation that folks (presumably not present) who debunk negative student comments on evaluations often do so by saying, "It's just that I'm a tough grader." Mangurian had evidence in hand revealing that students make up their minds about teachers long before grades are issued. In the study she cited, the comments taken from students after a brief classroom encounter with their professor were unchanged by the end of the course.

Mangurian illustrated these findings using graphics to demonstrate differences in brain activity experienced during both genuine and forced smiling. It seems that students' evaluations of their teachers may be influenced more by sincerity than by either grading practices or an impressive command of the subject being studied. As the workshop progressed, we participants absorbed a detailed overview of the current understanding of brain development and

maturity in college-aged students, as well as visual representations of the influences of stress, alcohol, and boredom upon students' brain activity.

Some very specific and simple truths emerged from Mangurian's surprisingly clear representations: eighteen-to-twenty-year-old students are still maturing mentally, emotionally, and physically; lectures lose most listeners after the first ten minutes; and alcohol consumption minimizes the brain activity necessary for learning and retention. While these facts inspired a sense of responsibility, they also reminded me of the limits to my influence. I can take into account the developing person, strive to vary my instructional methods and advocate healthy choices, but college is a time of exploration and growth involving mistakes as well as accomplishments for all students. The decisions are theirs to make, the education theirs to claim.

Nevertheless, I came away from the workshop with a powerful sense of confirmation. The information Mangurian had presented built upon what I already knew about brain science and its application to education. I felt encouraged to continue to respond to the individual student in whatever ways are possible given the pedagogical situation. Mangurian's emphasis upon the responsibility of teachers to communicate subject matter effectively resonated with me strongly, affirming that a responsive teaching style can be grounded in objective, scientific evidence in ways that encourage the development of more effective instructional strategies. I liked her confidence that, even in the face of practical and necessary concerns about grades, we and our students are in pursuit of truth.

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Like many English graduate teaching assistants, my background is not in composition studies. Still, my reading as a homeschooling parent and my analytical nature predisposed me to look to theory to provide a solid basis for my teaching. With guidance from several mentors in my department, I found myself swimming in a sea of names: Elbow, Bartholomae, Britton, Murray, Knoblauch, Tobin, Berlin, Perl. These and other Olympians of

composition theory, like the ancients, duking it out over mutually exclusive viewpoints, gave me a lot to think about. Too much, in fact – I will need to continue my education to the Ph.D. level to sort out their stances and what I myself think at the end of the day. But given the limitations implicit to the process of learning and doing at one and the same time, I drew inspiration from these and those they've influenced in order to build and support my teaching practices. In particular, the ongoing tension between "expressivist" and "structuralist" philosophies in composition studies intrigued me.

My director of composition encouraged new T.A.'s to use the popular portfolio system for our first semester, and provided Elbow and Belanoff's *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisted* as a teaching text for us. I relished the emphasis these authors placed on voice, and hoped that at least some of the ideas I had gleaned from John Holt (whose *How Children Learn* and *How Children Fail* have influenced many home-schoolers) and other educational thinkers might apply to composition.

Imagine my astonishment when my students' initial enthusiasm for this system degenerated into apathy and pleas for directives! I was shocked when students did not do their reading or hand in assignments; I was stunned when they stonewalled and refused to work in groups. Not to be defeated, I read widely from the other scholars mentioned above. I asked for advice from professors and more experienced grad assistants, held conferences with my students, tried engaging activities, and provided many organizational handouts. None of it seemed to have much effect, and by the end of my first semester, I resorted to stressing grading in a last-ditch attempt to motivate my students. As I look back, I fear that we were all disappointed with this first experience of college composition. Beginning as I had with confidence in my abilities and from a sympathetic perspective toward students, I came to know what many have learned before me: teaching is complicated. It's just plain hard.

Since that first semester teaching, I've made countless changes to my syllabus. I've worked from numerous texts, and begun to develop a better, more

interesting and genuine teaching style. A point-graded system of discreet paper assignments – including the opportunity but not the obligation to revise – has worked better for my students than delayed-grading or ungraded portfolios, though it stresses my role as judge more than I would wish. Still, the system allows a little bit of both expressivist flexibility and structuralist accountability, so for now the balance feels right. The simple but effective truism, "you must read more to write better," determines much of the course content. And giving weight to ongoing smaller writing assignments (journals, webct, quizzes about readings or discussions) based upon participation rather than "correctness" helped to motivate students to work with greater engagement at these most helpful writing activities.

Each semester, a couple of students want me to spell out exactly what will constitute an "A" or a "B" and so on. Although I now provide detailed rubrics for grading, it still feels wrong and intrusive to give such prescriptive answers. It is as if these students are asking, demanding, that I rob them of something precious which they don't yet value: the ownership of their own ideas and work. Still, I know that the instruction and feedback I am able to provide to my students are clearer, more coherent, and more correct each semester – and that these are the same standards by which I evaluate their writing in order to assign grades. I find myself buffeted by the dual concerns represented by the meetings I describe above, and by the significant questions I face as a teacher. Do I serve the students, the institution, the society, or the subject matter? Surely, the true answer is "all of them." But to what degree, in what balance?

Mangurian's speech confirmed my sense that maturation is the consuming concern for early college students. This means that, in order for the course I'm teaching to have any impact upon or usefulness to them, I must acknowledge their development as human beings and educate myself about the best means of delivering course content. Since composition is more experiential, preparatory and practical than content-based courses are, and

since such practices and goals are highly individual, I have concluded that I must vary my approach responsively. I must get to know my students as people (to the degree possible within the confines of sixteen-week course) in order to provide the feedback that can help to improve their writing. Brain science provides a pragmatic answer to the questions posed above: no matter what the larger purposes of the education, learning itself is optimized or obstructed by instructors' awareness of the evidence supporting or contradicting their approaches to teaching.

As for evaluation, when students seem to crave the external judgment provided by grades, they may miss opportunities to grow as writers and as human beings. Of course, we all give locus of control to teachers and/or rubrics in any graded setting; that is the prevailing educational model. But at what cost? It may benefit society and businesses in some ways when individuals sublimate identity to fulfill civic or employment responsibilities, and it may feel safer to students, but surely when society values individual freedom and corporate cultures value innovation there is a clear need for students to embrace that nineteenth-century virtue, "self-reliance," as well.

At the same time, I am not blind to the practical considerations of the other entities with a stake in students' educations. There are "hoops" along the way for all of us, whether we approve of them or not. Standardized tests, graded essays, limitations to the scope of study within courses, peer observation and assessment, assignments of varying degrees of usefulness and relevance, to name just a few. Teachers also operate within a system they did not create; as James Berlin points out in the afterword to his final manuscript on composition studies, the power of the grade positions the instructor as an educational and economic "gatekeeper" regardless of pedagogical philosophy (177).

I definitely feel the weight of the responsibility to describe these "hoops" to my students so that they can prepare for them, and hopefully move through them successfully. I see it

as part of my job to point out the distinction between what we do because we want to, because we love some idea or activity and are inspired, and what we must pour meaning into for ourselves because the task is merely designed to facilitate institutional judgment. I attempt to communicate the philosophy that, while we often can't control which or how many hoops we're required to jump through on the way to certain destinations, we can decide what to get out of the experience, how to grow. Of course, the prescribed obstacle course defeats some; others decide that compliance with such a system costs them too dearly. In these cases, I hope my students will feel that an alternate path may present itself, and that they have aspirations and strengths which will help them to find it.

During my theoretical composition odyssey, one of my departmental mentors introduced me to Howard Gardener's theory of multiple intelligences. Gardener's ideas in *Frames of Mind* and *Intelligence Reframed* perfectly address Mangurian's findings about attention-span and the need to engage students in a variety of activities in the classroom rather than relying so heavily upon lectures. Awareness on the part of teachers and students that there are multiple valid ways to approach the acquisition of knowledge and experience can only optimize success for everyone involved in education. As well, Gardener's ideas offer inspiration that resonates with my years of home-schooling. He writes, "I want my children to understand the world, but not just because the world is fascinating and the human mind is curious. I want them to understand it so that they will be positioned to make it a better place" (*Intelligence* 180-181). I'd like to think that, increasingly, I am incorporating strategies that work well to foster intellectual growth in my university students in ways that encourage the kind of understanding Gardener describes.

As for "grade inflation," I find myself wondering how helpful grade-focused concerns, on the part of both students and teachers, actually are. In her 2002 article, "Repositioning Emotions in Composition Studies," Kia Jane Richmond writes, ". . . if teachers view themselves as 'guardians of

standards,' they might view their relationship to students as more adversarial than facilitative, which might have an impact on the way students write to or for them" (14-15). My classroom experiences, though brief, as well as Mangurian's presentation concerning instructor evaluations, confirm the idea that difficulties must occur when an instructor's pedagogical philosophy appears combative or competitive to students. Who hasn't encountered a teacher whose focus seems to be upon exposing and interpreting failure rather than fostering learning and growth? My students seem to grow more as writers once they value their own work for their own purposes more than they value my external judgment.

So I feel myself to be a minor river-god, pulling all these philosophical and practical conduits together, feeding the river of composition studies for my students. Not Poseidon, huge and majestic, deciding the fates of my students (via grades!) as they navigate the rapids. Instead, I pull from many sources, prioritizing one and then another, listening to what my students seem to need, accenting what helps and discarding what doesn't. I try to make the grade scheme reflect the things my students and my studies have taught me that they need to do, so that the "judgment" is about how thoroughly they have engaged with activities designed to assist their development as writers. This way, experience is the teacher for all of us, and I become the guide for this particular shared part of our diverse journeys.

As a graduate teaching assistant, I have taken a somewhat unusual approach and shared my own process of selection and learning openly in the classroom, talking about these elements as both teacher and fellow student. Some of my students have criticized this. They may have wanted an expert teacher who had all the well-documented answers, whose curriculum was settled and well-practiced. Some of my peers and mentors have shaken their heads at my approach, knowing that occasionally students may mistake it for a power vacuum. I recognize the validity of these concerns; they've been proven through numerous "optimal learning curve" moments during these two years of

teaching. Still, as I've gained experience I have been able to offer enough of the "teacher as expert" to satisfy this desire and need while still adopting practices that help all my students to feel more responsible for their own educations.

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Bridge building requires knowledge of both shores, and of the shared space being crossed. How can teachers evaluate fairly and usefully? Students do need to know where they stand, or their own decisions about education are without foundation. If concerns about "grade inflation" are found to have a sound basis, surely it will be agreed that deceptively high grades are damaging. On the other hand, an opposite bell curve system which culls out only a set number of excellent grades in order to maintain an appearance of rigor is patently unfair to excellent students who work hard and achieve course goals, but are out-performed by a handful of classmates. Even the use of achievement-based rubrics which allow any number of students to obtain excellent grades can be problematic; objective criteria for the purpose of judging and ranking work sounds scientific, but the application sometimes falls short of measuring performance, comprehension and retention of knowledge. There is even a case to be made against the assignment of any grades to writing, since it may be that preoccupation with outside evaluation truncates growth.

On the other hand, who is responsible for student learning? Of course, the majority of college students are adults and must become responsible for their own lives, for both their accomplishments and their failures. But Mangurian's research indicating the incomplete nature of human brain development during early college implies that, for many students, the traditional methods employed by college instructors are incompatible with their optimal learning styles and mental maturity. Her slides presented images of brain activity that underscored the role of experience in understanding subject matter. In light of these discoveries about the human mind, don't we instructors have an obligation to educate ourselves about more effective approaches and strategies?

I hope to have the opportunity to try using portfolios with freshman composition students again. Although my inexperience made the system too unwieldy during my first semester of teaching, I can see that it promises the bridge I always seek – in this case, a means of evaluation which nurtures and rewards growth. It's interesting that Stanford, M.I.T. and Northwestern are developing electronic portfolio programs for their students (Young, 13). And interesting also that the new president of my own university, came to us with positive experiences from other universities where the use of portfolios and/or holistic assessment strategies are status quo. Perhaps portfolios can provide a marriage of flexibility with structure - a chance for teachers to develop more responsive pedagogies while appropriately assessing student work.

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In my bridge metaphor, the students are the water, flowing past theoretical encampments on either bank. They come from many sources, and will split and travel to countless destinations. Their health and progress will be effected by what we add at this bend in the river, but they are headed somewhere else. Most of the teachers that I know don't live along the river banks, solidly settled in one approach or another. Instead, they spend time examining many sides of the debate, finding what they can to provide for the needs of their students, their subject, and society. They reside where they themselves are students: on the bridge.

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