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Assessing College Writing or The National Writing Project and a College Composition Course

F. Richard Thomas

Murmurs of conversations echoed throughout the small banquet room. Dirty dishes and silverware clinked and clattered in the background as the waitpersons cleaned the tables. In the midst of this cacophony, the featured speaker, Richard Sterling generously answered questions and offered advice for each Teacher Consultant or Project Co-Director who lined up to speak with him one-on-one.

Finally free, Sterling headed for the exit. I had second thoughts about trapping him halfway to the door, but when he got close to me, he didn't appear to be as exhausted as he should have been, having just been named the new Director of the National Writing Project. So I introduced myself. I lavished praise on the elementary and secondary teachers—the vanguard of the writing revolution in this country—with whom I wrote, discussed, and studied in the Red Cedar Writing Project in 1993. They had given me the courage to radically change the way I taught my college composition class. “Now,” I offered, “my college composition course is much better.”

Without a blink, he shot back (and I paraphrase), “How do you know? That's the real question. That's where we need the answers. We need to show that it really works to the legislators and the people who control the purse strings.”

“Well,” I stumbled. “I'm not an ethnographer, I really haven't done the research, you know, in the classroom, and...”

Not far into my awkward backpedaling, one of the waitresses, balancing a tray on her shoulder, barged in. “Excuse me,” she said, “but I just have to say this. I want you to know that Dr. Thomas is the best teacher I have had at this university. Because of him, I'm not afraid to sit down and write anymore.” Then she swung her tray around and stepped toward the kitchen.

Sterling smiled. I blinked. The Teacher Consultant standing next to me said, “That was well-orchestrated. What did it cost you?”

Sterling said (I paraphrase), “OK. There's a start. Your students are not afraid to write anymore. Anything else? Write it up. Let's see what you've got.”

I am a teacher who is also a writer. I write poetry and fiction and scholarly works on photography, poetry, and emigration. For some inexplicable reason I've never written an article on teaching freshman composition class and I never thought I would. But because I am enthusiastic about the way I have revised my pedagogy as a result of learning from elementary and secondary school teachers in the National Writing Project,

and because my former student, now also waitperson, fortuitously intervened on my behalf, I owe it to her and to the Red Cedar Writing Project at Michigan State University to support and encourage the National Writing Project goal of better writing among all students across the grades, across the disciplines, and across the curriculum.

Let me explain.

After teaching college composition for almost twenty-eight years, I was burned out. I had made innovations over the years, and I think I taught writing fairly well. I tried to keep up with some of the practical applications of the research on composition, but I never made the leap to overhaul my pedagogy—partially because I didn't know exactly how I wanted to overhaul it (I just wanted to retire), and partially because I was ignorant of some of the methods that teachers across the country (especially in elementary schools) had already experimented with and used to teach writing successfully.

I have the good fortune to teach in a department called American Thought and Language. The texts for all of the composition courses in this department are American. We use social, historical, literary, film, material culture texts. You name it—whatever text you can think of, we use it. I have always thought this was a marvelous boon for a composition teacher, for the use of American texts can so perfectly build on the “American” experiences of our students, whatever those might be. Most of the memorable, personal experiences that our students have had, also have national, social, and political relevance, current and/or historical. In brief, American Thought and Language is the perfect course for the writing teacher who wants students to come to terms with the intellectual and practical concerns that confront the citizenry of our “democracy.”

When students left my classes, I believed they had a much better understanding of their place in American culture. They wrote a great deal about that. Nevertheless, I still had the nagging feeling that my students were not much better prepared for the writing they would have to do in all of their future courses and in the workplace in which they would need to write. They seemed to be only

slightly less timid and fearful and only slightly more confident about putting pencil to paper than they did when I first got them. How could I change this?

Enter the Red Cedar Writing Project.

After five weeks of discussion, writing, and research with teachers at all grade levels, and after “graduating” as a Teacher Consultant, I knew what I had to do.

I am not going to describe everything I now do in my composition course, because not all of it is helpful for understanding how my revising the assessment of student writing allowed students to become more confident and productive. Nevertheless, a brief summary of my new course is relevant.

Initially, students read and discuss “What America Stands For.” This involves not only reading essential American documents, like the Declaration and Constitution, but the practical application of these documents to real world problems. Many of these real world problems are found in the *State News*, the Michigan State University daily newspaper, which is required reading for my course and which is filled with the important civic and political issues of all news in a democracy: rights violated and justice upheld or denied.

Next, I introduce students to our academic community through tours, study, and writing about campus educational resources. These include not only the essential library, but also our excellent museum (which has changing exhibits on national and international folk culture as well as permanent exhibits on American culture), the art museum, the Performing Arts Center (including a backstage tour), the Writing Center, the Student Services Center, the Career Development Center, and the interview of a campus “expert” on a topic of each student's choice.

Building on this local introduction to American culture, students go on to research an aspect of American culture that engages them. They bring these investigations to closure by writing (and sending) a letter to individuals they think will benefit from or take action on the research they have conducted. For example, the student who lamented the poor condition of the equestrian facilities at the university, wrote to the

president of the university (and subsequently got a reply and was appointed to a committee to remedy the situation). The student who was also a welfare mother wrote to the governor of the state, noting the injustice of the new restrictions on students as welfare recipients. A Hawaiian student researched affirmative action policy at the university and sent his findings to the office of minority affairs at the university. As a result of discussions and readings and the American content of the course, their research usually focuses on issues of rights and justice.

This background is important for understanding the following discussion about how I revised assessment—the most important, fundamental element of change that I made. By changing the way student writing was assessed, I was able to “renew” my whole course for the better, for both myself and my students.

I changed the way I assessed student writing because of a comment in the Red Cedar Writing Project from a fifth grade teacher, Norma Boehm. She said (I paraphrase): “Perhaps the most important assessment of written work a teacher can make in the classroom is whether or not a student does his or her work conscientiously.”

That makes sense, I thought. If students are really interested and involved in what they are writing about, that will show. Numerous additional sessions and discussions with other fellows in the Red Cedar Writing Project gave me the courage to say, “Sure, I can judge writing on the involvement of writers with their work. I’ll give it a try.”

Thus, “graduating” from the Red Cedar Writing Project as a new Teacher Consultant, I came to my fall semester class with a new plan that rekindled my desire to teach.

Assessment 1: Is it Interesting?

During the first two-thirds of my composition course, my personal responses to the writing that students hand in focus on whether or not students are doing their work conscientiously. In order to encourage them to do conscientious work, I let them know that they must make sure that their work is interesting to write as well as interesting to read, through comments like the

following: “Do you have any experiences—personal, encountered, or observed—that you can add to illustrate how John Student’s First Amendment rights [that you read about in the *State News*] are being violated?” “If you were running the Performing Arts Center, how would you get corporations to contribute.” “How would you set up a museum exhibit, if you were going to display items that are important to you?” “The problem with writing in an academic community is that while you can say Modern Art sucks, no one really cares what your opinion is unless you back it up with specifics. Why don’t you like Modern Art? Pick only one work, look closely, change your perspective, analyze your gut instinct, and then explain why you don’t like Picasso.”

Brief evaluations relating primarily to the content of the writing and what will make it interesting have two advantages: 1) I can assign five times as much writing because I do virtually no sentence-level red marking of these papers. I do not mark mechanical errors unless I see a particularly chronic error that I think a student will benefit from having pointed out. 2) Students learn to write for meaning. They learn that I’m interested in their content. They learn that I’m interested in what they have to get across to their audience and not so much concerned about whether or not they misspelled a word or used a semi-colon incorrectly. Instead they learn 3) not to be afraid to write. They know that as long as they conscientiously try to express what they want to say, and try to make their writing interesting for other people to read, they will get credit for their work. My comments, then, are those of a coach trying to help them become the best players in this game that they can be. And their writing does become a kind of game for many of them, as Betty [student’s name changed here and subsequently] suggests: “[The assignments] forced me to want to write a paper because it would be fun. They were always interesting, unlike the boring ones [I did previously]. You kept my attention in wanting to come to class and write, as I tried to keep you interested in reading my papers.”

Over and over again students comment to me at the end of the semester that writing, they admit almost guiltily, can even be fun. “I believe my

attitude change occurred," Adam wrote, "when I realized that there really could be a paper in which I was interested in writing With some effort almost every paper can be made enjoyable. It is with this mindset that I now sit down to write a paper. It is this motive that has changed my perspective on writing throughout the course."

Because students are enjoying writing—because they must make their writing interesting for themselves as well as for the reader—and because most of them are writing much more than they have ever written in their lives, they become more fluent. "I remember trying hard," wrote Dana in a reflection, "to make every sentence sound interesting, fluent, believable, and detailed when writing my first few trial papers. I have noticed recently that my writing is starting to come together, and achieving its fluency automatically."

. . . students evaluate and assess each other's work—not for grade, but for effectiveness, for persuasiveness, for whether or not the work is convincing.

In fact by the end of the semester, when I do begin to look seriously at fluency, structure, and mechanics, many of the problems they started with at the beginning of the semester have all but disappeared. By the end of the semester, my students have written so much and have been so engaged in their writing that they no longer write in the halting, fearful, apparently semi-literate style that so plagues much of their writing when they first come into my class.

Because they write for effectiveness rather than for a grade, and because I, as coach, help them to become more effective writers, they also learn very quickly—in addition to mechanics—the importance of clarity, coherence, and the necessity to use persuasive details.

Assessment 2: Peer Evaluation.

There is another wrinkle on assessment in my class: students evaluate and assess each

other's work—not for grade, but for effectiveness, for persuasiveness, for whether or not the work is convincing. They then help each other improve their work. At the end of the semester, when students polish several papers, if they also find mechanical problems to mark, so much the better. After all, when we send our work out into the world—whether to a boss or the American Scholar—the work must be as free of mechanical errors as possible. (I assume most of us ask other readers to look over our work before we send it off for "publication." I certainly do. And I want my students to know the importance of this.)

Assessment 3: Reflections.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, students evaluate and assess their own work via reflections. At every opportunity they reflect on their work—their failures, their successes—throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, I ask them to collect everything they have written for the whole semester into a 3-ring binder. Then I ask them to reflect on everything they have written and show me specific successes and failures and turning points in their writing, and why these are successes, failures, and turning points. I hope that these personal reflections will help students learn how to learn how they write. I also hope they learn how they have improved their own writing so they can carry their newly-appropriated writing knowledge with them to future courses and careers.

Grades

This kind of assessment, you may say, is fine for the classroom, but "conscientious work" can't be reported as a grade to the registrar's office. How are students' course grades determined?

On the 4.0 system, where a 4.0 is the highest grade, I guarantee a 3.0 to all students who complete all of the work conscientiously. There is a deduction for each piece of work not completed. In addition, the first time or two a student does not complete work conscientiously, I return it, saying in effect, "I can't give you credit for this. You can have a second chance on this writing assignment. But in the future, if you don't com-

plete work conscientiously, I will have to make a deduction from your final grade. See me, if you don't understand what I'm saying."

Everyone who completes all of the assignments, and completes them conscientiously, gets a 3.0. Every student can also earn a 3.5 or a 4.0 grade too, but I determine these higher grades by the quality of a small set (3 or 4) of highly polished works—ready for the world to see (for example a letter that is actually sent to an authority in a student's field of research, or sent to a periodical). A 4.0 must be fluent, clear, convincing, interesting, coherent, free of mechanical errors, and stylistically wonderful. A 3.5 may not have to be stylistically wonderful.

Conclusion

Why do I think this method works? In other words, how do I know my students are writing better? I don't have statistics and numbers, but my students are quick to tell me in person and in their reflections that they now know how to write and they're not afraid to write.

"At times," wrote Cassy, "I can actually remember saying to myself, OK, now what did he want me to focus on? How can I make my paper evolve around this and still be funny, interesting, and informative?" This is definitely the greatest achievement I have ever witnessed myself go through, especially when it concerns something that I was convinced I was a failure at."

End-of-semester comments like this are numerous, since I revamped my writing course. I have heard other stories: a colleague who taught an advanced writing class told me about one of her students who wrote a literacy story, in which she described how my course tricked her into becoming a fluent writer. Michigan State University also uses student instructional evaluation forms that teachers are not allowed to see until the semester is finished. When I read these evaluations I am convinced of the success of this kind of writing class: one based on a method of evaluation that lets writers get started without being burdened by a surfeit of red marks, one that encourages writers to become fluent first before asking them to send their words of wisdom out into the world, one that gives waitresses the courage and confidence to balance a tray on their shoulders in the middle of a crowd of teachers, approach the featured speaker, and say, "I'm not afraid to write papers any more—not after this class."

It would be wonderful if my college students came to my classes unafraid, so we could jump right into learning how to write complicated and persuasive intellectual essays; but until that time comes, I want to encourage fluency in my students and—through constant writing, continual reflection on their writing, peer response, and coaching—provide them with the confidence not only to continue writing but to continue learning to write on their own, after they have left my class.

Thanks to the Red Cedar Writing Project.