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I'VE GOT SOME READING TO DO

Cheryl Forbes

I became a writing teacher after leaving the field of publishing for two reasons: I love to write, and I love to read. My goal as a teacher is to instill in students these same loves. I want them to leave my courses committed to writing and reading for themselves, without teacher prompting. To do this, I have structured my writing courses as workshops, where students and I exchange writings and readings. We write together, we respond to each other in writing— as well as in informal conversations over supper and in conferences— and we read together. My role in this process is to select the essays we read, set writing deadlines, and as an experienced reader and critic, respond to each student. This last role needs some explanation, for it is not one common to teachers of writing.

Let me explain by using an essayist my students and I often read, Stephen Jay Gould. When I pick up "Counters and Cable Cars," I don't read to find the number of clichés Gould uses, though he uses plenty; nor do I fault him when he leaves me to supply the transitions and thesis or when his logic is anything but linear. I read Gould for pleasure and information; I also read to interpret him, that is, to make sense of his meandering style, his quirky connections, and his unpredictability. I attempt to create an identity for the author, which helps me create a role for myself as a reader.

But give me a student who shows these same characteristics, and I change my reading. All the things I ignored— or found charming— in a writer like Gould, I find unacceptable in a student. I talk about coherence, unity, thesis sentences. I circle clichés and ask, "What's the main point?" "How are x and y connected?" and "Where are your transitions?" Or, I used to. I now think that such questions, as valid and necessary as they might be at times, do not engender in students an enthusiasm for writing and reading. Instead, I offer to students an interpretation of their work. I point out metaphors, thematic patterns, linguistic or rhetorical devices that tell me something about who they are. I try in my responses to encourage students to learn from

reading themselves. I write, "Reread what you've written and tell me what you learn." I try to make my responses an encouragement for further reading, reflection, and writing— not always a revision of what I've just read but sometimes a starting place for new essays. I have found that students unwittingly reveal interests in many subjects that lead to additional personal essays and research topics. Students, as any writing teacher knows, find invention difficult. Yet the spur to invention usually lies right before them, in their own work. As I read and interpret their essays, I am scouting for subjects that they might want to write about.

This is the teacher-to-student half of the transactions in my classroom. But remember, I am writing along with students. And my writing is as open to interpretation as is theirs. So they respond to me as I respond to them, interpretively and critically. They tell me that I sound jealous of my sister or that I am disciplined because words like "commitment" and "responsibility" recur in my essays (often without my conscious awareness until they point it out). Or they laugh at how often my mother creeps into my essays. They speculate about my meaning and identity as I speculate about theirs. They ask me to write more about certain subjects; they point out subjects that I seem particularly interested in. Students tell me that they get to know me by reading my essays; I get to know my students in the same way. By critically interpreting my students' writing, I offer them my understanding of who they are.

I am asking, then, that writing teachers read students the way we read Gould or Joan Didion or Alice Walker. I am asking this because it has three results. First, students begin to view themselves as writers; that is, they take their own writing seriously because we (and their colleagues) take it seriously. Second, they begin to learn from and through their own writing. And third, they begin to write without teacher prompting.

If my goal is to help students love to write and to read, which means first seeing themselves as writers and readers, then I know of no better way to do this than to read them as I would any writer. Since I have begun to read my students critically, many of them— but not all— have begun to take their writing seriously. Their response does not come all at once but slowly over the semester as essay by essay they invest more time and energy in what they write. I can't always point to a single response of mine with a direct one-to-one-response from them as evidence of this, though more than one student has said, "I have come to care about my writing— to think I have something

worth saying." Others tell me this by writing on their own and including that writing in their final portfolios. Still others include essays they have written in other classes to demonstrate their commitment to writing. Because they are proud of their work, they share it.

Since I have begun to read my students critically, students *have* begun to learn from and through their own writing. Students do become much more articulate and introspective about themselves and their work. Joy, for example, discovered as she wrote during the semester that she did not want to be a doctor and so changed her major from pre-med to English. She also discovered an interest in women's studies. As she told me recently after reading my interpretation of an essay she had written on Margaret Atwood, "My essay has become much more of a feminist piece in my mind as I've thought about what you said and as I've reread and studied it."

Since I have begun to read my students critically, students have begun to write without teacher prompting. Let me give an example from a student I will consider in detail shortly. Grace undertook to write a journal during our semester together, which she turned in as part of her portfolio at the end of the semester. Although I never saw her journal as she was writing it, it was her response to my comments on the essays I did see and to the conversations we had throughout the semester, particularly one over supper. At the beginning of her journal, she acknowledges my role in its writing and rewriting. Grace took responsibility for her own learning. I did not need to respond directly to her journal writing throughout the semester because I was responding to her other work interpretively. When she was ready for me to read her journal, she turned it in. After I read and reread her portfolio over the summer and wrote an extensive interpretive response to it, I gave her what I had written. She is now writing a response to my interpretation—writing prompted solely by my critical interpretation and not for a grade or a course.

Here, then, I want to give examples of what I tell students, sometimes in writing, sometimes in extensive conferences, and indicate some responses from students. I have chosen brief passages from three writers, each of whom shows at least one of the three responses I outlined above to my critical readings of them: they have begun to take their writing seriously; they have begun to learn from their own writing; they have begun to write without prompting. My aim is that all students achieve all three. Sometimes, however, I must be content with only one.

Steve was an upperclassman about to graduate, and Grace and Aaron were two first-year students. Steve was a basic writer; Grace, a Korean student on academic probation, bright but unmotivated; Aaron a well-prepared, better-than-average student and writer. These three students represent the spectrum of students we find in our classes. Let me add that the brief excerpts I will use come from only a small part of each writer's canon, though they represent the style and themes of each writer. Some readers may disagree with my interpretations, which will focus on questions of self and identity; I welcome disagreement because it supports my view that there is interpretive work to be done, even with the weakest writer.

Steve

Steve was a criminal justice major already working as a police officer. He had enrolled in a psychology and literature course that fulfilled two requirements—his last supplemental writing skills course and a liberal education course. He had passed a developmental writing course, the standard two-semester first-year writing courses, and two other supplemental writing skills courses. But he was still a basic writer, uncomfortable not only in writing but also in speaking. As he asked in one paper, why would anyone “want to read [what he’d written] out loud and let people in your mind. Hell, I don’t know about any of you, but I sure don’t like to read anything of mine out loud and let people in your mind. I’d rather kiss my sister.” Steve shows an astute understanding of writing here; he also indicates that a person can’t hide—or that he won’t hide—when he writes; thus, for him writing is potentially threatening to self and identity. This theme emerges in almost everything Steve wrote during the semester, in particular his final essay. Here are four paragraphs, unedited:

What are masculine traits, rough, unemotional, strong, or be a leader not a follower (submissive). What happens if a women has some of these traits or all of them. She is laugh at and often called names or looked down on, mostly by men. Let's for instance look a the word dike. I could not find the definition in the dictionary for an aproperate explanation of this word, but we all known when it is thought that a women has manly qualities.

The physical aspects of what society thinks that a dike looks like. Very large, fat, squat or both, short hair and no makeup. That's not the bad part of it at all. To be known as a dike, is to be known as a lesbian. Does this mean that any woman who is not submissive or shows that she can do anything that a man can do is thought to be a dike and gay.

What about the word stud, this is a word that most of the men of the world would like to be remembered by. The dictionary reads, a sexually promiscuous man. I think that dike, slut and stud kind of mix together. Stud is all good traits of man, been laid a lot and achieve his goals. On the other hand men give more demeaning titles to women who show any of these traits. A woman sleeps around and gets laid a lot she is given the titled slut, nice HA. Then if she is aggressive or shows any many traits at all. She is then known as a dike and thought to be gay. I don't understand this, how did it get like this and who made it up.

This word to men stud, is not just about being a champ in bed or how many notches he has on his bed post. To a male this word means that he excels in what ever he does. For the most part people use this word as a sexual derogatory. The symbolism of stud means that a man has reached manhood if he is seen as a stud in the eye's of his peers. (in the age practice that I am in). This usually means that he reached manhood.

If any writer should be read in the traditional way, it is Steve. His text reveals someone who reads very little, if at all, and who is struggling to put words on paper. Remember that he is in his last supplemental writing class of his college career, having passed his other writing classes. I suspect, though I cannot prove, that essays in his other classes had been read for errors. It takes a great deal of resistance not to read Steve for correction and remediation.

Steve shows someone who is struggling to make sense of himself and his society. He is asking implicitly, "How would – or should – a man write and speak?" He began class with numerous stereotypical prejudices, particularly about the roles of men and women. Women, he implies, should be submissive, men aggressive. Aggressive women are masculine – dikes – and submissive men are, in effect, feminized. He is attempting to put into words something that has bothered him for a long time.

Concerns about identity surface in these paragraphs. What does it mean to be feminine? What does it mean to be masculine? Are all ugly women with short hair dikes? Are all non-aggressive men homosexuals? Notice that though he easily uses negative labels for women, he leaves the reader to supply the negative male labels. In his culture "stud" is not negative – nor is getting laid. Stud means, Steve writes, "that a man has reached manhood."

It is significant that he thinks "dike, slut, and stud kind of mix together." As readers, we have to do a lot of constructing here to arrive at a possible meaning. I construct his meaning in the following ways – that men who are studs should be considered sluts if women who behave promiscuously are to be considered sluts. However, he is not condemning the behavior of either. In addition, part of being a stud means giving certain kinds of women those kinds of names: to be a stud (and therefore mature) means participating in the demeaning and stereotyping of women. In other words, to be a man means refusing to grant women anything more than label status. But as Steve writes, he begins to question a society that seems to make people choose between men or women; we can't have both because the one negates the other. He also suggests that constant verbal contests result. These are startling insights for someone who began the semester with a definition of himself as a stud and who had always thought in labels and advertising slogans. The quintessential Miller man, living the high life.

Steve uses the verbal labels and slogans as weapons against themselves and ultimately against himself. For maturity is exactly what by the end of the semester he had decided that he lacked. He had learned much about himself through writing, class discussions, and my critical responses. Steve had no answers about how to gain maturity, but at least he finally understood that he had been looking for it in the wrong places.

What I have just explained is, in more formal language, a summary of what I wrote Steve as I read his weekly one-page essays and three extensive

essays. I pointed out to his concerns with identity and gender. I persisted in telling him that he seemed concerned with the meanings of maturity and intimacy. The four paragraphs I have cited come from his final essay, where he addresses the questions I had raised to him throughout the semester. They reveal ambivalence, insecurity, and immaturity. Steve's space breaks between paragraphs indicate a lot of silence, places of inarticulateness that he simply doesn't know how to fill. Yes, the space breaks make his essay longer, which is also their function, but he needs to fill his text with silence because he can't fill it with words. Although his discourse reveals an discomfort with himself and his masculine image, I also find a willingness to change and take some risks. For me, this is a consequence of my critical interpretations, though the most significant response comes in the last one-page essay he mailed to me. There he said that he should repeat the course, because he did not learn as much as he should have.

Did he make as much progress in writing and reading as I would have liked? No. Three months at the end of a college career is too little and too late to help students like Steve discover that their work has value; that is a long developmental process, though he has finally begun. Had each of Steve's writing classes provoked him to take himself seriously through critical, interpretive readings I don't think I would have seen the same student. Even though his writing didn't radically change during my course, his understanding of himself and his desire to communicate did change. He moved from indifference to concern to questioning himself and society. His papers became longer; he attempted to use syntax that was more complex than he had at the beginning of the semester. And he tried to use his reasoning to answer his own questions rather than be content with teacher questions or social stereotypes. So of my three goals, Steve achieved the second; he had begun to learn from his own writing.

Grace

Grace entered class already asking some of the questions Steve left his course asking. As an immigrant, a green card holder, and a fluent speaker of English who thinks of English as her native tongue, not the Korean of her home language, she had intense ambivalence about her identity: Was she an American or a Korean? Because Grace is interested in writing, she chose to read and write about Asian-American writers. Because she is a feminist, she

chose women. Her writing, both in her journal and in her essay on Amy Tan, reveals conflicts with her ethnicity, her culture, her mother, her language. Grace explores who she is and what she wants. By writing as she does, she comes to view herself as a writer, at the mercy of no one other than herself, not a student at the mercy of me, a professor, those creatures who "always seemed like unreachable figures way out in the universe."

Grace and I spent much conference time discussing my interpretations of her work and her responses to them. I pointed out the anger I heard, the ambivalence about her identity, even her passive resistance to school, with perhaps her desire to flunk out and so outwit her mother. I also pointed to places where she had deliberately silenced her own experiences. She responded by reading and writing in her essays on Asian-American writers and in her journal. What follows is, as with my readings of Steve, a formal summary of the week by week and end-of-the-semester critical interpretations I gave her, in writing and in conversation.

Reading the first two paragraphs of her portfolio, we might find it hard to believe that she was a silent student. Only at the end of the semester as a member of a group of supportive women did Grace begin to find her voice. Listen to her words about her first research paper, said during an in-class discussion with her colleagues: "I think this one *sucks!*...you can't even hear *me* in it. This is *not* my paper." Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule tell us that silence is common in the experience of women, as they begin the journey toward knowing. They also tells us that "women's talk,' in both style (hesitant, qualified, question-posing) and content (concern for the everyday, the practical, and the interpersonal) is typically devalued by men and women alike" (17). I find Grace in this description. She is fighting for her voice, but the louder she seems to speak the less she seems to be heard.

In an essay called "Tan's Mother," Grace explores her relationship to her mother as she explores the mothers found in Amy Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. Like the mothers in Tan, "who seek to prepare a better life for their daughters, push Chinese values, stories, superstitions and admonitions," Grace's mother has done the same:

She sometimes tries so hard to make my life a 'success' that she does not realize *or hear* what I want out of my life. I remember telling

her in high school that I wanted to go to a university with thousands of students. Where the community is not full of stiff-neck conservatives—where I get to see life outside of Tulipville GR—have non-Christian friends and atheist teachers. I also pleaded with her that I couldn't stand the responsibility of a homemaker, which is what I have been doing, while she was in Egypt. But, no, *she didn't hear a word I said* . . . She said that as a Korean female I had a responsibility to my family and obedience to parents. [italics added]

Not even Grace's mother allows Grace a voice. Her words are wasted, as if she had not spoken at all. She is reduced to a category, bereft of voice and so of self. It is all "Eun-Hae, do as I say. . .," "Eun-Hae, don't talk back at me," and "Eun-Hae, you are Korean. Why must you disobey me and try all those things that are so American?"

Grace believes that she faces the identical situation with her Korean mother as Tan's characters do with their Chinese mothers. And in both cases, the language of the relationship is not English. Grace feels trapped in a washing-machine mind, to use one of her own images, not knowing who she is, which language is hers, which voice is authentic. She is confused because of the mixed up, un-sorted-out messages from her mother, like unsorted laundry: "She did not want us to be incompetent, Korean housewives. . . but she was not willing to sacrifice the Korean culture, at least not in such big chunks." Notice how often Grace focuses on domestic images. She resists domesticity, yet incorporates it through images of her growing sense of self and voice.

When Grace experiences the same conflict with her writing that she has with her mother, she rejects her work, as she did above ("this is *not* my paper"). The essay, which she did not include in her portfolio, reflected her silence, not her speaking. At the end of a long journal entry, she wrote about her writing experience:

I couldn't start my paper because I was not prepared to write with little research. I had much to say but couldn't find ways of saying it. . . I love my research topic and the importance of learning more about it and understanding it that I will risk my . . . grade for it. I don't care if it is late. I do not want to write a flimsy paper that would be a

disappointment to myself and others who might rely on my paper for support and introduction to Asian-American women writers.

She is looking, in Elaine Showalter's words, for "a literature of [her] own," as well as a voice and a language of her own. She had much to say but no way of saying it. The story of Asian-American women writers was not just any story; Grace saw it as her story, their experience of alienation, fear, and powerlessness, as her experience. She also feels responsible as a writer to her audience. She may be the only source for the white, female, Anglo audience to learn about the history and experience of Asian immigrants becoming Americanized. To submit "flimsy" work—work that is thin, insubstantial, transparent, without body, a fabric without sizing—would not only violate her growing sense of herself as writer but also the commitment she owes to her sister-writers. I must also read this journal entry as comment and gloss on the opening statement of her portfolio; "I had so much to say but couldn't find ways of saying it" means that her washing machine is spinning out of control. Too many *flimsy* clothes, too easily torn by too much anger and not enough time for solid construction—a fleeting semester of unmet deadlines.

Here is her first journal entry, her response to dinner at my house with students who are part of the majority:

There is so much I want to write about. Memories, incidents, my life. Everything is spinning in circles. Tid-bits of conversation and flash backs of incidents mangled in disorganized form flip and turn inside my head.

I find a pattern emerging as her voice emerges. Again Grace uses the images of spinning, of ideas flipping and turning. The angry washing-machine becomes her head, colored clothes and white clothes the "tid-bits of conversation and flash backs of incidents mangled in disorganized form." Her choice of the verb "mangled" is significant. It reveals a sense of brutality and violation of herself. She wants to sort out her life into neat, manageable categories: Korean, American, woman, writer, daughter, sister, friend. But like broken Humpty-Dumpty she doesn't yet know how to put her memories back together; she doesn't yet know how to construct a self.

As she vacillates between her two cultures, as she defends each position, she decides that she has betrayed each one in turn, and so betrayed herself. When she first arrived in this country to attend a white private high school, she says:

I was not proud anymore for being Korean. To everyone I was a Chink. I tried so hard to cover up my embarrassment. I refused to go out to restaurants with my family and relatives because everything they did was so Korean that it embarrassed me. I did not like who I was. The way I looked. My small eyes and blunt nose and straight black hair. . . I feel as if I had betrayed my own kind.

More troubling still to Grace was her ignorance of her own history, by which she meant the history of Asian immigration in this country. Johnnella E. Butler puts it this way: "Students of all racial backgrounds come with an acute ignorance about American history and culture. They therefore possess a false sense of self, based on ignorance of ethnicity and the intricate role it can play in not only dividing whites from people of color, but also in dividing whites from each other—indeed, people of color from one another" (234). Here is Grace's struggle.

Grace wants it both ways—to be Korean, to be American. She wants to negotiate between all the selves, all the "tid-bits of conversation and flash backs of incidents," to come to some center or core that she can accept and reveal as herself. She fights against the mangling and brutality, the forms flipping around in her head. She struggles to find a voice that speaks two languages simultaneously. And her research, which initially she resisted, becomes the catalyst for her search for voice and self. Or as she calls it, "the most important mineral—an element of life. I cannot stop digging for the meaning of life and my role as a female." Intuitively Grace understands that she cannot write until she finds at least provisional answers to her questions. Once she does, she writes, "I can begin my paper now."

The brief passages I have cited show that Grace has responded to my critical readings in the three ways I hope: she has begun to take her writing seriously, even to the point of risking her grade; she has begun to learn from her own writing, as she explains when she talks about how her essays reveal

her own ignorance; and she has begun to write without prompting, as evidenced by her journal.

Aaron

Unlike Steve and Grace, Aaron came ready for college, with a strong sense of his identity. He told me during an early semester conference that he liked being right and he liked being in charge. Aaron also pointed out to me how much he enjoyed mathematics because he always knew that there was a right answer and a wrong answer. Writing, on the other hand, was too subjective for him. So he approached writing as he did math, a problem to solve. For that reason, he resisted revision, because he had worked hard to get the right answer the first time and if it was right then why should he change it? And if it wasn't right, then I should tell him how to make it right. In mathematics, students didn't redo correct answers.

We had this discussion periodically throughout the semester, when he would stop by my office to talk—always unannounced, never with an appointment. Every visit had an agenda, usually some challenge to my approach to writing or to a particular assignment, such as the one to write an essay on any topic using slang. Aaron did not approve of it, as he told me before the assignment and after the assignment.

Somehow, writing in slang couldn't be the right answer. "How will I use it in another college course?" he asked me. "Don't you think you should be teaching us the correct forms? Don't we need to know the right structure for a paper before you let us start playing around?" Playing around was not something a serious student should be doing with his time. A paper written in slang was playing around; it wouldn't help him get A's in his other courses. But Aaron was not content to confront me privately; he also chose the public arena of his essay. I need to point out that his tone of voice in conference was never overtly aggressive or hostile, any more than the tone of this essay is. Here are his first and last paragraphs:

Dear Cheryl and Classmates,

Sorry, but I didn't do this lame assignment. Straight up! I'm not trying to dis anybody, but to crank out a paper loaded with slang is not kosher. Cheryl, you're probably just joshin' us about the whole idea anyway. An entire paper full of slang? I don't buy it. And for the rest of you geeks in the class who just

went with the flow and wrote it, get a clue! Before you all get honked off, take a chill pill, because I have a ton of reasons why this assignment was bad news. . .

Just when I was about to freak from all this pressure, I realized that writing slang would only make me a piss-poor writer for the rest of my life anyway. A paper with big time screwed up English isn't worth didley squat. That's why I refuse to be a guinea pig in this cheesy excuse for a learning experience. I only hope that our wannabee prof will see that she screwed up and eighty-six this experiment with all of you wannabee writers.

In eloquent protest,

And then he signed his name.

Here Aaron pits himself against me and the rest of his colleagues who quietly acquiesced to my request to "slang it." But he chooses a safe approach to his protest; he fulfills the assignment, while protesting it. Most of the letter concerns his supposedly fruitless attempts to get help coming up with slang, thus his last paragraph where he concludes that writing in slang wouldn't make it, anyway, so why should he bother. He analyzed the assignment as he would a math problem—how to achieve the most with the least. Here is what I told him throughout the semester.

Aaron is a risk-taker, within limits. He has read the class, me, and the assignment, and has decided that a protest letter won't blow his semester. He also knows that it's funny; if he didn't realize it, one reading aloud with his colleagues assured him of his success. Aaron enjoyed the attention he received from his fellow writers and complained to me that he didn't see the point in wasting class time that way. He knows his audiences as his mix of slang shows. He took account of my lack of familiarity with college slang by using "bogus" slang, like "just joshin'" to refer to me, "didley squat," and "cheesy." He reserved contemporary slang for his colleagues. Aaron pushes his insults toward me and his colleagues as far as he thinks is socially and rhetorically acceptable. He wants us to get his point—me, especially—but he doesn't want to anger us.

If anything separates Aaron from Steve and Grace, it is his seeming lack of questions. His text exudes self-confidence and a strong sense of personal identity. Only a student with a strong sense of his own voice and

ability would take any kind of rhetorical risk. Most students are too worried about the teacher thinking they have gotten the assignment right (the ubiquitous, "Is this what you want?"). Aaron wants to please himself. If he thinks he's gotten it right, he's willing to leave it there. Unlike Steve and Grace, there is no waffling back and forth, no sense of inner dialogue creeping outward. A student in another class, after reading Aaron's essay, adopted a similar metadiscourse style. She wrote an essay on procrastination by making the work itself an example of procrastination. One of her colleagues expressed to me the reservations most students would have: "I liked it, but I would never turn in a paper like that. It just didn't seem like a paper."

Only when we read Aaron's "Rhetorical Analysis," a one-page look at what he has written, do we find some misgivings:

. . . it was difficult for me to keep the usual essay form. I was disappointed that it ended up sounding more like a story than an essay. Is that okay?. . . I do hope that my paper was mildly offensive, as slang often is. I didn't want to go to go far with it, however. I tried to keep a general introduction-body-conclusion format so as to make it sound like it was an official protest letter. . . I did less revision of my sentences than usual. . . I was kind of disappointed that in some ways my paper did not lead in the most logical direction. . . I think over all that my paper was less technically proficient than usual, but that had a lot to do with the style. Might my paper have been more effective if I had written it very correctly so as to make the slang stand out more?

Here we find the back and forth dialogue that Grace and Steve allow to enter their formal discourse but that Aaron keeps well hidden. There is a tentativeness that doesn't surface in the letter itself. Notice that he repeats the word "disappointed." The first refers to the story-like quality of his essay, the one thing his subsequent readers have praised. The second is his concern with logic; essays, not stories, are logical. Notice, too, that Aaron is concerned about correctness, technical proficiency, and the proper form of an essay—"introduction-body-conclusion." Yet immediately after his point about proficiency he writes a sentence that is syntactically formal and complex, thus undercutting his concern that I might think he doesn't write correctly. He asks a question, "Is that okay?" which seems to be directed toward me but

in the context sounds as if he's asking it of himself. He also admits that he didn't revise as much, perhaps a fear that his answer wasn't "correct."

Aaron's analysis supports my reading that he is a qualified risk-taker. He admits that he wanted to be "mildly offensive" without going too far. He leaves it for the reader to supply the reason. Image? A sense of decorum? Knowledge that he would be reading his text to three women? That I would be reading it? That too great a risk was worse than no risk at all? Perhaps Aaron thought that it would show a lack of control as a writer and as a person to use the kind of extreme slang he skirts: "I couldn't find any funky slang. I was up crap creek." Or, as he says in his letter about "cuss words": "(I'd probably get narced on by some goody-goody, and some. . . administration bigwig would want me kicked out)," the only place in his letter where he offers an apology about his tame collection of slang. Again, this is a matter of image. Aaron sees himself as a man in control.

Did Aaron begin to take his writing seriously? Yes. His continuous questions about corrections and form to me and his experimentations in writing show that he viewed himself as a writer. He consistently undercut his complaints about my readings and my theories by writing to satisfy himself. Did he learn from his own writing? Yes, again. His protest letter led him to choose slang as his research topic because he had learned from his own writing how much slang he and his friends used. He wanted to learn more about himself by studying his own language. Did he begin to write without prompting from the teacher? No—and yes. I have no evidence that he was writing outside of class because he wanted to. On the other hand, he wrote the longest evaluation I have received in seven years of teaching. Most of my students do write a paragraph or two. Aaron filled both sides of the form and quit because he had run out of room and time. I take his extensive critique of the course as small evidence that he had begun to write without teacher prompting, despite his complaint that because I had not addressed his "proficiency," he had decided to spend most of his time on his other courses, like math.

Critical and interpretive reading offers a range of possibilities, some of which I have only touched on. We can read students as individuals; we can also read them as members of a group of four or five writers, as members of a writing community of twenty or more, as students in our institution. We can

take into account their social, cultural, and political histories. We can hear the conversations they are holding with themselves and their society, as well as with us. These ideas are familiar to those of us who have studied modern critical theory, whether Marxist, feminist, reader response, or deconstruction. But most of us trained to teach writing are not taught to read critically; we are never asked how we interpret an essay let alone the canon of one of our students. We leave that work to students and teachers of literature. I maintain, however, that critical interpretation is the work of all teachers who read, as it is the work of all students who write.

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Cheryl Forbes teaches writing at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.