11 What Grades Do for Us, and How to Do without Them

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I have chosen not to grade students' writing any longer for a very simple reason: I have found that grading just doesn't work in helping people to learn to write more effectively. In my experience, no matter how much I try to make the assignments "real," no matter how I try to encourage students to write for their own purposes and to make their own discoveries, no matter how easy I make it for students to take risks, as long as I'm the one grading their papers, students tend to understand the writing situation as one in which their task is to please me so that they get a better grade. When I give grades, they tend to ask questions like "How can I make this paper better? Why didn't it get an A? What do you want me to revise?"—all questions that indicate to me that they haven't seen the writing of that paper to be a communicative act, but rather a demonstrative one. They have written to produce what Anne Freadman might call "an example of" something, rather than the something itself.

I see several problems with this state of affairs. The first is that it portrays what is to me a false notion of what writing is and what purpose it serves, because it obscures writing's communicative function (sometimes beyond recognition). The cycle of write, revise, get a grade, write, revise, get a grade tells students that writers write primarily for the purpose of being evaluated, not for the purpose of conveying information or attitudes about a subject that they care about, and certainly not to change anyone's mind, or to move anyone, or to make them angry, or to get them to laugh; that writing is typically produced and evaluated in a vacuum, divorced from genuine communicative intent or function or a genuine real-life situation to prompt it; that the purpose of writing is to produce fixed texts which serve no function

beyond providing the writer with occasions to produce them; and that the end point of writing is for the writer to receive varying degrees of approval or disapproval. This is a bit like suggesting that the point of growing vegetables is to win prizes at the county fair. Prizes are (arguably) nice, but they don't put food on the table.

Furthermore, if students are concentrating on their grades at the expense of thinking about their writing as a communicative act, they are being given a false model of how people actually develop as writers. They are laboring under the delusion that learning to write is simply a matter of being told what to do and then doing it, that if the teacher could but only provide the necessary bits of information (or if they could only manage to learn all the right rules), they could generate flawless texts every time. If students are intent on getting a grade, they don't see much of the necessary cognitive work involved with learning to write; they don't come to understand that to a large degree, they will have to learn by trial and error—and that they themselves, not some outside authority, will have to determine where the error lies, that they themselves will have to determine what to do to correct it. They may come to think of learning to write as a process with an end point which the teacher has achieved and they have not. Or worse, they may think of learning to write as something only a few people can accomplish; and they will never develop the habits of mind which will enable them to continue to grow as writers for as long as they care to. This is really my chief objection to using grades and teacher-generated assessment and evaluation to teach writing: It denies the cognitive work about assessment and evaluation that has to become part of every writer's repertoire. What's important isn't that *the teacher* thinks that a student has done well, but that *the student* knows how to determine if she's done what she set out to do in a particular piece of writing (which may or may not include getting a good grade on it).

Finally, a grade-driven model of writing prevents students from engaging a great deal of what they already have learned about communication and language and how they function in the world. Students come to school with a number of years of rhetorical experience. They come to us with a host of language-learning behaviors that have served them since infancy. While I would not claim that learning to write is identical to learning to speak, I would argue that the two are similar enough that we ought to apply what we know about language learning in general to the classroom in particular. I would also argue that by not doing so, we deprive ourselves and our students of rich

resources for learning to write—and that our students' development of writing skills is considerably hampered as a result. But explicit correction or evaluation of the kind provided by grades plays an extremely limited role in natural language-learning situations, which instead provide intricate, multilayered avenues of feedback and support for the language learner.

How Not to Grade?

I have tried many different arrangements for arriving at grades without my actually having to grade students' work. I have used various kinds of portfolio assessment methods; I have had people evaluate each other's work; and I have used contract-grading schemes. At this point, I have arrived at a method which suits me and which seems to allow for more of the kinds of learning I value than do the other methods I've used.

My approach is two-pronged: I try to create writing situations that simulate natural, out-of-school language-learning situations as closely as possible, and I shift the tasks of assessment and evaluation to the writers themselves in as many ways and as many different contexts as possible. What I actually do to determine students' final grades is really quite simple: I assign grades solely on the basis of the amount of work that a person does. Thus, in the freshman writing class that I taught in the fall of 1995, for example, I required that students

- read and annotate about 200 pages' worth of articles, culled (by them) from popular periodicals for the first half of the term and from scholarly sources for the second half;
- write one-page article recommendations (whose purpose is to convince others in the class to read the article they recommended) about once every other week (a total of five);
- write one-page responses to articles which had been recommended by others (they wrote six of these in all);
- produce a draft and final copy of a five- to seven-page typewritten, double-spaced midterm report;
- produce a draft and final copy of a five- to seven-page typewritten, double-spaced final report;
- write one-page responses for the authors of five to seven other midterm reports;
- write one-page responses for the authors of five to seven other final reports;

- write five 150–200-word "colleague acknowledgments": statements about the writing of classmates whose writing they respected;
- write a three- to five-page self-evaluation at the end of the semester.

Anyone who did all of those assignments to the length requirements specified got an A. Anyone who did 80 percent of the work (counted as total numbers of pages specified) got a B. Seventy percent of the work got a person a C, and so on. Missing a major assignment (I defined the midterm and final reports, the colleague acknowledgments, and the self-evaluation as major assignments) got a student's grade lowered by a whole letter.

Let me elaborate a bit. The scheme above called for 200 pages of reading and a minimum of thirty-six pages of writing. If students did at least 90 percent of that—180 pages of reading and thirty-two pages of writing—they were assured of getting an A in the course, assuming they'd not missed a major assignment.

This sort of grading plan creates a lot of paperwork; it's necessary to inform people early and often about where they stand. It also involves a lot of discussion, particularly at the beginning of the semester, about matters such as what constitutes a page, and so on. Sometimes those discussions get tedious—but they are no more tedious than the discussions I used to have about what makes a "substantive" revision, or what "better" means, or why certain changes haven't improved a piece of writing.

Actually arriving at the students' final grades for the course is only the tip of the iceberg, though; it doesn't take much work or thought to devise a scheme and to keep track of who has done what. Anybody could do this, once they'd decided to; it's pathetically easy to determine a final grade on the basis of quantity instead of quality. That's not the interesting part. The real trick is to create contexts where people are motivated to work and learn—where they take the work of the classroom seriously—in spite of the lack of grades on papers.

What Do Grades Do for Us?

As I have experimented with different ways of not grading writing, I've developed a healthy respect for the myriad functions that grades serve for both teachers and students in our classrooms—functions that relate to a student's performance and behavior in the classroom, even as they have little to do with that student's mastery of the subject of

the class—and for the difficulty of replicating those functions in the current context of American schooling. It is not enough simply to take the specter of grading away and then to expect that students, liberated, will soar into new realms of language development and risk taking in their writing, and that teachers, released from the burden of evaluating and grading, will become coaches, mentors, and friends. Take away grades and you also take away the traditional means whereby students are motivated to work hard; you take away the chief mechanism through which they get feedback about their writing; you take away the means through which they learn how successfully they write compared with their classmates and others; and you take away their sense of accomplishment and reward. Similarly, when you take away grades, you take away the familiar lens through which teachers are accustomed to viewing students, themselves, and everyone's respective roles in the classroom—even what goes on in the classroom. If we choose not to grade student writing, that choice sets in motion a chain of causation that necessitates a number of other decisions as well.

If we take away the prop of grades, then, we need to see to it that the functions served by grades (albeit poorly served, for many people) are met in other ways. In the rest of this essay, I want to discuss those functions and the other means by which I've been trying to meet them. I also want to provide a small glimpse into how my role in the classroom has changed because I am no longer grading students' writing.

Motivation

It is undeniable that grades motivate many people. The problem, as I see it, lies in what grades motivate *for.* Grades provide people with extrinsic rewards, which work at cross-purposes with intrinsic motivations. There are numerous studies which show that extrinsic rewards severely inhibit intrinsic motivation (summarized in Kohn). Furthermore, extrinsic motivation doesn't lead to intrinsic motivation. Once the extrinsic reward is removed, people do not generally continue to engage in the behavior for which they were rewarded. Extrinsic reward doesn't lead to long-term, lasting changes in behavior (Kohn).

And long-term, lasting changes in behavior are precisely what I want to foster in my writing classroom. I not only want people to get response and feedback from their peers for the fourteen weeks in which they are enrolled in my course, I want them to continue to see getting a reader's response as a valuable addition to their repertoire of

writerly tools. I not only want people to engage in extensive reading and research when they write papers in my class, I want them to come to understand that research really means extended engagement with the academic conversation, not finding five sources to quote for a paper. I want people in my classes to find reasons to be motivated to read, write, and research—and I want them to be able to find those reasons when they write for other classes later on (even if those classes are graded traditionally).

As I have experimented with different ways of not grading in my classrooms, I've come to see motivation as the result of a complex interrelation between activities and reasons. Paris and Turner argue that it is misleading to think of motivation as a "characteristic of people or a property of events" (213). Instead, they propose that "analyses of motivation should consider the characteristics of individuals in specific situations because a person's motivational beliefs and behavior are derived from contextual transactions" (213–14). They identify four characteristics of academic tasks which motivate learning:

- choice ("the ability to choose among different courses of action, or, at least, the freedom to choose to expend varying degrees of effort for a particular purpose") (222);
- challenge ("success without effort is a cheap reward and quickly loses its value in the classroom") (224);
- control ("Once students have chosen personally interesting and challenging tasks, they must exhibit control and autonomy to reach those goals in classrooms....Despite...[the] benefits of student control and autonomy, teachers often provide little genuine freedom in classrooms") (225); and
- collaboration ("Social guidance and cooperation in classrooms have now been recognized as fundamental for motivation") (226).

Setting up situations where students have motivated reasons to write without grades is tricky and risky. It requires second-guessing the sorts of tasks that will interest students and being willing to change or modify expectations in midstream if interest is waning. It requires setting up mechanisms whereby people are held accountable for doing their work. It requires giving students as much control as possible over the circumstances in which they write, while at the same time providing enough structure so that they can get help if and when they need it.

At first, engineering a classroom that provides students with choice, challenge, control, and collaboration seems like a dizzying,

impossible task. One imagines a room full of twenty-five students pursuing twenty-five different agendas—with a teacher writing twenty-five lesson plans, twenty-five sets of feedback, and going home each day to twenty-five nervous breakdowns. Happily enough, I've found, creating such situations is largely a matter of "less is more." You start with one or two organizing principles or overarching pedagogical goals and move out from there. In my case, I am determined that all the writing my students do will be dialogic—they will write to people who will answer their writing, either by writing back, or by using it as the basis for further research, or by trying to do what it asks, or whatever—because I believe that those uses of writing illustrate most clearly what writing is for and why people do it. I want my students to perceive that they are writing out of their own genuine need to communicate something to someone who really wants to know what they have to say. A writing classroom without grades cannot function without this condition being present; otherwise, students will know that there is no reason (real or otherwise) for them to do the required work, and they will become bored and frustrated.

My task, then, initially becomes to find real audiences for my students' writing, or to make the situation in the classroom real enough that students care about reading what their classmates have to say. I try to find one large task, encompassing many smaller tasks, that will engage people for the duration of the semester—in short, I try to find what Frank Smith calls "enterprises." In the past, I have had freshman writers collaboratively investigate Henry Ford, the auto industry, and their impact on the southeast Michigan region where I teach; I have had technical writing students create discipline-specific Internet guides for humanities faculty; I have had technical writing students create World Wide Web pages for departments on campus; and I have had ESL students write a booklet designed to tell students new to the U.S. and to our campus about strange or baffling customs and university procedures. In each of these cases, the primary audience for the writing was someone other than me and someone outside the classroom, but I have also had success with having students work in groups to investigate specific topics and present the results of their research to their classmates by means of a class book.

If students' anonymous and confidential end-of-semester evaluations are any guide, the enterprises work at motivating people:

> I liked the way we were assigned to write documents that were actually going to be used. This not only helped to motivate me in doing the work, but it also gave me a sense of accomplish-

> ment knowing that what I was spending so much time writing wasn't going to be read by the instructor, graded, and then thrown out.
>
> The freedom that we had during this class's [electronic] discussion also motivated me. It would be easy to say that my personal involvement in my writing has taught me that what I write has great meaning and it created a passion to write rather than a boring and bland analytical writing assignment where I am struggling and just jumbling words onto paper to reach the professors' requirements. I wanted to write, I wanted to send e-mail messages, I wanted to make my point, I wanted people to notice and understand my writing. The freedom to choose our own research topic also pushed me to write with a definite goal and an absolute interest to make my point.

When I read those self-evaluations, I hear the voices of students who did find motivation in the situations I created for them.

Such is not always the case, though, and those other circumstances are troubling. The flip side of grading as a motivator for students is that grading can be a means of punishment, or at least of control, for a teacher. Giving a low grade can be a way (a not very specific way, to be sure, and hence not very threatening to the teacher) of signaling to a student that she needs to buckle down and work harder. Not giving grades on writing means that instructors have to find other means of informing students that their work is substandard and that they need to pay attention to it. I hope that the enterprises I've constructed will create means whereby a student will become publicly embarrassed if she does not complete her work on time and correctly—the need to fulfill an obligation made to group members or to other faculty on campus often does keep students more conscientious than simply completing an assignment for me.

Feedback

Grading is a crude substitute for many of the mechanisms that provide feedback in naturally occurring language-learning situations, and yet, as feedback mechanisms, grades are extremely poor. Even when teachers (or peers) offer extensive commentary in addition to grades, the presence of grades distorts the feedback, influencing the way the writer hears it. Giltrow and Valiquette, for example, showed that while students in their writing center recognized that instructors' comments on their papers constituted a specific genre which it was important for them to understand, the actual comments themselves confused and sometimes angered the students, who didn't know what they were

supposed to do on the basis of them. Giltrow and Valiquette found that students most often read the comments as justifications for the grade on the paper, rather than as specific suggestions for improvement.

Other research, too, shows the dubious value of teacher comments on students' papers. Summarizing the research, Sperling writes that

> The emphasis on response has motivated much research on the comments written by teachers on students' papers. A large number of investigators examining the effects of such comments on students' writing have concluded that comments alone do not affect students' work (see review by Hillocks, 1986). One study of college teachers' comments showed them to be so facile and vague as to be mere "rubber stamps," interchangeable from text to text (Sommers, 1982). Other studies have shown comments to carry meaning for the teacher but not for the student, to be ignored by students and thrown away, and to be discounted by students who see in such comments their teachers' "confused readings" of their papers rather than their own writing weaknesses (e.g., Butler, 1980; Hahn, 1981). (66)

Sperling further notes that most of those studies were conducted on the basis of analyzing comments apart from instruction; there is evidence that comments may function best when embedded in process-based instruction. Even here, though, Sperling issues a caution, pointing to research that suggests that "student writers and teacher readers abide by complex and context-bound assumptions about one another that comments may not help to mediate....When students read teachers' responses to their writing, they may face, in part, the task of unpacking this complex of orientations" (67).

By contrast, in natural language situations, feedback is inherently easier to understand because the language always is intended to *do* something, to provoke some sort of a response in a hearer or reader. In such situations—a toddler asking her father for a glass of juice, for example—there is no need for grades; the person making the utterance knows if it succeeds by whether or not her hearer acts in the way she intended for him to act. Actions, of course, need not be restricted to physical movements; it is often the case that people talk to each other in order to evoke emotional reactions in their hearers, or to get others to share their point of view on a particular topic. Much research (Polanyi; Labov) shows that the point of a conversation is, in fact, to negotiate the meaning of the conversation, to settle on an interpretation of the facts and events being discussed. Thus, in the normal course of

language-learning events, the ability to cause a specific action or to negotiate a certain meaning with our hearers provides feedback about the success of our efforts at communicating.

Naturally occurring language-learning situations also provide feedback to the learner specifically about particular utterances. For example, children learn the grammar and syntax of their native language largely by trial and error, and explicit correction from adults is comparatively rare. (Usually, in fact, it is restricted to specific formulaic situations—"Say thank you for the gift"—or to a small percentage of a child's utterances—"Don't say 'ain't.'") When correction occurs, though, it almost always occurs subtly and in the context of a meaningful discussion. If, for example, a child's utterance is unclear or ambiguous, a listener will ask for clarification, possibly offering alternatives, as in the following example:

> *Child* [looking at a car in a parking lot]: Mom, look at how that one's shaped.
>
> *Mother:* Shaped?
>
> *Child:* Yeah. It's all banged up. Look. It has rust.
>
> *Mother:* Oh, what shape it's in.
>
> *Child:* Yeah, what shape it's in.

In situations where an ungrammatical utterance does not interfere with meaning, usually no explicit correction is given. However, adults will sometimes repeat the structure of the utterance in a later utterance of their own.

Grades alone, of course, come nowhere near to offering this kind of subtle example or reinforcement to learners. Grades only tell students whether or not their work has met an acceptable level of competence, without helping them to know in what ways their communication has failed or succeeded and without providing alternatives which might have worked better. As a result, students come to believe that all that really matters is a sort of crude acceptable/sort of acceptable/not acceptable rating; they lose interest in the finer distinctions about performance.

Furthermore, grades teach people not to care much about what linguists, in reference to spoken language, call "repair"—about modifying or expanding on their work so as to clear up any initial confusion that resulted from it. For most people, once the grade is given, the transaction is concluded. Even in writing-process classrooms, the opportunity to revise for a higher grade is often seen by students as an opportunity to raise a grade, not to clarify the communication.

In the classroom, again, enterprises help to structure situations that provide for a fuller and more meaningful range of feedback for writers. As a result of structuring situations where written language will actually be used—to persuade or inform readers, who will use the information or arguments to carry out further tasks or to construct counterarguments—writers' and readers' feedback is always embedded within a context where the writing is expected by everybody to be immediately meaningful and pertinent. In such cases, the ways in which the reader uses the information that the writer has presented, or the sorts of counterarguments that readers advance, tell students the ways in which their written discourse is effective or ineffective. For example, if the enterprise in the class is to teach faculty members how to use the Internet, a guide that is incomprehensible to the faculty member for whom it was written is clearly ineffective. The situation provides the feedback; the faculty member clearly cannot follow the instructions the student has written because the faculty member is doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. The writers are pushed to clarify their statements and to find other ways of expressing their thoughts. The communication is not finished until a successful negotiation has occurred.

The standard set by negotiating understanding is at once more demanding and satisfying than working for an A. As one student put it:

> At the start of the semester the only thing I was looking forward to was the end of class....But with the group work...I notice that from reading other people's materials and just actively listening to what is being said amongst the groups that the quality of my work is improving. When I can look at my work and honestly tell that it is getting better, I try to dig deeper to get more facts or look at the topic from a different viewpoint to make it more interesting. Also, when I see people actively discussing my paper and arguing it vigorously, it is sometimes hard for me to believe that I wrote it.

And in an anonymous, end-of-semester evaluation another student said:

> I learned to be persuasive with my writing. The class discussions on the e-mail were very helpful. Not only did I get to express myself but often times students questioned my opinion and I had to explain in more depth the exact meaning of my statement. Which skilled me with the technique of persuasive and supportive writing.

Evaluation and Reward

Perhaps most obviously, grades are also a crude way of evaluating a person's performance and rewarding people for a job well done. Grades enable students to know where they stand in relation to others in the class, and they (theoretically) are supposed to give outsiders—employers or graduate school admissions committees, most likely—an objective measure of how an individual ranks in comparison with some Platonic standard.

This notion of standards is problematic. On the one hand, we want students to be aware that there *are* standards, and yet their understanding too often takes the form of wanting precise rules. If there's a standard way of doing things, why don't we simply tell them about it, so they can get on with it? A too-rigid conceptualization of standards reinforces a cookbook-style approach to writing: Follow the recipe and you'll succeed. Even though we as teachers know that blindly following recipes for good writing almost always leads to disaster, students are more often than not resentful at our refusal to provide recipes because they think we're holding out on them.

In the same way, although we might promote the idea that standards are really quite flexible (by saying, for example, that there are many types and kinds of good writing, or that there are many ways to approach a particular assignment) and that they are negotiated within a particular community (and thus, not really a product of a particular teacher's whims), students invariably understand standards as instantiated in particular classrooms at particular times by particular individuals. Thus, they ask, "What do you want on this paper?"—not "What does the academic community at large consider acceptable on this paper?"

Thus, if students are writing primarily to get a decent grade, then their focus must necessarily be on writing in a way that conforms to the standards held by the grade giver. To the degree to which they are writing in accordance with what the grade giver thinks of as good writing, they are denied the opportunity to learn to make their own value judgments about writing. Grades deprive students of the need to do the cognitive work involved in figuring out what constitutes appropriate writing in a given genre or discourse community. I want to be clear that this state of affairs applies simply because of the presence of grades in the classroom, irrespective of what any particular teacher does or does not do. As long as the teacher is passing judgment, the teacher's judgment will matter more than the student's.

But it is neither possible nor desirable to sidestep judgment altogether. In a class where grades are not given in the traditional manner, students still need to know how their performance compares with that of their classmates, to get a sense of how their writing works overall, out in the real world. Rather than provide such evaluations myself, however, I try to construct situations which will enable students to learn to make them. Learning to assess their strengths and weaknesses in comparison with others' is, to my mind, a crucial ability for writers (at any level) to develop and nurture. Good writing starts with the admiration of and respect for others' good writing.

To satisfy the writer's need for evaluation, and also to give people the chance to make their own judgments, I use a process of colleague acknowledgments, which I have borrowed and adapted from Russell Hunt (1993–1996) at St. Thomas University. At several points during the semester, I ask students to write me a note, telling me which (three or four or five) of their classmates' writing is particularly effective. I vary the wording of this assignment, depending on which rhetorical features I want them to think about. I might ask them to explain which pieces of writing have challenged their beliefs or perceptions, I might ask them whose writing is the clearest, or I might ask them whose style they most admire and why. I might ask them to quote specific bits from others' writing in their explanations.

I then redistribute these acknowledgments (anonymously) to the people who have been acknowledged. Thus, students in the class gain an understanding of whether others see their work as valuable, and if they do, what exactly about their writing strikes people as worthwhile. I love distributing the acknowledgments; people usually find them far more affirming than any grade could be—and since the acknowledgments are freely given, they are read by the recipients as being much more sincere than even the sincerest praise coming from a teacher.

The acknowledgments always make for interesting reading, both for me and for the people being acknowledged. I am frequently amazed at the diversity and subtlety of what students notice about each other's writing; I nearly always get a fresh insight into what's really going on in class for the students—what they value about writing and the class, what they're coming to value, as well as what they're not seeing or understanding. Mostly, though, students' acknowledgments are often specific and perceptive as well as complimentary, as the following example shows:

> Jennifer is a very talented writer; she is very expressive and heartfelt in her papers. I especially enjoyed reading the article on corruption in America's P.D. She is very persuasive in the presentation of her topic, and doing so on a level that is of interest to us, young college students. I thought that her point-of-view was the same as mine, or vice-versa, in that, "What distinguishes an officer of the law from the average person?" and "We do not need close-minded corrupt police officers taking away individual rights and creating chaos." I admire the fact that she is strong-minded and will put it in her writing. I am always afraid of what other people would think, and tried to avoid any type of controversy. After reading Lisa's papers, however, I realized that your view won't always be like someone else's, but it is a good way to make a discussion. I have learned to be more expressive from Jennifer's example.

Sometimes, even if the acknowledgments are not particularly specific, they display an honesty which is not available to me as a teacher to show:

> Kerri puts a lot of effort into her work; you can tell she doesn't B.S. her way through writing assignments and she does a good job making her topic sound important and meaningful.
>
> Sandy's writing is never confusing; she always gives great detail and gets right to the point. I can read her papers without getting completely bored.
>
> I thought Laurie's topic proposal on stress was very persuasive compared to most of the other proposals. She made a somewhat boring topic sound pretty interesting.

Also, sometimes it is clear that the acknowledger understands that her acknowledgment is written primarily for the writer, although she knows that I read them, too:

> I think that Danny R. is an excellent writer for a variety of reasons. He manages to write casually, without losing the basic sense of grammar or the point of the assignment. I enjoy reading his writings because they are interesting as well as informative. I like what he did to the encyclopedia article. He used his imagination to get around the obstacle the article presented. (He knows what I mean). I respect his writing because he gives his opinion very openly, yet at the same time, it is never offensive. I hope he keeps this writing style because it is persuasive, and I think we will find it beneficial to the group.

It often happens that not everyone in a class will receive acknowledgments. In order to increase the learning that is possible from the acknowledgments, I have used a variety of strategies to make it possi-

ble for others to read them. One strategy is to ask people who've been acknowledged to send me, via e-mail, the acknowledgment they value the most, along with a short explanation of why it was meaningful to them. I then reproduce those notes anonymously and pass them out for the whole class to read. At that point, we can discuss in more general terms what makes for effective writing—and what makes for effective acknowledging. People thus have the opportunity to see what kinds of qualities their classmates have acknowledged in others' writing, as well as how others have effectively expressed their admiration; the whole notion of what makes for good writing can thus expand beyond any one person's ideas.

Another strategy that I have begun to use is to ask students to post their acknowledgments anonymously via computer using a World Wide Web-based bulletin-board program called HyperNews. The advantage here is that as the acknowledgments are posted, other students can read them. I'm hoping that being able to read what others have said, just before they post their own acknowledgments, will give students another context for learning strategies for effective writing. I also hope that the ability to read others' acknowledgments will help to develop a classroom climate of appreciation—rather than criticism—for the writing being done in the class.

Replacing Grades with Learning

Finally, then, deciding not to grade students' writing has had a far more profound impact on my classroom than I ever imagined it would. In the process of noticing that removing grades was also removing many positive elements from the classroom, and of trying to replicate those positive elements in other ways, I have had to interrogate many of my longest-practiced teaching techniques in light of my most deeply held assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning. I have begun to question nearly everything that goes on in classrooms—in mine and others'. I think that I'm on the right track with what I am doing now. The kinds of learning I see in my students lead me to believe that if a class is structured to provide the elements that grades supply, not grading students' writing really can free them to take more control over their work.

I'd like to close with comments written by two students on their end-of-semester self-evaluations:

> I think I have reached new heights in self-expression this semester. Sometimes when I write for classes I am afraid of my point

> of view offending people. This semester I think I have overcome that fear. A lot of what my group was writing about is considered controversial and I was aware of how strong my views are about the topic, but I overcame that and wrote what I felt should be written. It was especially rewarding when people agreed with my strong opinions and enjoyed my writing because of them. In other classes I would have toned it down a bit. I really felt that there would be no negative consequences from writing "from the heart" so I went ahead and did just that. I didn't have to worry about being graded down for offending the professor. Because of the lack of grades, I was able to concentrate completely on my writing and not what I thought the professor wanted to read.
>
> Through high school I had always done well in English but I never really got the opinion of other students on my writing. In this class I found that all those A's in high school didn't really mean anything if other people can't understand your writing, find it boring, or have many questions about what you wrote.

These evaluations, and others like them, let me know that the payoff for upsetting the apple cart is that at least for the space of time that they're in my class, people have the chance to learn what it means to write for themselves.

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Interlude

I remember once bringing home a report card from elementary school. I had straight A's except for one A-. My father looked at the card and said something like, "What's the matter with you, this A-?" Now my dad was a fairly stern parent and wanted us to achieve in school. I was crushed, and to this day, I don't know whether or not he was joking.

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