8 Student Attitudes toward Grades and Evaluation on Writing

Jean S. Ketter and Judith W. Hunter
Grinnell College

Jean S. Ketter was a high school English teacher for eleven years and is now assistant professor of education at Grinnell College. She has conducted research on portfolio assessment of writing and portfolio assessment in teacher education. She has published in English Education *and* Teaching Education.

Judith W. Hunter was a high school teacher for five years and is a professional tutor in the Grinnell College Writing Lab. She consults with faculty about the teaching of writing and edits the Writing Forum, *the Grinnell College newsletter on the teaching of writing. She also serves on the Grinnell-Newburg Board of Education.*

The evaluations that I find most useful are those that are balanced: when a teacher points out the good along with the bad, it is much easier for me to work on improving my writing. Obviously, there may be times when a paper really does need major restructuring, but the task is made much easier when a little encouragement is given along the way.

—Irene, a junior science major who has chosen to devote time to improving her writing

Those who teach don't always listen to students discuss how they feel about themselves as writers and how grades affect their view of themselves as such. When students at Grinnell College

We would like to thank the following students for filling out the questionnaire: Natalie Christensen, Alice Gates, Melissa Hess, Camille Johnson, Sonam Lama-Sherpa, Jennifer McCormick, Matt McKinney, Msawenkosi Nxumalo, Taimur Rahman, Amy Robinson, Sayaka Sawada, Helen Siefert, and Bryon Witzel. We would also like to thank the following students for filling out the questionnaire and for being interviewed: Eric Brue, Sarah Daney, Mike DeWaay, Masako Koyangi, Carmen Nunez, Rachel Phillips, and Sarah Slack. Additionally, we would like to thank Karin Connelly, Mathilda Liberman, Christopher Hunter, and Lisa Mulholland for their help with this project.

responded to a questionnaire asking them what kind of assessment they find useful, they indicated that they value discussion, revision, and collaboration with an evaluator:

> When the evaluator writes a little paragraph explaining why he/she did certain corrections and/or writes positive comments about the assignment. (Emily)
>
> Revision of papers. (Phil)
>
> Insights into why I did it one way and why it should be the other way. (Ned)
>
> I don't know. Maybe the best evaluation I have received is when someone goes through my writing and shows me their criticism. (Frank)
>
> When the teacher asks me questions to make me think about what I'm trying to say. (Tina)
>
> I really appreciate it when my instructor questions the ideas and problems sentence by sentence. This technique reveals a lot of assumptions I've made about the nature of the material I'm writing about, and also gets to the crux of the technical problems I have. (Georgia)

In these remarks, students show that they value the chance to revisit a paper and to talk with someone about their writing. None of these students mentioned grades as a useful tool for assessment.

As the authors of this essay, we define assessment as feedback intended to shape a student's performance to meet clearly established and expressed criteria. Thus we view assessment as communication, not as judgment, not as a method of sorting students. As does Nick Peim, we question the ethics of grading practices devised to sort students and to grant status to certain kinds of language on the basis of claims that universally understood criteria for good writing exist (188). As Grant Wiggins suggests in *Assessing Student Performance*, we believe that grades should result from clearly expressed criteria and standards which the student has knowledge of prior to writing; we believe that faculty should evaluate students according to how well they meet those criteria and standards on the basis of their abilities (168). Many teachers currently use grades to rank order students' writing performance in comparison with others'. We believe that teachers should consider whether grades are an effective means to encourage students' thinking or to communicate information students can use to improve their writing, that is, to alter it to meet better the evaluator's criteria. We assume that students, in order to improve, have to feel

confident, have to feel as if they can succeed. Beginning with these assumptions and beliefs, we investigated how grades affected students' attitudes. The student voices we listened to reverberated with discouragement that resulted from evaluation that conveys only the presence of faults and the finality of judgment.

Our shared interests in how students learn to write spurred us to conduct research into the effects of grades. Jean's experience both as a high school English teacher and a college professor has convinced her that current grading practices are subjective, reifying, and ultimately unethical because they marginalize and sort students according to the too narrow parameters of performance. Judy's work in high school English and as a professional tutor in the Grinnell College Writing Lab has led her to believe that assigning a grade which compares one student with other students merely interferes with the individualized process of teaching students to write. Both researchers believe that eliminating grading altogether is a desirable goal, but one unlikely to be achieved.

We looked into student attitudes about writing and grades by administering a questionnaire to twenty-one students taking a one-credit course, "College Writing," in the college writing lab during the spring semester of 1995. From among those students, Jean interviewed seven volunteers, all of whom received comments on a number of papers, both from professional tutors in the college writing lab and from their professors; they were interviewed about their reactions to this feedback and to the grades they received from professors. By listening to the feelings they expressed in these interviews, we hoped to understand the complicated reactions students have toward assessment and grades.

The seven student volunteers agreed to two interviews with Jean, one in which they would bring a graded paper to discuss. They were a group likely to be interested in improving their writing because they were taking the nonrequired "College Writing" course. In their academic work at this very selective college, none of these students would be described as marginal or at-risk. However, their struggles with conquering the art of communicating in academic discourse marginalize them at our college and cause most of them to perceive themselves as unsuccessful writers. The group is highly diverse as to background, age, and experience with writing.

We do not claim that these students' perceptions give a complete picture of grading practices at Grinnell. Students' perceptions may be mistaken: Students may misinterpret what a professor says, or they

may read into comments an attitude which the professor does not intend to communicate. Some of their views may be clouded by their negative reaction to the grade they received on the paper or may be influenced by the opportunity we offered in this study to speak out about the process of grading. Despite all of these possible difficulties with studying students' perceptions, we still maintain that it is important to look at them. We who teach need to know how our grading practices affect our students and how our students interpret the grades we give them.

At Grinnell College, the paper that students most often bring to the writing lab is what we will refer to as the "standard academic paper." Although writing assignments that differ from the standard academic essay are becoming more common at the college, the majority of assignments are still discipline-specific, thesis-driven articles. Evidence of the prevalence of the standard academic paper at Grinnell is found in an inventory of writing assignments taken during a recent semester. Such standard academic papers—including what individual professors refer to as analyses, synopses, grant proposals, term papers, and research papers—are by far the most common types assigned (Gross).

In this essay, we discuss student reactions to grades on the standard academic paper. We do not mean to communicate that this type of writing is more valuable than other modes of discourse or that it should be the dominant mode of writing assigned at college. We are aware of the current controversy among compositionists about the dominance of academic discourse. One view holds, like Bartholomae, that "academic writing is the real work of the academy" because "there is no better way to investigate the transmission of power, tradition, and authority than by asking students to do what academics do" (65–66). Another view asserts that in asking students on the margins to "mimic the discourse of the academy" while simultaneously critiquing it, we place these students in an untenable position (Hourigan 41). Judging from the preponderance of assignments at our college that call for academic writing, we conclude that our faculty believe that the structure of the standard academic paper can provide students with a useful tool for expressing sophisticated ideas. Although this belief may be problematic and in need of investigation, many at Grinnell currently hold this view. Perhaps faculty see themselves as responsible for preparing students to succeed in graduate school, since a high percentage of Grinnell students do go on to do graduate-level work. Whatever the reason, this emphasis on the academic paper at Grinnell

has widespread effects. One effect is that the writing lab staff see it as their obligation to teach students how to write the academic essay because that is what the students are asking to learn and what they believe will bring them success at Grinnell. However, because many students (as the ones we interviewed demonstrate) are not familiar with the discourse community's tacit assumptions about appropriate style, because they are uncomfortable with the certainty that the structure and voice of the academic paper imply, and because they are unacquainted with the academic audience, they may find their expression restricted by the expectations of the discourse community.

Grades are one of the rewards that faculty use to reinforce the notion that the standard academic essay is not just different from, but better than, other kinds of writing. The students we talked to come to the writing lab, for the most part, because the grades drive them. Grades indicate to them that they haven't been successful with the type of discourse they believe is expected of them, the type that they believe means success at the college. Their comments reveal that they don't understand how to write the A paper that they believe meets the professor's expectations for the standard academic essay.

With the exception of Melissa, a confident sophomore with well-developed writing skills, the students we interviewed conceive the form of the academic paper as a rigid heuristic which limits them. They see the structure not as a flexible, manipulable organizing tool, but as a box into which their ideas have to fit. In the interviews, students gave the impression that they knew the right words to explain the structure of their paper, but when pressed to elaborate, they responded with formulaic explanations, almost as if they had been drilled on the components of a good essay and were reciting them by rote. For example, Tina, a junior transfer student who had attended a state university, explained the rigid structure she believes she must fit her ideas into: "You do your introduction, you do one side, you do the other side, and then you discuss which you think is better." Jenny, an active first-year student, told us that she has figured out that the best way to write a paper is to "find what citations I was going to use and make that into my outline...and then write around the citations." These students' restricted notions of the form for the standard academic paper do not allow them to take into account such possibilities as considering counterarguments or allowing for failures of their own argument, possibilities valued by most faculty.

Although one student, Melissa, saw the possibilities inherent in the structure of the standard academic essay, she still criticized it. Mel-

issa was a sophisticated writer, interested as much in discussing composition theory and modes of discourse as in improving her own writing. She explained what she disliked about the expectations for writing at the college:

> I was really getting frustrated with just feeling that every one of my papers was the same, in a way. I just had to focus on all that we had been studying and choose some very small minute thing to focus on and to try to prove that everything we'd ever looked at fit into the theory or idea. Or to just be so selective in finding evidence and not [pause]—I prefer to look at things in a broader perspective, and usually that's not what we're expected to do here. We are supposed to make kind of half truths into truths in our papers.

Despite this critique, Melissa admitted that "it's a good skill to have, to be able to argue well, and I think that's what I'm learning from writing the types of papers that my teachers expect of me." She saw how the structure has the potential to help writers, but recognized that she does not feel at ease enough with that structure to use it well:

> I may not be a strong enough writer yet to be able to get past that with this framework. I think that if a prof who's a good writer were to take the same formula and structure that we're taught to use—the introduction, development and conclusion—if a prof were to take that and write a good expository piece on something, it would probably be a lot better at incorporating contradictions and incorporating ideas and the prof's own thoughts in a way that would still be a good example of that genre, but I feel that I'm not a strong enough writer to be able to take in those less [pause]—the more ambiguous elements into the paper and still be able to make it a good paper within the framework that we're supposed to work in.

Most of these students believe that there is some "code" for the A paper that they are missing. We discovered three main factors that contribute to their difficulty with breaking this "code." First, they struggle with the voice of the academic essay. Second, they are unacquainted with audience and with how audience expectations shift in different disciplines. Third, they are confused by the idiosyncratic and highly individualistic expectations for writing that teachers communicate through their grading and comments.

First, the problem with voice. These students were mystified and somewhat befuddled by the voice of the academic paper, what Elbow calls the "rubber-gloved quality to the voice and register of most academic discourse—not just author evacuated but showing a

kind of reluctance to touch one's meanings with one's naked fingers" (145). Ned, a serious, thoughtful first-year student, described this sort of "author-evacuated" voice that he believed he was being expected to use in his writing: "I mean, this paper was definitely written by me and it's all my thoughts, but it doesn't really feel like it....[I]t feels like, sort of like VCR instructions; it doesn't feel really personal....I didn't get to write it the way I want to write it." Jenny explained that academic writing frustrated her because she is a "passionate person" who feels "strongly about ideas." However, she has been advised that the "idea you're passionate about isn't always the best idea...that I should maybe step back and like look at some other options before I just start writing." Jenny perceives the standard academic essay as robbing her of her own passionate voice. She may not know what kind of voice she is expected to use to replace it, although she does know that she needs to master another, more impersonal voice in order to get good grades.

Second, these students are inexperienced in writing for the academic audience. They struggle to envision the person to whom they are writing their papers and cannot make the subtle adjustments in audience that different disciplines require. Delores, a vivacious and voluble woman frustrated with her inability to understand what is expected of her in her writing, explained:

> It's really important for me to grasp that...a humanities paper would be different from an education paper or from a science write-up. I want to be able to, and I don't know that I ever will be, but to know the types of styles and what's appropriate and what's not....Each one has a different technique...and is approached in a different manner and I have to know and distinguish them.

Ned, who was working hard to improve his writing in his first year of college, described the process he believes takes place as he learns to adjust to the expectations of different professors and disciplines:

> These first two years you're coming away with all these different...little things that professors have...and that's basically when you need the writing lab, you need to figure out what's going on. And then once you, once you have...all these styles.... But, I think it [would help] a lot if...the professors would tell you before each paper what exactly [they wanted].

These students understand that in different assignments, they are speaking to different audiences, but they do not know how to address these audiences appropriately. One way teachers in the specific disciplines may help students learn about audience is by clarifying the spe-

cific audience stances they assume when they read each assignment—to help students move away from a rather inchoate and intuitive assumption about audience to one that is more particularized, developed, and clearly articulated. In doing so, teachers will help students clear up what Charles Moran describes as the difficult "rhetorical situation of the student in 'academic writing'," one that is "extraordinarily murky—writing-to-be-evaluated-by-someone-you-don't-know" (146).

Third, although students appear to believe that some "standard academic essay" exists, they discover that each professor has a slightly different notion of what that essay is. In addition, they find that, even in the same class, professors sometimes have different expectations for different papers. Mary Minock explains that students lack a

> metatheory that would allow [them] to interpret the differing expectations and make coherent the differing advice from different teachers about the different writing they do and will do....[Therefore,] they often simply are left to figure out our prejudices. (166)

Ned revealed his inability to understand independently what the professor wants:

> I went in and talked [the paper] over with [a writing lab tutor] and she sort of interpreted it for me...and I got a feeling for what [the professor] wanted, got a feeling for what I should write and what I sort of did wrong.

Many of these students, needing more information about professors' expectations, use the writing lab as a resource for discovering each professor's prejudices and idiosyncrasies. Ned explained that he learned about "points that certain professors—that really bug them," but he was not convinced that these same "points" would "apply to other professors....It seems like every professor has this little stylish niche that they've created." Frank, an intense, gentle, first-year student who felt discouraged about his writing abilities, expressed his worries about whether the professor who had just handed back an assignment with what Frank considered to be a good grade would have different expectations for the next assignment: "It kind of worries me because...this turned out well, and so I'm worried that the next won't turn out as well." Ned stated a desire for his professors to give clearer statements of philosophy about writing:

> I think if all the professors would start giving a handout at the beginning of the semester saying what they are looking for—

> what their philosophies are and all that—then you'd be learning yourself by following that."

Delores, clearly frustrated by a professor's marginal note on a paper she was sharing with us, gave a graphic description of the kinds of comments she cannot use or sometimes even understand:

> ...well, [reading a comment from her paper] "needs transitions." Well, if I didn't do it the first time, there's a reason why. There are some times when I consciously don't put transitions because I don't know how to find them. And when I get a professor, for instance, who says [adopting an arch tone and imitating an imagined comment], "The thesis must not only incorporate your analytical assessment of it all but also must answer the 'So what?' question," I think...so give me an example! You can read about how to hop and if someone doesn't show you how it's done, you can't do it.

Clearly, these students want the professors to show them how to hop: to explain what their "secret code" is and to provide models of essays that have "broken" the code successfully. If a professor wants students to write what he or she conceives of as a standard academic paper—one with an introduction that piques the reader's interest, with the thesis at the beginning, with topic sentences relating explicitly to that thesis at the beginning of each paragraph, with an orderly sequence of paragraphs culminating in a conclusion that explores the "so what" question—then the professor, understanding that other kinds of papers exist, ought to make that expectation clear. Faculty ought not to assume that everyone knows that formula, knows what it looks like or how to do it. Faculty ought to explain, to model, to make explicit their often tacit expectations for the papers they require.

By engaging in these practices, teachers will prepare students to better understand the assessment they receive. In this way, the assessment will better meet the criteria which Wiggins (26–27) says should guide it:

- In assessment, the interests of students should be paramount.
- Assessment should provide information which the student can use to identify strengths and to guide improvement.
- Assessment should motivate students positively.

Let us look at the first criterion: In assessment, the interests of students should be paramount. The students in this study were interested in improving their ability to write, to perform the tasks their professors want them to perform. And they regarded the grade as an accurate

reflection of their ability to do so. It is in the student's interest that assessment should provide him or her with good information about how to learn better and do better. This goal is not met if a grade merely interrupts or ends the process of improvement, rather than encourages the student.

Often, the grade, instead of working in students' best interests, merely discourages them; indeed, they may write poorer papers because they are worried about the grade. Yasuko, an exchange student struggling to express complicated ideas in a second language she was trying to master, exemplifies how students' concern for the grade may cause them to say something other than what they mean or to eliminate ideas: "So sometimes I have to change what I want to say or give up something to write down—it's too confusing." Jenny, too, even though she did not have the problem of writing in an unfamiliar language, described her frustration with trying to improve her writing and the paralysis she felt as she saw her performance worsen: "The harder I tried, the worse [the papers] got. I don't understand, because the more revisions I do, the worse it is, so maybe I am just not seeing things." The discouragement caused by grading makes them so worried about meeting teachers' expectations that their writing becomes more unimaginative and stilted.

When we look at the second criterion—that assessment should provide information that the student can use to identify strengths and to guide improvement—we clearly need to question whether the grade does either of these. The grades these students received on their writing did communicate to them whether they were close to achieving the ideal essay their teachers have in mind when they make an assignment and which the rhetorical situation they invent for students demands. But the grade, even with comments, gave students little useful information about how they should alter their future work to meet the professor's standards for success. The students we talked to viewed grades and comments as not very informative about strengths and only generally so about weaknesses. Jenny said, "Comments on a paper are there and depending on the grade you're like, [pause]...you just don't read them because you're like, I deserve better than that." Ned explained that, because each teacher had his or her "little niches," he was not certain it was possible for him to use comments on future papers: "The comments point out what you did wrong. I think you get a general picture of what you write like, but nothing that will really help you improve your writing." Because the students saw the ending comments and the marginal notes as intensely contextualized, they

did not perceive them as information that could be carried over or applied to new writing. Melissa, the confident writer, said, in describing marginal comments: "It's nothing you can take and use...'cause I think of that being entirely about the particular idea that you thought of. Like this, this [comment] here is about a connection between two ideas in a paragraph...and I could never use that again." Perhaps they have difficulty applying evaluative comments to future writings because each assignment demands that they adjust to slightly different rhetorical situations and slightly different audiences.

In all the cases we examined, the students were looking at papers that had received a final grade. From the students' remarks, we infer that it is terminal grading which is the problem, grading which stops revision. It seems questionable to argue that teachers can expect students to improve their writing by building on skills they develop during the semester if the students are given no opportunity to revise or rewrite each assignment. We realize that allowing students to revise or rewrite does not guarantee that their writing will improve. According to research on revision (Bridwell; Calkins), inexperienced writers struggle to improve texts effectively through revision because their strategies tend to be superficial and because such writers fail to look at writing holistically or globally. However, experienced writers tend to make more holistic or global revision and to view revision as a way of discovering incongruities and dissonances in their writing (Sommers). Whether students are inexperienced or experienced, some evidence exists that they can be taught to revise more effectively (Wallace and Hayes). In general, even with inexperienced writers, revision does seem to lead to improved writing (Wallace and Hayes). It seems obvious to us that, although allowing for revision does not guarantee improvement, not allowing for it certainly makes improvement even less likely. When students revise their papers after receiving feedback unaccompanied by a grade, they can grapple earnestly with real problems in communicating.

These students see the grading process not as a guide to improvement, but as a mysterious and inviolable process—something that is done to them by experts who almost magically uncover their inevitable mistakes and shortcomings. It is unsettling how meek and willing they are to allow themselves to be judged by a standard they neither understand nor feel capable of achieving were they able to understand it. They regard the grade as an immutable judgment. For example, although Melissa, a strong writer with sophisticated views

on writing, agonized about the organization of one paper, she assured us that she would not go to the professor to try to change the grade:

> I could hit myself over the head....I think I want to go in and talk to him about it too, just, not to change the grade or anything, 'cause I mean, the way that I handed it in is, I can't change that, but...uhm, just to kind of see if he thought it would have been better if I hadn't done that.

Ned praised his professor for her teaching of writing, even though he couldn't understand her comments:

> Mrs. [name withheld] is, she's a really, she's really good when it comes to writing; I mean, she's a good critiquer of writing. ...And she knows what she's doing....But it's just, I can't really make sense of some of her comments.

If he can't "make sense" of them, how can he use them to improve?

Instead of viewing grades as communicating information useful to their future writing, these students view grades as indicating whether their ideas agreed with those of the professor, with those of the respected authority. Many of the students interviewed believe that earning a good grade requires saying what the professor wants to hear. Yasuko explained that "sometimes I know that maybe if I emphasize different things she likes, maybe I might get a better score because she likes it. So sometimes I do that." Yasuko's remarks exemplify the idea of many of these students that they are expected to construct their ideas to fit the views of the professor. Delores expressed her appreciation for an "objective reader" in the writing lab to counterbalance what she saw as the subjective grading of a professor:

> [A writing lab tutor] is so objective and I know that...she's going to be objective and she's going to tell me what's wrong with my work, but if...I get something back from my professor and he didn't feel quite the same way then I know...that it's just a matter of opinion and it's just a matter of what he expects and...that makes it easier for me not to get so upset with myself and not to get so upset with the professor because I know that...somebody did think that I did well and that's important to me.

Melissa explained, most eloquently, this influence of the professorial authority:

> Sometimes when you go to talk to a professor...they can't withhold their ideas or kind of their own image of what your paper is going to be like, and a lot of times I have been in to talk to a prof and come out with the prof's conception of how the paper

> should be and have done it according to that because I know the prof will like it that way.

Ned expressed the notion that the purpose of the standard academic essay is to demonstrate that the student has the right answer; this purpose, in his view, precludes any chance of the student improving on a draft of an essay. Ned told us that some professors did not like students to come in to discuss papers before they were submitted for a grade because it would be "like cheating." He explained further that

> [I]t might get tricky when you start talking with the professors because, they're the ones that grade you on it, and they don't want to give everything away....[I]t's like, you're here to learn....[I]t's sort of like a little game....It's like, if you talk to a philosophy professor, he's not just going to sit down with you and tell you the meaning of life. You've got to figure it out for yourself.

According to this view, if students succeed in figuring out the right answer, the secret, they earn an A. Few of these students appear to believe that they might actually write about something the professor did not already know or did not agree with; instead, they appear to view the writing task as reporting back to the professor something he or she expected them to gather from the course—writing with no surprises, no discoveries, no mistakes.

The third criterion we consider—that assessment should motivate students positively—is particularly telling in relation to these students. The poor grades students had received on their writing at the college undermined their confidence. Jenny, who was advised by one professor that she "may not be small-liberal-arts-college material," recalled the trauma of trying to prove herself to that professor:

> There were times when I went in to talk with him and I had to fight off tears, just because I knew he was trying to help me...and I was trying to make him proud of me in a way....And I...just couldn't do that somehow. The harder I tried, the worse I did....One of the reasons why I wanted to please him so badly was to prove to him...that I did belong here.

If we hope to motivate our students to improve their writing by grading it harshly or by holding it to rigorous standards that have not been clearly communicated to all students, then these students' comments provide us with cautionary advice. They are eloquent in communicating the discouragement—and, in some cases, the paralysis—a low grade creates in them and the encouragement and confidence a

simple comment like "good" brings them. Jenny, astutely, used a metaphor of teacher as coach to explain the effect of criticism:

> The good coach is the one that will sit you down and say, "Now you did this wrong but you did this really well and you, you've got that part down, you just have to work on this other part." As opposed to a coach that will just, like, ream you out for the one thing you did wrong....[Y]ou could have won the game and you...could have thought you played really well, and he will just ream you out for this, like, one thing you did wrong....It makes you not...like that person because you did do something well and you deserve to be acknowledged for that. You shouldn't just be taken, ya know, taken off just because of the one thing you did wrong.

Similarly, Delores described her frustration with a paper for which she had earned what she perceived as a low grade: "It is really frustrating when you put everything you possibly could and sweat blood for this paper and get back a B-. And you think, 'This is the best I can do; it's my very best!'" Tina said, "I don't think I will ever get an A on anything I write here" and went on to explain: "I just feel continuously unconfident in my writing skills. I mean, when I try to make an effort, then sometimes I don't do well and when I blow it off and do it at the last minute, sometimes I do do well." Jenny described her experience when her grades for papers in a class

> went downhill....I kept trying harder and harder to write these papers for him and they just kept getting worse...actually worse. And so, that's another reason I took writing lab this semester. That class really undermined my confidence in my writing ability. I really, after that class, I really thought that I wrote like shit.

Frank explained the importance of self-confidence in writing:

> Probably one of the most valuable things that the writing lab helps me out with, when I bring my paper in really early, and the writing lab helps me out with just giving me confidence in writing....When you start out the writing process and you're, if you're writing with confidence, that's a huge advantage....

These comments indicate that grading, rather than motivating these students positively, merely discourages them.

These students tend to view grading as the only part of assessment that matters, a final score that terminates the possibility for improvement. In contrast, we believe that if grading must be a part of assessment, it should be a part of the learning process, a process that

takes place in the public discourse of the classroom community: students should collaborate in establishing criteria; they should collaborate on revision; and teachers should delay grading and grade only what the student, through these collaborative activities, has selected as his or her best work.

One way in which the grade can become part of the learning process is for students to participate in the delineation of criteria for that grade. In "Myths of Assessment," Pat Belanoff, describing grading as that "dirty thing we do in the dark of our own offices," urges teachers to bring assessment and grading into the classroom community, where students and teacher collaborate on defining criteria clearly (57). Even if teachers do not involve students in developing criteria for grading, they are obligated to make clear their own criteria for judgment and to communicate, prior to grading, how students can meet them. For the students we listened to, the combination of a letter grade and comments does not communicate these criteria well enough, or communicates them only after the fact.

It seems to us that teachers would do well to model their assessment of writing on the collaboration that occurs in the writing lab at our college. In this writing lab, the tutor functions as the average, educated reader for the paper; although students maintain responsibility for their papers, they hear the way such a reader reads it, they hear the questions such a reader has, and they see where they may have made unwarranted assumptions about such a reader's knowledge or attitudes. Few professional writers would publish something without having a trusted reader give an opinion on it; coming to the writing lab affords students that same privilege. Even if the services of professional tutors are not available, students can benefit from the feedback of other readers, whether they be classmates, peers, or the teacher.

Obviously, teachers do not have the time to sit down with each student for a series of talks about each paper, but perhaps there are ways to get closer to that ideal. Some teachers at Grinnell have reading days in class or in special sessions; in these classes, students share early drafts with one another and get feedback from classmates and from the teacher. Some teachers read and comment on early drafts and allow revision of all or several papers. Many teachers encourage students to revise globally, not just to correct usage, by insisting on such holistic revision in rewrites. Some teachers delay grading as long as is practically possible and involve each student intimately in that final grading moment. Until that moment, some teachers keep collaboration open; students may continue to tinker with their writing, sharing

it with many others, just as we do as professional writers. By providing feedback to students as they are writing—instead of after they have "completed" a performance—teachers make it possible for students to adjust and improve their performance.

A final way in which teachers can make grading a more useful part of the learning process is by avoiding practices that make writing seem to be a test, that is, a one-time performance that cannot be altered or revised. If writing is merely a test, students, hearing little praise and much criticism, may fail to understand what they are doing right and may believe that they are doing it all wrong. Students learn nothing positive from the double insult of first writing poorly and then learning that the teacher agrees with their estimate of their poor performance. One way to avoid grading papers that students perceive as failures is to use a portfolio for which students choose the pieces they wish to have evaluated. If students recognize that not all of their writing will be submitted for a grade, they might possibly come to see writing not only as a means of demonstrating what they know, but also as a means of discovering something new.

The students who spoke with us in these interviews about their attitudes toward grading are perhaps not typical of all college students, but their negative reactions to grades are predictable. No one likes to struggle to speak in a new language, about subjects one is unfamiliar with, in a form that seems rigid and unforgiving, to an audience that seems unfriendly, and with the firm prospect of receiving a grade that will symbolize failure. We assume that the goal of teaching writing is to improve students' writing skills; we find that the grades these students get, mainly on the standard academic paper, tend, instead, to convince them that they can't write.

Until students come to see the grade as merely a part of assessment and to see themselves as an essential participant in the development of the grade, the effects of grading will remain negative and counterproductive. Before students ever receive a grade, they should collaborate in the development of clear, specific criteria. The teacher and students should explore and articulate the particular idiosyncracies of the discipline and the specific audience for each writing assignment. Students would also benefit from access to exemplary models to imitate and from support and encouragement as they work toward reaching the criteria. Short of abandoning grading of writing altogether—which we see as a desirable but unlikely goal—it seems to us that the best compromise is to encourage collaborative assessment by allowing students to interact with others, to delay grading as long as

possible, and finally to grade only what students select as their exemplary work. To extend Delores's analogy, if we want students to hop, we should demonstrate how we want them to hop. We should discuss with them whether we want them to hop far, or high, or steadily, or beautifully. We should give them ample time to practice hopping, and we should encourage them to have peers evaluate their hopping. We should take care that we do not discourage them from developing their own style of hopping. And finally, if they stumble when they try to hop, we should help them back up and encourage them to continue, not just confirm that they fell.

Works Cited

Bartholomae, David. "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow." *College Composition and Communication* 46 (1995): 62–71.

Belanoff, Pat. "Myths of Assessment." *Journal of Basic Writing* 10 (1991): 56–66.

Bridwell, Lillian S. "Revising Strategies in Twelfth-Grade Students' Transactional Writing." *Research in the Teaching of English* 14 (1980): 197–222.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick. "Children's Rewriting Strategies." *Research in the Teaching of English* 14 (1980): 331–41.

Elbow, Peter. "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues." *College English* 53 (1991): 135–55.

Gross, Janine B. *Inventory of Writing Assignments.* Grinnell: Grinnell College, 1995.

Hourigan, Maureen M. *Literacy as Social Exchange: Intersections of Class, Gender, and Culture.* Albany: State U of New York P, 1994.

Minock, Mary. "The Bad Marriage: A Revisionist View of James Britton's Expressive Writing Hypothesis in American Practice." *Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the 90's.* Ed. Lad Tobin and Thomas Newkirk. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1994. 153–75.

Moran, Charles. "How the Writing Process Came to UMass/Amherst: Roger Garrison, Donald Murray, and Institutional Change." *Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the 90's.* Ed. Lad Tobin and Thomas Newkirk. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1994. 133–52.

Peim, Nick. *Critical Theory and the English Teacher: Transforming the Subject.* New York: Routledge, 1993.

Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980): 378–87.

Wallace, David L., and John R. Hayes. "Redefining Revision for Freshmen." *Research in the Teaching of English* 25 (1991): 54–65.

Wiggins, Grant P. *Assessing Student Performance: Exploring the Purpose and Limits of Testing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

Interlude

There are lots of ways to avoid grading student papers. Check-plus/check/check-minus; comments only; self-assessment by student, meaning student decides (probably within certain guidelines) how good the work was; conferences; pass/fail; satisfactory/unsatisfactory; groups rank members' work according to rubrics they (or you) develop. Evaluation is a necessity, whether you use grades or not, because in order to reach audiences, satisfy readers, convey our thoughts, get what we want, we have to observe certain conventions and be familiar with certain requirements. Grading is an art, not a science, but I don't think we need to apologize for, or slight the necessity of, making judgments. To praise student work indiscriminately cheats students of the chance to achieve. To withhold judgment lies to them.

—Deirdra McAfee
Henrico High School
Richmond, Virginia