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A Tree Falling in the Forest: Helping Students 'Hear' and Use Your Comments

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When it comes to commenting on student writing, good advice abounds. The literature suggests that we offer praise and critique, be specific in our comments, and balance suggestive comments with directive ones. To improve our effectiveness and efficiency, we may adopt a grading rubric, choose "minimal marking" for errors, or comment only on a few crucial focus areas.

Even so, a perfect set of comments on an essay can still fail to "make a sound"—if students do not hear us and use our feedback to improve their writing. All of us have seen it happen: students glance at the grade and toss the paper as they leave class. Responding to student writing is perhaps our most labor-intensive act and a terribly frustrating effort if it has no effect.

Meanwhile, learning to write better is one of the most difficult tasks facing students, and our comments can support their efforts. Recently, I find myself being more deliberate in the ways I try to help students use my feedback to improve their writing. Let me illustrate with some examples.

Adjust the timing: While we know it makes sense to give more feedback early in the writing process, doing so efficiently is difficult. We may have to comment a lot on an early draft and then very little on the final essay, even though the final essay has a grade that needs defending. We may comment more early in a term, even though later assignments may involve more complex skills or carry a higher grade-weight. To help us all adjust, I tell students what I am doing and why, I combine this approach with some of the strategies I list below, and I use a rubric-checklist of key features that helps me quickly defend my final grade even without commenting on all those features. These steps help me to *shift* rather than simply *increase* the time I spend commenting.

Ask students for responses: If I record my essay grades separately from my responses, I can then hand back essays in class and ask students to respond in writing to my comments before I hand back (or email) the grades. Usually I ask students to write about one comment they understood, one that surprised them and one that they have a question about. In some classes, I collect and respond to their responses; in others, I treat students' responses as a write-to-learn exercise and don't collect them, though I may offer students a moment to compare notes with a partner. This exercise effectively engages students with comments even if I only devote five or 10 minutes to it.

Help students become revisers: Simply reading my comments does not always sufficiently inspire or direct students. To motivate more learning, in my draft-and-revise assignments I now set aside a small percentage of the final essay grade specifically for "significant revision," an activity I take time to define for my students. I can check this quickly by eyeballing early and later paper drafts in a folder, or by asking students to use "Track Changes" in an online document. When time is short, I ask for a revision memo instead: in a paragraph or two, students identify key changes they *could* make in an already graded essay, and include specific examples. Other times I set aside class time for students to practice a revision strategy such as elaboration. "Take out your previous draft, find one place where I asked for more detail and write three sentences that would help. Share those with your partner." I preface this exercise by discussing examples of good writing that I hope students will emulate, and follow it by answering student questions.

Ask students to articulate their learning: Students, of course, need to take responsibility for improving their comment reading and revising. In reflective post-writing assignments, students articulate how a current essay or draft uses comments provided on the previous one to improve the quality of writing. More recently, I have used an approach borrowed from a colleague: students find a comment I've made on a previous essay. They write it on the top of their current essay and then use two sentences to explain how the new essay implements that suggestion.

Teach students to comment: Finally, I have begun asking students to make the first comments on their own essays. Even on final essay copies, I ask them to write

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- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
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Inspiration from Renaissance Beauty

By Richard A. Giaquinto, St. Francis College, NY
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"Let the beauty that you love be what you do" (from *Mediations from the Mat*, 2002)

I took this statement to heart last summer. I took 20 students to Florence, Assisi, Rome, and Pisa to share what I like to do—travel. The trip was part of a new course, *Teaching Literacy through the Visual Arts*. The course explores how visual arts might support the teaching of reading and writing in the elementary schools. We spent half the time in the classroom and the rest visiting major art galleries. Now that I am back home, I have been asked a lot of questions about the experience. Two questions have been asked repeatedly, and answers to them motivated me to prepare this article. *Why did I do this? What did I learn from the experience?*

I undertook the project because designing the new course gave me the chance to consider the connection between the visual arts and teaching reading and writing to children in grade school. I had always been interested in the possibility of a connection but had never taken time to explore it.

Second, I didn't realize this at the outset, but the course actually confronted some issues relevant to retention. I found out through first-hand experience that students—especially in commuter institutions—respond quite favorably to meaningful experiences that transcend the traditional lecture.

Not everybody can take their classes to Italy, but everybody can look seriously at *how* content is presented in the courses we teach. This experience taught me that we need to take risks in our classrooms. Whether it's dramatizing a reading to students or—even better—having them do it, the goal is to find better ways to engage students in learning.

As for what I learned, I discovered the importance of two key factors associated with improving retention—the importance of learning communities and the relationship between instructor and student. On the trip, students were more open to new relationships and more willing to take chances when it came to learning, and were less reticent in their communication with me. Again, I am not suggesting that all faculty travel with students (as wonderful an experience as it can be), but rather that all faculty pay closer attention to daily interactions in class and on campus with students.

Students were allowed to suggest projects through the use of proposals; this self-selection allowed them to explore areas of interest and the results proved to be better than anything I might have assigned.

They worked collaboratively on these projects. I also believe that the strategy of permitting them to help design the rubric to evaluate these projects added to the success of their work. It gave them ownership, direction, and the capacity to self-assess and reflect on their work.

On the trip I found that setting clear limits and having high expectations prevented many behaviors reported as being typical of today's college students. I didn't have trouble with excessive drinking. Students respected me and followed my instructions. They were also open-minded about the Italian culture and what they could learn from it. Again, this has implications for teaching. It supports the need to carefully spell out expectations for students in the course syllabus.

In closing, my message is simple; don't resist the need to reinvent when it comes to pedagogy. You might find what I did, without ever leaving your classroom.

Changes in the Academic Profession

As college teachers, most of us know that the profession is changing, but we aren't always as up on the details as we should be. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, between 2001 and 2003 only 54 percent of the faculty hired were appointed to full-time positions, and 35 percent of all full-time appointees were not in tenured or tenure-track positions.

A very well-documented recent book (reference below) highlights these changes by describing three different kinds of faculty appointments. What these appointments are called at the local institution does vary a great deal, but virtually all colleges and universities employ faculty who teach in each of these categories.

The first and easiest to understand is the traditional **tenure-track appointment**. Because there has been such an influx of new faculty entering higher education (primarily as retirement replacements), new tenure-track appointees have been surveyed and interviewed at length. Much is known about their experiences as beginners in the academic community. Taken together, research indicates that new tenure-track appointees are concerned about three aspects of their jobs: 1) the lack of comprehensive, clear and rational guidelines and procedures for the tenure process, 2) their sense of a lack of community at their institutions and among their colleagues, and 3) the difficulty of balancing the demands of their personal and professional lives. A significant number of new faculty are not finding these traditional appointments as attractive as former faculty did.

In 1978, 58 percent of all faculty were in tenure-track positions. Now, 32 percent of all full-time faculty have **contract-renewable appointments** and 46 percent of all faculty members teach part time. These full-time non-tenure-track positions increased by 88 percent between 1975 and 1998. Institutions use these more flexible positions in a variety of ways. In some fields and professional programs they are used to hiring experts who have lots of experience but may not have the academic qualifications for a tenure-track position. Some institutions have responded to concerns about the number of part-time teachers by converting formerly part-time positions into full-time jobs.

For some professionals, this kind of appointment represents a viable career alternative. However, the ways that faculty are treated in these positions depends very much on the institution. In most places, salaries are lower than for those holding tenure-track appointments and teaching loads are heavier. But at some institutions, these positions are permanent (with multiyear contracts), promotions are possible, and full fringe benefits accompany the positions. Faculty holding these positions may have voting privileges and be eligible for professional development opportunities. In other places, faculty in these positions are marginalized by both the institution and their faculty colleagues.

Finally, institutions appoint some faculty to **fixed-term positions**. Here the work is mostly part-time, for a specific time period, like a semester or year, and these contracts come with no guarantee of renewal. The percentage of faculty in these positions depends both on the type of institution and the academic discipline. Thirty-seven percent of faculty with fixed-term contracts teach only one course, although 16 percent teach more than three classes. Most receive less than $3,000 per course and no benefits for their teaching services. Most teach with virtually no institutional support. There is little or no office space, equipment, or support services available to them. There are few professional development opportunities provided. Seventy-one percent of part-timers do have jobs outside academe, and their college teaching, on average, provides about 27 percent of their total income.

Clearly, there are political issues relevant to each type of appointment. But regardless of your position and view of other kinds of appointments, it is wise to have the larger picture and to understand that faculty appointments are not all the same, not equal and not like they used to be.

Ed.'s note: The book below is a great reference on the changing nature of faculty work. It covers all aspects of academic work (not just the part of our jobs that relates to teaching) and ends with a compelling list of recommendations for coping with these many and significant changes.

Reference: Gappa, J. M., Austin, A. E., and Trice, A. G. *Rethinking Faculty Work: Higher Education's Strategic Imperative*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

Helping Students 'Hear'

FROM PAGE 1

three to five margin comments: a few in which they identify something specific they fixed or did right ("I included my own argument here"), and a few in which they ask questions ("Do I summarize too much here?"). I can respond quickly to these as I grade essays, and students pay attention to the comment-conversations that *they* started. More important, students start internalizing elements of good writing and learn to identify these moments in their own essays.

Most of these approaches do take time that I am often reluctant to give. However, I have decided to take this time in order for my investment—the hours and hours I spend responding to student writing—to pay off. When the tree falls in the forest, I want my students to hear the sound and use the event to their benefit.

For a thorough, recent bibliography of research related to commenting on student writing, see Rich Haswell, "The Complexities of Responding to Student Writing," *Across the Disciplines 4* (2007): http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/haswell2006.cfm.

Mistaken Assumptions That Mislead Beginning Teachers

Lately I've been wondering if there's a set of assumptions made about teaching and learning initially that inhibit instructional growth and development subsequently. I think there is, and here is list of these assumptions along with a bit about why each makes teaching excellence less likely to develop and be sustained.

Teaching is a gift—Teaching does involve some natural ability; some teachers are more gifted than others. But success in the classroom also depends on a learnable skill set. If you attribute success to a gift, then anything less than success must be equated with the absence of a gift—and that bodes poorly for future development.

Learning to teach is easy—If teaching is a gift, then any learning associated with it comes easily, much like a gifted athlete learning a new sport. And much of what new faculty are given to learn about teaching looks easy. In reality, just beyond those first easy answers are a slew of complicated algorithms mastered only with practice and a commitment to the pursuit of excellence. If you don't seem to have the gift and what's being tried isn't coming all that easily, is the commitment to excellence likely to remain strong or might it be easier to start blaming students for what isn't being accomplished in the classroom?

Teach like your best teachers, and/or teach the classes you'd like to take—Emulating favorite teachers works only so long as the new teacher is like the favorite. Even then, the best teaching is always teaching that is a genuine, authentic representation of the person involved. New teachers must be their own persons in the classroom and with students. They must discover and build on the strengths they bring to teaching. If they try but can't do what their best teacher did, does that develop confidence and self assurance?

Most of today's college students favor learning modes quite different from those of the teacher. Previous learning experiences are a well from which ideas can be drawn, but the river of student experiences and approaches to learning is deep and wide. A teacher can fish for learning with a pole or nets. If the size of the catch matters, then nets are the obvious choice.

Master the lecture first—This is perhaps not explicitly assumed but clearly evidenced by what new faculty first do: they collect, organize and present content. Lecturing is the easiest teaching method to master, which might seem to argue in favor of tackling it first. But lectures rely on things teachers can control. Learning to lecture does not develop the skills of flexibility and spontaneity. Lectures do not teach teachers to trust students. From discussion, group work, problem-based learning, or any of a host of active learning strategies known to better facilitate student learning, teachers develop skills that make teaching a more dynamic, evolving endeavor.

The importance and relevance of content will be obvious to students—Most students do not come to college in love with content or with learning. Most faculty (even new faculty) forget how content looks when first met. The reasons faculty love content may not be relevant reasons for students to find course material attractive. If students don't embrace content, it's easy for faculty to start blaming them for all that doesn't happen well in the classroom.

In courses students mostly learn content—They do learn content, but content also teaches about process. And students learn life lessons from faculty. Faculty like to think that they control what students learn in a course—in fact their control over what students learn is tenuous at best.

Content is important—both in individual courses and program curricula. If students do not graduate solidly grounded in the content knowledge of their major, they have not received a quality education. But making content the be-all, end-all of classroom encounters often prevents teachers from doing what promotes learning and renders teaching a much less satisfying experience for teachers and their students.

Some students cannot learn some kinds of content, and this lack of ability will be obvious to teachers—Decisions about what can and cannot be learned are made by students, and in some cases the ability of the teacher to predict who will and won't succeed ranks right up there with palm reading and tea leaf analysis. Teachers do owe students honest feedback. If the student has miles to go, the student deserves to know that the journey will be long and hard. But when teachers start making decisions about who can learn what, a kind of insidious intellectual elitism develops. It keep faculty from seeing promise in unlikely students and results in academic disciplines where everybody thinks alike.

Teachers are always smarter than students—Teachers are definitely smarter than most students and even smarter than smart students most of the time. But the assumption is not always true. When you believe that there are things that can be learned from students, you make teaching a more rewarding adventure.

There will be behavior problems in every class unless the teacher takes action to prevent them—Today most syllabi devote way more space to what the students won't be doing as opposed to what they will be learning. Is it possible that prodigious efforts to prevent problems end up promoting them? A retreat behind policies and prohibitions ends up defining the teacher-student relationship adversarially. Teachers and students both deserve to have bottom lines. The question is how many and which ones. Teaching is a much less pleasant profession when rule enforcement is its major task.

One of the questions we really need to be able to answer is why some faculty end up so burned out, cynical and ineffective in the classroom. I just can't believe that most start out wanting to end up in that place, but too many arrive there. Is there something about how they approached teaching or believed about it in the beginning that headed them down this nonproductive path? Is there a corresponding set of assumptions that can put faculty in a more positive and productive trajectory?

A Certificate in College Teaching

Ed.'s note: Faculty continue to teach without much in the way of preparation to do so. Most learn to teach by doing it, sometimes supported by a small credit seminar in graduate school or workshop activities offered on campuses or at professional meetings. Would faculty do better if they had more in-depth opportunities to explore instructional issues? Undoubtedly, but how might those be structured so that faculty are motivated to participate and institutions recognize the value of faculty efforts expended to develop themselves as teachers? What follows is a description of an interesting model with promising possibilities. It is an opportunity currently open to any interested faculty member, and the features that make this program so successful could be replicated elsewhere. Information contained in this article comes from the website that describes the program (find its address in the article) and an interview I conducted with the two administrators in charge of it.

Born out of a national grant project, Preparing Future Faculty, and an informal agreement between two institutions outside of Boston, a Certificate in College Teaching is now formally offered by the Colleges of Worcester Consortium. The Consortium, an organization that affiliates 13 public and private colleges and universities in central Massachusetts, describes the certificate program as "a collaborative institutional response to the ever-present challenges of promoting exemplary teaching in today's complex higher education markets." Seed money to fund this certificate program came from the University of New Hampshire as a result of UNH's participation in the Preparing Future Faculty grant project. However, this certificate is unique because a consortium of institutions, rather than a single research university, sponsors it.

Here's how the Certificate in College Teaching works. "Students" who are graduate students, full-time faculty members, new appointees, adjuncts or part-time teachers take six credits worth of coursework that includes a foundational two-credit course, Seminar in College Teaching. Students also take three one-credit electives that focus on certain pedagogical topics such as teaching with technology, designing and teaching online courses, legal issues in teaching, and teaching in a specific discipline (foreign languages, engineering or psychology, for example). To complete requirements for the certificate, students take a one-credit practicum during which they engage in a mentored teaching experience and prepare a comprehensive teaching portfolio.

The program allows students a great degree of flexibility. With the exception of the practicum, designed as a capstone experience, students may take courses in any order and may take individual courses even if they do not intend to complete the certificate. The courses themselves carry bona fide graduate credit through Consortium member Clark University. Courses are scheduled throughout the year, including summer, and some are offered in online formats.

Faculty who teach in the certificate program are recruited from Consortium institutions as well as from outside. They are paid to teach the courses and may receive an additional stipend to support their course development efforts. Certificate program coordinators (Dr. Susan Wyckoff , the Consortium's vice president for academic affairs, and Dr. Judith Miller, associate dean for special academic initiatives at Clark University) emphasize that faculty are expected to "model the methods" of course development, teaching and assessment proposed in the courses. So, for example, when information and advice on leading a discussion are offered, faculty do not lecture; they "discuss" the topic.

Those enrolling in the courses do pay tuition, although institutions in the Consortium often underwrite this cost. Adjunct faculty are most likely to pay for the coursework themselves and then use the certificate to buttress teaching experience on their resumes. Some Consortium institutions "highly recommend" that new faculty participate in the program either in the summer prior to their first year at the institution or sometime during their first three years of college teaching.

The Consortium's website (www.cowc.org under "faculty resources") contains a great deal of information about the certificate program, including detailed course descriptions, complete syllabi and an impressive collection of endorsements from program participants. Not only is this an interesting model for institutions and collections of institutions interested in providing substantive professional development experiences for faculty, but this certificate and individual courses are also open to faculty outside the Colleges of Worcester Consortium. The website contains information on enrolling and tuition prices, and includes a course schedule that indicates which courses are offered online. It also explains the procedures for faculty who might be interested in developing and/or teaching a course in the program.

Dr. Miller has been involved with the program since its very early and informal beginnings. Both Dr. Miller and Dr. Wyckoff have overseen its transition from its inception in 2002 to a formal program now offered by and in part supported by the Consortium. As it has evolved, the program has grown significantly in size and complexity. Through the process, they have learned much, including the importance of starting out with a clear set of learning outcomes for the whole program as well as individual courses. They have faced the challenge of designing a program that has curricular coherence at the same time it offers faculty the flexibility to take from the program what they need—which may not be the certificate. Both are happy to answer additional questions about the program and share in more detail what they have learned. They may be contacted electronically: Dr. Wyckoff at swyckoff@cowc.org and Dr. Miller at JudMiller@clarku.edu.

I Hate Groups!

By Joseph F. Byrnes, Bentley College, jbyrnes@bentley.edu and MaryAnn Byrnes, University of Massachusetts Boston, Maryann.byrnes@umb.edu

Some students tell us they hate groups—as in really hate groups. Why do faculty love groups so much, they ask. I work hard, I'm smart, I can get good grades by myself, these students insist. Other students are a waste. I end up doing all the work and they get the good grade I earned for the group. Why do you, Professor Byrnes, make me work in a group. I hate groups!

Sound familiar? We call these bright, motivated, annoyed students our lone wolves. They demand learning activities where they know they can excel and are fearful that our emphasis on group work will mean lower grades for them. The least of the students will drag down the best, seems to be their constant refrain. Get me out of these groups and let me show you what I can really do.

We have developed an unusual way to deal with these bright, motivated lone wolves—we form groups of lone wolves! On the first day of class, we have students fill out a data sheet. Here is the question that deals with groups.

Think about your experience working in groups. Please select the one response that best suits your experience.

A. _________I enjoy working in groups because my group members usually help me understand the material and tasks and therefore I can perform better.

B. _________I question the value of group work for me, because I usually end up doing more than my fair share of the work.

C. _________I have little or no experience working in groups.

D. _________I have a different experience than the choices given above. Please describe.

When we form groups, we place the students who have selected B (our lone wolves) in the same group. There are usually sufficient numbers to form one or even two groups of these lone wolves.

The result is delightful to observe. Often for the first time, the lone wolves are challenged by group-mates. They must learn to negotiate, trust, and share with others who are equally driven and equally intelligent. Another positive outcome is that students in other groups have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate leadership capacity, without the interference of these lone wolves who tend to control others in groups.

At the end of the semester, many of our lone wolves make a point of telling us this is the best group they have ever had. They are shocked about their experience and they ask us for our secrets about forming groups. When we tell them we placed them in a group where every student hated groups, they inevitably smile and thank us. Their next question is whether we will be telling other professors about our sneaky technique. We just have.

Evidence against Using Crib Cards

We have published several articles proposing that students be allowed to place course content on an index card that they are then permitted to use during an exam. The principle advantages of these crib cards include their effectiveness at reducing test anxiety and the study value of selecting and organizing material for the card.

As intuitive as these benefits may seem, a small but well-designed study did not confirm them. In this research, students took four multiple-choice exams. For the first and third exams, students were allowed to construct crib cards and use them during the exam. For the second and fourth exams, students were not given the option of preparing crib cards. When they arrived at the exam, they were given crib cards prepared by a student research assistant and told they were welcome to use them during the exam.

"Students performed better with the other-constructed cards than with the self-constructed cards." (p. 40) Researchers posit several possible explanations. When students do not expect to be able to use a crib card, they study harder. They work to really understand the material as opposed to having information on the cards that they can use to answer questions without really understanding what it means. Or maybe the other-constructed card was simply better. A final explanation involves the inability of students to effectively prepare and use crib cards they construct.

Because the use of self-constructed crib cards did not improve exam performance in this upper-division psychology course, these researchers recommend against using them. That may be appropriate advice, but probably the better admonition is for instructors who use crib cards to analyze their effects in those courses where they are being used. Perhaps improved exams scores is not the only outcome of significance. The impact of crib card preparation and use on learning outcomes is not all that difficult to assess. This article provides one good model of how crib cards' effectiveness might be ascertained.

Reference: Dickson, K. L., and Miller, M. D. (2006). Effect of crib card construction and use on exam performance. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33 (1), 39-40.