

EVALUATION: THE PROCESS FOR REVISION

It is becoming increasingly clear that teacher evaluation of student writing, offered as a final judgment on a finished product, is only minimally useful as a tool for learning. We, of course, find student writers who can abstract and apply to their next writing what they have learned from the list of errors, deficiencies, and successes noted on their finished papers, but for too many basic writers there is little retention and even less interest in the contents of such post mortems. Even when we evaluate students' papers and ask for revisions, we are entering into the act too late if the first comments a student receives are directed toward a draft which is already, to some degree, suffering the onslaught of *rigor mortis*.

What we need, then, for truly useful evaluation is a continuing program of offering feedback to student writers as they move from the initial chaos of the unrefined subject to a well articulated written product. Moreover, we need to provide students with different purposes and methods for each stage of evaluation to fit their needs as they develop each piece of writing and as their general skills improve. In addition, the student's own evaluation skills should develop as the semester progresses so that his initial responses give way to more mature judgments. Finally, the instructor needs a format or strategy for evaluating the writing skills the student has acquired by the end of the course. The program of evaluation offered here aims at achieving these goals.

We should first appreciate that the acquisition of evaluation skills through on-going critiquing is essential for the student who has not yet adequately developed his own skills as the primary critic of his writing. To move students beyond that passive waiting to see "what's wrong," what The Teacher wants corrected, we cannot be the sole graders during a semester or two of composition courses and then suddenly turn the

Muriel Harris is Director of Purdue University's Writing Laboratory and the editor of the Writing Lab Newsletter.

student loose to become a self-regulating editor who can effectively spot the need to reorganize, revise and correct. We must wean the student so that he or she becomes not only an independent writer but an independent critic as well. We can accomplish this by helping students acquire the very different kinds of evaluation skills appropriate to each stage of a piece of writing by providing models for evaluation and opportunities for extensive practice in different kinds of evaluating. Our first task, then, is to differentiate the types of feedback needed in the pre-writing, writing, and revision stages and at the same time to consider how strategies such as peer criticism and evaluation forms can help the student learn how to become his own best critic—and not incidentally, a critical reader of other writing.¹ Ideally, in the best of all possible writing courses, students should be able by semester's end to grade their own papers with some degree of accuracy.

Evaluation begins where any writer begins, with the pre-writing stage which, as Donald Murray so succinctly describes it, "is everything that takes place before the first draft. Prewriting usually takes about 85% of the writer's time. It includes the awareness of his world from which his subject is born. In prewriting, the writer focuses on that subject, spots an audience, chooses a form which may carry his subject to his audience."² Well said, but how can the inexperienced basic writing student who has either been ignored or forced to write for a lone "Teacher-Grader" spot his audience if he has not yet developed a clear sense of the distinctions between different audiences, their interests, and their varying needs for information. Feedback on these matters from a real audience is the first need of the inexperienced writer, and it can be offered easily in small groups who come together to react to each other's suggestions or proposals for a paper.

When this initial pre-writing exploration proceeds orally, an apprentice writer can test his ideas aloud by "talking it out" or reading from jotted beginnings in a journal or roughed out notes of a preliminary planning draft. In whatever way he chooses to proceed, the writer who is not yet comfortable with the idea of writing as communication needs to

1. Surveys of studies showing the effectiveness of peer grading can be found in Ross Jerabek and Daniel Dieterich's "Composition Evaluation: The State of the Art," *College Composition and Communication*, 26 (May 1975), pp. 183-186, and an ERIC/RCS Report by Turee Olsen, "Grading Alternatives," *English Journal*, 64 (March 1975), pp. 106-108.

2. Donald Murray, "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product," *Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers*, ed. Richard L. Graves (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden, 1976), p. 80.

try out his first formulation of his subject in a small group setting. It is here that he will gain that initial sense of audience which, as Murray reminds us, is so necessary in the pre-writing stage. While there are a few excellent texts which offer beginning exercises in varying the audience (describe a party first to a close friend and then to a parent, etc.), not all basic writers succeed merely by being reminded of the varieties of audiences that exist, for the egocentric writer continues to see the world from his own perspective. It is the live, questioning, reacting audience which most effectively jars the writer into an evaluation of whether he has appropriately communicated.

I have found that students who meet in small groups in the classroom to send up their trial balloons do several useful things in the act of talking out or reading their first suggestions.³ They often embellish on or continue to create content as they talk, adding to or rejecting what they are offering not only because the mental juices are beginning to flow but also because of their changing perceptions of the audience's reactions. Verbal or non-verbal reinforcement from another student who really begins to listen suggests that they may have some very real reader interest; a question from another student makes the writer aware of the need for more information or the need to develop another aspect of the topic. In one way or another, if the members of the group are actively engaged in helping each other to begin their papers, the writer will start to gather useful information about who his audience is. The instructor's role in this stage of evaluation is really that of a facilitator who establishes a comfortable level of openness in the classroom, brings the groups together, and offers only minimal structure for the groups' task, perhaps no more than a rehearsal of some open-ended suggestions or a vocabulary for useful responses.

Before the small groups begin their listening and responding, the instructor can also remind the class that they may emerge from their sessions with somewhat altered conceptions of the direction or emphasis of their original topic. In one of my basic writing classes, I can vividly recall a small group session early in the semester in which a shy and very inarticulate student from a farm hesitantly offered his group the possibility of writing an explanation of the high cost of raising a calf to the stage of being sold. The student was generally a reluctant writer, unable to produce more than a paragraph or two on a given theme that

3. This process can go on in a writing lab tutorial or in instructor-student conferences though, of course, the audience is more limited.

he had chosen because of his interest in or knowledge of the subject. His manner when presenting the topic suggested that he expected silence, disinterest, or laughter from his group—the kind of feedback that would relegate this topic to a bare-bones repetition to himself of what he already knew. Instead, a student from an inner city area responded vigorously that she really wanted to know why beef was getting so expensive. Startled, the agriculture major began his explanation but found himself being interrupted by others in the group who needed this or that bit of information in order to follow this explanation that was going to tell them why meat was disappearing so rapidly from their dorm menus. Finally, the prospective writer realized that he really wanted to write a paper for city-bred consumers of meat, persuading them that farmers would have to ask even higher prices for their beef cattle in the future in order to survive.

It is here in that all-important stage of pre-writing where, as James E. Davis explains, “The talker may work himself toward a stance or a commitment on a subject.”⁴ Certainly, the writer may find his own stance, but the interaction with the audience is what helps the basic writer learn how to sharpen or define it, particularly when he has not yet developed a sense of writing as public communication. When a basic writer is writing not for self-discovery alone, but for that public beyond himself, he can learn how to evaluate his initial judgments, to base the writing not on his intention of what an audience might want, but on their real reactions. The more the writer is exposed to this kind of feedback, the better able he is to begin building some generalizations about the future audiences he will write for.

This discussion of small group pre-writing feedback may sound like nothing more than a re-warmed version of “class discussion,” but it isn’t. Faced with speaking up in a large classroom, students rarely compose orally or react to someone else’s composing process with the same ease that they do in small groups, and the feedback in a large class often has to be encouraged or provoked by the teacher, the result being that the student who responds to another student’s talking too often has one eye on the instructor’s reaction to his comment. In a small group having about five members for optimal effectiveness,⁵ the likelihood for

4. James E. Davis, “The Blockhead Writer: A Confessional,” reprinted in *Rhetoric and Composition*, p. 219.

5. Ernest and Nancy Bormann, *Effective Small Group Communication* (Minneapolis: Burgess, 1972), p. 6.

useful interaction increases greatly. I have noticed also that students tend, at first, to write to their particular peer group, but as the sense of audience becomes firmer, there is the urge to branch out to other audiences (provoking a need for the group to role-play another audience). However, when there is negative feedback, the writer begins to make choices. Is he writing primarily for himself; or, if it is public discourse he is engaged in, is there another kind of audience who would be likely to be more receptive to the topic? These important questions and distinctions can be discussed in the abstract, but they seem to flow more naturally after group reaction time.

After the writer has had some pre-writing feedback and some time to turn his suggestions into a first draft, he is ready for a different kind of evaluation, a more structured critiquing by a group in which the writer may or may not be present (though I find that both situations should be tried). Again, the evaluation is offered primarily from the writer's peers, though the instructor can be a more active participant in offering models for evaluation by means of evaluation forms. The questions to be answered on these forms are a way of giving direction to the group's task, but more important, they are an aid to basic writing students who usually do not, at first, have a clear idea of what they should be looking for in trying to judge whether a piece of writing is good. I have found that evaluation sheets for the group to fill out early in the semester are best kept very general, seeking mainly for some of the more easily arrived at holistic responses, e.g.:

Did the panel of readers enjoy reading this paper?

If so, what contributed most to the enjoyment—interesting topic, vivid details, etc.?

If not, what could make the paper more effective—more description, clearer focus on the subject, etc.?

To suggest to the writer the range of audience reactions, I usually leave spaces after each question on the sheet for the readers on the panel to respond separately if there is no clear consensus among them. Because a basic writer also needs to realize that some parts of a paper can be more successful or less effective than others, I include on early evaluation forms questions such as:

Which is the best part of this paper? Why?

What should be left out, changed, or expanded?

These kinds of questions are encouragingly easy to respond to as the writer-reader starts to flex his critic's muscle; similarly, such questions are fairly easy to internalize as guides for the writer's next writing. Another very useful question on an evaluation sheet used early in the semester is one that asks the panel of readers to state what they think the main point or thesis of the paper is, thus seeking out the degree of overlap between the writer's intention and the reader's perception.

As the semester progresses, the evaluation sheet questions for this second or rough draft stage (after the initial pre-writing feedback) become more precise to include new concerns that are being discussed in class, such as effective use of introductions and conclusions and paragraphing. To help "test the effectiveness of a student's piece of writing as a whole," Richard Larson offers four questions to ask which, though intended for use by teachers, can and should become students' criteria as well:

1. Does the writer perform felicitously the act he promised?
2. Are the conclusions, the judgments, consistent with and supported by the data and arguments that precede them?
3. Is it possible for the reader to see, from beginning to end, in what direction the piece is moving, what steps are taken to reach the writer's goal, and why?
4. Who is talking to us? Are we in the presence of a faceless speaker or a distinctive identity? Is that identity consistent within the paper, and is it suitable to the writer's goal in coming before us?⁶

On the students' evaluation forms we may not be able to ask all of Larson's questions as fully as they are presented here, but we ought to be moving the class toward an understanding of these criteria.

We ought also to listen to the students' sense of what they consider to be important standards by which to judge their writing. If the evaluation sheets have been working effectively, the questions originally suggested or structured primarily by the teacher should give way, later in the semester, to the class's suggestions. When the evaluation sheet is made up of criteria which the students have chosen as their goal for the assignment and have themselves written in their own phrasing, it has a validity which no textbook list of recommendations could ever hope to achieve.

6. Richard Larson, "The Whole Is More Than the Sum of Its Parts: Notes on Responding to Students' Papers," *Arizona English Bulletin*, 16, No. 2 (February 1974) pp. 176-177.

Before I proceed, I ought to include another rationale for these evaluation sheets because for some they surely seem like that bureaucratic approach to life we prefer to avoid. Filling out these forms is an excellent opportunity to practice conciseness, clarity, and accuracy in writing, for the act of answering the questions requires that the critic select from the flow of the group's conversation the relevant words that need to be recorded. It quickly becomes apparent that unclear or partially explained evaluations are less than useful to the writer when he later consults his sheet for suggestions as he proceeds to the next stage of revision. In addition, as I move around the classroom during evaluation sessions, I find that students in their roles as critics may need help in articulating vague impressions. Sometimes I am able to help the group see the connection between what they are groping for and what we may have been discussing in class. At other times the group and I need to examine the sentence or paragraph that the evaluators cannot adequately judge, to see what criteria we can apply.

In sum, the teacher's role during the stage of panel evaluation is, first, to structure the evaluation procedure so that students can practice and refine their critical skills; and second, to be available for help in recording the kind of evaluation that will also be useful to the writer. The teacher's role here is somewhat more structured than Thom Hawkins' suggestion that the teacher's most effective role generally in small groups "is to facilitate learning by questioning, listening, and observing,"⁷ but there is a need for models (at least, initially) for evaluation criteria. After the group has done its work and the writer has had a chance to browse through the comments, I usually ask for equal time as yet one more reader of the rough draft, and I react in writing both to the group's comments and to the writer's writing. What is returned to the panel of readers and then to the writer is a set of multiple voices talking to each other—in writing.

Since I am convinced of the validity of the workshop approach to the composition classroom, the revision that follows after the evaluation forms are returned to the writer goes on for several days in class. It is here (or in conferences) that the instructor becomes most directly involved in helping each individual student. Solutions for weak spots are discussed, alternative organizational patterns can be considered, or rules of grammar that are needed can be explained. Intensive work in grammar

7. Thom Hawkins, *Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing* (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1976), p. 1.

is best left for this stage because errors in earlier drafts may disappear from the page as sentences are discarded or rewritten. Techniques for proofreading can also be offered at this time, if that is what is needed. In this stage of revision, then, the student has a more well-defined sense of what writing problem (or problems) he is trying to solve, and the instructor becomes a consultant who can offer from experience a wider range of suggested solutions than the student may yet have at his fingertips. The effect of this is to reverse the usual grading procedure because help is offered as a solution to a need, not as an *ex post facto* umpire's call. For example, the need for parallel structure in a series is usually marked as an error by the instructor and then revised and perhaps learned for future use by a student. However, compare this order of instruction (and its probable effectiveness) to the situation in which a student searching for an emphatic ending, or peroration, to his paper is offered some instruction in parallel structure, should he care to use it. Like most beginning craftsmen in the middle of coping with a demanding task, students are more receptive to new tools when they are offered in time to solve particular technical problems.

When the paper which results from this second stage of revision is handed in for a grade, the teacher's evaluation is both easy and quick. Rather than being confronted with an unknown, new product, the teacher is working with familiar content in which successful revisions and remaining difficulties are easier to spot. We can and should grade these revised papers throughout the semester to help students evaluate their work, but even these grades can be stages along the way to a final evaluation in a course where students are in the process of acquiring a skill. I have never been comfortable with the concept of assigning a course grade based on an average of those grades given during the semester because no matter what the student's entering skills were, his or her goal is to be a competent writer by semester's end. We can weigh the last few papers more heavily, but this puts undue stress on the writing performance evident in a small sample. One partial solution which, however, does not alleviate the problem of grading a small writing sample, is to allow students to spend the last week or so of the course revising several papers of their choice to submit as a final sample for consideration. By the end of the semester the student who has achieved some skill as a critical reader can go back over old papers to see problems or better solutions that weren't apparent to him earlier. At the end of the semester, when the student submits what he now considers to be his best effort, he is demonstrating the skills he has acquired by the end of the course.

I strongly believe, and am convinced by watching students' progress, that when evaluation is stressed as an on-going tool for revision, the student comes to the realization that not only is writing a process, but evaluation is too. The teacher's role as Super Critic dissolves as he becomes instead what the instructor of composition truly is, a tutor helping students as they learn how to write well. Extensive practice in evaluation through each stage from pre-writing to final draft helps the student to sharpen his skills as a critic of other writing, guides him as he revises, and demonstrates to him that, finally, evaluating his writing is *his* job.