My dirty little secret: I don't grade papers

By Linda Christensen

I have a secret: I haven't graded a student paper in the last 28 years. Now, don't get me wrong. That doesn't mean that I toss them in the fire, "accidentally" lose them, turn them over to student teachers, stamp them with a six-trait writing analysis and plug in numbers, or push them through some kind of computerized grade machine. I discovered early on that if I wanted to produce writers, I needed to let go of grades.

Creating Meaningful "Work"

Our grading should match our pedagogy. In my classroom I attempt to prefigure aspects of the kind of society I want my students to live in: a society where the work is meaningful and intrinsically rewarding, where people grapple with big ideas that they care about in an environment where they can talk, read, write, and think without worrying about failure or ridicule.

Students need to feel that their work is important, relevant, and meaningful. If not, why should they spend time working on it? I was reminded of this recently when I demonstrated a narrative lesson in a classroom at Madison High School in Portland, Ore. Madison's student body comes from diverse cultural, racial, linguistic, and economic backgrounds. Students had just read Breaking Through, a short memoir by Francisco Jiménez, about growing up in a migrant family and trying to fit in as a teenager. The students and I examined a point in the memoir where Jiménez describes going to graduation wearing a white t-shirt because his family couldn't afford to buy him the required white shirt. We also read Gary Soto's story "The Jacket," as
well as a number of stories written by my former students. [See "Pro Wings," page 37.]

We talked about buying clothes to fit in, desiring clothes we can't afford, receiving clothes that we don't want from people we love. The topic fits my criteria. It's about big ideas: poverty and acceptance. Students struggle with finding a place to belong, but they also want to avoid being a target of other students' ridicule for wearing the "wrong" clothes or shoes. Many are desperate to fit in—even when "fitting in" means joining a group that rejects the standard teen scene of tight low-riding jeans and shrink-wrap tops.

As we started the writing, I told the students, "Find your passion. Write your way into a story that you want to tell." Damon didn't write about clothes. He wrote about getting a gift he didn't want from his foster parents. He wrote about living in foster homes, about learning how to lie about gifts he didn't want. He also wrote a list of questions about his next home and his next school—he was headed into his 12th home the week after I gave the assignment. He wondered if his new "family" would like him. He wondered if he would make friends at his new school. Fitting in meant a lot more to Damon than wearing the right clothes.

Because the assignment was open enough for Damon to write about what was important to him and what was on his mind, he did. Because I want Damon to keep writing, I didn't put a grade on it. Instead we had a conversation at the end of the period where I talked to him about what I loved about the piece, and I told him the truth: Many adults and students need to read his piece. I gave him a few suggestions for revision.

He's experimenting with making his story into a narrative essay, tied together with vignettes about the skills he's learned in foster homes. He sent me the next draft via e-mail from the library near his new "home." Damon's not writing for a grade. He doesn't even attend Madison anymore. He's writing because this is a topic he cares about. He's writing because someone is listening to him, and he hopes that through his writing, more people will understand what it's like to live in a foster home.

And before you say, "I can't talk with 150 students after class," I understand. I can't either. I talk with them when we work on revisions in the computer lab, during breaks, during lunch, and after school. When Jefferson, where I spent my teaching career, had tutor time during the school day, I made appointments with students. I also structure revision time during class, so that I can work with students while they are revising. Most often, I start conversations in the margins of their papers—asking questions when I'm confused, and sometimes making suggestions or reminding them of another student's piece or class talk.

I see responding to student papers as part of the teaching process rather than the evaluation process. Instead of taking my time writing comments on first drafts, for example, students read their papers out loud, and their classmates give them feedback. (I call it a read-around because my students sit in a circle, and we read around the circle. See Reading, Writing, and Rising Up for details.) At the beginning of the year, the feedback is always positive. Later in the year, we add suggestions for strengthening pieces. We start with what we love about the piece, what's working—a great opening, the use of humor, the rhythm in a certain line, a flashback that builds the reader's understanding of character. I point out techniques the writers are using intuitively, so that fellow students can pick up the strategies and use them in their writing.

But the read-around is also a place for me to informally assess common problems in class papers—lack of evidence, sloppy transitions, weak introductions—as well as individual problems. The read-around, which
provides a real audience for writing, allows me to teach, assess, and move students to the next draft.

Students in every class I've taught have made it clear that the read-around was the best part of my teaching. Adam wrote:

There is so much to learn about good writing. I know that a lot of what shaped my writing was not the diagramming sentences or finding the subject and verb that we learned in grade school, but the desire to learn more about what I'm hearing around me. Just hearing the work of good writers makes an incredible difference. When I find something I really like, I ask myself, "What was it about that piece that made me get all goose-bumpy?" That's why I think it is really important to have those read-arounds in class. Not only does the author get to hear comments about his/her work, but the rest of the class gets a chance to hear some pretty amazing stuff. Like when we heard Nicole's home language paper, I don't think there was anyone who wasn't touched by it. Everyone had felt, at some point, like that and her paper was able to capture those feelings and describe them perfectly. At the same time, everyone thought, "How can I write like that?" We all learned from the paper. Now, this is only one example, but almost every day we share, something like this happens.

Another response strategy I use is a variation on the small response group. Instead of reading papers out loud, pairs of students exchange their pieces and write letters to each other based on the criteria of the paper. In the letters—which typically run two pages—students point out what's working, where they had questions, and which criteria were present or missing. They also give suggestions for revision. Students benefit from reading each other's papers by noticing how someone else approached a similar topic and by reading with an editor's eye: What's working? What's missing? What would help this paper? This is a skill they can transfer back to their own work.

Grades as Wages

In too many classrooms, grades are the "wages" students earn for their labor. Teachers assign work, students create products, and grades exchange hands. There are problems with this scenario. Students who enter class with skills—especially reading and writing skills—are rewarded with higher grades. They already know how to write the paper; they just need to figure out what the teacher wants in it. Essentially, they take what the teacher talks about in class and reproduce it in a paper. Students who lack these basic skills are at a disadvantage. Unless there has been an explicit teaching of how to write the papers, they may not know how to produce the products the teacher expects. As a result, they receive lower grades.

Instead of rewarding or punishing students with grades, I believe that we need to "live out our ideals" as Myles Horton exhorts us, by creating situations where students, like Damon, learn to care about the work they produce. Of course, this means creating meaningful and important work that students want to do and creating communities where good work can happen. It also means explicitly teaching students how to write essays, articles, stories, poems, and memoirs and finding real audiences to read that work.

Revision: It's Never 'Done'

Numbers on a six-trait analysis or grades for content and mechanics on the top of the papers don't teach students how to write, nor do they push them to their next drafts. These methods either assume that students are "done" or
that they will care enough to go back and attempt to fix their drafts in order to raise their grades. Numbers and grades "assess" or judge the paper, rather than provide feedback about how to improve it. Too many of my students had learned to negotiate the difficulties of writing by turning in hurried drafts pulled together without much thought. They received their C's or D's, and they were "done" with their writing. The grades let them escape learning how to write.

When Keith Caldwell from the National Writing Project visited the Oregon Writing Project in 1980, he used a great analogy. He said, "As soon as you put a grade on a piece of writing it's done. Don't grade it and you signal that it can still be revised, still worked on." He compared writing to baking pastries. Grades, according to Caldwell, are the frosting. They signal that the donut or the sugar cookie is heading for the showcase. It's done.

Because I want my students to view their writing as a process, I refuse to let them be "done." If students turn in drafts that represent their best work at that point in time, they receive full credit for the writing. Students who don't have a draft receive no credit. When students turn in rushed drafts that clearly aren't their best efforts, I return them and ask them to redo the papers. Students regularly write and rewrite papers they care about a number of times. I remember Anne Lennon, a senior, lamenting in her end-of-the-quarter portfolio: "Seven drafts on this essay and I'm still not done!"

Too often, writing—and thinking—in school becomes scripted (hence the five-paragraph essay), because scripts are easier to teach and easier to grade. Unfortunately, they fail to engage students in real writing. Real writing is messy. And students often don't "get" how to write narratives or essays the first time we teach them. They need lots of practice without judgments; they need to be told what they are doing right, so they can repeat it; they need to examine how to move to the next draft.

**But What About Report Cards?**

Because I work in public schools that still churn out report cards, I must give students grades at the end of each quarter and semester. And I do—based on the total points earned for each grading period. The difference is that I don't put grades on individual papers. (And I don't gives quizzes or tests, nor do I assign or accept extra credit work.) They receive all of the credit possible or they redo the papers. For example, a first draft of an essay is typically 150 points; a revision is 300 points. But they only receive the points—all of the points—if they write a paper that meets the criteria. (See sidebar.)

I'm sure there are folks who will shake their heads at the lack of rigor or standards in my system, but I believe my system is rigorous and that I hold students to meaningful standards. They don't pass my class if they can't write an essay or narrative—even if they complete all of the class work. I will work with them until they can write, but I will not accept work that doesn't meet the exit criteria. And over the years, I ended up working with a number of students over winter and summer vacations.

**The Ideal World Faces Reality**

Here's the rub in this idyllic world: I don't always select topics that students
find meaningful, and there are academic formats—literary essays, for example—that students would rather pull their teeth out than complete. But I feel compelled to teach them to write in these formats.

I struggle to create assignments that make academic formats compelling. One year, my seniors at Jefferson read *Yellow Raft on Blue Water* by Michael Dorris. The novel is told in the voices of three Native-American women. It starts in the present day and moves backwards as the women unfold their perspectives on events that shaped them. In my class, students wrote about key moments from their lives. Then they invited their parents or other important people to write about the same moments from their points of view. If students couldn't get a parent or friend to write, they wrote about the events themselves, but from another person's point of view. It was a powerful assignment, and students shared incidents of abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction, as well as other problems. It was hard to turn from this emotionally charged work to writing essays, but it was necessary because I wanted my students to also know how to navigate academic writing.

Instead of asking them to write traditional literary essays, I invited students to include their lives in the essays, to bring in their stories in the same way they had during class discussions. Dina wrote:

I was raised in a home of five children, six including myself. My father was an alcoholic and a drug addict. My mother was on her way to the same behavior. She hid my father's problem for many years until our home was falling apart. My father was a ladies' man, sharing himself with others while my mother said nothing, pretending everything was all right. He would come home drunk, and they would fight and he would move out for periods of time, and return after awhile. My mother continued to take him back and try to keep the marriage and family as one. Regardless of the hurt she felt inside, she wouldn't let it slow her down. At least, I never saw that it did. Co-dependent is what I call her behavior today.

Reading *Yellow Raft on Blue Water* by Michael Dorris I found that he dealt with the topics of dysfunctional families and co-dependent issues. The character Christine reminded me of my mother . . .

Dina went on to include specifics from the novel to develop her essay, comparing her mother and Christine from the novel. She learned to write a literary essay, but one that had personal meaning for her.

**Student Reaction**

Nicole's reaction to my grading philosophy cemented my belief that I was doing the right thing. Nicole enrolled in one of my classes every year beginning with her sophomore year. The first year, Nicole was frozen by her fear of making a mistake. She attended daily, she responded to other students' papers, but she resisted writing—and this was in Writing for Publication, where writing was essential. In the opening days of her junior year, when a rather smug student made a negative remark about a classmate's paper during a read-around, I didn't have to say a word. Nicole jumped in and talked about the importance of finding what works in a paper. She set the tone for the year—and she finally wrote.

In a mid-year class evaluation of my senior course, Contemporary Literature and Society, Nicole raised her hand. "I like that you don't grade our papers. I went through Sabin Elementary and Beaumont Middle Schools with Mira. Every time the teacher would hand back our papers, Mira's would have an A
and mine would have a C. It made me feel like I wasn't as smart as Mira. Now when I look over at Mira's paper, I see that we both have comments from you written all over them. It's a conversation, not a competition."

Mira, the valedictorian, also liked comments instead of grades. "What tells me more about my writing? A grade or the comments and questions you write in the margins?" In fact, Mira looked for colleges that wrote narrative evaluations of their students rather than grading them. (Now, she teaches writing at the college level and writes magnificent poetry.)

Peter, a skeptic in the no-grade process, entered my junior class with college-level writing skills. By the end of his second year with me, he wrote in his class evaluation:

The way you have us make comments (what did you like about the piece of writing) has helped me deal with people. My skin is thick enough to take a lot of abuse just because I've always had a fairly high opinion of some of the things I can do. I didn't realize a lot of other people don't have that advantage. After a while I found out positive criticism helped me more than negative too.

I keep William Stafford's poem "At This Point on the Page" over my desk because it reminds me of the fear I still feel when I turn a piece of writing over to someone to read: Will you like it? Did I do a good job? And what I mean is: Do you like me? Am I OK?

**At This Point on the Page**

Frightened at the slant of the writing, I looked up
at the student who shared it with me—
such pain was in the crossing of each t,
and a heart that skipped—lurched—in the loop of the y.
Sorrowing for the huddled lines my eyes had seen—
The terror of the o's and a's, and those draggled g's,
I looked up at her face,
not wanting to read farther, at least by prose:
the hand shook that wrote that far on the page,
and what weight formed each word, God knows.

When I start a new class with students, I need to remind myself to begin with praise, to find what's working, to find the beauty before I find fault. To remember that when I teach writing, I'm teaching the writer, not the piece. Will my words keep them writing or send them scurrying for cover? n

Bibliography


Linda Christensen ([lchrist@aol.com](mailto:lchrist@aol.com)) is language arts coordinator for Portland Public Schools and a Rethinking Schools editor. She is author of *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the*

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