Reading Students, Reading Ourselves: Revising the Teacher's Role in the Writing Class

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At the end of each semester I ask my students to write an essay on writing, to identify and comment on some significant feature of their own writing process. The idea is to help them better understand how they have written in the past so that they will have more control over how they write in the future. Most of my students find this assignment tedious and end up writing a fairly perfunctory self-study, but I keep giving this assignment for two reasons: first, I am really curious about how students view the writing process and, second, when these "process papers" are good, they are remarkably good.

Recently I was telling two of my colleagues about a particularly insightful essay one of my students wrote about the relationship between thought and language. In her essay, Nicki argues that a writer can only think clearly when she is allowed to use a voice and a style that she has mastered. In my course, she felt that she had been able to think through important issues in original ways; however, in her humanities class, she had trouble developing and organizing her ideas about Homer, Cicero, and the Hebrew prophets. She accounted for the difference not by the difficulty of the material—she took on complicated problems in my course—but rather by the encouragement I gave her to explore ideas that mattered to her in personal and informal language. Her humanities professor, she complained, had denied her this access by insisting on numerous references to the text and "impeccable English prose."

Her point was not simply that her expression became more awkward in her humanities papers; instead, she was arguing that in the translation from her own form of expression to the academic language required in that course, her actual ideas were lost or distorted. The irony, she concludes, is that although her humanities teacher claims to value creativity and logic, he insists that students write in a form which virtually guarantees detachment and confusion. "But what is best about her essay," I told my colleagues, "is that it is so well written. At the end she writes something like, 'The essay I am writing right now proves my..."
point. I am comfortable and I am able to use "I" and "you" which allows me to
tell you clearly and directly what I think. But when I try to write "impeccable
English prose," I lose sight of my audience and I disappear as a writer.

They seemed impressed, maybe even won over by the idea of this assign-
ment. But as I walked back to my office, I started worrying that I had overstated
the value of the assignment and the quality of Nicki's essay. When I re-read it, I
was embarrassed to discover how much I had organized and focused her argu-
ment in my re-telling. It is not as if her essay was without thought or skill. In
fact, the section that I singled out for its rhetorical sophistication was actually
much better in Nicki's paper than in my memory and re-telling:

In Humanities, I have to remember a certain format and I have to back up every
general statement with specific examples. Oh, and that word "I," I just used. You
would never see that word in one of my Humanities papers. Neither would you see
"you." It would be marked with red ink and a comment, "You who??" or "To
Whom do you think you are referring?"

But in general the writing seemed much flatter and more prosaic that I had re-
membered it:

Though it is good to be able to write for different audiences, I do not want to have
to change my preference in writing because of some particular "format" I am sup-
posed to follow. There is no law that states that I must write in a certain way.
When I write I like to feel as if I have gotten across what I want to say.

But it wasn't just the writing. My discomfort grew as I began to see how
much her whole argument echoed my own ideas—I, also, believe that a student
should be allowed to write in her own voice, that she should be able to choose
topics, that writing is a mode of thinking, and so on—all ideas to which I have a
strong ideological and personal commitment. For years I have argued with col-
leagues who believe that students should not be allowed to write in first person
or from personal experience, who insist on impeccable prose, correctness, and
perfect one-inch margins. So it only makes sense that I would be pleased and ex-
cited to see that my student's writing supported and even validated my own
positions and, therefore, that I would make her argument more eloquent and so-
phisticated than it actually was.

But there were other reasons for my misreading. This was not the first essay
of Nicki's I had read. All semester I had seen her work; I read this final essay in
terms of all of our interactions. From our conferences, I knew that her parents
were first-generation Greek-Americans and that she was a first-generation col-
lege student from a small, working class town in Massachusetts. From her pre-
vious essays, I knew that during her last two years of high school she had been
involved with a man in his twenties who was addicted to cocaine, who cheated
on her with other women, and who once beat her up at a party. I also knew that
throughout that whole relationship her worst fear was that he would break up
with her. I knew that she considered herself a "good Catholic" but was shocked
and angry at the Church for "never telling her the truth about God."

So when I read Nicki's essay on writing and personal voice, I was also read-
ing Nicki herself and imagining—rightly or wrongly—that this first term of col-
lege was a crucial time in her development. I was thinking about how she ended her essay on that self-destructive high-school relationship:

To this day, I am not sure why I loved someone like that. Why was I drawn to a person who treated me so badly? I guess you could say he was my drug. He was my high and my addiction. It was hard to “just say no,” but I finally did. I’ve been clean for almost six months now and I plan to stay that way.

And I was thinking about how upset she was when her humanities teacher dismissed her argument as superficial and that the God in Exodus and the Book of Job who was sometimes “vengeful, jealous, and merciless,” was “more realistic” than the all-loving, perfect God that the nuns had described.

But to make matters still more complicated, I was also reading myself. I had a vested interest in thinking that my teaching and my course had provided Nicki something she did not get in her humanities class. I had an interest in thinking that my teaching helped her feel confident about her abilities and her potential. By reading Nicki’s text in such a way that it reached a self-confident and successful resolution, by making her into a text with a happy ending, I could congratulate myself not only for helping another writer succeed but also for helping another student establish her identity. And, perhaps most complicated of all, by reading her in a particularly imaginative and integrated way, I could use her (as I am trying to do right now) for my own benefit in my writing and research.

Obviously the specific circumstances of my reading or, more accurately, misreading are unique—and that is part of my point. But I am also suggesting that, in many ways, my misreading illustrates common issues and problems. As teachers, we play a crucial—but generally misunderstood—role in our students’ writing processes. While we have begun to understand how students compose and to develop a more comprehensive and flexible view of the unconscious forces which shape their composing, we continue to oversimplify the teacher’s reading or interpretative processes. Or to put it another way, while we have come to see writing as socially constructed, we have failed to understand the teacher’s role in the construction of that meaning. We need to develop a theory of reading student texts which takes into account our reading of the students themselves, of our own unconscious motivations and associations, and, finally, of the interactive and dialectical nature of the teacher-student relationship.

**Reading and Misreading Student Essays**

The most significant relationship in any writing course is the one between the writer and her text. But if reading and writing are reciprocal or transactional processes, as Louise Rosenblatt believes, we also need to develop the teacher’s relation to a text. That I misread Nicki’s essay in certain ways is not significant in itself. After all, most of us in English studies have grown relatively comfortable with the notion that our readings are not simple or literal decodings of texts, that when we read we create and recreate, deconstruct and reconstruct. While this fact seems to cause shock and anguish in old-fashioned New Critics and neo-Aristotelians, most writing teachers are comfortable with the idea that meaning is found not solely in the text nor solely in the reader but rather in the interac-
tion between the two. In fact, that process is at the very center of our work as writing teachers: we must misread every student text in order to help students say what we think they really mean. It is this sort of generous and deliberate misreading—readings in which we go beyond the words’ literal meanings to try to draw out possibilities in a text, to imagine what the text might be trying to become—that is at the basis of Shaughnessy’s analysis of error, Elbow’s believing game, and Bartholomae and Petrosky’s plan to integrate reading and writing.

So far, so good. But the next step causes resistance: few writing teachers want to go so far as to admit that we actually create the meaning of our students’ texts, particularly if this creative act is largely the result of our unconscious biases and associations. The problem with admitting our role as co-author is that it violates most of our fundamental beliefs about the objectivity of the teacher, the integrity of the text, the rights of the individual author. And yet that next step seems unavoidable, a fact not lost on those interested in the application of critical theory to the composition classroom: if great literary works are unstable and subject to multiple readings and interpretations, then how unstable is the evolving draft of an inexperienced composition student (Harris 158)? If every reading of Chaucer and Shakespeare is a re-writing, then how can teachers avoid becoming authors of our students’ drafts (Eagleton 12)? Or, to put it another way, if a teacher is reading a text that was written specifically for her, with revisions that are a direct result of her suggestions, how can she possibly have any clear sense of where the text stops and her reading begins?

But in spite of these nagging realities, I sense that in practice most of us cling to the notion that our readings of student essays are somehow “objective”; in spite of our knowledge of reader response theory and deconstruction, we believe that when we read student essays we are responding to some objective reality in—or noticeably missing from—the text itself rather than to a text we have unconsciously revised or even created. We are not unaware that we bring to our teaching of writing and our reading of student essays strong beliefs and biases. We know, for example, how we feel about abortion and gun control, how we respond more favorably to some rhetorical strategies than to others, even how we like some students much better than others. But we conveniently forget those issues and pretend that we can willingly suspend those beliefs and disbeliefs. We see ourselves as neutral, objective, open-minded. We give each student an equal chance. We are ready to like essays on any topic in any mode. We just want students to find their own voices, to find themselves.

This paradigm of the teacher-as-objective-reader fails to do justice to the complexity of the reading and writing processes and to our relationship to our students. When we read an essay on abortion or a presidential election, most of us go out of our way to be fair, to try to evaluate the writing for its own sake, if such a thing is even possible. But what happens when we read an essay on a seemingly “unpolitical” issue or topic about which we have powerful (and often unconscious) associations? Consider, for example, this exchange during a discussion I had a few weeks ago with two other writing teachers. First teacher: “If I get one more essay on ‘how I won the big high school football game,’ I’ll scream. I mean these guys describe each play in great detail and then show how
they saved the day at the end. Yuck. They are so self-serving and so trivial.” Other teacher: “You’re missing the point. Those aren’t trivial at all. For an adolescent male, those games can be his most significant experiences.” In part this is a gender issue: the writers of most of these sports essays and the second teacher are male, while the first teacher is female. In part it is personal: the male teacher went on to explain that he remembers high school sports as perhaps the one “pure thing” in his life, while I went on to admit that because my memories of high school sports include failed expectations—mine and my father’s—it is for me one of the most impure things in my life.

Of course, it’s not true that every reading is equally idiosyncratic and personal or that student texts do not exist until we de- and then reconstruct them. I am not suggesting that all student papers are Rorschach tests or random ink blots on the page. Clearly there is a text in the class, and it is even a text for which we can—and have—developed shared criteria for evaluation. Sometimes this “interpretative community” is consciously and deliberately created, such as the training of teachers participating in holistic scoring sessions; more often, though, it is the result of shared unconscious preferences or, as Lester Faigley’s study of teacher preferences demonstrates, shared “unstated cultural definitions” (410). There is even a certain type of essay (I will call it the autobiographical narrative of a self-actualizing event) that most of us in this interpretative community prefer. But the fact that we agree a text exists and that we agree about some of the criteria for evaluation should not make us underestimate our own creative and often idiosyncratic role in the process.

My point (similar to one that Louise Phelps makes on the various stages of teacher response) is that we need to develop a theory of reading student drafts that reflects these issues, that allows us to acknowledge—to our students and to ourselves—that we play a central role in the composing process, not only when we give our students guidelines and heuristics, not only when we suggest changes in conferences, but also when we read the essays themselves. We need a theory of reading that takes into account the “intertextual” nature of our work; that is, a theory that takes into account the fact that we cannot read any student essay without unconsciously and simultaneously reading a number of other texts as well. And, finally, we need a theory that allows us to recognize our limitations, to say first to ourselves, and then directly to a student, “I am not going to be a good reader of an essay on this topic. You should know that going in.”

In part, then, this is a process for which we need to use and extend what we have learned about reading and analysis from critical theory. But it is more—and less—than that. The evolving student draft is not identical to the published literary work and thus requires, as Phelps and others have argued, new theories of reading and response. Our readings of student essays are contextualized in ways that readings of literary texts are not. We know the authors of these texts, we work with them, we suggest changes to them, we have something to gain if they succeed, or—if we dislike the students involved—something to gain if they fail. None of this is static or linear or unilateral but changes with each teacher and each student. Therefore, in order to develop a more dialectical theory of reading
and interpretation we need to consider how actual readers and writers—teachers and students—interact. We will not come to understand this interaction by de-contextualizing context (as I believe Linda Flower and other experimentalists often do in their research on this subject) but rather by examining our readings within the student-teacher relationship.

Towards Redefining the Teacher's Role

If we are to respond differently in the teacher-student relationship, we need to re-define our role and self-image. Ironically, as much as the teacher's role seems to have changed in the great paradigm shift from product to process, one thing remains the same: we still have written ourselves relatively minor and unfulfilling parts to play in the writing process. In the traditional class the writing teacher played several roles—provider of information, lecturer, upholder of standards, corrector—but each was relatively static, unilateral: the teacher provided the students with rules and models of good writing and then graded them according to how closely the results approximated those rules and models. Not only did this role fail to reflect the complexity and pleasure of the writer, it failed to acknowledge the intelligence, creativity, and interests of the teacher. In fact our role in the traditional classroom seems to me a little like the tyrant's rule in Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant." By denying our students power, we actually limited our own freedom. Although we did most of the talking, although we told the students the rules and gave them the models, although we believed that we were in control, there was actually very little room for the sort of originality, risk-taking, and inquiry that Cynthia Onore and others have argued is essential if a writing relationship is to be successful (240).

When I say that our role is still dull and one-dimensional, I am not suggesting that there has been no significant change over the last two decades. Nor am I ignoring some current examples of more innovative and interactive teacher-student relationships. It's just that the new role most process teachers have adopted is in many respects as narrow and rigid as the old one. I'm referring to teachers who describe themselves as "facilitators" (as if they have no agenda of their own, or rather, as if their agenda is not important) or as "just another member of the writing workshop." The concept of the de-centralized writing classroom is based on the following logic (or illogic): "all we really have to do is get out of our students' way and let them write." I realize that I am creating something of a caricature here of the process teacher and classroom, but I think that there has been an element of naivété in this approach.

Many writing teachers deny their role as co-authors and their tremendous authority in the classroom because it does not fit with the image they would like to project. Most of us are uncomfortable admitting that we are the center of a "de-centered" classroom, that we hold so much power, that we are largely responsible for success and, even worse, for failure. But while there are good reasons for our discomfort—many of us would like for political reasons to think of our classroom as democratic, supportive, and non-hierarchical—there are even better reasons to face the truth: from a student's perspective a writing teacher is an au-
thority figure, even—or especially—in process classrooms. (In fact, as Tom Newkirk has argued, the teacher in composition classes in which students are asked to write about their personal feelings and to meet in one-to-one conferences actually holds more authority, because the stakes are higher.)

I suspect that the notion of teacher-as-non-authority developed as a necessary stage or antithesis to the thesis offered by traditional classroom teachers. The synthesis is to move beyond either/or thinking—either we have authority or they do, either we own the text or they do, either the meaning is in the writer or in the reader—towards a more dialectical definition. Rather than dichotomizing the teacher’s and the student’s roles, we need to see how they are inseparably related. Just as Janet Emig argued that traditional models of the composing process failed because they ignored the role and uses of the writer’s unconscious, most of our current views fail because they ignore the role and uses of the teacher’s unconscious. Until we have a clearer and more realistic notion of how we shape and influence student writing and how, in return, that writing shapes and influences us, we will continue to limit our student’s potential development.

And to limit our own. One reason many English teachers dislike teaching composition is that they feel they are supposed to dislike it and then set out to prove it. The teaching of writing should not be fun, they feel, and a writing course certainly should not be tailored to an teacher’s individual taste or preference. This sense of composition as a teacher’s unpleasant duty or burden runs deep in our profession and is one of the reasons so many people distrust, resent, and envy those writing teachers who talk about their work in intensely personal and positive terms. I know for a fact that my colleagues are more than a little skeptical when Toby Fulwiler gloats that Freshman Writing is the “Best Course in the University to Teach” or when Don Murray muses, “There must be something wrong with a fifty-four-year-old man who is looking forward to his thirty-fifth conference of the day” (“Listening” 232). This kind of enthusiasm for composition does not seem possible to teachers who have scrupulously sought to remove themselves and their own interests from the course. By remaining detached in this way, by refusing to misread essays in personal and playful ways, we make composition an unpleasant duty—for our students and for ourselves.

The Lure, Lore, and Leery(ness) of Therapeutic Models

So how do we write more interesting and satisfying roles for ourselves to play in the writing class? And how do we develop a clearer and more realistic notion of the way that our responses and non-responses shape student writing? My own suggestion—and it is one that may not be particularly popular or politically correct—is that we pay more careful attention to the research and experience of psychotherapists. I am not equating composition and therapy nor am I suggesting that psychotherapeutic relationships are free from the power politics and self-deceptions that I am criticizing in the writing class. I am simply saying that it makes no sense to ignore lessons from the field in which the workings of the unconscious and the subtle dynamics of dyad relationships have been carefully and systematically analyzed. I think that most writing teachers know that thera-
Therapeutic models can help us explain and explore the teacher-student relationship, but because they find this comparison threatening they publicly deny it. That may also explain why so many composition theorists offer instructive models from and comparisons to psychotherapy which they then immediately disown. Take, for example, this paragraph by James Moffett:

The processes of psychotherapy and writing both require maximum synthesizing of firsthand and secondhand knowledge into a full, harmonious expression of individual experience. This calls for the removal of spells to which the person has not agreed and of which he is unconscious. Freud asked the patient to start talking about anything that came into his head—in other words, to attempt to verbalize his stream of consciousness or externalize his inner speech. This technique presupposes that from the apparent chaos of all this disjointed rambling will emerge for analyst and patient an order, eventually "betrayed" by motifs, by sequencing, by gradual filling in of personal cosmology. Thus, if successful, the subject's coslogizing processes, the idiosyncratic ways of structuring and symbolizing experience, stand more clearly revealed and presumably more amenable to deliberate change, if desired. The most important thing a writer needs to know is how she does think and verbalize and how he or she might. . . . Not for a moment do I suggest that the teacher play psychiatrist. The therapeutic benefits from writing are natural fallout and nothing for a school to strive for. (100-01)

I think Moffett is saying that, "Writing and psychotherapy are similar processes, but composition teachers and therapists have nothing in common." In other words, although he is unquestionably drawn to—and willing to draw from—the experience of psychotherapists, he is determined to distance himself from this model as quickly as possible. In fact, Moffett's statement is only the clearest example of the schizophrenic response that most writing teachers have to the composition-as-therapy metaphor. For example, Thomas Carnicelli, concerned about the kinds of questions and clues that promote self-discovery, suggests first that Rogerian questioning might help, but then quickly offers an artificial distinction: "The teacher's function is to lead students to adopt the teacher's values, the common criteria of good writing shared by the teacher, and the English profession, and, with certain wide variations, educated people in general. The therapist's function is to lead clients to clarify or develop their own individual values" (116). Similarly, Stephen Zelnick, in writing about conferences, admits, "I am afraid that whether we wish it or not, we become role models for our students" and "there is the romantic/sexual vibration. If it is in any way possible, conferences set going a buzz and flutter of fantasies" (49), but then he dismisses the therapeutic model altogether: "Translating student conferences into other, simpler paradigms of efficient, smooth client relations, or psychotherapeutic self-exploration impoverishes education. We can do better than that" (58).

Oddly enough, Don Murray, the writing teacher whose work seems most heavily influenced by psychotherapeutic goals and methods, is perhaps the most outspoken critic of this analogy. While Murray talks again and again about reading "my other self," about "writing to learn," about writing conferences in which the teacher listens and the student speaks, about a process which, in fact,
sounds suspiciously similar to making the unconscious conscious, he finds the comparison ludicrous:

Responsive teaching is often confused with a stereotypical therapeutic role in which the teacher always nods, always encourages, always supports, and never intervenes. That is ridiculous. . . . The conference isn’t a psychiatric session. Think of the writer as an apprentice at the workbench with the master workman. (Writer 154)

I can’t help but wonder why these writing teachers are going so far to deny a connection that they actually brought up themselves. No one claims that conference teaching equals therapy; but the fact that there are significant differences between teaching writing and doing psychotherapy is hardly the point. Carnicelli, Zelnick, Murray, and others seem to admit that there is role-modeling, sexual tension, even transference, in the teaching of writing and the teacher-student relationship, but because these things make them uncomfortable (which they should) they deny their significance and suggest that we focus on the writing process and product as if it existed in a decontextualized situation and relationship.

Still, these early attempts to link composition and therapy were valuable because they called attention to important aspects of the teacher-student relationship and paved the way for more recent essays which unapologetically take advantage of therapeutic models. I want to mention two of these that focus on the unconscious drives and associations that shape the way our students respond to us as teachers. Robert Brooke, relying heavily on Lacan, suggests that students in “response” classrooms of the type that Murray and Elbow describe improve their writing because they identify with—and want desperately to please—the teacher, the “Subject Who is Supposed to Know” (Brooke 680). The student then projects or transfers emotions and associations from his own early-life relationships, particularly with his parents, onto the teacher. Ann Murphy, relying more heavily on Freud, extends Brooke’s argument by demonstrating how transference can also account for our students’ occasional resistance to us, to writing, to self-knowledge, to education. Murphy argues:

Despite their many obvious and important differences, both psychoanalysis and teaching writing involve an intensely personal relationship in which two people painstakingly establish trust beyond the apparent limitations of their institutional roles, in order that both might learn and one might achieve a less, marginal, more fully articulated life. (181)

While I think these essays go a long way in explaining classroom dynamics, I want to go still further and suggest that counter-transference—our unconscious responses to our students or, more significantly, our unconscious responses to their unconscious responses to us—also shapes the reading and writing processes. Freud’s explanation of counter-transference has important implications for writing teachers:

We have become aware of the ‘counter-transference’, which arises in [the analyst] as a result of a patient’s influence on his unconscious feelings, and we are almost inclined to insist that he shall recognize this counter-transference in himself and overcome it. Now that a considerable number of people are practising psychoanalysis and exchanging their observations with one another, we have noticed that
no psycho-analyst goes further than his own complexes and internal resistances permit; and we consequently require that he shall begin his activity with self-analysis and continually carry it deeper while he is making observations on his patients. Anyone who fails to produce results in a self-analysis of this kind may at once give up any idea of being able to treat patients by analysis. (145)

As teachers, we also can go no further than our own complexes and internal resistances permit, and thus we, too, need to begin with self-analysis. We, too, need to identify the extent to which our responses to our students and their writing are not neutral or objective, the extent to which counter-transference responses interfere with our ability to help students improve their writing.

If writing teachers react negatively to the suggestion that they play therapist, I assume that my recommendations—that we analyze ourselves, that we consider our own neuroses in the reading and teaching processes, that we also play patient—seem even more irrelevant and threatening. Again it's not that writing teachers are unaware that our own unconscious issues often obscure and shape our actions; it's just that we hope if we don't talk about this, it will go away. For instance, Rosenblatt acknowledges that when students read and write personally, they often reveal some of their "conflicts and obsessions," thereby tempting teachers to deal directly with these psychological issues (207). Although she points out some instances in which students have benefitted from this sort of interaction, she ends up warning teachers against "officious meddling with the emotional life of their students" (207) because teachers cannot be trusted in this sort of relationship:

Unfortunately, like members of any other group, many teachers are themselves laboring under emotional tensions and frustrations. Given the right to meddle in this way, they would be tempted to find solutions for their own problems by vicariously sharing the student's life. They might also project upon the student their own particular preoccupations and lead him to think that he was actually suffering difficulties and frustrations that were the teacher's. Assuredly even worse than the old indifference to what is happening psychologically to the student is the tampering with personality carried on by well-intentioned but ill-informed adults. The wise teacher does not attempt to be a psychiatrist. (208)

Rosenblatt is right to point out that teachers have the power to impose themselves on their students in dangerous ways, but it is not always so easy to distinguish between a teacher who is guilty of projecting his "own particular preoccupations" onto his students and "tampering with personality" from one who is emotionally engaged in his teaching and honestly interested in influencing his students' values and ideas. By attempting to edit feelings, unconscious associations, and personal problems out of a writing course, we are fooling ourselves and shortchanging our students. The teaching of writing is about solving problems, personal and public, and I don't think we can have it both ways: we cannot create intensity and deny tension, celebrate the personal and deny the significance of the personalities involved. In my writing courses, I want to meddle with my students' emotional lives, and I want their writing to meddle with mine. Transference and counter-transference emotions are threatening because they are so powerful, but they are most destructive and inhibiting in the writing class when we fail to acknowledge and deal with them.
Reading Myself Reading My Students: A Classroom Example

Let me try to illustrate this process of identifying and using counter-transference emotions with an example from my own teaching. Last fall I taught two sections of freshman composition; from the very first week, one section went extremely well while the other was a nightmare. I had trouble getting the students involved in the discussions or in their own writing, and I grew increasingly irritated during class. I was especially bothered by the four 18-year-old male students who sat next to each other, leaning back in their desks against the wall. They usually wore sunglasses; they always wore sneakers with untied laces. Whenever I tried to create drama or intensity, they joked or smirked. Whenever I tried to joke, they acted aggressively bored, rolling their eyes or talking to each other. At first, I tried to ignore them, trying not to let them get to me. But I found that it was a little like trying not to think about an elephant. I was always aware of them, even when they were not acting out.

After two weeks, I decided that everyone was being distracted by these students, that they were responsible for the unproductive mood of the classroom. But for some reason, I was not able to confront them directly about their aggressive behaviors in class or their passive efforts outside of class. It was as if in confronting them I would be acknowledging that they were bothering me, and I refused to do that, partly because I always prided myself on my relationships with students and the comfortable, relaxed atmosphere in my classrooms. So instead of confronting them directly, I stewed inside and—I am embarrassed to admit—fantasized about revenge: "Be patient," I told myself, "Grading time will come along eventually and then you can get even. You can fail them all."

I suppose the other reason I did not confront them was that when they came for their first individual conferences, they were polite, even a bit deferential. They were emotionally detached, but they answered my questions, accepted most of my suggestions, and, except for one, even seemed somewhat grateful. Still their writing was relatively weak, and I made little effort to help them improve. I read their texts looking more for problems than for possibilities. I had essentially written them off: I had decided that these four were just insecure, adolescent boys trying to act tough in class in front of the other students; that they were not secure enough with their roles, with their masculinity, to be independent, serious, or mature; that if they wanted to get nothing out of this class, then that was fine by me, and, finally, that I would just concentrate on the other students in the class and ignore them.

But that noble plan failed miserably. It seemed that every time I would accommodate their acting out, they would raise the stakes. For example, during small-group peer response times, they would choose to work together and then spend the time talking about football or dorm parties. Even worse, if I assigned groups, they would talk about writing for a few minutes and then call to each other across groups. I retaliated (note the aggressive language) by indirectly threatening them. I interrupted the class one day to give an angry and sarcastic speech on how anyone who was not taking the class seriously would fail and end up taking it again. I told them how sorry I would feel if that happened, but that I...
had no choice. Although I knew that these four students would not fail—their essays were not that bad—I looked at them when I made the threat.

Finally, one day, I snapped. I walked into class, saw them together, laughing and leaning against the wall, and in a voice that conveyed much too much anger and disgust I said, “I have never had to do this in ten years of college teaching; in fact, I left high school specifically so I wouldn’t have to deal with shit like this, but you guys are completely out of control. I don’t want you to sit together any more.” There was an awkward silence and then one of the boys said in a mocking voice, “Completely out of control? Fine, I’ll move.” Another asked, “That’s why you left high school?” It was an embarrassing moment because it was clear—to them and to me—that I was the one who felt out of control.

What was going on? I was usually relaxed and comfortable with students. I was reasonable. I was well liked. So the problem had to be with them. They were threatened by me, I told myself, so insecure that they had to stick together and act tough. They saw me as an authority figure and were rebelling, not only against me but against authority figures from their pasts. And those explanations were partially true. But that still did not explain why my response was so angry. I had allowed myself to get caught up in a macho competition with these students, and I was losing. Clearly this had as much or more to do with my insecurities and unconscious responses as it did with theirs.

That’s when I realized the significance of my slip about high school. I had meant to say, “That’s why I left high school teaching,” but I had referred accidentally to my own experience as a high school student. I remembered periods when I acted like these students and later periods when they were the type I felt I was competing against. And I realized how much, for whatever reasons, I was still bothered by the group behavior of adolescent males. The realization helped: by recognizing and somehow naming the source of my anger, it dissipated and became more manageable. I’m not saying I suddenly felt comfortable with these students or with their texts, but the situation now seemed within my own realm, somehow within my control.

Although this example may have more to do with my neuroses than with composition theory, the point is that this knowledge changed the way that I read these students and their texts; it helped me in my teaching and, indirectly, helped these students in their writing. I began to confront them directly, asking them if they agreed with certain points, inviting them to criticize my readings, giving them room and invitation in conference and class to challenge me in (what I took to be) constructively indirect ways: I encouraged them to freewrite about the course and me. I asked them to write metaphorically about writing. I told them to push back when they felt I was pushing them too hard in a conference.

Although one of the students continued to write essays that showed little effort or commitment, the other three made significant progress. One wrote an essay in which he used the metaphor of writing as playing the drums to argue against my emphasis on revision: a writer has to revise just as a drummer has to tune his kit, but “sometimes you just have to let me play.” Another wrote a satiric essay on “productive procrastination,” suggesting not only that I took writ-
ing too seriously but also that my view of the process was limited and limiting. He ended his essay by saying,

If you begin writing too early, the pressure may not be great enough. If you begin too late, your ideas will not have time to take shape. Procrastination is the key because it triggers your unconscious ideas. Oh, by the way, it is now 3:27 a.m. And you probably thought I wouldn’t have time to write a good essay.

The fact that these challenges to my authority came in conventional forms that supported my authority neutralized my anger or defensiveness; the fact that I allowed and encouraged these challenges neutralized theirs.

But the third student, Jack, provided the best example of this sort of interaction. From the beginning of the year, he had seemed the angriest and the least cooperative. I was irritated that the first essay he brought into conference, “The Advantages and Disadvantages of Biotechnology,” was clearly written as a report for high-school class. When I asked him to write something new, he brought in “How to Make a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich.” There were attempts at humor (“A true P, B, and J expert takes this science a step further by experimenting with exotic varieties of peanut butters and jellies.”), but for the most part it was a flat description of the process.

As I was reading it, he spoke up, “Remember in class what you said? You said that there are no good or bad topics, that someone could write a trivial essay on something profound, like nuclear war, or a profound one on something trivial, like making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. So I tried it.” Again I felt irritated, and couldn’t quite figure out how to respond, so I asked him the purpose of the essay. “To tell the reader how to make peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Why? Isn’t that OK?”

“But doesn’t a reader already know that?”

“Yeah. So are you saying that something is missing . . . but what else can you say about this topic?”

When I asked him if he meant the essay to be funny, he said, “Sort of,” so I suggested he try to locate and develop the humor in a revision.

After he left, I knew I had been too aggressive in my responses to him and too passive in my readings of his texts. I was not making any effort to read or rather misread meaning or possibility or potential into his writing because I felt convinced that he was trying to get away with something; he was provoking and mocking me. Still I was frustrated with myself: rather than calling him on anything directly, saying “I don’t want dredged-up high school essays” or “Why waste time making fun of the assignment?” I was still operating at a stage in which I did not want Jack or any of the others to know they were getting to me.

It was during the next week that I began to realize why I was so upset by these four students. It was also the time that I realized I had to confront their resistance more directly while at the same time giving them more room to channel it. So when Jack came back with a revision of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich essay, I responded differently. He had made a few minor changes, but nothing striking. When we discussed it, he said he tried to make it funnier by
making the instructions “more ridiculous.” When I asked him why he was writing a comic essay on making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, he had no idea. I suggested that if the essay were meant to be satiric, he ought to think about who or what was being satirized. He seemed totally confused and asked for an example. I said that the essay could, for example, be making fun of technical writers who complicate simple processes. He looked irritated. “Or, maybe you are making fun of teachers who give foolish assignments.” He looked surprised for a second, then laughed. I had not planned to confront him in that way, but as soon as I did I was convinced it was the right move.

“‘I decided to drop the peanut butter and jelly essay,’” Jack told me in his next conference. “‘You kept asking me what I learned from writing it and what I wanted the reader to learn and my answer was always ‘I don’t know, probably nothing.’ So I decided that if I couldn’t learn anything from it, the reader can’t be expected to either. So I wrote an essay about why this wasn’t a good topic.’” Now it could certainly be argued that Jack had simply quit resisting or that he was now putting me on in a new way, but at the time I only focused on how this new essay was an interesting discussion on the role and difficulty of topic selection in the writing process. His main point was that a “simpler topic is actually harder to work with than a more complicated and in-depth one.” He tried to prove that point by comparing his peanut butter and jelly essay to a classmate’s essay on the death of his father. He argued that he had struggled to generate ideas because his topic was so simple, while his classmate “had many avenues and moral implications to explore.” I encouraged him, pointing out that I thought this essay had more potential than his earlier ones. I raised questions about certain nuances of his argument. And I talked a little about what kind of topics I found easier and harder to write about. In short, I finally tried to misread one of his essays in ways that would open up the topic for him and for me. After Jack revised his essay, we both agreed that it was by far the strongest piece he had written all semester; not coincidentally, it was also the first one in which we both felt an investment.

Until I recognized the fact that my unconscious responses were creating much of the resistance, Jack stalled as a writer. After that recognition, we both were more productive in our respective roles. The essay on the relative difficulty of certain topics may have begun as the same kind of dare as the first peanut butter and jelly paper, but it is clear that in writing that essay, he and I both became interested in the topic, more connected to the text and to each other. In fact, until I could recognize how much my anger and defensiveness were shaping my responses to all four of these student writers, I was not an effective writing teacher for them or the other students in the class.

The Personal is Pedagogical

Of course, these students may have had difficulty as writers in my class for all sorts of reasons that have nothing to do with my personal hangups or limitations. In fact, I’m certain that there were a combination of explanations for their problems early in the year. But the fact remains that I may have contributed to their
problems by responding to them and to their writing in ways that limited our relationship. The same is true in Nicki’s case. It’s possible that she was able to write effectively in my course partially because of her transference emotions and identification with me. But it is also true that I may have failed to push her as hard as I might have if I were not caught up in feeling proud of myself. Nicki’s writing directly and indirectly validated my teaching and, as a result, I was flattered; I read the early drafts and behavior of these four males as threatening and critical and I, in return, was defensive and punishing.

Of course, a sexual component is in this: we cannot ignore gender as a factor in the way students respond to their teachers and the way teachers respond to their students. But beyond the sexual tension—most of which is unconscious—there is simply the problem that I respond more favorably to students—male or female—who make me feel secure than to those who threaten me. And that is what I need to monitor: as soon as I find myself giving up on a student or, on the other hand, feeling tremendous personal pride in a student’s work, I need to question my own motives. I need to discover in what ways my biases and assumptions—both conscious and unconscious—are shaping my teaching.

Now I suspect that this concentration on my own feelings and associations seems self-indulgent and misguided to composition specialists who believe in more “scholarly” research. I further suspect that they would advise me to quit thinking so much about myself and to focus instead on the tropes and conventions of academic discourse, or on the problems of task representation, or on new ways to empower student writers. But this is not an either/or choice, not a decision to study myself rather than my students or their texts; my point is that we can never fully separate one from the other. If we want to find less constrained and constraining ways of responding as writing teachers, we have to examine our responses within the contexts of the relationships in which they occur. By engaging in ongoing self-analysis, by becoming more self-conscious about the source of our misreadings, by recognizing that our unconscious associations are a significant part of a writing course, we can become more creative readers and more effective teachers. By avoiding this process, we will never know in what ways we are limiting our students, their writing, and ourselves.

Works Cited


