

The role of assignment design in the search for  
consistency in evaluating student writing

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most time-consuming and frustrating factor in teaching freshman composition is evaluation. If the average composition instructor faces from 75 to 100 student essays every ten days to two weeks, and he or she spends 20 minutes minimum responding to each, the total number of hours spent evaluating student work, on top of class presentation and preparation, can become frustrating and the comments mechanistic.

This is particularly true if the students' response to the assignment is not what the teacher has anticipated or asked for. For example, if the majority of the students in a given class do not understand the term "analyze" in the instructions for a writing task, their response may be to summarize or narrate. The instructor is then faced with the possibility of several student essays which have not answered what he or she had intended for the assignment. Hence, the teacher must accept the inadequacy of the instructions and rework the assignment itself, or spend an inordinate amount of time teaching through comments on the students' work. Any way we examine it, the answer to the problem is time consuming and frustrating.

In addition, we will inevitably see--after taking special care with the comments we write to the students' drafts--some students who will quickly glance at the grade on the paper and

file it away in their folders, or, worse, toss it in the trash on their way out of the classroom. These are students who either "marry" their first drafts, refusing to acknowledge new ways of looking at their work and problems within what they've done. Or, on the other end of the spectrum, some students have little to no confidence in their abilities, wanting to write only for their readers and not for themselves. How do we, as teachers, meet the evaluative needs of so many diverse individuals in the English composition classroom?

My answer lies in the role of assignment design as it pertains to evaluation. I believe that one of the keys in establishing consistency in evaluating student writing is to incorporate evaluative criteria within the assignment itself.

Though my intention is to focus primarily on how evaluative criteria within the writing assignment may aid the *composition* instructor, my conclusions may also be applicable to instructors who design writing assignments in any field of study. Students who write persuasive essays for second semester composition and those who write essay tests over World War II for Political Science 101 often face similar difficulties interpreting set writing tasks and teacher expectations. Thus, establishing evaluative criteria within writing assignments may be an across-the-curriculum challenge, which could prove a profitable direction for further research.

In Chapter One I will address the need for consistency and provide a brief overview of pertinent research on writing evaluation. This will be followed in Chapter Two by a similar study of the research on assignment design. In the third chapter I will summarize what I believe to be the most important aspects practical factors in both areas, and I will conclude with an assignment, which I have used in class, that demonstrates my theory. In addition to a works cited page at the end of my research, I have included a list of works consulted which may be of use to teachers interested in pursuing this subject further.

## CHAPTER ONE: EVALUATION

Before I relate the topic of assignment design to evaluation, let's first examine each separately in order to define several key terms and outline research done in each area. In this chapter I will 1) define the terms *evaluation* and *consistency*, 2) discuss the need for consistency in evaluation, and 3) give a brief overview of recent research on writing evaluation.

### Definition of Terms

It is neither logical nor desirable to assume that there is a method or "key" which would enable a room full of composition teachers to look at a given essay and agree without question that it deserves a C+. Far too many variable factors, such as regional or cultural influences, or interpretation of the aim or purpose of the discourse, play a part in determining the grade. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify early in this work that my intention in using the word "consistency" is not to suggest a fool-proof, all-purpose grading secret. My goal is instead to suggest specific evaluative criteria which, when combined with the kind of assignment to be outlined in chapters two and three, will allow evaluators to approach all papers consistently. Hence, consistency refers to the approach to evaluation rather than the final product.

In my research I have tried to avoid the "final product" aspect of evaluation. The all-important grade, valued mainly by the Registrar and some competitive students, has proven a headache for most composition instructors. For most of us, the primary goal is to help our students to think critically and gain insights into their writing processes, which will enable them to succeed as communicators. Nancy Sommers says, "We comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students become that questioning reader themselves, because, ultimately we believe that becoming such a reader will help them evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing" (148). This "control" Sommers refers to should be the end measure of success in any composition course. But of course the Registrar may have difficulties averaging Jennifer's B- in College Algebra and C+ in Consumer Chemistry with the fact that she entered her Freshman Composition course not knowing she had a writing process, and left, not only recognizing it, but using it to her advantage when developing concepts and arguments on paper.

Thus, we need to have a standard, interdisciplinary grading system in order to speak the same language. But W.U. McDonald, among others, criticizes a standardized letter-grading system by saying that, "We are forced to reduce a complex set of observations and responses and assessments to a single symbol,



the letter grade, a manifest impossibility for a composition course" (155). I would add that the letter grade itself is reductive and inconsistent with what we teach in the classroom about the complex relationship between expression, tone, and any number of other characteristics. Most of us regularly encourage our students to play with words until they find the precise combination to fit their needs and the needs of their audience. This often results in much time spent prewriting and doing several revisions. Ultimately, however, the final draft benefits from carefully chosen language which enhances the intended meaning. If precise, clear expression is one of our main goals for the composition class, how can we presume to communicate our meanings and feelings about the students' work with just a letter grade at the bottom of their papers?

Any standardized grading system poses difficulties for composition instructors, and any means by which they might achieve consistency in assigning letter grades would likely reduce teaching composition to using objective exams. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the grading system *does* exist; thus, our students' writing is necessarily both a process and a product. Edward White addresses this concept:

We make ourselves foolish if we ignore the fact that writing is a product as well as a process. Every student turning in a paper to be graded, every

scholar producing a paper for delivery or publication or promotion knows perfectly well that writing is an important and measurable product.  
(188)

The key here is that we, as instructors of writing, must find a balance between product- and process-oriented response to student writing. To ignore the process runs the risk of diminishing the teacher's role to that of simply an authoritative judge. This, of course, sets up an adversarial relationship between the student and teacher. To ignore the product aspect of evaluation, is to appear impractical and hypocritical when we are forced to place a grade on the paper in the end. I believe we must acknowledge that both product and process are facets of evaluation, and that we must target both through our evaluative commentary.

Though placing a letter grade on student work may be inconsistent with some goals of a composition class, the negative aspects can be offset by the evaluative commentary the instructor provides. My research in this area will therefore focus on how this commentary may be most effectively implemented for consistency. I will examine evaluation in terms of commentary on student writing, as opposed merely to placing a letter grade on the paper, to address the crucial question of how well the writer has achieved the objectives of the assignment.

### The Need For Consistency

At the beginning of each term I ask my students to fill out an information sheet which asks for such information as their campus address, phone number, and what they like to read--that is, assuming they like to read at all. The information sheet is designed to briefly acquaint me with my students and provide me with cues that will help me to easily recall and memorize their names. The last question on the sheet asks what their personal goals for the class are. This is meant to be a "feeler" for weaknesses the students perceive in their own writing, and how they may approach turning these weaknesses into strengths. Most of the answers I get to this question say something like, "I've never used commas right, this semester I want to learn where to put them," or "I just want to pass this class so I don't have to take any more English."

Recently, I had one answer which particularly caught my eye. "Kristian" was a sophomore engineering student who had taken two college composition classes prior to entering mine. He took the first class at a community college and received high praise for his topics and ideas, but had difficulties with mechanics. Because he was required to achieve a particular grade in order to get into the engineering college, he took the class again, this time

at the university. Because of his problems with mechanics in the community college class, Kristian worked hard to improve them. But when he enrolled in his first freshman composition class at the university, he began to experience negative feedback for his content. It is no wonder, then, that his answer to my personal goal question was, "I want to figure out what [you] want me to write."

When I read his answer, I didn't know any of his background. So I couldn't decide whether he meant that he wanted to learn how to read the assignments I posed, or if he wanted me to dictate his content, or if it was another standard generalization written to make me happy. A few weeks later, in his first conference with me, I asked what he had meant by this statement. He told me that in his two previous writing courses the instructors had reacted very differently to his work, and he felt he had to shape his work to what he believed they wanted to hear.

The specific instance he cited involved an assignment that both of his previous instructors had given. It asked the students to describe a place that held particular significance for them. Kristian chose, in his class at the community college, to write about a beach where he met his best friend. From the instructor, Kristian received praise for the originality of the idea and the detailed description he provided. However, he had severe spelling

and punctuation difficulties and, as a result, failed the assignment. When his second instructor posed nearly the same assignment, Kristian decided to use the same subject matter, as it had succeeded previously. But this time the instructor criticized Kristian's story as "a cliché" and focused on organizational difficulties. Kristian claimed that in content and structure his papers were nearly the same. The result was that he felt that the key to success in English composition was to figure out "the guessing game" behind what the teachers really wanted.

The anecdote concerning Kristian illustrates two key problems relevant to evaluative consistency:

- 1) instructors do not clearly define criteria by which they will evaluate the students' writing, and
- 2) teachers tend to appropriate students' texts.

The first, of course, is clearly illustrated in the instructors' different expectations of the same assignment, which I'll examine shortly. Let's first address the secondary problem of appropriation. Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch have done extensive research in this area and describe appropriation this way:

The teacher's role, it is supposed, is to tell the writers [students] how to do a better job than they could do alone, thereby, in effect appropriating the writers' texts. In reading those texts and commenting on them, the teacher-evaluator "fixes" the writing in ways that

appear to approximate the Platonic Discourse, the Ultimate Propriety, that any student text may have suggested, but not achieved. (158)

I would add that the danger here is that the students begin to bow to what they deem the all-powerful authority, the teacher, and cease to write what they believe. Instead of developing ideas that interest them, they begin to interpret "what the teacher wants." Although they may, as a result, produce structurally or grammatically "correct" essays, their content runs the risk of being flat and is no longer honestly their own. The underlying message in Kristian's comment on his student information sheet is that the desire to win over the evaluator is often stronger than the desire to please one's self. I believe if Kristian had known that I am a New York Yankees fan, he would somehow have worked into his next essay an assessment of George Steinbrenner's winning personality.

In addition to the "appropriation" Brannon and Knoblauch describe, the situation Kristian illustrates also suggests a certain inconsistency in the approach both instructors took to evaluate his work. How is it that, for virtually identical assignments, Kristian chose the same subject matter and yet was criticized for a cliched image in one instance, while praised for originality in the other? Why did one reader address organization, when the other did not? Without both texts, we cannot answer these questions precisely.

But there are some things we can assume. The first is that both readers expected very different things from Kristian and the assignment. This is, of course, evident in that the two instructors attended to different aspects of Kristian's final product. The second assumption is that the assignment did not specify an audience or purpose for the discourse.

For Kristian, this inconsistency may appear simply idiosyncratic, and justifiably so. However, I argue that the difference in attention to specifics on the parts of these instructors stems from the fact that neither has defined criteria, for themselves or their students, by which they would judge each essay. Thus, the fault lies with the assignment itself, not necessarily completely with the instructor.

In the end, an assignment like the one Kristian describes makes more work for the evaluators, as they are consequently forced to go to each successive text with a new set of evaluative criteria. The students are also forced to play a "guessing game" of sorts, and spend more time worrying about what the teacher is after or what the hidden purpose of the assignment might be, than they do developing their ideas. What is needed is a comprehensive set of evaluative criteria which may be applied to any given composing task. The goal is to make this set of criteria accessible to both the student before he or she writes, and the evaluator before he or she reads. This is not an exceptionally new

idea, and in the next section I will provide an overview of recent research conducted on this subject in an effort to provide some theoretical background.

### Analysis of Research on Evaluation

Because of the diverse approaches taken by researchers in composition evaluation, I have chosen to focus on the two aspects most relevant to my study. The first, Commenting methods, will address some of the most significant concepts proposed for enhancing instructors' commenting techniques. My emphasis will be on written evaluation, as opposed to conferencing or protocols, since written comments are most applicable to the assignment design aspect of my research. Next, I will summarize recent research in Scoring methods. The difference between scoring and commenting is similar to the differences I outlined between grading and evaluating. Scoring primarily deals with ranking the students' work according to specified criteria, and although I have already stated that my purpose does not entail examining grading techniques *per se*, there are relevant points and theories which may be applied to my work.



### Commenting methods

It is fair to assume that evaluation without comments--grading alone--limits the value of the text and the effort it took to create it. Simply assigning a grade at the bottom of the last page with a terse "nice job," or "needs work," implies that the work is a finished product, requiring no further thought from the writer. Evaluations such as this may also suggest that the teacher did not have strong feelings for the work or, worse, may not have carefully read the piece at all.

Michael Robertson illustrates the problem with this type of response in a hypothetical anecdote of a friend's reaction to Robertson's description of a vacation to the coast. After Robertson details the beauty, danger, and adventure of the vacation, highlighting an experience while snorkeling, the friend responds, "'Do you know that you have a slight lisp? Whenever you said 'snorkel' it came out 'thnorkel'. Did you realize that?'" (87) Robertson's point is that often, composition instructors are so concerned about things like comma splices and weak transitional phrases that we forget to concentrate on the meat of the student's work; we ignore *what* they say in favor of *how* they say it. This is one of the most basic problems facing evaluators of student work.

In order to encourage students to write honestly, we must react honestly as their readers and prove to them that what they

say has an effect on others. If our response is couched totally in terms of technical criticisms like "your paragraphs are too long" or "try to vary your sentence patterns a bit," then we deserve the automated, flat prose we have asked for. The student who receives comments like these will naturally respond by addressing these technical difficulties, believing the ideas they have presented are sound and finalized or relatively insignificant.

Instead, as Robertson urges, we need to help students to continue to think critically and respond honestly.

We need, first of all, to let students know that their message reached a receptive individual, not a mere judgemental power-figure or analyst of technique. Before we draw on our years of academic training to tell a student how to revise, we need to rely on our common human experience to let a student know, 'I'm listening.' (91)

Robertson outlines several methods that may be helpful in achieving this "humanity" while responding to student writing. Such responses might be "1) indicating that the narrative has affected us emotionally, 2) mirroring for the teller of the story his own attitudes of the event he recounts, and 3) telling about a similar experience of our own" (90).

These same ideas are detailed in Mary Beaven's "Individualized Goal Setting, Self-Evaluation, and Peer Evaluation," in *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging*. Beaven's

work is particularly important in conjunction with Robertson's, because she suggests some practical pedagogical applications for the "humanistic approach" Robertson calls for. Beaven describes three basic ways in which students may be involved in measuring the growth of their own writing, which in effect asks them to work side-by-side with the all-powerful authority they have traditionally kept at arm's length. Through such exercises as individualized goal-setting, self-evaluation, and peer evaluation, students are able to better assess their own needs as well as those of their peers; thus, once the student "finishes" a draft, he or she must recognize that the job is not yet completed. Continuing the writing process in this manner and helping to identify and evaluate individualized goals and problems engages students on a new level, one that asks them to see the teacher more as an aid than an adversary.

To further build this "climate of trust," Beaven suggests that evaluators develop comments which reflect the fact that 1) they have indeed read the work, and 2) that they are human beings with human, emotional reactions. This, of course, directly relates to the kind of response that Robertson discusses, but takes the notion one step further by examining several assumptions which must accompany this approach in order to apply it. These assumptions are:

- 1) Growth in writing occurs slowly.

- 2) Through their evaluative comments and symbols teachers help to create an environment for writing.
- 3) Risk taking, trying new behaviors as one writes, and stretching one's use of language and toying with it are important for growth in writing.
- 4) Goal setting is also an important process in the development of writers.
- 5) Writing improvement does not occur in isolation. One must experience outside stimulation and response [from real-world readers].
- 6) We have a reasonably clear understanding of procedures that will permit effective formative evaluation. (136-8)

Pedagogically, Beaven outlines steps which teachers may employ for all three evaluative techniques. These steps generally suggest 1) responding through commentary with an emphasis on positive comments at the beginning; 2) establishing goals and emphasizing the importance of proceeding one step at a time (avoid tackling more than the student can handle at any give time or assigning new goals without first accomplishing the previous ones); and 3) encouraging substantive revision by assigning tasks within the evaluative commentary.

Though Beaven's steps are extremely useful, as they feature a very student-oriented attitude, I do find a few practical problems which should be addressed before implementing her approach. First, teachers run the risk of time-management difficulties if they cannot prescribe additional goals until the

student succeeds with the ones given. I foresee teachers trying to juggle twenty students per class at various levels; thus, they will require much one-to-one supervision. Part of the problem can be dealt with both through peer response and self-evaluation, but inevitably the teacher will be required to conference more, which can pose serious time pressures.

Second, I suspect that some students who have difficulties achieving early goals may become frustrated by this sort of "failure" and consequently become bored with the repetition. The logic behind Beaven's theory is quite sound, but a frustrated, bored composition student may not always acknowledge or value this logic.

Finally, isn't it also possible that this repetition of goals may imply to the student that there is a right and wrong way to write, that the teacher has some sort of hidden agenda, which the students must figure out in order to succeed? Reasonably, we see that students must be able to form a sentence before working on a cohesive paragraph, just as they must be able to observe the details of a scene before they can effectively narrate a story. But I believe it is just as important to acknowledge a measured amount of success and allow some room for experimentation in order to keep the students' interest. I'm not sure that this is inherent in Beaven's approach.

Elaine Lees finds a balance between teacher evaluation and student assessment while maintaining the necessary practicality it takes to implement it. Unlike Beaven, Lees gives most of the responsibility of evaluation back to the teacher, but provides seven "modes" with which teachers may establish both a humanistic commenting system and consistency in their responses:

- *Correcting*: inserting a preferable form, i.e. "than" for "then";
- *Emoting*: venting emotions or reader response--this, of course, is where the teacher responds to the students' passionate or emotional pleas as a fellow human being;
- *Describing*: explaining the cause of the emotions or reactions gauged by the reader;
- *Suggesting*: providing editorial advice, i.e. "You ought to provide a transition here so I know you're raising new point";
- *Questioning*: leading the student to discovery of strengths and weaknesses through questioning, i.e. "But how did you behave when you were angry?" "What led you to form this opinion?" Questioning leads students to participate in self-evaluation as Beaven recommends;
- *Reminding*: expanding the context of the response by echoing class discussions or one-to-one talks; and
- *Assigning*: creating another assignment based on what the student has written. This is one way to

assure that the students' revisions are just that:  
a way of re-seeing a subject. (372)

Lees points out that the purpose of these different modes is not to bombard the student with so many different responses that the paper is covered with ink and the teacher is appropriating the text. But she acknowledges that the tendency for teachers to write a full critique of students' work is always there. "A teacher marks things because they're *there*" (373). The key is that one need not address every mode Lees describes in each paper. The goal is to provide *enough* feedback with the *right combination* to encourage students to evaluate how they will improve the texts themselves.

Lee Odell also addresses commenting on student writing in his chapter "Measuring Changes in Intellectual Processes as One Dimension of Growth in Writing," from *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging*. In this work Odell outlines six means by which teachers may determine what intellectual processes students use to improve their writing. "Describing these strategies considerably enriches evaluation at a number of levels: diagnosis, formative evaluation in the classroom, and growth measurement" (Odell 106). Odell takes a different angle on evaluation in that he examines the writer's cognitive processes and intellectual growth *during writing*, as opposed to the teacher's difficulties with evaluation *after* the student has submitted a

draft. In addition, his work encompasses all stages of the writing process: diagnosis in the early drafting stages, formative evaluation in the middle, and growth measurement as the post-drafting assessment. The cues Odell recommends are:

- *Focus*: segment and focus upon distinct units of experience;
- *Contrast*: know what the item is not, seeing how it differs from other items;
- *Classification*: consider similarities, compare with other things;
- *Change*: change is part of our experience; awareness of change is crucial to an understanding of experience;
- *Physical Context*: examine something specific or detailed in light of what surrounds it;
- *Sequence*: giving a semblance of order, cause and effect adds dimension. (108-120)

These cues are designed to aid both the writer and reader; they help the teacher formulate specific comments, which, in turn, should help the writers re-see and rethink their work. Because the aim of the heuristic is to guide both, Odell's work bridges the gap between the two sets of participants.

Finally, perhaps the most comprehensive, yet succinct, work I have found on evaluation is in Erika Lindemann's *A Rhetoric for Writers*. Lindemann's approach focuses on instruction-oriented response, or "teaching through comments on student papers" (230). This form of evaluation is designed to enhance what the



teacher has done in the large group class with more directed personal response on the paper and in conferences. In general, Lindemann seems to choose the best aspects of several different works--including much of Mary Beaven's and Lee Odell's approaches--and pulls them together with some of her own theories, for example, "Avoid labeling problems unless you also give students a way of overcoming them" and "Make praise work toward improvements" (232). The combination produces an approach which addresses both the evaluator's needs--the need to help the student improve, and the need to save time in evaluation--and the students' needs--the need to succeed at and to understand the evaluator's directives. The following is a condensed version on Lindemann's recommendations for teaching through comments on student papers:

- 1) Read the paper through without marking on it.
- 2) Identify one or two problems. View the paper descriptively, not to judge it, but to discover what the text reveals about decisions the writer made.
- 3) Formulate tentative hypotheses to explain some of the problems you want to focus on. Merely labeling an error "misplaced comma" doesn't teach students *why* and *how* your logic and theirs differs.
- 4) Examine what the student has done well. Can you find evidence elsewhere in the paper that the problem has been handled successfully? How can a student's strengths be used to repair weaknesses?

- 5) Now you are ready to begin marking the paper.
  - 6) Questions can help call attention to trouble spots, but avoid questions which can be answered simply "yes" or "no" and then be dismissed. Preface questions with *why*, *how*, or *what* so that students must re-examine the paper and become self-critical of their own prose.
  - 7) Avoid labeling problems unless you also give students a way of overcoming them.
  - 8) Make prose work toward improvements. Students need to know how a reader responds to their work, but they're rarely fooled by token praise. Avoid "good" or "I like this" unless you add *because*. Remember to commend students for progress they have made since the previous paper.
  - 9) Avoid doing the students' work. Rewriting an occasional sentence can give students a model to imitate, if you make it clear what principle the model imitates.
  - 10) Write a carefully thought-out end note to summarize your comments on the paper itself and to establish a goal for the next paper. The goal should be worded to encourage students to experiment and take risks, but don't prescribe additional goals until students have reached those you've already given them.
  - 11) Write yourself a note to chart the student's progress.
- (230-32)

Clearly, we see influences of Mary Beaven's individualized goal-setting and self-evaluation theories in steps 6, 9, and 10, as well as Odell's intellectual process assessment in steps 7, 8, 9, and 10. Beyond that, though, Lindemann's approach considers the process of the evaluator. The above steps encompass not only the things

to do and not do in terms of the students' needs, but also the feelings and tendencies of the evaluator while examining student work.

### Scoring methods

My purpose in examining the scoring aspect of evaluation is two-fold. First, as I have previously stated, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that writing is a product as well as a process. Commentary on student work lends itself implicitly to viewing writing as a process as it tends to be revision-oriented, and, as Beaven suggests, can be used to set future goals. Thus, in order to acknowledge the aspect of product as well, we need a method of scoring, a way to arrive at a fair grade. My second reason for examining scoring is that some of the concepts raised by the methods are pertinent to my overall thesis, which, involves developing direct correlation between assignment design and evaluation. In other words, some part of the evaluation method must entail scoring/grading.

Charles Cooper, in his chapter "Holistic Evaluation of Writing," from *Evaluating Writing*, and with Lee Odell in their essay, "Procedures for Evaluating Writing: Assumptions and Needed Research," provides a fine overview of the most important work done on scoring methods. In this section I will briefly highlight from Cooper and Odell's work some of these methods, and comment on their strengths and weaknesses as I see them.

Holistic evaluation, according to Cooper, is:

...a guided procedure for scoring or ranking written pieces. The rater takes a piece of writing and either 1) matches it with another piece in a graded series of pieces or 2) scores it for the prominence of certain features important to that kind of writing or 3) assigns it a letter or number grade. (3)

These three types of holistic evaluation are designed to make it easier for the evaluator to differentiate between strong students, who need to be encouraged to experiment, and weaker students, who need extra guidance and support. By quickly rank-ordering a set of papers, using one of the methods, evaluators can save time, as they will not be forced to ponder the students' grade while trying to comment on their work. Rank-ordering serves a very practical purpose in that it asks teachers to approach evaluating one methodical step at a time. First teachers rank and grade, then they comment. This is the basic premise for holistic evaluation. Let's now examine several different types of such evaluation, as they are presented by Cooper and Odell.

Essay scale      The essay scale primarily asks the evaluator to arrange, according to quality, a series of completed essays to use as a measuring device for a group of essays which require assessment. The model essays are arranged in order from "exemplary" to "inadequate" and the evaluator attempts to match

the student essay with the one on the scale which it most resembles. Of the three specific essay scales Cooper describes, those developed by the California Association of Teachers of English, the London Association for the Teaching of English, and Vernon Smith, only the London scale provides criteria by which teachers may judge the essays in order to rank them. These criteria were:

- 1) Realization (sincerity, spontaneity, vividness)
  - 2) Comprehension (primarily awareness of audience)
  - 3) Organization
  - 4) Density of Information
  - 5) Control of Written Language
- (Cooper "Holistic" 6).

Of the scales Cooper describes in his chapter, and later explores with Odell in their article, the Essay scale appears to be the least efficient. The time and organization it would require to set up such a scale is simply not worth the results. This type of measuring device asks for an inordinate amount of reading, not to mention a large number of essays to choose from, to which not all instructors have access.

In addition, I question the reliability of the results. No two essays will or should match precisely, nor will the objectives of the assignments always coincide. If they did, there might be some serious questions about the flexibility of the classes or the assignments. Also, in using this scale there may be a tendency to

force certain essays into molds to which they do not belong simply to place the students' work *somewhere* on the given scale. In other words, the Essay scale does not appear to leave room for creativity, and asks the students to adapt to the theory as opposed to having the theory adapt to them.

Analytic scale Created by Paul Diederich in 1974, this holistic scoring method asks the reader to "list the prominent features of characteristics of writing in a particular mode" (Cooper "Holistic" 7). Essentially, this requires readers to detail their expectations of the writing they will receive for a given mode or assignment. They are then to rank each aspect of a given essay, low, middle, or high according to the features outlined. Teachers need to be specific in terms of their requirements for what constitutes a high or low ranking before they begin assessing student writing.

Unlike the essay scale, the analytic approach does provide criteria by which the reader may judge the work. In addition, formulating expectations for low, middle, and high work allows teachers to alter what they have prescribed or outlined if it does not prove workable with the papers they receive. I find this interesting particularly because it appears to be a sound method for detecting assignment designs which are working and those which are not.

Dichotomous scale The dichotomous scale is slightly more structured than the analytic scale, but consequently is a bit more rigid. This scale poses several statements about the essay which can be answered "yes" or "no." For example, the evaluator must determine whether or not a given piece contains ideas that are creative or original, ideas that are expressed with clarity, or whether there is a thesis or not (Cooper "Holistic" 9). The evaluator then marks yes or no for each statement and rates the paper accordingly.

The premise of the Dichotomous scale is sound; the student *should* fulfill specified criteria for each assignment. However, it cannot be utilized practically with individual papers as it is not overly reliable in that capacity, since the "yes" and "no" answers to the statements do not leave room for the "sometimes" answers which will inevitably be necessary. Generally, Cooper says, this scale is more effective "for making gross distinctions between the quality of batches of essays" (Cooper "Holistic" 9).

Primary Trait Scoring Perhaps the most relevant holistic approach for my research is Lloyd-Jones' Primary Trait Scoring. Unlike the other scoring procedures I have examined, Lloyd-Jones targets the beginning of the scoring problem, not in the assessment of student work, but in the assignment design itself. Lloyd-Jones poses several questions which should prompt the evaluator to closely examine what the assignment calls for from

the student. In assessing these demands, the evaluator should be able to go to the assignment with a very structured set of expectations. (Note that I do not say a structured set of evaluative criteria.) Questions to consider in this type of assignment evaluation are:

What is the rhetorical context for this writing? What assumptions can we make about the knowledge/values/personality of the reader for whom it is intended? Even more important: What is the purpose that the writing is supposed to accomplish? Is it to persuade, to influence the reader's thoughts and actions? Is it simply to express the writer's own thoughts without attempting to change the audience's thoughts? Or is the purpose to explain, to present comprehensive, reliable information about a topic? (Cooper and Odell "Procedures" 39)

Questions such as these should guide the teacher to an understanding of the requirements for success with a given assignment.

An additional distinction between Lloyd-Jones and others I've examined is that Lloyd-Jones rejects the notion that there is one way to approach each set of essays, that one set of evaluative criteria can be effectively used. Instead, he contends that with each rhetorical task, the evaluator must develop a new set of



expectations for the student work, as the assignment is asking different things from the writers.

Though this theory appears to deviate from my search for consistency, in effect it requires the evaluator to structure and analyze the assignment itself, which is exactly my desire. Like Lloyd-Jones, I believe that the problem of scoring lies more in the misinterpretation of the assignment (or the lack of defined boundaries), than it does in specific evaluative criteria.

In the next section, I will examine recent research and theories about assignment design, and summarize the most important characteristics of both assignment design and evaluation.

## CHAPTER TWO: ASSIGNMENT DESIGN

A theme assignment ought not to be given simply to evoke an essay that can be judged. Its purpose should be to teach, to give students an experience in composing (selecting, arranging, and expressing his thoughts) from which he can learn as much as he can from the reactions of his teacher to his essay. (Larson 209)

Richard Larson's statement about the purpose for the composition assignment is an appropriate introduction to this chapter as it raises the two primary points I will address: what assignments *should* and *should not* do.

I will begin this chapter with an overview of research which addresses the problems composition instructors face in designing assignments. Some of the stumbling blocks I will highlight are: the "product-oriented" assignment, concepts such as *audience*, *purpose*, and *organizational mode*, which are difficult to define and harder to incorporate, and finally inconsistencies between teachers' and students' world views, knowledge, and abilities. The latter portion of this chapter will be devoted to a brief summary of approaches which suggest or means to cope with these problems.

### Basic Problems

#### "Product-oriented" assignments

Larson points out that a writing assignment should not be given simply so the teacher has something to base a final grade on. Unfortunately, this is the message many assignments communicate when they outline only bare requirements for the writer. If students are given no more than a task--that is, no purpose, no description of relevance, no concrete audience, and no rhetorical approach--what else can they assume but that the task is yet another "hoop" through which they must jump in order to get the grade, to pass the class, to graduate?

As an example of a product-oriented assignment, let's refer back to Kristian's story in the preceding section. Though we do not have the actual assignment to analyze, we can infer some things from Kristian's desire--"to figure out what I wanted him to write." The task he previously faced may have read something like: *Describe a place that holds significance for you.* Not only is the term "significance" vague, but it is obvious that the instructor specifies no audience to aid the writer in focusing tone and purpose. Nor is there a reference to how this assignment builds on the last, or, if it is the first task of the semester, what the writer will gain from such a prescription. Without such specifics,

the student is likely to believe, as Kristian did, that what he or she produces in the first draft is the "end product," and that "end product" inevitably means a grade.

The problems with assignments aimed only at producing an end product to be evaluated are numerous. James Middleton and John Reiff describe the problems with the product-oriented assignment in their essay, "A 'Student-Based' Approach to Writing Assignments."

Traditional assignments such as 'In 5-10 pages compare and contrast X and Y' do give useful guidelines for shaping the final product, but reinforce the students to assume that process is not important, that they are writing only to measure up to the examiner's standards--not to communicate something to a reader. (232)

These assumptions, which are echoed in Kristian's comment, make up the product-oriented task and ignore the goals for writing that Middleton and Reiff suggest--that is, informing, moving, and persuading our readers. The student seeks to complete the task for a grade, as opposed to building on personal knowledge and insight. Thus, the students' world has not been broadened, but rather narrowed by the lack of specificity in the assignment.

### Defining and incorporating purpose, audience, and organization

**Purpose** In order for a composing task to have any significance for the writer, the teacher must incorporate into the assignment the *reason* for doing it. All too often, students are told to perform without being given a reason why. As a result, instructors look like drill sergeants barking, "Jump!" and because many students are too timid to ask, "How far?" they attempt the task without a springboard.

There are several meanings behind the term "purpose" as it is used here. First, there is the purpose for the assignment, the motivation for writing the assignment and how it is relevant in the scheme of things. Motivation can be achieved by giving the task a context. In support of this notion, Josephine Tarvers argues that "the writing assignment must create a purposeful rhetorical situation and invite students to use that situation to create meaning in language" (46).

For example, in the case of the assignment *Describe a place that is significant to you*, a purpose which would add context might be:

*As this is your first assignment of the semester, we are all interested in getting to know one another. One of the best ways to do this is to find out how a detail or an aspect of your past has helped to shape your views. Sometimes this "shaping" can occur through the specific effects that places have on us. Imagine our*

*class sitting around a large campfire in the middle of the woods. Each person in the class is telling a story about the most frightening place they've ever been. Your turn is next and you need to describe a place with which you associate the feeling of fear. Ultimately, your description--both of the place and your reaction to it--should help both you and us to see an aspect of your personality or something you value.*

In this assignment the students now have a reason for the description--to more clearly characterize themselves for their peers. Tarvers recommends several questions for the teachers to pose in order to establish context and make it easier to incorporate context into the task.

What is the topic, subject, or principle behind the assignment? Has the instructor specified an exact topic, or is the student supposed to find the topic by narrowing down the subject area? If so, what kinds of narrowing might be profitable? What kinds of skills are students expected to demonstrate? Who is the audience? For what purpose is the audience reading? What kinds of questions or problems does the assignment raise? (46)

Though it is not necessary to use all of these questions for each assignment we develop, most are useful at some time.

The second aspect of purpose deals with what Richard Larson describes as the compositional "staircase."

[One should] view the [composition] course, to put the matter figuratively, not as a succession of steps to be

taken singly, one after another, the later steps scarcely affected by the earlier ones, but as a staircase to be climbed so that at the end the student stands higher, has a broader prospect beneath him than when he began. (212)

A consistent problem in the designs of many assignments is the fact that they are isolated, not relevant to those which precede and succeed them. In order to grasp the meaning of the assignment in relation to the structure and purpose of the course, students need to be given some sort of guide or cue that assures them the skills they employ for the task have and will be useful to learn.

If students have gained certain skills in a previous assignment, the knowledge that they can fall back and use what they know is comforting when trying to tackle something new. For example, when an assignment asks a writer to analyze a piece of writing, it's reassuring to be able to utilize the summarizing skills he or she gained in the previous assignment to "warm up" for the analysis.

Though such connections may seem obvious to us, too often students can't see them. Thus, without the explanatory phrase (i.e., "This task will build upon the summary skills you gained in your last assignment in the following manner..."), students lose sight of the organizational pattern, much in the same way we can lose the flow of a paragraph when sentences lack transitions.

Finally, assignments often lack clear definition of the skills writers must employ in order to be successful. This is often due to the words the teacher uses to describe the task. Words like “analyze,” “examine,” or “discuss” are often not very directive for the student with limited experience in written response.

A good example of this sort of miscommunication can be found in Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy’s “Designing Topics for Writing Assessment: The Problems of Meaning.”

The *Interviewer’s Manual* from the Michigan Survey Research Center tells how a particular question had been answered as expected in its field trial, but in its actual use, an unanticipated meaning emerged. When the interviewer asked, ‘Do you think government should control profits or not?’ one responder replied, ‘Certainly not. Only Heaven should control prophets.’  
(411)

Clearly, the difficulty illustrated here lies in ambiguity unintentionally created in oral communication. However, I believe that similar problems arise between students and teachers with written communication, primarily because the instructor wrongly assumes that students have sufficient backgrounds to comprehend the meanings of the words teachers employ. Ruth and Murphy support this notion in their statement, “The art of writing actually begins in an act of *reading comprehension*, and we usually assume that each reader is getting the same message



to direct his writing performance" (410). This assumption is often what gets the instructor (the designer of the assignment) in trouble.

A good example of this can be found in my own experience. One of the first assignments I gave as a new teaching assistant asked students to observe a particular area and describe it to someone who had never been there. Several students took the term "describe" to mean "list" because I spent most of the preparatory class time on observation. The resulting essays were, to say the least, as exciting to read as the batting order for the Toronto Blue Jays. The flaw in the task was my own oversight in explaining (or rather not explaining) the word "describe." I assumed that my students knew how to depict a scene, because many of them had done it verbally in class discussions. I neglected the fact that these students had never *named* what they instinctively knew how to do orally. Therefore, when I asked them to "describe" on the assignment sheet, I unwittingly asked them to perform what seemed to be a brand new task.

We can see that clarification of purpose--on several levels--is essential in designing writing assignments. Perhaps equally important is the question of audience.

Audience My discussion of audience in assignment design will take two different angles. First, I will look at how the

assignment addresses the student; then, I will examine how the student addresses the potential readers.

In "An Experiment with the Wording of Essay Topics," Gordon Brossell and Barbara Hoetker Ash discuss the question of how to address the student writer in the assignment.

Does it matter whether a topic is addressed to a writer ('you') or is couched in impersonal or neutral terms? Does it make any difference whether a topic's 'charge' is cast as a question or an imperative? These are admittedly small changes, but they rival opinion on the best model for constructing essay topics. (423)

I contend that the way a teacher addresses a student in an essay topic is more than a "small" variable. It is essential to engage writers in any way possible for them to become excited with the task and produce honest material. I believe this will come about more naturally through the use of direct references and personal pronouns.

Such an approach prompts important questions, however. If the instructor refers the essay topic to the students in personal language--with the use of "you" specifically--does the writer tend to ramble and become self-centered? Is it an invitation for shallow, self-indulgent material? Or does it enable the student to identify with the topic and produce more thoughtful prose?

I argue that both results are likely; the student will undoubtedly identify more with the subject, but may tend to be slightly self-indulgent as a result. Nevertheless, I would say that the benefits of the former effect far outweigh the problems with the latter. We can show students ways to get around the rambling and point out how they can identify and avoid the self-indulgence. Both drawbacks can be combatted through strict attention to structure and syntax. However, we cannot teach writers how to identify personally with a topic. This must come from the individual naturally--and sometimes it is exceptionally slow in coming. But the results are well worth whatever prompt we may have to conjure to set them in the right direction.

Brossell and Ash report only slight differences in the outcome of student essays upon changing the wording of the assignment; however, I believe that even a slight change is a significant step in the right direction as we continue to experiment with ways in which we may help to bring students alive on paper. Thus, the assignment ought to engage the student as much as possible, and I believe this can be done in part with direct, concrete language in the wording of assignments.

As teachers must consider their audience (the students) in designing the assignments, so too, must students consider their audience in response to the task. Let's reexamine the key focus of

the modified essay assignment I posed in the section under Purpose.

*Imagine our class sitting around a large campfire in the middle of the woods. Each person in the class is telling a story about the most frightening place they've ever been. Your turn is next and you need to describe a place with which you associate the feeling of fear. Ultimately, your description--both of the place and your reaction to it--should help us and you to see an aspect of your personality or something you value.*

Obviously, since the assignment prescribes a specific group of readers/listeners--in this case peers--the purpose or goal is clearer for the students. We saw that Kristian's response to the original, product-oriented assignment was to write to the teacher. Consequently, we must assume that some of his content may have been less than honest, as he believed that the key to success was to please the teacher. Audience may be concretely named or merely alluded to, but in either case the key is that a real-world purpose is solidified, even if the audience has only a vague label such as "peer group." This in effect helps define the writer's role as communicator. Without a defined audience, to whom or with whom does the writer communicate his or her message?

However, defining a specific audience may not always appear as realistic as we would hope. William Irmischer points out that though we hope students will envision the real-world audience we designate, this is not always the case.

Unless otherwise specified, [the audience we designate] will be [the writer's] peers. But almost all students realize that their peers do not read their papers. Realistically, as most of them know, the teacher is the only audience (76).

If this is true, then isn't the act of naming an audience artificial, an exercise to reassure the teacher that he or she has done all they can? Perhaps. We realize that there is only so much an assignment can do; it cannot hypnotize a writer into believing in a created audience, if that is not what the writer wants to see. But there are methods, such as peer editing, which help the writer to accept the possibility of real outside readers. Peer editing asks students to formulate editing "teams" to provide authentic reader response. When students act as readers themselves, the concept of audience suddenly becomes tangible.

I have found one of the best ways to bring this role of editor home to students is to have them respond to work done in another section ( writing class) that I teach. This way, the papers that they read do not have names and faces attached to them and the role of editor is less like a game and more like a job. In addition, they realize that their work is being read by peers in another section, who also take their jobs seriously; writers tend to write seriously for serious readers, and vice versa.

Carol Berkenkotter describes another risk we run in defining audience and providing first-hand reader response. Berkenkotter

contends that students may become defensive with reader response because they take it too seriously. In this way, too, writers “may lose authority over their texts” (319). Though this is a valid concern, some defensiveness can be viewed as positive. Ideally, the writers' protectiveness can show that they value their effort. Instructors can work from students' pride in order to help them re-work and re-see their efforts. If students hold no regard for their work, they are much less likely to spend any quality time with it. In addition, reader response can be guided to couch criticisms in neutral terms like “I felt...” or “the text affected me this way....” Response feels less like a personal attack than an neutral observation in these terms.

In spite of some of the problems audience awareness and reader response spark, I believe that in order to guide students toward a well-defined purpose, we must use them to incorporate a clear conception of audience.

Organizational patterns In addition to audience and purpose, assignments should clarify an organizational pattern that the student must recognize and use in order to be successful. Specifying the organizational pattern helps students to see the compositional “staircase” Larson describes in that through this reification, students begin to believe in both the process and

overall structure of the course. It serves in the same guiding capacity as a lighthouse might for a ship in a storm.

One of the difficulties teachers encounter by naming the organizational pattern in the assignment is intimidating the student with what seems to be "compositional jargon." An assignment I often pose asks students to compare and contrast their writing processes with those of a designated partner. Then they are to analyze their findings and come up with some sort of thesis statement about writing as process. Once, after I handed out the assignment sheet and we had discussed the requirements, a student timidly raised her hand and asked, "I don't think I understand what you mean by compare and contrast. How do you want us to do that?" Once we talked about the different ways of defining, classifying, and categorizing, and examined ways that we compare and contrast things in real-life terms such as when we bargain hunt in the grocery store, the students were much less intimidated by the requirements of the assignment. It was the academic language that scared them.

Though some students initially have problems with the language, they also take pride in knowing that they can narrate, analyze, inform, and persuade once they have been successful with it in their work. This recognition can encourage them and can also help students see the need for such a skill as it relates to other tasks.

The key to incorporating the discourse mode is to go beyond simply naming them in the assignment and explain their necessity and applicability to real-world situations. This can be done briefly on the assignment sheet and should be further illustrated in the classroom work that frames the assignment.

### Recognizing student limitations

Perhaps the most difficult problem to address in assignment design is how teachers neglect student limitations in world view and language. The difficulty in addressing this problem lies in our inability to fully comprehend our students' views (and the personality of each class) until they have written several pieces for us.

For example, I have used an assignment which asks the students to write an extended definition of a slang term through the use of outside sources and polls of their peers. One of my sections literally "went to town" on the assignment and produced fine work. The other section had no interest whatsoever in the subject and did only as much as it took to get by. Since I used the assignment early on in a semester in which I did not use the student information sheets, I did not know that the class that enjoyed the assignment was dominated by science majors and pre-engineering students. The scientific analysis and reasoning was exactly what they enjoyed doing. My other class was filled with humanities and liberal arts students, who would have



preferred to "explore" themselves or their environments. This assignment could have worked for both sets of students had I recognized their personality differences. I could have asked the students to perform the same task, but couched my directions in terms which would engage both groups. To reach both sets of students adequately would likely have meant constructing two sets of assignment sheets, worded slightly differently, but the results would have probably produced better papers--particularly from the second class.

We get to know our students through their response to our assignments, but at the same time we run the risk of alienating or frustrating those who cannot identify with the topics we pose early in the course. In essence, the question is: *How do we find a bridge between the very different backgrounds of knowledge and experience that teachers and students bring to the tasks of writing and interpreting?*

Ruth and Murphy address this problem in their research and acknowledge that there is no heuristic or key to help teachers overcome the problem completely. According to Ruth and Murphy, the teacher must in effect "guess" at the students' knowledge of the world and language early in the semester. Then, as the teacher-student relationship develops throughout the semester, the teacher may assemble facts from evidence and work from them in designing the assignments.

Though I recognize the inconsistency in “guess work” and the risks of incorrectly labeling a student, I have been unable to locate in any of my research a guide which aids the teacher in assessing this information *before* constructing the early assignments. Perhaps, then, the most important point to make here is that teachers need to be careful to present a topic in an engaging manner, and, if the topic involves a hypothetical situation, it should be within the realm of possibility for the student.

### Suggestions for Assignment Design

Now that I have established certain problems teachers face in designing assignments, let's examine some approaches which attempt to address these needs.

#### Portfolio approach

Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff devised an approach which takes both the students' writing process and the teachers' evaluation process into consideration. Their scheme asks students to present three pieces of work from all that they have composed at a given point in the semester in a portfolio style. Included in this portfolio are several drafts of the three pieces they have written with a brief, informal cover sheet explaining the writing processes involved in each paper. At mid-term, groups of

teachers meet to discuss portions of each portfolio to establish whether they warrant pass or non-pass. These teachers serve only as judges--as opposed to instructors--for the students whose portfolios are reviewed. Therefore, the primary instructor's role ideally feels less adversarial to the students, and more like that of a "coach." The result is a better working relationship between student and teacher as their goal is the same: to get the student passing marks, a C or better, from the committee of judges (Elbow and Belanoff 336).

In terms of evaluation, this approach is different in that it is "criterion-referenced or mastery-based or competence-based--which assumes that the ideal end product is a population of students who have all finally passed because they have all been given enough time and help to do what we ask of them" (Elbow and Belanoff 337). The premise of this is that the teacher becomes someone who helps the student *overcome* writing obstacles, as opposed to simply pointing problems out.

As ideal as this approach sounds, it is not something many of us can relate to. What Elbow and Belanoff suggest is based on a teaching and evaluation system, the luxury of which most of us do not have.

### Transitory approach

In "Writing Assignments for Cognitive Development," Paula Tremblay identifies the difficulties students face making the transition between personal narrative and "thesis-oriented" academic writing. The series of writing assignments Tremblay has developed help students to be consistent with both concrete and formal operations.

These assignments confront the writer with an idea or piece of experience, ask her to respond to it, and then ask her how she arrived at this response and what other responses she imagines could be made, by herself or someone else. (342)

Theoretically, the questioning Tremblay describes here ought to form a bridge from the personal reaction-identification (which, of course, is concrete because it is inherently *hers*), to abstract thinking, speculation, and new ideas and angles. Both dimensions are necessary, though sometimes difficult to incorporate into one assignment. Tremblay suggests that one assignment be broken down into a series of several exercises which address each response as an addition to the one prior to it.

For example, in the assignment on slang I posed earlier, Tremblay would likely suggest that the students first examine their own personal impressions of the word. In the next draft, she might recommend that they look at how they formed these impressions (the gathering of the information and formulating of

opinion). Finally, she would ask that the students address how others view the word and are affected by it. All three assignments ask the student to build on the ideas communicated previously.

Such an approach makes the writing process real for the students as they must compose several different drafts from various perspectives; it is truly process-oriented. In addition, Tremblay's assignments encourage experimentation with different organizational patterns and provide opportunities for real reader response (peer editing).

### Sequencing approach

In order to address the need for a definite purpose in assignment design, many scholars have written on the subject of assignment sequencing. This concept simply asks that the tasks a writer performs be inter-related with end goals and clear, logical order. As we see in Tremblay's approach, sequencing can occur within any given assignment through building on successive responses. Additionally, an assignment may be sequenced to build on the skills and ideas honed in the assignments which precede it.

William Coles' book *The Plural I* presents a series of thirty assignments, all of which ask the writer to examine and re-examine subjects posed in the previous tasks. The purpose of this

is to balance both critical thinking skills and distance with personal identification and honesty. Hence, the student is encouraged to *question* the ideas he or she has discovered within previous work.

Unless a fundamental question is being seen freshly, it isn't being seen as a question at all; as a consequence, various points of view on such questions are all we have. (2)

I found Coles' book to be the best in terms of sequencing because of the vivid examples he provides from his students' response as well as the assignments themselves. The concept of sequencing, for Coles, goes beyond simple revision. It demands from the writers essential self-evaluation and questioning that every assignment ought to strive for.

### Larson heuristic

The most comprehensive work on assignment design I discovered in my research came from Richard Larson's chapter "Teaching Before We Judge: Planning Assignments in Composition." Here, Larson presents a series of steps designed to aid the composition instructor in creating writing tasks. Below is a summary of these steps.

- 1) Plan the course at least in broad outline for a term and possibly a year in advance. Decide what you

want your students to be able to do when they complete your course.

- 2) Analyze each prospective assignment carefully before you give it.
- 3) Consider what the student will need to know in order to do well on the assignment. Try to determine what a successful piece of writing on the assignment might look like, i.e., what features it might have.
- 4) Decide what you must teach in order to assure students a fair chance to do well on the assignment. This decision will be based on a comparison of what the students now know and can be reasonably expected to do in order to carry out the assignment.
- 5) When your first four steps have been carefully taken, and you are sure that you know what activities and skills you are calling for, draft a written bulletin describing the assignment. Make sure that the instructions are clear and unambiguous.
- 6) Determine what your standards of evaluation on the assignment will be. The standards should, of course, reflect the purposes of the assignment and what you are trying to teach by means of it.
- 7) Explain the assignment to the students fully. Follow the explanation--or, perhaps better still, precede it--by some discussion of exercises or problems that will prepare the student to handle the task.
- 8) As a part of your explanation of the assignment, allow time for students' questions, and be ready

to point out pitfalls and difficulties they will encounter as they work on the assignment.

- 9) In evaluating and commenting on papers, make special note of where the student has and has not succeeded in reaching the objectives of the assignment.
  - 10) Discuss the papers with the students when you return them. Distribute or read aloud examples of the completed assignments, both successful and unsuccessful.
  - 11) Ask students to revise or rewrite. For most students, revision ought not to consist simply of correcting errors in mechanics; it ought to be a thorough rewriting of the entire assignment.
- (214-18)

Larson's heuristic takes into consideration the teacher's writing process, particularly in the first four steps when he or she is asked primarily to brainstorm and pre-write. These first four steps invite the teacher to in effect create evaluative criteria for the assignment. By envisioning a successful answer to the task, the teacher not only considers what the task should ask of the student, but also what the teacher wants to see.

I would like to take Larson's "envisioning" one step further and suggest that it is appropriate and necessary to specify what will make a successful essay *within* the assignment sheet the students read. As Larson has proposed, the teacher begins drafting the assignment *after* he or she has established in their



own mind what the students are to accomplish. Nowhere does Larson mention incorporating the evaluative criteria into the assignment sheet itself. I believe this is necessary for the student to fully comprehend what is expected, and for the teacher to maintain consistency.

Though Larson's steps themselves do not specify variables such as audience, purpose and organizational strategy, there is room for their consideration, particularly in step six, which asks the teacher to determine his or her standards of evaluation. They can effectively be worked into the standards of evaluation and should be elaborated in the teacher's oral explanation of the assignment.

Finally, Larson's heuristic considers the students' writing needs in terms of time and detail in his recommendations to acknowledge successful and unsuccessful work and require revision. As I have reiterated several times, this attention to process can only enhance the students' appreciation for the writing task.

### Conclusion

In this section I have highlighted what I believe to be some of the most pressing assignment design problems facing the composition teacher today.

Both Coles and Tremblay emphasize the need for sequencing assignments to encourage revision. Larson and Elbow and Belanoff incorporate this concept within their approaches, leaving room for students to base revision on suggestions from their readers as well as added experience. In addition, Ruth and Murphy acknowledge the need to understand students' lack of knowledge about the world and themselves when designing our assignments. This idea is important to teachers particularly when we try to gauge our response to student work, as well as when we choose particular wording for the assignments. Finally, it is essential to focus writing tasks as much as possible in terms of audience, purpose and organization so that the students clearly understand what the assignment asks for.

Though the difficulties I acknowledge in this chapter do not attempt to account for every problem, they do provide a comprehensive overview of what we ought to be concerned with when designing student writing tasks. In the next section I will combine my theories of assignment design and evaluation in an attempt to find a method which addresses the needs of both.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE ROLE OF ASSIGNMENT DESIGN IN THE SEARCH FOR CONSISTENCY IN EVALUATING STUDENT WRITING

This third and final chapter will focus on both assignment design and evaluation techniques as they can work together to aid instructors in achieving consistency. I will begin by summarizing the goals and needs of both evaluation and assignment design based on the overviews I have provided in the preceding chapters. I will then theorize how the two may be connected. Finally, I will pose an assignment which illustrates how the two camps may work together practically.

#### What Should Evaluation Do?

Acknowledging that grading is one of the least popular, but still necessary, aspects of teaching writing, I want to focus my assessment of evaluation techniques on commenting methods, which may aid the students in re-seeing their work. Below is a summary of several points which should help lead students to an understanding of how they have succeeded or failed with a given task.

- 1) Evaluative comments should be both process- and product-oriented. As I pointed out in the first chapter, it is essential to understand that the product aspect (the grade) serves as the practical balance for the ideal revision-oriented process

approach. The grade is necessary to satisfy university requirements and commenting serves to further instruct the students.

However, without the product-oriented final assessment, students suffer disillusionment when a grade must be given at the end of the term. Likewise, if the student receives only product-oriented feedback, he or she will never grasp the importance of revision and will see the instructor merely as an inflexible judge. Writers must be encouraged and allowed the opportunity to revise their work in order to grow from the composition experience. Ultimately, the instructor must find a balance between process and product emphasis in order to fully serve the needs of the students.

2) Inherent in the process-oriented approach is the acknowledgement of contextual strengths and weaknesses through marginal comments and end notes. In order for the student to gauge how a reader responds, the teacher ought to correlate reaction to text in the margin alongside specific points. This enables the student to visually, as well as conceptually, link reader reaction to his or her own points. In addition, end notes should be used to generalize strengths and weaknesses as well as point out how the writer may further examine the ideas he or she has presented. This shows the writer that text is flexible and the ideas are not, indeed *should not* be, cast in iron.

3) One of the most important aspects of evaluating student writing deals with the tone of the instructor's commentary. It is essential that evaluators respond as human beings first and technical editors second. If teachers neglect to respond to *what* writers communicate, then students will likely assume that what they say is not as important as the way it is said. Thus, it is impossible for students to grow intellectually because their concentration is spent primarily on managing the technical aspects of their work as opposed to rethinking positions and ideas.

Teachers can incorporate this type of response in their comments through honest reader-reaction and empathy. For instance, if a student has recounted the pain she felt upon her parents' divorce, a teacher may sympathize, "This is tough for anybody to go through, but it must have been especially difficult for a child of your age in this account." Or, the teacher may be able to relate it to a personal experience of her own, "I was a little older when my parents were divorced, but I can relate to the anger you talk about here--I felt it too."

The other option is to ask the student more about what she has described in order to show that the teacher has an interest in the student's experience and also to encourage the student to continue to think about the subject. An appropriate question in this case might be, "How did you show others your pain? If you had a friend experiencing the same situation, what advice would

you give them based on your own experience?" It is important to note that not all of the questions posed in the margins need be answered in a subsequent draft by the student. The purpose for this questioning is to get students to *think* and to see that we have indeed read what they have written.

4) Finally, the teacher needs to be careful not to spring anything new on the students in the evaluative commentary. That is, the teacher should only measure the students' performance based on what the assignment has outlined. For example, an instructor should not criticize an essay's aim at a specific audience, say, the teacher, if the assignment did not specify an alternative. This may seem obvious, but if a student's essay is lacking in some way, we will inevitably try to label the problem. Instructors need to be careful that, in so doing, they aren't expecting the student to understand shortcomings he or she has not previously been instructed to avoid.

All four of these points support what I emphasized previously within Chapter Two on assignment design. I believe it is essential that writing assignments outline specifically what evaluative criteria will be used and adhere to these guidelines in the actual assessment. This adherence will help teachers and students identify consistency in response. If expectations are outlined in the assignments, evaluators are able to work with

something similar to a heuristic in that they respond to how well students have answered the stated requirements.

This is not to say that evaluative comments will be easily duplicated from one student's paper to another's--rubber-stamping is not the goal here. The teacher should still expect to respond individually and with consideration, as I indicated earlier with the help of Michael Robertson's "thnorkle" example. But comments should come more easily, as it will be easier for the instructors to identify whether the student has answered what he or she needs to address in the task.

In addition, if these goals are not met in any draft of the student's response to the assignment, the teacher should be able to either go back to the assignment and quickly identify what is unclear, or easily pinpoint goals to set for the student. For example, if one of the goals for the assignment is to make fewer than two major mechanical errors per one hundred words, and the student cannot master this in any of his or her drafts, the teacher should be able to identify what the student needs to work on in order to accomplish this goal.

For the students, the assignment goals help guide content as well as shape their views and attitudes about the role of the teacher. If teachers present these evaluative criteria within the assignment, suddenly, they no longer wear the black hat, nor do they hear "I want to figure out what you want me to write" as

frequently. Instead, students should respond to the teacher as one who can help them attain their already-stated goals. A partnership in writing is much more conducive to a healthy learning environment than the adversarial relationship so familiar to many of us.

### What Should Assignment Design Do?

In order to establish the criteria which make up a good writing assignment, we must first define an overall goal for student writing. There are numerous avenues to take in defining this goal, as assignments for various tasks may pursue different objectives. Therefore, our definition must be somewhat general to fit many purposes. I believe that the primary goal of the writing assignment is to enhance the writers' awareness of themselves and their environment through the act of communicating effectively with a specified audience. As Richard Larson puts it, "The purpose [for a theme assignment] should be to teach, to give students an experience in composing" (209).

With this purpose established, let's now examine some features which make up a solid assignment based on the information from Chapter Two.

- 1) A writing assignment should first provide the student with guidance or focus to prevent "floundering." The areas which require specific direction from the teacher include: audience,



purpose, and organizational strategy. As I illustrated in Chapter Two, without this direction, students tend to write for the teacher, and often exchange their own views for those of their readers in hopes that an agreeable topic may overshadow absence of style, tone, or technical expertise. Assignments need to point writers in a specific direction, preferably away from the teacher, to minimize the common "teacher-as-adversary" image. This is best done by specifying a real-world audience--one that will not only read the work, but will possibly be influenced by it.

In addition, the assignment should guide the student in terms of purpose. It should depict for the student what skills he or she can hope to gain or improve upon. Ideally, the task accomplishes this by building on the requirements of previous assignments, asking students to master writing and thinking skills in a logical order of progression.

Finally, an assignment needs to specify an organizational pattern or structure for the student by defining "compositional jargon" such as *analyze*, *compare*, or *examine*. Without these clearly defined instructions, students run the risk of misinterpreting the task and creating a structure or organizational pattern inappropriate for the assignment.

2) A writing assignment should be creative and also inspire creative response from the student. Assignments like *Describe a place that is significant to you* are not new; thus, they do not

inspire fresh approaches from our students. This is exemplified in Kristian's attempt to write the same essay twice for two different classes. The attempts failed partly because his content was not new, as it was a response to an uninspired writing task.

3) The language of a writing assignment should engage the writer. Though the language employed by instructors to describe the writing task is familiar to them, it can sometimes inhibit the students by posing unfamiliar terms or a tone to which students cannot relate. Thus, instructors must attempt to assess early on who their students are in order to gauge the writers' abilities and personalities. Assignments cannot present an individualized tone for every student's needs. But a teacher can get a feel for the overall personality of the class through a diagnostic assignment and early class discussions. These early assessment procedures may only make the difference between using the term *persuade* in lieu of *urge* or *argue*, but the response from students may vary considerably depending on which term is used.

4) Finally, I believe that it is important for an assignment to outline the criteria by which the instructor will evaluate the work. This way, the student and teacher begin with an equal understanding of what is expected from the assignment and the writer. In addition to producing more focused work than otherwise, this should also enhance the student-teacher relationship. If the teacher outlines these criteria within the

assignment, hopefully, students will see that there is no hidden agenda, and teachers are not "out to get them." Instead, both parties work as a team to achieve the same stated goals. Evaluative criteria should also focus the instructors' comments and allow for consistency in approaching each assignment. In the next section I will elaborate on the ideas I have outlined on assignment design and evaluation through a practical application

#### Application: The Writing Process Assignment

In practical application of the theories discussed here, I offer an assignment which incorporates, among many of the other elements I have examined, evaluative criteria.

In your first assignment you were asked to read James Miller's essay "Discovering the Self" and describe a personal discovery you made through an act of writing. In this assignment you will still be doing some self-discovery, but you will also expand on the theme to include another person. You will also build on the descriptive skills you exercised last time by adding observational and analytical skills, which we have discussed in class this week.

We've been talking this week about what makes a writer unique. As we've seen, each writer has an individual writing process which includes rituals; planning, drafting, and revising strategies; and many other personal elements. Whereas one person can only compose in a dead silent room, between the times of 2:00 and 4:00 a.m., with a bottle of mineral water close at hand, another may only be able to concentrate with Pink Floyd's *The Wall* blaring at top volume, an unlimited amount of Hostess Ding

Dongs and Diet Cherry Coke nearby, and with fifteen minute breaks every hour to throw darts at their English teacher's 8x10 portrait on the wall. Like a fingerprint, every writer's process is unique.

Your Task: For this assignment, you are to interview a partner (to be named in class) about his or her writing process. In addition to the information you will gather first-hand from your partner's answers to your questions, you may also want to observe him or her write (in a free-write situation, for example), interview friends and acquaintances about your partner's lifestyle, or do some investigative research on your own--keep it legal, folks! Your partner will be using similar techniques for the same purpose, so try to listen carefully to your own answers, too. Once you have gathered this information, you should choose one of the following options to write on:

Option 1: Compare and/or contrast your partner's process with your own for a group of prospective college freshmen who are unaware of their own writing processes. Remember that comparing and contrasting is really no different from comparison shopping. You need to hold each article side by side and look at the details separately and together in order to make a judgment. Your comparison should only detail a few aspects of your respective processes, because trying to cover everything could get to be too much. Highlight only what you think is most interesting, and try to guess why you and your partner do things the way you do. In order to focus this comparison/contrast, try to come to some conclusion about writing as process. What can you advise these inexperienced writers about the writing process based on the evidence you have gathered?

Option 2: Imagine that you have recently moved to a school district that requires all students to use the writing process of (the name of your partner) who is a famous, published author. This

community believes that because\_\_\_\_\_ is so famous, his or her writing process *must* be the best around. Thus, the school board has mandated it for all students in hopes that it will produce more great writers like\_\_\_\_\_ to enhance the reputation of the area.

Write a letter to the editor of the newspaper either in support of this mandate or arguing against it. The key question is: Can you write according to your partner's process--why or why not? Remember that you will need to explain certain characteristics of each writing process (yours and your partner's) to illustrate your points.

Things I will be looking for:

- A clear thesis statement about writing as process and support for it. This support should be based on the information you gathered through interviewing and observing, and should be detailed as much as possible.
- An appropriate tone for either the high school senior audience that I designated in the first option, or the newspaper readers for the second. You need to make sure that your language is clear and precise--that is to say, you will likely want to use some of the words we've talked about in class like *process*, *product*, *rituals*, etc., and stay away from expletives (which, of course, a newspaper couldn't print) and 24-letter words (which your high school students don't use or understand).
- Your organizational structure can be pretty open in this assignment; that is, you can present this in the form of a letter, a dialogue, a speech, or anything else that fits your style and purpose. Keep in mind, though, that your audience needs to be able to see the distinctions you make between your process and your

partner's. The comparison/contrast element *must* be there, and your personal goal for the assignment must be evident.

- There must be fewer than two major mechanical errors per one hundred words--refer to your student manual for a list of them.
- I'm interested in seeing some close observation on your part. Look carefully at the quirks of each process, and then get daring and look beyond the surface.

This assignment has been quite successful with my second semester freshmen, largely because the evaluative criteria I have outlined tells them exactly what is required for successful completion of the task. In the first paragraph of the assignment I have linked this task with the one prior to it in order to show the student the relevance of the skills they learned previously. Ideally, the reference to the descriptive skills, refined in the first assignment, should reassure them of their knowledge as I challenge them with the new tasks of observing and analyzing.

The second paragraph attempts to engage the students with familiar references (Ding Dongs and Pink Floyd), and may identify with some frustrations they feel when trying to compose. This preamble does not necessarily instruct or introduce any new material, as we will have discussed much of what is there in class. However, it does serve to warm up the student with a bit of

humor, and it acknowledges my awareness of the "plight of the student writer," making me a bit more accessible to them.

I give two options for this assignment not only to allow the students breathing room to choose, but also to provide a bit more of a challenge to those students who can rise to it. Obviously, the second option adds a dimension of argument to the task that the first option does not have. I do not evaluate the students' argument for effectiveness, because, at this point, we have not studied argument *per se*. My reason for including this option is to allow for some experimentation, especially for the stronger students.

Finally, in the last section of the assignment, I provide a detailed account of the basis for my evaluation. Several of these points, like "provide a clear thesis" and "make no more than one major mechanical error per hundred words," are boiler-plated onto subsequent assignments, as they are requirements for successful completion of the course. However, other requirements are shaped for this specific assignment and cue the writer as to what he or she needs to accomplish. As I've already stated, this guides both the students, as they draft, and me, as I evaluate their drafts. I believe the statement of these objectives has enhanced my relationship with my students as it is one based on mutual respect and honesty.

## CONCLUSION

By stating the evaluative criteria within writing assignments, teachers should not expect to have all assessment problems solved. This approach does have several shortcomings.

The most obvious is the fact that with the addition of evaluative criteria, inevitably the assignment is lengthened, sometimes by as much as a page or more. This runs the risk of intimidating slower or less adept student readers as they stare at up to three pages of "stuff." The result may range from simple frustration to writer's block, and though individual conferencing and in-depth class discussions of the assignment help, they do not alleviate the problem all together.

In addition, the detailed assignments I am recommending do not leave much room for spontaneity on the part of the instructor. Because of the preparation involved, both in terms of lesson plans, which will address the needs of the assignment, and the time it takes to construct the assignment itself, teachers must plan to spend extra time creating the task. Though the assignment itself will be longer, the reader will ultimately spend less time evaluating each student draft, so this can be viewed as a trade-off. But for those instructors who have the ability to create a successful assignment on the spur of the moment, based on the needs and the interests of their students, my approach may seem cumbersome.



Some might also argue that by illustrating evaluative criteria, we are dictating the students' content to the extent that we stifle their originality. Though the work I've received from students has never supported this claim, the argument may be a valid one for assignments which do not address the scope of characteristics I have outlined.

Despite some difficulties, or maybe because of them, I believe this area is valid for further research and attention. As teachers, our collective goal ought to be to ensure that each student has succeeded with the material we present. This material should help them question and re-see themselves and their environment. If we want to see all students succeed, our assignments, which in themselves should be instructive, ought to help guide them by being straightforward with what we want students to accomplish. The teachers' candor with what they are looking for in student work will also open the doors for stronger student-teacher relationships, as both parties will be working for the same goals. Hence, the classroom environment will be conducive to learning, as opposed to being dominated by students' attempts to master the rules to the "guessing game."

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