

## How to Enhance Learning by Using High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Writing

Peter Elbow and Mary Deane Sorcinelli

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### A LITTLE THEORY: HIGH STAKES AND LOW STAKES

Because writing is usually learned in school (where it is virtually always graded or evaluated), and because writing tends to be used for more serious occasions than speaking (“Are you prepared to put that in writing?”), most people feel writing as an inherently high stakes activity. But writing is not *inherently* a high stakes activity. Indeed writing is better than speaking for *low stakes* language use--for exploration and experimentation. This is because writing can so easily be kept private--or revised entirely before sharing with any reader. Of course we need to set high stakes writing assignments in our college courses, but that writing will result in more learning for students and go better for us if we also exploit the resources of low stakes writing.

Why high stakes essay assignments? If we ask students to articulate in clear writing what they are studying we help ensure that they will in fact learn it. And without these carefully written papers, we can't give trustworthy final course grades--grades that reflect whether they actually understand what we want them to understand. For if students take only short answer tests or machine graded exams, they may often *appear* to have learned what we are teaching, when in fact they don't really understand. Besides, writing is a central skill for higher education, and students will not get good at it if they write only for English or writing teachers.

And low stakes writing? The goal here is not so much to produce excellent pieces of writing as to increase how much students think about, understand, and learn what we are teaching. Low stakes writing is usually more informal and tends to be ungraded or graded informally. You could describe the goal this way: we can throw away the low stakes writing itself, but keep the neural changes it produced--the new insights and understandings.

### LOW STAKES WRITING

#### Kinds

The most obvious approach is to ask for comfortable, casual, exploratory writing about a question or topic, and urge students not to struggle too much to try to get the thoughts exactly right or the writing good. Make it clear that the writing is for exploring and processing course material--and will not be graded. Low stakes writing also increases fluency and confidence in writing and helps with creativity and risk taking. These benefits are maximized if you sometimes ask for low stakes

writing in the mode of *freewriting*--asking them to write without stopping, putting down whatever comes to mind, even if it doesn't make sense.

## Occasions

**In class.** Many teachers ask for five or ten minutes of low stakes writing at the start of class--to help students bring to mind the homework reading they did or to explore their thoughts about the topic for today. Or in the middle of class, to ponder a particular question--especially if discussion goes dead. Or at the end of class, to summarize and reflect on what was discussed. Students will have more to say in discussion, and be less afraid to speak up, if you start with a few minutes of freewriting. Two minutes of quick freewriting after you ask a question will make all the difference in the world.

**Out of class.** Many teachers ask students to keep a journal of informal reflections on the readings and classes. The goal is to get students to process what they are studying and connect it with the rest of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Because students sometimes experience journal writing as an artificial exercise and resist it as useless "busy work" (especially if no one else reads it), many teachers have found it helpful to ask for weekly *letters* that students write to a classmate or friend--letters in which they reflect on the course material (see Young, 1997). Many teachers now ask students to post letters or journal entries on a class website--or even simply have students e-mail entries to everyone using a group e-mail address.

## Benefits

Some faculty members are nervous about inviting students to write loosely and informally. Therefore, we feel it's important to spell out a number of the benefits:

Low stakes writing helps students involve themselves actively in the ideas or subject matter of a course. More minds are usually at work on the course material during low stakes writing than during a lecture or discussion.

Low stakes writing helps students find their own language for the issues of the course; they stumble into their own analogies and metaphors for academic concepts. Theorists like to say that learning a discipline means learning its "discourse," but students don't really know a field unless they can write and talk about the concepts in their *own* informal and personal language. Successful parroting of the textbook language can mask a lack of understanding.

Frequent low stakes writing improves high stakes writing. Students will already be warmed up and fluent before they write something we have to respond to. And when they turn in an impenetrable high stakes essay (and who hasn't tangled up one's prose through extensive revising?), we don't have to panic. We can just say, "Come on. You can revise

this some more into the clear lively voice I've already seen you using.”

Low stakes writing helps us understand how student minds are working: how they are understanding the course material, feeling about it, and reacting to our teaching.

There's a special application of low stakes writing to math and science courses—and to problem solving in general: ask students to write the story of the paths their minds followed as they tried to solve a problem. These paths are interestingly idiosyncratic but instructive, and it's useful to have students share these meta-cognitive stories.

Regular low stakes assignments make students keep up with the assigned reading every week. This means that they contribute more and get more from discussions and lectures. Quizzes can do this job, but they invite an adversarial climate and don't bring the other benefits described here--including pleasure.

And don't forget: low stakes writing takes little of our time and expertise. We can require it but not grade it. We can read it but not comment on it. In many cases we don't even need to read it. Yet we can get students to read each other's informal pieces--and (if we want) discuss them.

### **Handling low stakes writing**

There are still plenty of students who are not used to low stakes writing--or who don't expect it in a “hard nosed disciplinary course.” They assume that all writing must, by definition, be read and graded by the teacher. So it's important to explain frankly to them why you are requiring it and not grading it. You can point out that much writing in the world gets no response at all. If it helps, you can say “This is graded. You get 100 if you do it; 0 if you don't.”

Most teachers set up a combination of different audience relationships for low stakes writing: some is private and some is shared; some of the shared writing goes to the teacher and some only to fellow students. Sometimes students are invited to *discuss* the information and thinking they've heard in each others' low stakes writing--but not give feedback on the quality of the writing. If you have time to give nongraded response to some of their low stakes writing, that can be useful, but most of us need to save most or all of our responding time for their high stakes writing (but see the section below on “middle stakes writing.”)

Some teachers read journals; others treat them as private and just check that students have written. Some teachers ask students to trade journals weekly with a peer--perhaps for a response, perhaps not. Letters are natural for sharing, and lots of learning comes from this sharing.

When starting a new class with students who don't trust us and who might resist writing anything we don't see, it can be useful to collect the low stakes pieces for a few sessions. We stress that we won't grade it or comment on it--just check quickly to make sure they explored the topic. By doing this, we help them learn that nongraded or even private writing is not wasted busy work but, in fact, leads to new insights and better enjoyment of writing. Many students have never had the

experience of writing with their *full attention* on their thoughts. Their writing has always been for a teacher and a grade, and therefore much of their attention has leaked away in the form of worries about mistakes in language, spelling, or wording. After a few sessions, we can stop collecting it and let these pieces be entirely private--or just for sharing with classmates.

When asking students to do low stakes writing in class, it's important for the *teacher* to write too. This helps students see it as a process that adult professionals and academics use for developing their thinking.

Will low stakes writing promote the habit of carelessness in writing? This is only a problem if teachers fail to emphasize the sharp distinction between low stakes and high stakes writing--and insist on high standards for the latter.

### HIGH STAKES WRITING

We cannot give fair course grades unless we get a valid sense of how much students have learned and understood. For this, we need high stakes writing. The stakes are high because it needs to be good and it bears directly on the course grade. But most readers of this book are not trained as teachers of writing and will understandably feel some apprehension about high stakes writing: especially about devising topics, commenting, and grading. The stakes are high for teachers as well as students.

If your campus has a **writing center**, it can be enormously helpful with high stakes writing. Tutors there can help students at *all stages* of the writing process: understanding the assignment; brainstorming ideas; and giving feedback on either early or late drafts. A writing center is specifically not a "copy editing service," but tutors can *help* students learn to copy edit better.

### Topics and assignments

In devising assignments, it's worth doing some strategic thinking about goals. For the obvious goal of *learning*, it's worth trying to choose topics that will lead to writing that interests the writer and will interest the reader. Thus, try to avoid assignments that ask for mere regurgitation of material from textbooks or lectures.

How about the goal that students should learn to write in the academic forms used by professionals in your field? In a graduate course, this will certainly be a goal; perhaps for majors. But a huge proportion of students in undergraduate courses in, say, physics or sociology or literature, will never have to write like professional or academic physicists, sociologists, or literary critics. Perhaps you feel nevertheless that they should have *experience* with those forms and genres, even though they won't actually need to use them later. You get to decide. For ourselves, we lean away from using academic genres and styles for nonmajors.

Our goal, instead, is what is sometimes called "essayist literacy": the ability to organize an essay around a main point, to support that point with clear reasoning, and to illustrate it with apt examples. In truth, a fully academic genre with all the rituals of academic style can sometimes *get in*

*the way of* clear exposition and argument. We think students often learn more from explaining course concepts or making an argument to readers *outside the field*. Note how much publication there is of high quality science writing for general readers.

It is important, we believe, to insist on so-called “standard” edited written English for final drafts. This demand does not preclude interesting or adventuresome alternative genres that don’t focus so much on “essayist” structure. Here are some examples: papers written as a dialogue between two figures you are studying--or other interested parties; personal papers that start from a disagreement that came up in class discussion--that analyze the issue or take a side; fiction-like accounts of something you are studying (e.g., a certain person you are studying in a certain era--or the behavior and “motivation” of a certain molecule or enzyme); collaborative papers. Letters to the editor constitute a high stakes assignment that is *short* but still takes careful thought; papers in the form of a collage are much easier to write, but still ask for good thinking and writing (see Elbow, 2000)

### **Criteria for evaluation**

“Professor, what are you actually looking for in this paper?” Students can annoy us when they ask this question, but it’s a valid one and deserves an answer--ideally on the handout stating the assignment. (Teachers often regret it when they don’t put assignments on a handout.) We cannot fairly comment or grade if we’re not conscious of criteria our judgments derive from. How much will we care about factors like these: correct understanding of course concepts; application of concepts to new instances; creative original insights; organization; clarity of sentences and good word choice; examples; spelling and grammar. Certain assignments will suggest other criteria (documentation; correct format for lab reports; voice). There are no right answers here--good professionals differ in their priorities--but we don’t think it’s fair to keep your priorities hidden.

### **Multiple papers and multiple drafts**

There are two powerful ways to improve student writing and student learning.

(1) *Multiple papers*. We can assign a number of shorter papers rather than just one large one (usually a term paper--a “terminal paper”). Students tend to delay writing term papers, they tend to pad them, and they seldom learn from our comments since the course is over before they pick up their papers--*if* they pick them up. On shorter papers we can give briefer responses.

(2) *Multiple drafts*. We can require students to write drafts of high stakes papers, then get feedback, and then revise. Are we suggesting doubling our responding duties? No. Our time is limited and so we need to think strategically: how can we use our response time to do the most good? (Consider the guiding principle for our better paid medical colleagues: “At least do no harm.”) If we devote most of our available time to feedback on a *draft*, we have a better chance of getting students to improve their writing *and* their understanding of course concepts. By responding to drafts, we are coaching improvement--instead of just writing autopsies on finished products

that will never be improved. If we respond only to final drafts, students have a hard time using our feedback to improve future papers (especially if there are no other papers in the course--or if the next paper is quite different). But, of course, if we spend our limited time commenting on a draft, then we need to *save* time on final versions: we can save the time we need by reading through them once and grading them with a grid. Here's a simple generic grid:

Unsatisfactory	OK	Excellent	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Content, thinking, mastery of ideas
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Organization, structure, guidance for readers
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Language: sentences, wording, voice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mechanics (spelling &c.) and correct citations
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Overall

With a grid of this sort, teachers with too many students can limit themselves to reading each paper once and merely checking the boxes. The use of multiple criteria provides feedback about strengths and weaknesses--feedback notably lacking in conventional, one-dimensional grades. Because there are only three levels for each criterion, you don't have to stop and "compute a grade" for each criterion. You need only read the paper and then hold each criterion briefly in mind to see if the paper seems *notably strong* or *notably weak* in that dimension. If neither, then the verdict on that criterion is "OK." (See below on three-level grades and twelve-level final course grades.)

Grid criteria can be added or changed to fit different genres, your priorities, or a particular writing skill you want to emphasize (e.g., *research*; *considering both sides of an issue*; *skill in revising*; *audience awareness*.) It helps to use plain language for criteria. (See Chapter 6 for more on grids.)

### **Worst case scenario**

Teachers who have large classes or heavy teaching loads (and who have no training in the teaching of writing) will feel, understandably, that they have no time for the "luxury" of multiple papers and multiple drafts. The situation is not so hopeless, however, if we look more closely at the reality of what happens when students write for teachers. When we assign writing and get students to write, we can trust that we are helping them learn more and probably write better. But when we comment on their writing and grade it, we can't be so confident of good results. Research points up some disturbing facts. Comments by faculty members are often unclear. After all, we write most comments in great quantity--working slowly down through thick stacks of papers; it is often late at night; and we're usually in a hurry--perhaps even discouraged or downright grumpy. Almost inevitably, we write quickly and fail to read over and revise what we've written.

Even when our comments are clear, they are likely to be untrustworthy. That is, when we write

typical comments (like “You should omit this paragraph or put it later” or “This hypothesis has been discredited”), respected colleagues might well disagree with us. Grades on papers are notoriously unreliable (as students sometimes prove by turning the same paper into different teachers). It’s not surprising that many bright students are cynical about teacher response. And even when we manage to write comments that are clear, valid, and helpful, students often misunderstand them because they read through a distorting lens of discouragement, resistance, cynicism--or downright denial. And dare we acknowledge all those students who don’t even read our comments--looking only at “what matters,” namely the grade? (See Hodges, 1994, for some research on how often our comments misfire when read by students).

So even though teachers caught in a worst case scenario have very little “time-per-student,” their *strategic assigning* of writing yields the biggest payoff from their limited time. They can increase learning even more by assigning *two* or more shorter papers and save responding time by using grid instead of writing comments. Remember: grids give feedback about different strengths and weaknesses in the writing--whereas conventional grades give nothing but a number on a yea/boo meter.

To increase learning by getting students to draft and revise, teachers in a worst case scenario will have to resort to a worst case strategy--but it’s fairly effective. Tell students openly that you don’t have time to give them feedback on their drafts but that you can help them nevertheless. Set a due date for a required draft of each high stakes paper--perhaps one week before the final draft is due. Collect the drafts (counting off severely for drafts not turned in), but just glance at each one to see that it seems to be a draft on that topic. Then a week later, collect final drafts and respond with the grid. It’s only fair to admit that of course this doesn’t *force* them to revise. But most students will find ideas for a better paper coming to mind after they turn in their draft. Even more students will revise if you devote some class time for students to read their drafts out loud to each other in pairs or trios. (See below for more about sharing or peer feedback.)

## **Responding to high stakes papers**

Here are some specific suggestions for revising.

**Response as dialogue.** Commenting is easier and more productive if we ask students to write a brief and informal *cover letter* or *writer’s log* to hand in with the draft or final version. It should answer questions like these: *What was your main point--and your major subpoints? How did the writing go? Which parts feel strong and weak to you?* Most important of all: *What questions do you have for me as reader?* And when it’s a revision: *What changes did you make--and why?* With this cover letter, our comment is not the *start* of a conversation about the writing but rather the *continuation* of a conversation started by the student. Cover letters help us decide what to address with our comment. Often we can agree with much of what the student has said--and sometimes even be more encouraging about the essay than the student was.

(Students write better cover letters if, on the first couple of due dates, we take ten minutes for writing cover letters in class and hearing a couple of examples--so we can kibitz a bit.) On a

couple of occasions when we *return* papers to students, we can continue the dialogue by taking five minutes for students to write us a short note telling what they heard us saying in our comment--and how they are reacting to it. These short notes tell us when our comments are unclear or when students misinterpret us.

**Read through the whole piece *before* making any comments.** Students can seldom benefit from criticism of more than two or three problems. We can't decide *which* problems to focus on till we read the whole paper through. When we write marginal comments while reading, we often get into trouble: wasting our time on something that turns out to be a minor issue; making a brief comment that the student misunderstands; saying something that's actually wrong ("you don't understand x--when later on it's clear that the student does understand x); or getting caught up in a little spasm of unhelpful irritation. If we settle for making straight and wavy pencil lines during our first reading (for passages that are notably strong or weak), these will serve as reminders after we have read it all and we are trying to decide what few issues to address. Even when we want to give "movies of the mind"--that is, to tell the story of our reactions as we were in the process of reading--we can usually do this more clearly and helpfully by waiting till we've read the whole piece.

**Write comments on a separate sheet** rather than in the margins. This helps us comment *as readers* about what works and doesn't and how the writing affects us--rather than falling into the trap of trying to be an *editor trying to fix the text*. Sometimes, of course, we can say something more briefly if we put the comment in the margin, but on the other hand, most of us save time by writing comments on a computer--which means using a separate sheet.

**Use plain language.** Comments about the writing are usually more effective when we use plain everyday language instead of technical terms from English or rhetoric or grammar. How much better to say, "Your writing sounds distant and pompous to me in this passage" than to say, "Too many passive verbs here." How would you talk about a writing weakness to a colleague in your field?

**About criticism and encouragement.** There's an essential learning principle that is too often neglected: students can make more improvement in a weak area if we can tell them to *do more of something* they've already done--than if we tell them only *not to do* what they have done. An example:

I often got lost as I read your paper. It has big problems with organization. But I've put straight lines along several paragraphs that hang together just fine; and also a few lines *between* several paragraphs where you linked them well and your transition works fine. Give us more of that! You've shown you can do it.

One of the most useful kinds of response is often overlooked because it seems too simple: *describe the paper* as you see it. For example, "*Here's what I see as your main point: . . . Here's what I see as your subsidiary points: . . . Here's what I see as your structure: . . .*" This helps students learn to *see* their own writing from the outside (a difficult skill), and it tells them what got through and what didn't.



## MIDDLE STAKES ASSIGNMENTS: THINK PIECES

These are not essays and don't have to be organized around a single point, but they are more than mere freewriting. They are short exploratory pieces that ask students to think through a topic. The student needs to *work at thinking* and clean up what is handed in enough so it is not unpleasant to read. We can describe them as thoughtful letters to an interested friend. A good think piece, like a good letter, might pursue one line of thinking and then discover a problem, and finish by rethinking the matter in a different frame of reference.

If your teaching conditions permit it, consider requiring a think piece every week (say one to three pages). You can respond to them with just a check, check-plus, or check-minus--with or without a few words from you (not about the writing but about the ideas). No think piece would be due on weeks when a high stakes draft or revision is due. Think pieces can also function as exploratory drafts for high stakes essays.

Think pieces help students get more out of readings, class discussions, and lectures. Topics can be completely open (e.g., "*Write about something that interests you in this week's reading*"). But topics can focus on particular concepts that are slippery, or help students practice particular intellectual tasks. Examples: "*Compare these two concepts from the reading.*" "*Use this concept from the reading or lecture [e.g., the second law of thermodynamics? internalized racism?] to describe and analyze something you have encountered in your life.*" "*Write a true or fictional story that uses the technique of flashback and/or unreliable narrator.*" "*Write about this historical event from inside the head of one of the participants.*" Students can take intellectual and rhetorical chances because they know their grade will be fine if they throw themselves into the task. Learning is vastly enhanced if you take five or eight minutes on due dates for students to read them out loud to each other in pairs or in small groups.

## PEER RESPONSE

For teachers of a writing course, it's crucial to use peer response and take the considerable time necessary to teach students how to give it and receive it well. But most readers of this essay will not be teaching a writing course, so our advice is to emphasize *peer sharing* more than peer response. That is, students get *excellent* feedback by reading their drafts and final versions aloud to classmates. When students experience how each sentence fits in the mouth and sounds in the ear, they can usually tell which sentences work and which ones are a problem. And not just sentences: reading an essay aloud gives students an almost visceral feel for the organization and train of thinking--and when that train goes off the rails. Best of all, mere sharing--reading aloud--takes very little class time. Sharing is not just about the writing: when three students hear each others' drafts (and lots of low stakes writing too), they are hearing different understandings of the *course content*.

Teachers and students who have not used sharing in this way will be surprised at its power--not

just to help with writing and learning course material, but also in building community. One warning: when someone reads a piece aloud, they tend to feel awkward at not hearing any response, and listeners tend to feel awkward saying nothing. In truth, *listening thoughtfully and appreciatively* is the biggest help for a writer, but there's a helpful ritual for dealing with the silence: listeners say "thank you" and then move on to the next reader.

The sharing of writing can be a good occasion for discussing the content ("*I don't see it the way you do. In my view...*"). And if you want to encourage minimal peer response, here are two simple and quick responses. "Pointing": "*Here are the words and phrases that feel effective or stick in mind*"; "say back" or summarizing: "*Here's what I hear as your main point; and you also seem to be saying.*" (For those who want to make a bigger commitment to peer response, see Elbow and Belanoff, 2003)

### **ABOUT CORRECTNESS: SPELLING AND GRAMMAR**

It's not possible or appropriate for us to try to teach grammar and spelling in a college course. But we don't have to teach everything we demand (e.g., typing or word processing). The main thing students need to learn about correct mechanics is schizophrenic: it's *not* important for rough exploratory writing, but it's *crucial* for final drafts.

For high stakes essays, we think it makes good sense to require not only clear well-organized writing but also good copy-editing. Here is a useful formulation: "Your final drafts must be virtually free of mistakes." Many students can't manage this without the help of friends (or paid typists), so it's not realistic to demand that they reach this standard entirely on their own. But we can demand that they learn to get whatever help they need for good copy editing. *This* is the skill and the habit they need when they write on most other occasions they'll encounter. (Most of us ask for help in copy editing, and we get professional help when we publish.)

It doesn't make sense to penalize students for surface mistakes on in-class writing since they have no time to revise with fresh eyes and have no access to help. For exploratory think pieces written out of class, we can require what's appropriate for an informal letter to the teacher: there's no problem if there are some mistakes, but the pieces can't be annoying or hard to read because of mistakes or messiness. A few students can quickly go over and neatly correct obvious errors; others have to recopy and correct.

### **ABOUT GRADING**

There's a whole chapter in this book devoted to the difficult matter of grading (see chapter N). [[insert chapter number]] We'll just briefly mention a few practices that are particularly useful because of the central problem in grading a piece of writing: a conventional grade like B-, is an attempt to represent with just *one dimension* the quality of a *multidimensional* performance. (A spelling test, in contrast, asks for a fairly one-dimensional performance.) In deciding on the value

of a piece of writing, teachers will naturally differ about how much weight they give to the various dimensions of the performance (e.g., accuracy of course content, validity of thinking, originality, structure, sentence/word clarity, mechanics).

**Grading grids** mitigate this problem since they spell out individual judgments for individual dimensions. The kind of grid we illustrated *does* end up with a single dimensional “overall” verdict, but at least it *reveals* the teachers values--instead of *hiding them* as a regular grades does. For example, an “unsatisfactory” on just one criteria, such as “content” might pull the overall grade down to “unsatisfactory.” Grids don’t get rid of the inherent subjectivity in grading (how *bad* is “unsatisfactory content”?--how *good* is “excellent clarity”?), but at least it reduces it. (Research has shown repeatedly that the same paper often gets a wide range of grades from respected readers. Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier (1971) summarize extensive research. See also Tchudi (1997) and Diederich's classic study (1974).

For final grades most of us are obliged to settle for a one dimensional grade, but we can still use a grid to communicate the meaning of our grade to *students*. Here the criteria will encompass a wider array of performances, and teachers can communicate whether they are counting for dimensions like effort, improvement, or attendance.

The grid we illustrated above settled for only three levels of quality (unsatisfactory, OK, excellent). This may seem crude; people seem to hunger for fine distinctions. But the more levels of quality we use, the more work we give ourselves, the more chances we have to be wrong (that is to differ from how other respected readers would judge), and the more chances we have to make students disagree with us and resist our teaching. Yet of course most of us have to give a course grade with something like twelve levels of quality (counting pluses and minuses). There are many relatively simple ways to add up or average out multiple crude 3-level grades to yield a 12-level final grade.

## **Portfolios**

The problem of using a one dimensional grade for a multidimensional performance does not go away when it’s a grade for a portfolio. But somehow the problem isn’t so pressing because it’s a grade for a number of multidimensional performances. With multiple writings, we get a more trustworthy picture of the student’s ability or learning (thus “validity” is enhanced). And portfolios have other advantages. The grade seems fairer because students can choose a *selection* of their best writing and they are not so penalized for having started out the semester unskilled. Most of all, portfolios greatly enhance student learning because they function as an occasion for retrospective meta-thinking. For the final piece in a portfolio is typically a reflective analysis in which the student looks back at everything in it and tries to articulate what he or she has learned. For the sake of this reflection, it’s helpful for students to include some low stakes writing and at least one example of an “instructive failure.”

## **Contract grading**

Contracts are mentioned in Chapter N, [[insert chapter number]]but we want to mention a little known hybrid or mixed kind of contract that can be very productive in certain courses. Students are given a list of *all* the course activities that the teacher thinks are important sources of learning, and students are guaranteed a course grade of B if they simply *perform* them all with good faith or decent effort. Typically this list involves things like attendance, meeting deadlines, genuinely revising drafts, giving feedback, satisfactory copy editing, and any other activities that are important for learning--such as labs or special projects. The teacher gives normal feedback on all these activities where it's appropriate--feedback as to quality--but for the grade of B, judgments of quality are irrelevant. This system tends to get more students to do the work yet gives them a large foundation of safety; it reduces the degree of adversarialness in grading. Yet judgments of quality come into play for grades higher than a B.

## **PREVENTING--AND HANDLING--PLAGIARISM**

We can't catch all plagiarism—and if we try, we'll turn ourselves from teachers into suspicious cops. It's hard to track down the sources in internet cheating. "Using Internet search engines, DVD-based reference works, online journals, Web-based news sources, article databases, and other electronic courses, students can find information about nearly any topic and past the data directly into their papers. Or students can take credit for documents they find or buy online, or that they get as email attachments from friends living down the hall or a thousand miles away" (Stern-gold, 2004, p. 16). Thus it's far easier to *prevent* plagiarism than handle it after the fact.

The issue of plagiarism gets more complicated as a growing number of students from other countries and cultures "enter the [current U.S.] college classroom believing that truth, wisdom, and cultural artifacts such as art and literature are cultural community property, the result of years of accumulated wisdom transmitted by venerated leaders and by oral traditions, many of them religious" (Swearingen 1999. See also McLeod 1992). Thus it's far easier to prevent plagiarism than to handle it after the fact. See the chapter "What to Do About Cheating" for a fuller treatment of cheating. Here we treat only plagiarism in writing.

### **Ways to Prevent Plagiarism**

Clarify in your syllabus what constitutes plagiarism in your course. Tell students what documentation is required for essays, including use of the Internet. Tell students what is acceptable and unacceptable collaboration with other students.

Encourage students to come to you or email you if they are in doubt about citations. Try to persuade them that they are better admitting they don't know something than to making a mistake that could constitute plagiarism.

Ask students to check their syllabi in advance to see if there are some weeks where they

have too many writing assignments due at once. Allow students to hand in an assignment early so as to balance their workload.

Collect lots of low stakes informal writing so students know that you know their style and voice.

On high stakes essays, where students might be more tempted to cheat, assign specific, idiosyncratic topics so they can't lift things from books, the Internet, or other courses. (Examples: "*Apply this theory to that set of data*"; "*Describe your reactions to X and then go on to...*"; "*Give a sympathetic summary and then a critical summary of what X writes on page 134, and then write an essay of your own reflections about it;*" "*Write a short story that illustrates the principles we've studied this week.*")

Require drafts and revisions and cover letters that explain the revisions. Require students to hand in all previous versions and notes with every final draft.

Write fresh topics each year so students aren't tempted to recycle papers from previous years.

In large courses with different section leaders, have each of those leaders make up different assignments for think-pieces and essays—so students aren't tempted to copy work between sections. Circulate copies of new (and old) topics to all instructors.

Students are less tempted to plagiarize from the internet if you project that you are savvy and familiar with what is out there. One of our colleagues deters problems with this note in his syllabus: "*Last year, we suspended paper-writing in favor of hour tests while we studied Internet plagiarism and how to detect it. Now we're ready.*"

## **Ways to Deal with Plagiarism**

Despite our best efforts to prevent plagiarism, it can happen. But when we get work that looks plagiarized, we must withhold judgment in the absence of trustworthy evidence. In particular, it's no fair saying, "This work is better than you can do," for in fact most students are capable of work that's astonishingly better than what they usually turn in.

Some teachers who suspect plagiarism meet with the student right away and present their account of the situation. They try to bring samples of the student's earlier writing. If the student cited sources, they ask that he or she bring the source materials to the meeting. If the student pleads guilty, you may conclude, nevertheless, that it was not intentional plagiarism. In such a case, you can resolve the matter informally, for example by allowing the student to re-write the assignment rather than lowering the grade for the assignment or course.

Other teachers try first to establish definitive proof, for example, by using *google.com* or new software that can detect plagiarism such as *turnitin.com*.

Many campuses have a policy on academic dishonesty that forbids imposing any penalty at all without reporting the case to the official committee and allowing the student to appeal. This may seem bureaucratic at first glance, but there are two good justifications. Many students have been falsely accused and penalized; and not a few students have been found working out informal arrangements with teachers over and over again--convincing each teacher that they've never been involved in anything like this before. It's important to check out the procedures at your institution.

## IN CONCLUSION

Here are the main points we are making in this essay:

(1) Teachers can enhance student learning if they use a combination of high stakes and low stakes writing. (Most people experience writing as a high stakes use of language--in contrast to speaking as low stakes use. But writing, because, it is so easily kept private, is ideal for low stakes use.)

(2) We need high stakes writing in order to test whether students have learned what we are teaching. If we use only short answer exams, we don't get a trustworthy picture of whether students have a genuine understanding of course concepts and how to apply them.

(3) Low stakes writing is for exploration and learning: there is no concern about quality or correctness. It helps students explore and figure out new ideas, connect personally with them using their own language, become more active learners, and become fluent and comfortable in writing before they have to write the high stakes essays that determine their course grade. (And low stakes writing takes little teacher time or skill.)

(4) Students learn and improve more if they are assigned two or three essays, not just one, and if they have to turn in a draft of each essay for feedback before revising it.

(5) Teachers can handle the increased demands implied by the previous point by (a) keeping the essays short; (b) giving their main response time to draft--when these responses can actually help students improve; and (c) responding very quickly to final drafts by using a multi-criterion grid and just checking boxes--rather than writing a comment. The multiple criteria make the final grade more valid and reliable. (We provide many specific suggestions for the process of responding and grading.)

(6) It's far more feasible to *prevent* plagiarism than trying to catch and prosecute it. Here are some methods: make essay assignments particular and idiosyncratic so that students cannot find anything written by someone else that fits the assignment; insist on drafts of essays and then revision on the basis of feedback to those drafts (along with a process note about how they revised); see lots of students' low stakes, informal, in-class writing so we know their writing

voice and they know we know it.

### Supplementary Reading

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