Beyond Grades

Irvin Peckham

My point of view is determinedly utopic in that I am pursuing an image of a better world. I am also romantic because I think people work for more than extrinsic rewards. I don't think people need the dollar; I don't think students need the grades. What they need are the right conditions that will encourage labor and learning through intrinsic rewards. Those conditions, both in and out of the classroom, are possible.

I hear voices protesting that people want expensive cars, four-bedroom houses in suburbia, wall-to-wall television, Rolex wrist watches, vacations in the Bahamas—all the things only money can buy. Perhaps I do not want to be distracted into a debate over ideologically driven assumptions. But before getting to my central thesis, I will say—as many have said before me—that these desires may be culturally produced. I can imagine people who know better. I assume, in fact, that readers of this essay know better—or they wouldn't be teaching English. Even when we find ourselves distracted by desires for expensive objects and experiences, we know the real reward is in the doing, not in payments we receive for having done, that the reward of life is in living, not heaven. Whoever still believes in heaven is in for a big surprise.

My utopic vision of a classroom goes beyond grades. Because I am a writing teacher, I will focus my critique on the specific practice of grading students' essays (which amounts to grading them, for Derrida has taught us [and I provisionally buy it] that we write ourselves as we write). Although I could easily extend my subject, I am not in this essay writing about grading students for their coursework. I am working from the premise that most of us have to grade students at the end of the semester; we do not, however, have to grade their essays. Nor should we.

Student Resistance

Since third or fourth grade, our students have been insistent ly indoctrinated by a pedagogy (and worldview) based on grades, on objectified values, on ranking performance and people, on the commodification of labor. We have, of course, been subjected to the same indoctrination supporting the hierarchizing educational and social institutions within which our instruction and experiences have been embedded. I am half of a mind to say that so many years of grade-oriented socialization cannot easily be undone. I hear mixed reports from teachers who try to return essays without ranking them by grades. Some teachers manage to carry it off, but others say their students nag them for the grades.¹ As much as from a conviction that grades are persuasive carrots
or sticks, teachers seem to be grading essays because that’s what students expect them to do.

Although my experience argues otherwise, these reports that students are hopelessly addicted to grades are too consistent to ignore. These reports do not, however, distinguish among the students who “need” these grades. I suspect the grade-addicted students reside toward the top end of the bell-curve. But I would be willing to bet that the C and D students are not nearly so addicted to grades. These are the students who are hurt by grades, the ones who emerge from our writing class with a lifelong aversion toward writing and, not infrequently, reading. These students are my reason for resisting student resistance to going beyond grades.

Actually, I don’t meet serious resistance when I tell students I will not be putting grades on their essays. I announce this policy on the first day of class. In my preface to the course, I include the following section after a description of materials I want them to include in their folders for each essay:

EVALUATION AND GRADING

I will read the material in your folder and write an evaluation of your work on your essays. This evaluation will address all of the work you have done while writing the essay. I will not put a grade on these evaluations for several reasons, the most important of which may be that one tends to pay more attention to the grade than to the evaluation. Instead, I will respond as a reader responds to papers—I will tell you what I liked, what I didn’t like, and the kinds of things you might think of and practice in order to improve your writing in this kind of essay. I will assume my evaluation will be coherent enough so that you will know what I thought about your essay.

At mid-term, I will look at my records of my evaluations of your work. I will also consider such things as your attendance and class participation in group projects and workshops. I will write an evaluation of your work so far and give you an approximate grade that indicates how well you are doing in the course. I will encourage you to respond to me via e-mail if you wonder about any parts of my evaluation or the grade. You are, of course, always welcome to drop in to see me in my office to discuss your progress in the course.

For a final grade, I will consider your attendance, your workshop participation, your contributions to group projects, and your work on your essays. My process of evaluating your performance both at the mid-term and at the end of the semester
is admittedly subjective—which is quite in keeping with the writing process and the evaluation of written discourse. Writing is not a numbers game—a count of errors, etc. It is a matter of wanting and trying to learn.

Consider this:
A = a lot of effort; excellent work in class; excellent writing.
B = significant effort; good work in class; good writing.
C = reasonable effort; fair work in class; fair writing.
D = not very much effort; poor work in class; poor writing.
F = you didn’t try.

We should, of course, try to get beyond the business of grades, tests, etc., and get on with the business of doing our best to improve our writing. Needless to say, no tests in this course; just a lot of writing. Any questions?

I rarely get questions. My students seem to accept a classroom experience in which grades are more or less (it has to be more or less, for we are operating within the hierarchizing institutions) shuffled aside while we learn what we can during the short time we exist as a class. The following tally and comments represent the normal first year student response to receiving essays without grades attached. After returning their first essays and my comments, I asked them to write anonymously about their reactions to receiving non-graded essays back. I holistically sorted these responses into three stacks: students who preferred the comments without grades, students who didn’t seem to care, and students who preferred to have grades. Out of 20 students, 12 preferred comments without grades, 1 didn’t seem to care, and 7 preferred grades. Allowing some latitude for dissembling and my subjective reading, most students preferred to have my comments without grades. The following response represents the group who preferred the comments without the grade:

I think it’s much better to add comments to essays rather than grade them. I feel this way because when I get a grade I tend to think “oh ya, I got a ___” And then I don’t think about that test or paper again. However, if there is no grade and maybe just comments, I tend to think about what I did and how I can improve. I guess I work a little harder in a class that doesn’t just throw a grade at me. I also learn a great deal more. Grades do have a few good points. You at least know where you stand with the teacher all the way along (in a class). You also know where you are with other students (you can see how well you are actually doing as compared to others.) Bad point on giving
grades is that you tend to only work as hard as the grade you want & don’t really focus on learning the subject matter. (Annie)

The next response represents students who wanted grades:

I suppose both sides can be argued for this topic. It all depends on the situation for me. I need that security of finding a concrete yes or no—pass/fail—ABCD whatever when I check out my paper. Why? Because I am in college & the only thing my future employers will look at are my transcripts. I need grades for my own peace of mind. There is so much stress involved in the school system as it is I don’t want to have to guess my grade by a teacher’s comments. It leaves me feeling anxious & all tense—wound up—when I only receive comments from a teacher on my final draft.

On the other hand—people could use grades as not only a motivator to do better next time, but also as a demotivator. People who get “good enough” for their peace of mind may slump off in that particular class & pay more attention to another class. (Jenette)

I asked the same question of students in an upper level/ graduate Theory and Practice of Composition course. Eleven out of twelve students preferred my comments without grades. The twelfth student had no comment—I think because he was stunned by my less-than-complimentary evaluation of his paper. The following response is representative of the students who preferred not to have grades on their essays:

When first looking at your comments on my final draft, I thought I might be in a little bit of trouble. As a matter of fact, I said to myself, “I don’t think Irv liked this.” What was interesting to me was the way I reacted to your comments. I was more concerned about what you thought of my paper and was not as concerned about my grade. Five years ago, I would have looked at the bottom of the paper first to see my grade and then worried about your reactions. I think this shows me why I am writing and why I want to teach writing. By the way, it felt good to write like this after a little bit of a lay off and have someone, like you, enjoy what I wrote. I like to write for myself, but it always feels good to have someone appreciate your writing. . . . (Jim)

Several interesting and predictable issues surface in these responses to my query, but I would like to defer discussion on these for a few
paragraphs. Two points only need to be made. Despite the frequently heard protests that teachers grade essays because students demand them, most of my students say they can do without them. The difference in responses by my first year and upper level/graduate students suggests, in addition, that as students mature, they become less dependent on grades.

I suspect that the difference in reports on student attitudes toward graded or non-graded essays is, in part, a consequence of teacher attitudes. Teachers who cannot break from their grade-oriented training or who ideologically foreground grading and ranking will discover that their students demand grades on their essays. On the other hand, teachers like me discover that our students share our desire. While I am not suggesting that our predilections determine our discoveries, they surely color what we find. In any case, I know that teachers who are not committed to undermining the grading process and the concomitant celebration of standards and ranking should not chance what amounts to an oppositional pedagogy. They may find themselves forever questioning what they are doing when they meet (as they must) opposition to their opposition.

Grades as Deflectors

I will address a few of the more obviously counterproductive byproducts of grading essays before I describe an alternative response strategy. First, experienced teachers know (and new teachers soon discover) that when they return essays, students tend to look for the grades while ignoring everything else—that is, the comments the teachers have conscientiously written. Admittedly, a few students like Jim may read the comments, but the wasted labor of writing to the other twenty-five or so makes one question the purpose of all those marginal(ized) comments. The students who bother to read the comments probably receive A’s or B’s. The C, D and F students, interpreting the grades as only more evidence of their inability to write, generally ignore the comments—ironically ensuring in a negative dialectic that they will not improve their skill. Even those earnest B students still reading comments are not reading them in order to understand the messages; rather, they are trying to discover what kept their essay from earning an A. More often than not, they are engaging in an internal argument with the teacher, focusing on the teacher’s obvious misinterpretation of what they were trying to say. It seems as if the grade, the objectified symbol of the comments, either erases or deflects the real messages. If teachers want students to take the comments seriously, then teachers shouldn’t codify the messages in more reductive symbols. Trying to say what one means in a few comments is reductive enough. So why reduce the reducted?
The students' tendencies to ignore the teachers' comments and look for the grades is observable—we have all watched students receive their essays and flip through to discover where we have hidden their grades. The second counterproductive by-product, however, is not so concretely marked. Nevertheless, I think most teachers will grant (and some applaud) that when students receive grades on their essays, they work for the grades. From one perspective, the grades are the carrots that keep the mules moving forward. Unfortunately, the carrot motivation functions by keeping the mules' minds off the task. The mules go for only the carrots, and the students go for only the grades. Being reasonably practical, they want to know only the criteria teachers use when evaluating the essays. In order to objectify those criteria, teachers tend to valorize concrete and submerge less easily explained criteria, such as that indefinable something that makes readers want to read on—voice, grace, resonance, commitment, or insight. How much easier to talk about spelling, comma faults, and topic sentences! How much easier to quantify and percentize them! Percents (since their lives have been imbricated by percentages) students, parents, and administrators can understand. Percents are so... so scientific!

Opposed to this kind of behaviorist pedagogy is an admittedly romantic, oppositional pedagogy that imagines students will work for something other than grades and be the better for it. This romantic pedagogy is oppositional for some very odd reasons. On the one hand, the romantic (better called progressive)\(^5\) tradition seems to correspond with the avowed institutional objective of educating all citizens. On the other hand, the institution marginalizes by ranking and grading. After all the hoopla about individual initiative, equality in education, responsibility, etc., is over, we know that when we start assigning grades to second and third graders, making them into cardinals and blue jays or blackbirds, that the students who are consistently receiving C's and D’s are pretty much turned off from education. There is a good argument for saying that part of the underground function of the educational institution is to marginalize these students so that industry will always have a ready supply of workers (the Commons and Dumbs). It is no secret that the majority of those who get the C’s and D’s come from the already marginalized social classes (see Bowen and Schuster, Moffett, Brice Heath, Bernstein, Shor, Clark, Rose). The ranking by grades serves, in addition, to reproduce the capitalist structure that awards high salaries and good working conditions to some and low salaries and lousy working conditions to others (all determined by individual initiative, of course).

Within the arena of writing instruction, the educational institution intends to produce better writers. On the other hand, the ranking/grading pedagogy contradicts this purpose. I have mentioned only two
of the more egregious counterproductive by-products of grading essays. I could add several others—antagonism between student and teacher (who comes to represent the educational institution), teachers functioning as accountants rather than teachers, or the defensive habit of commenting on and marking only those elements that support the grade, i.e., only the bad elements if the paper/student gets a C or lower (see Connors and Lundsford 213; Freedman 158). We know we can be better writing teachers if we can get the students to read our comments seriously, if we can get them to focus on both concrete, countable criteria and on the more subtle elements of discourse, if we can erase the ever-present grades that stand between us and them, if we can get them to enjoy rather than dread writing. But the peer and institutional pressure to assign a certain percentage of C’s, D’s, and F’s to their essays (let alone the B’s, which rarely satisfy) impedes effective writing instruction. Nevertheless, most teachers still find it necessary to put grades on essays. A non-grading pedagogy is undermined because it lies on the weak side of an institutional contradiction. Although the non-grading pedagogy supports the overt claims of the institution, it subverts the underlying and contradictory purpose of reproducing the capitalist structure through the agency of grades. This latter purpose is the one that holds water, whereas the publicized purpose of educating the masses leaks. After all, where would we be if everyone got A’s?

Other Carrots

Teachers used to grading essays wonder whether students will try to learn if they are not rewarded or whipped by the concrete reality of grades. I want to offer a few speculations about why students learn just as well (if not better) by receiving only written responses to their essays. I also want to challenge the conventional notion that students will work hard on their writing only if they think they have to work hard to get good grades. It is a common mistake for teachers to assume that they have to buy their students’ cooperation with grades. Rather, one should buy their cooperation with good teaching practices.

Some teachers assume the majority of their students will enter class both unwilling and unready to learn. There are good reasons for these assumptions—for most students have endured many years of wildly ineffective classroom practices, practices that have silenced them, demeaned them, bored the hell out of them. But students are remarkably resilient. Perhaps their resiliency can be traced to the common knowledge that most of what passes for education is only so much b.s. They enter class after class, hoping this might be one of those rarities: the class that will turn them on. But it turns out to be the same old thing. As Jenette and Annie, my first year students quoted above, suggest, they go about their
business of discovering the grading structure and the way to get the most
reward with the least investment. They hope for something better from
the new class.

When they enter my class, I see that hope. Most, if not all students,
enter my class with the serious expectation that perhaps they will learn
something functional about writing. In addition, all of them know (or at
least have the unnerving suspicion) that people who can communicate
well by writing generally get along better in a literate culture than those
who are pushed into the margins by their textual silence. As first-
generation college students, most of my students are trying to escape their
working class origins and are consequently quite anxious to improve
their writing skills. They give me about a week, with the more generous
among them allowing me two. In that time, I have to convince them that,
one, I really do know what I am talking about, and, two, I have a way of
helping them learn what I know without boring them to death.

When my class works well, I surprise many of my students by
showing them ways in which writing is not a pimple on one’s posterior.
Once I get them to see that writing can, in fact, be fun (an exchange of
thoughts, a way of working out one’s problems, a text one can be proud
of), they are on the road to learning how to write for something other than
grades. I move from showing them ways in which writing can be fun (or
at least relatively painless) to showing them ways of generating and
shaping their ideas through text. The generation and shaping of ideas are,
in fact, the two purposes of prewriting. If I have designed the prewriting
strategies usefully (boring and generally useless prewriting tasks, e.g.,
canned heuristics, are as common as boring topics), students are excited
about discovering ways of writing that circumvent the generally hateful
process of trying to write essays. Although the fun phenomenon may
fade as we move toward the essays, most students go along with the pre-
writing because they are learning something few of them suspected
before—that is, there are ways of working on essays without knowing one
is working. They discover writing can be a way of trying out ideas in a
risk-free arena, that sometimes (in fact most of the time) what they write
down doesn’t have to count.

When students shape and write and reshape and rewrite until they
arrive at a final text, they can try out their texts on their readers—which
may or may not include me. When I design a writing situation, I generally
choose readers, such as students in another class, who will be able to
respond to their texts, telling the writers what they liked, what they didn’t
like, what they agreed and disagreed with. When my students under-
stand that their texts represent portions of themselves they can actually
send to real readers, my students discover the exciting mediating quality
of text—that text is a way of communicating with others, of saying
something to others and getting something said back in a way that is a response to what the writers said as much as how they said it. To communicate, then, so that students are understood and so that they can understand is another reason for writing in my class—another reason that goes far beyond the reason of grades.

Finally, my students learn what may be the most valuable lesson and the most powerful motivating force for working hard on one’s writing—that is, that writing is a way of discovering more about who they are. Electronic class journals, in which they write (and read) once a week about their participation in class, group, or individual projects are only one way of encouraging students to understand how writing generates self-discovery. Good prewriting activities and good writing situations accomplish the same purpose. I would consider any of my classes a failure if my students didn’t have a chance to use writing as a tool of discovery about external reality and their evanescent identities. Few of my students have thought of how writing functions as an externalization of their self, that what they put down in text is what they have thought (are thinking) inside and that what they put down in text is in very important ways who they are, that parts of their texts represent parts of themselves that have previously been hidden, that is to say, unrealized. So they discover that, as they write, they are realizing or writing themselves. And they can send those realized selves out to be read—just as they read others’ realized selves through the texts that other students write. Realizing themselves, then, and realizing others is a powerful motivating force for learning to write.

When these three motivation forces (learning how to write in order to get along better in a literate culture, learning how to use text as a mediating agent between self and others, and learning how to realize one’s self though text) are working together, I do not have to reward or punish each essay in my class with grades. Instead, I am free to join the conversation.

**Evaluation**

Ultimately (although I am open to arguments on this point), I have to evaluate the students’ work. I described in the excerpt from my preface to the course my method of responding to and evaluating their work. I write “work” rather than essay because I evaluate more than the essay. After we have finished the final copy of the essay, I have students label and arrange their work in a folder so that I will easily be able to review it. The folder is generally sequenced in the order of prewriting, outlines (by which I mean anything from clustering to formal outlines), their critiques of others’ essays, drafts, final copy, and self-evaluation (an open-ended letter from them to me about what they liked or didn’t like about their
essay, what they still have questions about, what part of the process worked, what didn’t, etc.). I look at the folder and evaluate the student’s work on each part. I can skim most parts of the folder to see whether the student has been working responsibly or sloughing off. Even with a careful reading of the final copy, I rarely take longer than thirty minutes to read and respond to the folder. I make some marks (underline parts I like, squiggly lines under suspect parts, check marks in the margin to indicate mechanical errors, a few marginal comments that I can’t resist) on the final copy, but I try to save most of my response and evaluative comments to write on my response form (a template that I fill in on my computer). Below is a sample response/evaluation of an observation essay. In brief, this assignment required students to write an observation essay that would show other UNO students something more about an object with which the readers were already familiar but had not closely observed.

English 115
Irvin Peckham
October 21, 1992
1:00

OBSERVATION ESSAY

WRITER: Alex

Prewriting: generally excellent. Your interesting side comes out in the way you let yourself become the old clock. I have an idea of what you’re going through. Wish I could do more than just wish you luck. You’re carrying a pretty heavy burden with your family; if you don’t mind my saying so (here comes foot-in-mouth Peckham), you could use some help via counseling. Do you know how to get it?

Notes from Draft 1: I see notes, I assume, that you got from others. But none that you used when responding to others’ papers read aloud. I was a little confused by this, in spite of your note. Were my directions unclear?

Outlines: very good. You know how to make good use of listing strategies, going back to them during different parts of the writing process.

Written Critiques: Missing—you didn’t get the idea here. I wanted you to write them out. Look again at my instructions. You were, at any rate, generally giving good oral advice to others.

Drafts: Excellent. You know how to look for points of revision. Can’t you get your first draft on the computer (or at least your second)? Saves you time.
REVISION
Mechanics: You had a few problems. Use your spell check. Learn how to use apostrophes—that is particularly important. They signal either possession or a missing letter (in the case of it’s, the ‘ signals the missing letter). Apostrophes have a couple of other uses, but let’s not complicate the issue. Look in the handbook. Make sure you get that. Some of your sentences get a little long and tangled (these are generally the ones with my squiggly lines in the margin).

Can you see how the overuse of “begins to” weakens your style?
Context: Excellent. Got smoothly into the interior of the clock’s mind. (notice the ‘).
Vividness of Details: Likewise excellent. No mean trick either when you decided to let the clock describe himself.
Pacing: Excellent. Very nice undercurrent here, too.
New Vision: Likewise excellent. No complaint. Not only do you get the exterior, you get the imagined interior of the clock. My congratulations. I worried that you would not be able to pull this off when you first described to the class what point of view you were taking.
Self-Evaluation: Learn the simple spelling rule I first gave. Why is writing not “writting”? You didn’t get the “perfect” essay, but you did a very good one. 115 and 116 do not really have “proper English” styles. Try to think that styles are appropriate to different kinds of writing situations (writing a letter to an aunt versus writing a newspaper editorial or an explanation in a scientific journal about a newly observed phenomena in the galaxy M31.) Even in broadcasting, you have different kinds of deliveries, according to the kind of radio program (a talk show is quite different from a news report).

Anyway, good job on your writing. This was an imaginative response to the writing situation. You might want to work on it a bit to clean up the mechanics and then submit this to Gateway. It might very well get published.

I am not promoting my response to Alex’s paper as an ideal. It was hurriedly typed and unedited. Although several of my remarks to Alex might not make sense to you, I wanted to include the whole of the text to reproduce the flavor of how I can respond to students’ essays without reducing both the essays and my comments to grades. I could elaborate for several pages on my response to Alex’s paper, but I would like to make
four points about using this kind of non-grading comment. First, since no grade is attached, Alex has to read my comments in order to discover what I thought about the essay. It is worth noting that I am gaining some extra mileage here, for Alex is also engaging in interpretive reading. Without question, I have implied quite a few things between the lines in several of my comments. Second, this kind of form allows me to shape my comments to fit criteria specific to the rhetorical situation. For instance, in this rhetorical situation the writer had to give readers a new vision of an object the readers were already familiar with. Third, the form leaves me room to make personal as well as evaluative comments. When I am writing these response/evaluations, I feel as if I am talking with the student. I couldn’t be as open if I had assigned a C to Alex’s paper. Alex and I would have been on a different footing—and it would not have been the kind that would have invited the personal relationship I was establishing with Alex through my text. And fourth, I am certain that the advice I gave Alex about his problematic mechanics was more readily received than if the advice had been interpreted as red marks adding up to a C.

I am giving Alex appropriate and substantive feedback in this response. I have said with my text what I thought about his writing process (which includes the product). The only additional meaning a grade would have given would have been his rank in the hierarchical distribution of students. That grade would have deflected the meaning of my text.

Writing teachers are used to having grades as a significant factor of final grades. If you don’t have essay grades, then how do you assign final grades? First, I would like to remark that in this era of databases and hypertext, we have ways of keeping anecdotal evaluations of students that would prove more effective than grades (see Harkin and Sosnoski). But until our imaginations catch up with our capabilities, I have to survive within an institutional structure that demands final grades for each student. Further, I recognize that the grades have to more or less correspond to grades that my colleagues would give for the same level of effort and achievement.

As I indicated in my preface to the course, my method of determining these grades is simple. For each student, I keep a folder that includes their in-class writings, sneaky little quizzes, my evaluations of their work on essays—anything, in fact, that will help me to determine the student’s grade. Since this is primarily a workshop course, I also consider attendance and class contribution. In other words, I engage in what might be considered old-fashioned grading. I hardly ever have an F. I rarely give D’s (students dropping to this level have had several conversations with me in which I encourage them either to put in more effort or to think about taking the course some other time). Any practicing teacher knows that,
after working with students for seven weeks, it's pretty easy (as long as you don’t allow yourself to be boxed into the silly predicament of having to defend your grades with percentages) to know who is getting C’s, B’s, and A’s. Using this data, I write up a mid-term report like the one below:

ENGLISH 116 MID-TERM REPORT
Student: Mike McKay
Instructor: Peckham

QUANTITY OF WORK:
Have you completed all assignments?
Prewriting: Yes
Workshop Responses: Yes
Drafts & Revisions: Yes
Readings: Mostly—but you didn't do very well on one of my sneaky quizzes.
Attendance: No absences
Self-Evaluations: Yes
Class Journals: Always on.

Thank you.

QUALITY OF WORK
Have you been
Using prewriting seriously?
Yes. You have learned how to write in order to discover your ideas rather than meet minimum requirements.
Revising your drafts substantially?
You're coming along on this. You have to think more in terms of global revision. You seem to be working exclusively at sentence level revisions.
Giving helpful workshop responses?
Yes; some were brief, but you read quite a few essays. Maybe read fewer and offer more comments or suggestions.
Writing perceptive self-evaluations?
Yes. Your self-evaluations give me an idea of what kinds of things you need to know about your writing.
Editing and proofreading carefully?
Okay. You can devote a little more attention to this. With our spellcheck programs, you could easily reduce the spelling errors.
Contributing to the class journals?
Definitely. Your comments have helped all of us focus on a couple of things that were going wrong with the large group editing sessions.
Contributing to group and class discussions?

Good with the former; trying with the latter. I know you're not used to contributing to whole class discussions, but they work better when everyone gets into what's going on. You have things to say. Try to step in and say them.

General Comments: Let's look again at the ending of your last paper sometime. You are obviously doing well in here. You're putting effort into all of your work, and you are clearly trying to push your writing along. I look forward to your next essay.

Mid-term Grade: About a B. Certainly not lower.

By using a macro as a template, I can review a student's folder and write up a report in less than a half-hour. In one way, writing these reports take more time than assigning grades—a time-value that concerns me because I want to show writing teachers ways of assigning more writing while doing less work. On the other hand, I don't have to spend time messing around with 87.5's, recording them, calculating them, and then juggling them so that I will be able to give the student the grade I know she deserves. The form of the report also gives the student more information than the solo grade. As I do with my responses/evaluations of their essays, I invite the students to write to me via e-mail or see me in my office if they want to talk over any part of the report.

My final evaluation follows the same format as the mid-term report with the exception that I add a response to the work of their last essay. I send these final reports and grades to them via e-mail. I usually get several replies to these final reports (and grades). Most of these replies make me feel pretty good as a teacher—not because I'm buying my students' affection with good grades (and I give a lot of good grades, thank you very much), but because my students are writing to tell me something without any expectation of a carrot or stick for having written. The written response is, after all, the response I have been working for.

We know that our method of responding to students' essays is of central importance to how we teach. If we can get by without labeling their essays with grades, then why should we grade—particularly if, as I have argued, grades deflect the meaning of our comments (or, in some cases, function as substitutes for them)? The only answer can be that we need to rank students via their texts. Beneath this purpose lies the further agenda of reproducing the social structure by turning texts into commodities that our students can exchange for grades, which reveal their academic rank as money reveals people's social rank. When this ideological agenda gets in the way of educating our students (as it does with the
Commons, the Dumbs, the Failures, and, frequently, the Borderliners), I can well do without it. I do not feel compelled in my writing classroom to teach my students how to function in a capitalist economy. My business is to help my students learn how to realize themselves through text. In order to do this, I go as far as I can beyond grades. I have shown in this essay how far I go and how I get there. I am of course quite willing to go further.

University of Nebraska—Omaha
Omaha, Nebraska

Notes

1 See Freedman. After surveying the response strategies of effective teachers, Freedman reports that students consistently value grades more than the teachers do. For many of the ninth grade students the researchers watched, “Grades loomed larger than what they learned” (158).

2 Critics might ask, “What’s wrong with average?” See Rose, 11 ff., for a good answer to this question. There is, of course, plenty wrong with being just average.

3 Student names are pseudonyms. I am using them in order to refer to these comments later in the essay.

4 In Connors and Lundsford’s survey, teachers who graded essays wrote significantly shorter comments than teachers who only commented. The readers in the survey felt the brief comments were a consequence of the teachers’ conviction that students would ignore their comments, so why write them? (211)

5 The conflation of a romantic with a progressive ideal may seem odd because the romantics, in the tradition of Rousseau, Wordsworth and company, are perhaps excessively concerned with the spiritual force that through the green fuse drives, whereas the progressive, in the tradition of Dewey, is concerned with experiential-based education. From the point of view of the postmodern world, Dewey, in fact, seems to veer toward scientism. Nevertheless, as contemporary scholars like E. D. Hirsch and James Berlin, with their own quite different agendas, have noted, the romantics and the progressives have something in common. For the purposes of this essay, I have in mind the contrast between the romantic-progressive’s faith in education for its own sake and the realist-capitalist’s assumption that people work for pay.

6 Both Connors and Lundsford’s (65) and Freedman’s (158) surveys indicate most teachers feel grades on essays do more harm than good.

7 Connors and Lundsford’s study implies that at least seventy-five percent of college teachers put grades on essays. I suspect the percentage is much higher.
I hope that my remarks will not be vulgarly interpreted as critical of incompetent teachers when my aim is directed at an institutional structure overwhelmed by internal contradictions.

I do not edit student work before they revise it. For the most part, when they hand it in to me, I act as final evaluator only. I teach by showing them how to give guidance to one another. I think a lot of unfortunate dependent behavior follows from the teacher who shows them how to fix their texts. Admittedly, this shifting of editorial responsibility gives me free time so that I can pursue tenure more readily by writing essays like this. When I was teaching high school, I adopted this rationalization as a survival strategy.

Works Cited


