

# Encountering Student Texts

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Interpretive Issues  
in Reading Student Writing

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## 12 Reading Student Texts: Proteus Grabbing Proteus

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This has been a hard essay to write. It has unnerved me. My pedagogical schemas and schemes have run up against the ghosts of former students, with resolution on neither side. Writing this essay has been like trying to climb out of a reverie with only a theory of communication as a ladder. Lots of luck.

The truths of how we read student papers have remained secret and obscure, hidden in unexamined private experience. How we comment on student essays is an easier subject, visible and open to inspection—and already discussed in numerous studies. But how we read student papers is a deep uncharted ocean, containing creatures we barely imagine until they come into our view. Yet the forces that swirl there are the forces out of which the writing classroom is born and out of which we construct our self-esteem as writing teachers.

Our writing courses are our reactions to our student writing—the “Oh my god, they better take care of this.” When we measure the student papers against whatever we believe writing is, we recognize our pedagogical priorities. The course we set for them is the projection of what we think writing ought to be. For these students are the one group of writers we have some putative influence over, the ones who we can make into the people who might write the things we would like to read.

Through the term, our readings of our student papers also provide our psychic rewards and punishments, as we measure the distance the students remain from our ideal writers. But also we are rewarded by watching the emergence of unanticipated people. Through our projections of the way the world is and should be, we catch glimmers of students’ projections of what the world is and can be. We become our students’ readers. In reading student papers we watch people coming and going, hiding and faking, being and becoming, and sometimes those people are ourselves.

How protean are we as readers? How protean should we be? Where should we stand fast? And what control do we have over our responses? A hard look at classroom realities is called for, but it all seems to be swimming before me. In earlier drafts of this essay I offered a confident vision of the teacher in control of a complex set of relationships, finely tuning mental set and reactive repertoire based on an assessment of the pedagogical process. I will get back to this—I have not totally abandoned my professional arrogance or responsibility—but the more I think and remember and look into myself, the more I see how ramshackle and ad hoc the process is. But honesty is the best policy, so onwards.

For sound institutional reasons and less certain reasons of educational psychology, composition specialists have devoted great energy to the issue of evaluation. But evaluation is a weak and faulted surrogate for reading, for it is the reading of a bureaucrat. We are all bureaucrats of course, functionaries in large educational/political/economic institutions known as universities and administrators of cultural institutions, such as standardized spelling, the direct American Hemingway sentence, and the autobiographical anecdote in support of a thesis statement. But bureaucratic readings call forth only the bureaucrat in the student, as students respond to the kind of audience we offer them. Our institutional address in a liberal arts college guarantees that we will feel tensions with our perpetuation of the constrained life form of bureaucracy, even the bureaucracy of an arts council.

But other things happen in the reading. Other forms of life leak through. Sometimes we as liberal-minded teachers insist on it, saying the students must bring their experience and thought and concerns into the classroom, into the text. We do this because we think students need personally urgent material to propel them to good writing and to reveal its power to master their worlds. But they write this material for us, even as they discover it for themselves. Our demand to the student has created a demand on ourselves to respond to this material. It is not the occasional dramatic revelation of family struggle, criminal activity, or mental anguish that makes the most demand on us, for we all can play the measured adult when the student asks for it. The description of their room, the letter complaining of a minor injustice, the confession of their career goals, or the obviously constructed fiction meant to mask the student's life and to feed what the student perceives of our need for vicarious engagement—these are the texts that most strain our human imagination, that tempt us to the condescension of thoughtless approval, or press us to rejection. How do we place ourselves when we read about their lives? What kind of reader is the

student asking for? What kind of reader do we want to be? What kind of reader is best?

A similar issue of placement enters when we as teachers bring into the classroom the future worlds we wish to move the students toward, whether of humanistic literary culture or of the technological corporation. Do we stand with students in naive puzzlement before these arcane communities, or do we embody these communities, rendering judgments on outsiders and setting initiation exercises for neophytes? Or do we stand on the sidelines as coaches and advisers to the students we throw into the fray? What kind of intermediate ground do we create on which we can accept and respond to the students' writing?

The dilemma of placement is, however, not just of our making. Even if we could create a class sealed from the outside world, working with genres unknown and without parallel in the world outside the English class, writing about personally unmoving and unmotivating material, we would still meet the challenge of unexpected constructions of our readership, for each person in that hermetic classroom will make of it what he or she will. Individuals will enter that classroom with a unique history which will shape their perception of and participation in the events that there transpire, and thus they will each want to make of us a creature to fit their own perception and skills.

In conferences and journals of our discipline, writing teachers have told many stories of the dilemmas posed by personal encounters with their students, so I doubt that the issues I raise here will come as news. There seems to be no other form of teaching at the university that creates such a personal bond between student and teacher, that grants the teacher such personal knowledge of a student as a sufferer and maker of his or her own life. Our subject creates the frequent occasions for students to tell us about themselves and to relate to us in a variety of relationships and situations. Both in the content of their writing and in their manner, students present themselves to us with a variety, fullness, and intimacy of revelations. Yet although we have regularly considered our relationship to our students, we have not (until this volume) confronted this relationship in its most central form in the writing classroom—what transpires between teacher and student across the written page.

In order to gain some grasp of our reading processes we must gain some grasp of those relationships. Reading (from all current research) seems to be a highly contextual activity, related to the readers' goals and the readers' schematic representation both of the material of the text and the situation in which the text is presented. What we as teachers think is going on in the classroom, the text, the student, and

the worlds that surround will affect how we read the paper, what signals we send to the students about what kind of audience we are, and ultimately how students will write to us. Where we stand and where we wish to move the students will affect our reading and their writing. Yet, as I have already suggested, this classroom world is not only of the teacher's making. If the presence, expectation, and perception of students reorganizes the world on which we are to set our feet, the fixed point from which to read becomes unfixed.

Perhaps one reason we have separated the question of reading from the question of the appropriate relationship with the student is that we have tried to displace the readership of the papers onto others, whether class peers or fictional outsiders, or even very real test-giving outsiders. The teacher then is free to become the editor, facilitator, confidant, to aid the process rather than receive the product. I find these wonderful classroom strategies and would be the last to deny them a major place in our pedagogic repertoire. However, the basic fact of classroom life, which I have seen very few classroom configurations overcome, is that the teacher is the most powerful person in the room, with the authority of the institution and the even more important authority of greater mastery of the skills to be learned.

The value of a piece of writing for the student is deeply shaped by what that student can glean of the teacher's response, directly through comments on the paper, and indirectly through the evolving relationship with the teacher. The student writes to the teacher, and we as teachers have a responsibility to accept that piece of writing according to our best lights. Even when students reject the judgments of their teachers (as I often did as an obstreperous lad), it is against those teachers that the student defines the self. My earliest and most formative impressions of the academic audience that resides in English departments and for whom I now write regularly came from my teachers. The professional voices and self-perception as a writer I developed then (and carry with me still) were in relation to those readers.

Given the importance of the teacher's role in the classroom, students inevitably write to communicate to that teacher. The student's perception of the teacher's level and focus of interest in the student's writing will influence the student's desire and goals in communicating with that teacher. How the student perceives the teacher as an audience will influence what the student will write, with what attitude and with what level of intensity.

Many of these perceptions will depend on the student's past history, but some, we hope, can be influenced by what the teacher communicates in the classroom. The teacher can, of course, communicate

salutary lies about the teacher's reading. But I am a terrible liar, and I suspect that teachers' responses are likely to be richer, more useful, more believable, and more consistent with all the relationships and dynamics of the classroom if they are based on real reactions to reading. Thus it is important to consider how we construct ourselves as readers, what influences that construction, and how that construction acts as a variable in student writing. Our reading of student writing forms the basis not just of after-the-fact evaluation of a text, but of the entire dynamic of language production through the term and after. The student carries the class as a consciousness- and skill-shaping experience when he or she steps into new writing situations.

All the complications I have been worrying about for the past few pages are the complications that arise from recognizing the student's contribution in defining the situation in which I read the papers. When I first viewed the subject from my perspective alone, as though I were fully in control of how I read, the problem seemed simpler. And I still think that is the situation that frames the other interactions, for the class is an institutional creation for which I have immediate responsibility. Both the university administration and students hold me to that responsibility.

The interaction that occurs between student and teacher across the student's papers is framed and driven by the reason we have come together in such a contrived dyad: for the students to learn to write better. I do not delude myself that if such a mutually agreed upon (and usually institutionally mandated) purpose did not exist for coming together, the student would have other spontaneous reasons for communicating with me. That does not mean that other relationships that might occur once we are locked into this primary relationship might not develop and possibly be mobilized for pedagogical purposes, but these other relationships must be kept in the perspective of pedagogical responsibilities.

With skill subjects such as writing, mastery comes with solving of increasingly difficult problems. The teacher-student relationship, I believe, should be constantly adjusted so as to draw the student into ever more ambitious problems and successful solutions. Sometimes this is encouraged through various rewards, such as the simple and powerful one of successful communication with another human being. Sometimes this is accomplished by the help of a writing collaborator. Sometimes this is called forth by well-stated expectations, upheld in after-the-fact inspection. Sometimes this is challenged by a curmudgeon. In order to know how to position myself in reading a paper, I must first read the situation—the kinds of lessons we have been

working with, the kinds of tasks set in the assignment, the kind of student, the processes and problems likely to be on the student's mind, and my ongoing pedagogical relationship with the student. Sometimes this positioning of myself is an obvious and unreflective outcome of events leading up to the reading of the paper, but sometimes it is a matter of conscious adjustment. Only when these fundamental issues of relationship have been settled, do I know what my goals in reading are. Most generally my goals are usually to respond in some way to the student writing, but what kind of response is appropriate in each case? Would it be most useful to this student at this moment and in this situation to give advice concerning surface editing? Or do I want the student to reconceive the problem of the paper in some deeper way? Do I simply want to raise the student's consciousness about what he or she has achieved? Or do I wish to communicate my pleasure as a reader of a finished product? Must I remind the student that something more is expected, whether grammatical propriety, density of detail, or intensity of concentration?

When I know what I want to do, I know how to read, whether with a proofreader's eye, a textual analyst's structural vision, an editor's helpful hand, a professorial challenge, a marker's red bludgeon, or a companionly ease. Each of these stances invokes separate reading processes. In each way of reading I look for and respond to different things. I generate different thoughts that are reflected in different comments on the paper or in different responses to the student sometime later in the term.

The situation of reading is also remolded by the paper itself. As the paper offers various things for my consideration and demands certain kinds of responses from me, I come to reconsider the right level at which to respond to it. Sometimes I must read certain papers or whole sets of papers through before I know how to position myself, how to read them. And some papers manage to break through my crusted middle age to my own passions, anxieties, concerns, and sense of surprise.

Reading student papers thus shares several features with all forms of reading. It is a situated, goal-directed, schema-laden interaction, negotiated between the reader's entering conceptions and the writer's invitations and imperatives embodied in the text. It is special insofar as the teacher's pedagogical vision, goals, and role define the reader's opening stance; the student's needs and attitudes generate special kinds of texts; and the educational enterprise creates and defines the interaction.

Trying to make sense of the ghosts of students who haunt me as I write this, I see some who within our interactions lived entirely within the anticipatable life of the classroom: students who wanted to avoid

the sin of grammatical error and happily displayed their competence for my correction; other students who without enthusiasm would produce pro forma work and would have been pleased with my indifference and a passing grade. The former I could easily cooperate with, then introduce into the more powerful mysteries of writing; the latter challenged me to find sparks of fire as I read. Sometimes I failed, leaving sleeping souls asleep. There were the students who entered the classroom with the fire to learn and would gallop down any path I pointed to; as I read I could watch how far their discoveries and inventions exceeded the poverty of the assignment.

Other students in their writing challenged the classroom life: students whose papers in their shoddiness showed contempt for the enterprise of classroom composition or in their otherness refused to be harnessed to the classroom. The writing of both such students often evokes a dual kind of reading within me, which I must then convey to the student: the pedagogue's response that this is not what I asked for or will accept and the confidante/adviser's response of attempting to understand why this student seems unwilling or unable to engage in the enterprise. I look for what students may not understand about the classroom enterprise or how their compelling passions may be harnessed into the classroom forms of life.

And then there are the students who bring into the student-teacher classroom life the overflow of their already powerful lives: students who look for confirmation of their worldviews, students who are struggling with problems and ideas, students coming to recognize the quiet outrages that have constrained their lives, students who have a depth of wisdom or feeling that illuminates my own soul, students who embody in their behavior and expectations cultures strange and enlightening to me. Each of these students calls forth a complex response in the reading, a response that tries to rise to their human needs and express my own human discovery while still maintaining the editor-collaborator's eye for possible revision and the teacher's sense of the lesson plan.

Looking back over the text I have written and comparing it to the editor's call for papers, I sense I have sidestepped the requested account of the particulars of what happens when I sit down with a stack of papers. I have not presented a protocol of my reading process nor an interpretation of the papers nor even a description of my state of mind. I have externalized the problem from seeing reading as a matter of my psychology and cognition or as a hermeneutic endeavor. Rather I have seen it as a matter of interaction in a complex social setting. My thoughts have been of how I conceive the situation, the dynamics that seem to shape and reshape the situation, and the concerns I have as I participate in the situation.

Perhaps the abstraction might have been reduced by turning it into a single case study, but since I have been on leave for an extended period and will not return to the classroom for another eight months, that option would be only a fiction. Moreover, any particular account I gave would move in and out of the same ground I covered here of the classroom project, the history and personality of the student, my history and personality, our joint history in the classroom, and our evolving interaction on all these grounds. Texts are not simply words, but forms of interaction, having meaning to participants. The best I could do would be to share that interaction. I would find it difficult simply to tell the story of myself with a disembodied set of papers. Evaluating examination papers, as I suggested earlier, is a different and relatively impoverished task.

My current distance from the classroom makes it hard to know what honesty there is in this account. My memory reminds me that sometimes I have cut corners and sometimes my readings have been moved only by the desire to avoid the embarrassment of facing the class the next hour with no papers to return.

It is even harder to know the impact that writing this essay will have on my future readings. Here I have done little more than hazard some observations on an only vaguely known process, but by so doing I have given my consciousness a more defined shape than it had previously. Articulating what we do changes what we do. Committing ourselves in public about what we do also challenges our own behavior. In teaching writing, I thought I was preaching what I practiced, but I found equally that I came to practice what I preached. We invent what we do and thereby construct an order in this protean world. To get the truth from Proteus, Menelaus must himself adopt the guise of a sea creature, catch the changing god in his lair at the verge of the sea, and hold on through the god's many transformations. Only then will the god assume a stable shape and reveal the way home across the sea.

## 13 On Writing Reading and Reading Writing

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"What does it mean and feel like to read student texts? What are the preconceptions, routines, constraints, and joys?" These questions, posed by the editors of this collection, first startled, and then intrigued, me. Like many teachers of composition, I suspect, I had not really thought much about how I read student essays—I just did it. Since the editorial guidelines encouraged "personal descriptions of and reflections on how [teachers] read student writing," I decided to keep a long-term journal where I would both describe and explore that previously unexamined experience.

I kept that journal during a term when I had two main teaching responsibilities: I taught a section of Oregon State University's required freshman composition class, and I supervised students working as writing assistants in the Writing Lab at Oregon State's Communication Skills Center, which I direct. Almost immediately, I realized that the experiences of reading the essays of the students in my composition class and my tutors' journals differed so significantly that it hardly seemed appropriate to use the same word to describe both activities. Investigating these differences has taught me a great deal about the complexity of my own reading processes and of my rhetorical situations as teacher. In the following, I would like to share the results of this investigation with you.

### Reading Writing Assistants' Journals

This is fun. No matter how busy I am, I always look forward to reading my writing assistants' journals. Last quarter was a particularly frenetic term for me, yet I noted in my own journal near midterms that reading my thirteen writing assistants' journals over the week would be a reward for all I had been through (even though it would obviously take a substantial amount of time). I know most of the