



# SPEAKING OF TEACHING

STANFORD UNIVERSITY NEWSLETTER ON TEACHING

SPRING 1992, Vol. 3, No. 3

## Responding to Student Writing

*Despair.*

*That's what most of us feel when we get a stack of student papers full of grammatical errors, flawed arguments, and awkward diction.*

*You can put red circles around the mistakes.*

*Or you can jot cryptic comments in the margins.*

*Either way, you suspect you're not reaching students.*

*Isn't it time for a change?*

To find better ways of responding to student writing, we quizzed three campus experts: Education Professor Melanie Sperling, who researches writing development; Ann Watters, Acting Director of Freshman English; and Claude Reichard, the university's consultant for Writing Across the Curriculum. Here are their ideas plus a bit of history to put things in perspective.

### The Old Goal: Justify the Grade

Back in the 1960s, the National Council of Teachers of English came out with guidelines on responding to student papers. The verdict? Correct every single error and write a lengthy note at the end to justify the grade.

"It's what I call the 'search-and-destroy' method," says Melanie Sperling. "But it's based on the industrial model of mass production. Teachers were supposed to turn student papers into standardized products."

Thirty years later, we know correcting every mistake takes forever. We suspect students ignore our comments. And even students glib enough to turn out a standardized product rarely think of their writing as conveying thoughts to another person.

For many students, writing a paper means little more than fulfilling a set of arcane requirements. "Too often students don't perceive papers as an opportunity to communicate," says Ann Watters. "A paper is just something they have to crank out."

### The New Goal: Communication

"Now we're trying to give students a sense of what it feels like to have their work read by another human being," says Sperling. "Getting people to be aware of the reader is critical. It touches everything—spelling and grammar, logic and coherence.

(continued on page 2)

## Inside

*Teaching Disabled Students..... p. 5*

*TA Advisor: Communicating with the Professor..... p. 6*

### CTL Workshops and Lectures on Teaching Spring Quarter, 1992

●  
Lecture:

"Teaching is Half of Learning:

On Preparing to Teach Your Own Course"

P. J. Ivanhoe

Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Thursday, April 23, 12:00-1:00, CERAS 304

●  
Conference:

"Academia and Society"

(sponsored in part by CTL)

Lecture and Panel Discussion

Page Smith on *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America*

Thursday, April 30, 7:30 p.m., Cubberley Auditorium

●  
Workshop:

"Issues of Diversity in the Classroom"

José Cazares

CTL Coordinator of Multicultural Teacher Training

Thursday, May 7, 3:15-5:05, CERAS 304

### A Note to Our Readers

With this issue, the CTL newsletter changes its name from *TA Talk* to *Speaking of Teaching*. The new name recognizes that our initial audience of teaching assistants has grown to include faculty both on and off campus, as well as others interested in teaching more effectively. The change also reflects our desire to encourage readers to suggest articles for future newsletters or to write contributions themselves. To discuss contributions or suggestions, please call CTL's associate director, Jack Prostko, at 5-0127 or send him e-mail at ea.jxp@Forsythe. You can also post questions and ideas electronically to CTL's new teaching bulletin board described on page 6 of this issue.

## Responding to Student Writing *(continued)*

“Ideally, teachers should help students think of themselves as both writers and readers. That takes the emphasis away from the product as something to be ‘shaped-up.’ It puts the emphasis back on the writer working in the world.”

### How to Improve Your Comments

- *Forget formulas.* Emphasize the flexible, human component of writing if you want better papers from students. Show your class the most compelling essays you’ve received in the past. “Talk about why each one is wonderful,” suggests Sperling. “Point out that the papers don’t follow rigid formulas—or express the party line. Students will see that there is a range of possibilities, a range of ‘correctness.’”

If you really think about it, many writing errors are relative. “You can go through George Orwell and E. B. White and find ‘mistakes,’ if you want,” says Sperling. “But you’ll have a very clear idea of what those two gentlemen think.”

- *Put down the red pencil.* Over-editing demoralizes students. Focus on one or two things in each paper that you really want the student to learn. Pounce on whatever obstructs clear communication of the ideas.

“The message students get from a paper full of corrections is that how you say it is more important than what you say,” adds Sperling. “That’s the last impression you want to give. If students are taking an intellectual risk in their thinking, or trying something new in their writing, a comma-splice becomes a trivial matter.”

- *Marginal notes aren’t enough.* Recently one researcher tried transferring comments from one student’s paper to several others. The same words were placed in the same place on all the papers. Students didn’t notice.

- *Why written comments go awry.* “Most of us spend an awful lot of time trying to be very clear in our written responses,” says Sperling. “But researchers have found that even very good students don’t always understand what teachers’ written comments are getting at.

“Also, students often are so attached to the way they’ve written something, that they see written comments as the teacher’s problem, not theirs. They’ll say, ‘She didn’t think it was clear. That’s because she didn’t read it the right way.’”

### Use Time Wisely

- *Want to be sure your comments count?* Build revision into assignments. Students will have to pay attention to your comments in order to improve their work. They’ll learn from correcting their own errors. And you’ll save time, because papers that come out of student revisions need fewer comments. To balance your workload, Ann Watters suggests assigning three papers with revisions rather than six papers with none.

- *Schedule conferences.* All of our experts stressed that conferences were the most effective way to respond to student writing.

“It does not pay to spend a great deal of time writing comments on student papers,” says Sperling bluntly. “What does pay is talking with students about their writing. You can spend half an hour commenting on a paper—or you can spend ten minutes jotting notes to yourself in the margins and 20 minutes making sure the student understands your concerns. You can ask a student to make changes on the spot. Students who really understand how their papers fail to communicate won’t question their grades.”

Conferences also allow students to tell you exactly what they meant to put on paper. If you give students time to explain, you may find that the problem with a sentence wasn’t punctuation as much as faulty logic.

Claude Reichard adds that it’s easier for students to accept criticism orally. “You can say many things faster and more effectively in conference,” he says. “One’s ego gets so involved in one’s writing that any sort of criticism can be very traumatic. That’s why correcting student writing is so different from checking off a problem set. You’ll be more successful to the extent that you can humanize the whole process.”

### Focus on Ideas

- *Emphasize students’ ideas.* “The whole point of writing is trying to think on paper and get other people to think with us,” says Sperling. “The student’s ideas are the most important thing. When you let them know you value their ideas, they’re more careful with the way they express those ideas.”

- *Make sure the paper has a point.* “We’re not just looking for polished prose,” says Watters. “We’re trying to get people to argue clearly. In Freshman English, we spend a lot of time teaching students to develop a thesis that makes a point and to support it with appropriate evidence. We try to get people to recognize the difference between a valid thesis and an over-generalization, or a statement of fact about which there is no argument.”

- *Look for patterns.* “Try to teach principles—something students can generalize from,” advises Reichard. “It doesn’t do students much good to recognize a problem in one paper if they can’t take a principle with them to apply to the next paper.”

### One Expert’s Approach: Play Reader, Not Editor

Ann Watters credits Peter Elbow’s 1981 book, *Writing With Power*, with introducing “reader-based feedback” that emphasizes writing as communication.

“The instructor responds as a reader, not as someone who is there to correct everything,” explains Watters. “You

make your marginal comments part of a dialogue, a conversation with the writer. You could write, 'I got lost here,' or 'You stated a point but didn't back it up; now I'm confused.'

"Reader-based comments are not highly 'directive,'" adds Watters. "They're not based on rigid criteria. They simply give the writer an interested reader's spontaneous reactions."

• *Start with a quick read.* "On your first quick reading, treat the student's writing as a real voice that you listen to with respect, but that you question. Don't worry about grading, just respond. You can even use a conference to do a cold reading of the paper with the student there to hear your reactions."

• *Then play smart reader.* "Read through a second time and analyze your reader-based comments," advises Watters. "Ask yourself, 'Why did I get lost here?' You may notice a bunch of run-on sentences. If that's what threw you off, leave a note to the student: 'These run-on sentences threw me off track.'

"If you want to move on to another level of feedback, you can offer suggestions," says Watters. "You can tell the student to hook up two sentences and subordinate one of the points so that it will be easier to follow the argument."

• *Don't edit for students.* "If you just put in a comma somewhere, it's not a learning experience for the student," says Watters. "Point out the problem and give the student a chance to work on it."

"If you're confused because the student's grammar is off, you still react as a reader. In any discipline you can respond to matters of style—grammar, syntax, punctuation, jargon—by pointing out that the problem threw you off as a reader. You can note: 'I can't follow this; you need to rephrase it,' or 'Is your point this or that? I can't tell because your language isn't clear.' Anything that interferes with meaning can be dealt with in a reader-based response. If the reader is going to miss the point because of bad grammar and spelling—or if the reader is simply insulted—then the writer needs to know those things are a problem."

• *Treat their writing seriously.* "The more seriously you treat the paper as an act of communication, the more likely the students will attend to your comments," says Watters. "Let them know you're the sort of reader who is willing to listen, but you aren't willing to accept everything they say just because they say it."

• *Save time: use student readers.* "I seldom assign a paper without a peer review of the draft before the final paper is due," says Watters. She believes using other readers increases a writer's awareness of his or her audience. And it saves time. Student readers help each other develop arguments and clarify language.

Peer review also implies that students should be able to catch their own mistakes. "It gets students into the habit of being readers of their own writing," says Watters.

(continued on page 4)

## HI-TECH TIME-SAVERS

### *Customize Comments on Your Computer*

When Dennis Matthies got tired of repeating the same comments to students, he let his computer do the talking. Matthies put extensive explanations in his data base. Now in responding to students' work, he looks for patterns of error, or recurring problems. Then he prints out a customized set of notes for each student.

"I warn the class that they're going to get more elaborate comments from me than they've ever gotten from anyone else," says Matthies a bit ruefully. "I've got comments on things that aren't covered in most student handbooks."

Are there any problems with Matthies' system? "Only the time it takes to compose the comments," says Matthies. "I found myself almost writing a book before I was finished. You keep adding to each section—more examples, even exercises."

Matthies is willing to share his glossary of comments with colleagues who will keep tabs on students' response to his work. Call him at 725-0128.

### *Request Drafts on Disc*

Many Freshman English instructors are experimenting with embedding their comments in the student's soft copy. "They choose a different font or italics to make their response stand out," explains Watters. "The student gets the reader's response in the draft stage."

Carolyn Ross in the English department is researching developments in computer software that will allow instructors to embed verbal comments into soft copy drafts of student papers. Call her at 723-2631 if you'd like more information or can contribute any leads.

### *Record Comments on Tape*

Instead of laboriously writing comments, put them on tape. Why not ask each student to turn in a blank cassette along with each paper? You'll feel freer to explain and elaborate if you aren't writing.

## Responding to Student Writing *(continued)*

Claude Reichard believes there is another bonus to peer review: peer pressure. He says students are “less shameless” about leaving their work littered with small, irritating errors if they know someone other than the instructor will see the work.

Reichard makes peer review part of the student reviewer’s grade. He has a detailed set of peer review guidelines that he will share with instructors in all disciplines. Call him at 723-1201.

### For Large Classes— Save Time with Triple Readings

“There are some real shortcuts in this trade,” says Claude Reichard. “And there are a lot of illusory ones.” When you’re dealing with large classes, it’s easy to short-change students if you aren’t systematic.

- *Start when you’re fresh.* “It takes a tremendous amount of stamina and clear-sightedness to disentangle student writing,” warns Reichard. “If you start at your peak performance time, you’ll go faster. I can try to do student papers at night, but I’m much more efficient in the morning. I’ll do a paper in a quarter of the time that it would take me if I weren’t fresh.”

- *Don’t jump right in.* “When you have a lot of papers, it’s a mistake just to start reading,” says Reichard. “When you’ve given a new assignment, you don’t know exactly what you’re looking for. If you try to read one paper, assign the grade, and go on to the next paper, you’ll be inconsistent. And you’ll generally miss the student’s key problem.”

- *Calculate your time.* “Figure out how much time you’ve got to spend and how much you can allocate to each paper,” advises Reichard. “If you plough through the stack, there’s a tendency to be more thorough with the first ones and then less thorough as you run out of time and energy.”

- *Don’t try to catch everything.* “There’s a limit to what students can absorb,” warns Reichard. “You can paralyze them and waste your time by commenting too much.”

- *Why multiple readings?* “You need to skim through all the papers once to get a rough idea of what the range is,” says Reichard. “On the second reading, you comment on obvious problems of argumentation. Ask yourself if the paper has a clear point. Does the paper stay focused on its stated point? Does the argument develop?”

“Once you’ve commented on the obvious problems, pencil in a grade. But don’t let your role as judge get in the way of your teaching. As much as possible, try to come across as a coach, even a collaborator in your comments.”

- *Checking consistency.* “After the second reading, stack the papers according to their tentative grade,” instructs Reichard. “Then read the papers in each stack against one another. You’ll see whether you’ve been consistent or not. This is particularly important in large

classes—anything over 15 people. We all have a tendency to be harder on the first papers we grade. As we go along, we generally become more forgiving.”

- *Detecting subtle problems.* “In the third reading, you have an opportunity to teach even the writers of A papers,” says Reichard. “Most of us have a tendency to triage. We spend the most time on the worst papers and let the A papers go without comment. But that cheats the very students who have the motivation and the intellectual curiosity to profit from any critique you might give them.

“Many Stanford students have a very superficial, polished style,” warns Reichard. “They have a great facility for cranking out sentences. When you’re reading quickly, their papers seem fine. But if you probe beneath the surface, you realize the paper is shallow, or the argument just doesn’t hang together. If you let these students breeze by, you’re denying them the education they came to Stanford to get. Only multiple readings catch these glib stylists and their shallow arguments. If you try to do it all in one reading, you get hung up on the obvious details, the easiest things to respond to.”

### No Matter What Your Method, Encourage Clarity

“The best comments encourage students to be clearer, to argue their points more effectively,” says Watters. Try to encourage students to improve their current paper, or to do better on the next assignment—whether it’s in your class or someone else’s.

#### Students With Severe Problems

“Even at Stanford, you’ll have some students with severe mechanical problems,” says Reichard. “They’ll have real trouble with spelling, punctuation, grammar, or even just putting together a decent sentence. With these students, there’s a limit to what you can do.”

If you suspect the student has a learning disability, call Molly Sandperl at the Disability Resource Center (see story page 5).

For students with poor preparation in the basics of writing, call the Center for Teaching and Learning at 723-1326. Extra individualized attention in improving a student’s writing, reading, or study skills can be provided, including peer tutoring.

Each quarter, one writing tutor from the English department holds open office hours, usually in Meyer Library. Call the Freshman English program for details: 723-2631.

# Teaching Disabled Students: What's Your Role?

*The final version of the Americans with Disabilities Act looks daunting. It's full of rules and regulations. But none covers good teaching. That's because every disabled student is different—and requires an individual response from you.*

Michele Cooke is a geology graduate student with a hearing impairment. The first year she was a TA, she was asked to design a geology lab for a blind freshman. "At first I was insulted," she says. "The decision makers thought, 'Oh, put the deaf one with the blind one.' But I learned a lot more than even I thought I would."

The biggest lesson Michele learned about working with disabled students is not to make assumptions. "No matter how hard you imagine, you can't know exactly what their experiences are like," she says. "You're always going to be off the mark—so any expectations you have about how to solve their problems will probably be wrong."

Instead of making assumptions about her blind student, Michele learned to listen to Christine, to discuss possibilities, and to let the student give everything a try.

"Disabled students won't know what they can or cannot do if it's the first course they've taken in your discipline," explains Michele. "With Christine, that was definitely true. Before we went on our first field trip, I told her exactly what we were going to do—so she'd know everything that was going to happen. I told her we'd get in the car with her seeing-eye dog. We'd drive to the rock outcrop. We'd go up the path. I'd give her a hammer and ask her tell me what she could figure out."

"It turned out she could do a lot more than either of us thought. She could tell where the layers of sand and clay were. When we went back to the lab, everything was clearer to her."

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Michele Cooke and Molly Sandperl of the Disability Resource Center say there are simple things every teacher can do to help students with obvious disabilities as well as those with "invisible" disabilities such as learning disorders, partial sight, chronic illness, and hearing impairment.

- *Invite students to make needs known.* At the beginning of each quarter, make a general announcement. Say something like this: "Students with disabilities should feel free to talk to me after class, or stop by my office to discuss any accommodation they need."

Ironically, students with visible disabilities are often least hesitant about discussing their needs. Cooke says, "Blind people and people in wheelchairs are used to asking for help. Blind students have to get the syllabus in advance so they can get the books taped or translated into Braille. People in wheelchairs have to call the room scheduler in the registrar's office early in the quarter to request a classroom change. But people with invisible disabilities—especially lowerclassmen—may wait too long before asking for help."

Sandperl adds, "A simple, open invitation in front of other students would do wonders. First, it gives others the message that it's OK to have a disability and get an accommodation. It also lets students know they don't need to be frightened. Undergraduates are intimidated by faculty. Imagine how you'd feel if you had to go up to four or five strangers every quarter and discuss your need for accommodation."

- *Listen.* "The best teachers deal with disabled students best because they always talk *with* people, not *at* them," says Cooke.

- *Be ready for anything.* Students with chronic illnesses may be on medication that has side effects which make it difficult to keep up with assignments. A student with a learning disability may need extra time on an exam. If you've got a beard, a student with a hearing impairment may have trouble reading your lips.

Sandperl says, "The Disability Resource Center has records of all undergraduates who receive our services. Call us at 723-1066 if you have any questions."

- *Problem-solve together.* Working together yields the best results. "Teachers who want a quick fix don't realize they may push students into frustrating, partial solutions," says Cooke.

Sandperl adds, "The younger the student, the more he or she will need your help problem-solving. Younger students may not know what will help them most. I remember a freshman with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis who appreciated a TA's suggestion that taking tests on the department's computer might be less painful than writing by hand. The student had no idea that option was available."

- *Stay flexible.* "Don't have your syllabus written in stone," advises Cooke. "One of my friends with a respiratory illness went on a 10-mile hike because he thought there was no alternative if he wanted to pass the course. He was sick for a week because of it."

- *Do not lower standards.* "Disabled students want to be held to the same academic standards as their peers," says Sandperl. "They have the intellectual ability. What you need to do is deliver the information and help them give it back to you in a format that is accessible to them. Try to remove any impact of the disability, so that you really test them for their knowledge."

- *Questions?* Call Molly Sandperl at the Disability Resource Center, 723-1039, Meyer Library. Sandperl is available to talk with TA and faculty groups, addressing concerns of particular disciplines as well as explaining how to help disabled students in general.

Sandperl also helps instructors recognize students with learning disabilities. If you think one of your students has an undiagnosed disability, call 723-1039. Sandperl will explain how to approach the student tactfully and will arrange diagnostic testing. "Usually," says Sandperl, "you'll notice a gap in how the student participates verbally and the quality of written work. You're confident the student knows the material, but they bomb the test."

## Teaching Problems? Ask the TA Advisor

Dear TA Advisor,

I am writing to share a difficult situation that arose while I was TAing an introductory science course. Within the first week of class it became clear that the professor was using the course to teach his own research interests. While he was enthusiastic and engaging, important facts were glossed over and often dismissed as uninteresting and available in the text. Students were told to read particular chapters on their own if they needed to review these subjects, but I felt entire lectures should have been devoted to this material!

The second half of the course was to be taught by a lecturer whose success would depend on the first professor presenting essential background information. The course lecturer attended the professor's lectures, but she seemed reserved and hard for me to approach.

I felt that as a TA I did not have the right to confront the professor about subject matter. However, I was the person who had to work closely with students during sections and labs. It was difficult to do this without revealing the anger and frustration I felt at realizing that these students were not being taught basic concepts in this subject. What should a TA do in this type of situation?

—Angry & Frustrated

Dear TA,

I understand your frustration—teachers of all ranks often forget what it is like to be a student in an introductory course.

Most professors and TAs I consulted think a TA in your situation is obligated to communicate his or her concerns to the professor. This does not have to be confrontational (as you suggest), but may be broached in a manner that helps remind the professor of students' expectations and needs. If you are not comfortable stating your observations forthrightly, you may present them as if you are expressing concerns students have reported to you. Another approach might be to set up a discussion between the professor and lecturer of the next course in the sequence (who probably shares your concerns). Finally, if these conversations do not prove helpful, discuss the situation with the department chair. It is, of course, never good to complain about the professor to the class.

An important part of TAing is to represent students and help professors evaluate how and what students are learning. Though it may be painful at times, most teachers genuinely appreciate the opportunity to discuss their teaching. By communicating your observations to the professor you will be moving your relationship to a more responsible, constructive, and collaborative level of professional interaction.

—Mark Gonnerman, Coordinator of TA Training, CTL

*How would you respond to this TA? Feel free to express your views (and ask questions from your teaching experiences) on our new electronic bulletin board. At the "command" prompt on Forsythe, type "show bboard su.org.ctl" and add your thoughts to our ongoing discussion.*

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OUR MAILING LIST, OR IF YOU  
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