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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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"How Did I Spend Two Hours Grading This Paper?!" Responding to Student Writing Without Losing Your Life

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Here's a nightmare you might know: you're grading a stack of student papers and, somewhere mid-stack, find yourself stopped, stuck, as you try to figure out a student's idea. You're pretty sure the student has one, maybe even a good one, but the writing is muddled. You want to help the student, so you start clarifying the idea. You make a distinction or two in the margins. Perhaps you work out the student's main claim in your final comment, which you finish with a supportive word about the student's idea, if not its execution. Then you look at the clock and—misery—realize you've spent a very long time on this paper, and you still have a stack of papers ahead of you and research to do and dry-cleaning to pick up and how are you ever going to get all of these graded and what the hell happened?

What just happened is that you were probably doing what I call "Platonic grading." Plato famously believed that the things of this world are mere shadows of another world full of blazing Ideas that are timeless and perfect. When you grade Platonically, you assume that the ideas in your students' papers are merely shadows of the real ideas that dwell "behind" or "beyond" the writing, perhaps in your students' minds. Consequently, you read "through" the writing to see that idea, which can take considerable time and effort. To say it

another way, a way that comes from the research on teaching and learning, when you grade Platonically, you treat students as though they were experts, experts who have expert—thought imperfectly expressed—ideas, rather than treating students as what they are: novices.

This expert-novice distinction is straightforward enough; it sounds like the familiar distinction between teacher and student. Yet in *How People Learn*, the book's authors note that this distinction involves the very process of cognition, "Experts notice features and meaningful patterns of information that are not noticed by novices" (p. 31). Experts see things—possibilities, potentialities, *ideas*—that novices can't see. In the case of student writing, this difference often means that you see features and meaningful patterns of information in your students' papers to which your students are blind. That doesn't mean the ideas aren't there to be developed; it means your students don't see them and wouldn't know how to develop them if they could. It means their papers aren't shadows of some glistening Ideas that actually reside in their minds, but signs of student learning, in all its shadowiness and struggle.

The trick, then, is to respond to their writing as learning, and doing so may require a shift in your approach. You may, moreover, need to remind yourself to make this shift again and again, since you will always be an expert and so, by default, always approach your course material in a manner that differs essentially from your novice students:

Research shows that it is not simply general abilities, such as memory or intelligence, nor the use of general strategies that differentiate experts from novices. Instead, experts have acquired extensive knowledge that affects what they notice and how they organize, represent, and interpret information in the environment. (p. 31)

When you and your students look at the same material from your discipline, your expert mind doesn't just work faster or know more,

it works differently. It apprehends, sorts, and analyzes disciplinary material in ways your students' minds can't, at least not yet, not while they're still novices. As an expert, you've naturalized your discipline's complex, demanding, and highly unnatural ways of thinking and writing. But your students haven't. So in order for them to learn, they need you to approach their writing not as the work of experts, but as novices, novices you're teaching to become experts.

What does such an approach look like? It becomes clear when you compare it with an "expert" approach. If you look at your students' writing as an expert, then you'll probably see their papers as failures, because no student, no matter how strong, is going to write a discipline-changing paper. A few might make a modest contribution to a discipline in their senior theses, but even then, they're just getting their first sustained experience as scholars. So as an expert, you'll often find student writing disappointing, even deflating, and you'll often find yourself responding to student work as though you were asking, "How does this writing achieve an interesting idea in my field and how can I discern that idea in this mucky prose?"

If, however, you look at your students' writing as novice work, that muck becomes the sign of students confronting what Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz call "the novice-as-expert paradox" (p. 131). The paradox lies in the fact that writing assignments usually require students who don't possess disciplinary expertise to write as though they do. As a result, student writing shows signs of the difficulties and struggles that novices face in learning a discipline—the specific conventions of writing it requires, the sorts of critical thought it utilizes. Teaching novices, then, doesn't mean finding the expert ideas that students might, but really don't, present in their writing. Rather, it means helping them to think and write a little more like experts. It means reading their work from the perspective of an expert-as-novice and asking, "How can I respond to this paper so the student can take the next step toward expertise in my discipline?"

How you respond—how you go about helping your students advance as novices—will differ depending on your discipline. By its very nature, disciplinary expertise doesn't translate easily across

fields, which is one reason why students have such a hard time during the semester: they're striving to attain expertise in multiple disciplines at once. Yet a useful approach to teaching any discipline is to make the conventions and assumptions of that discipline as transparent as possible for students, so they can understand—and model—the ways that disciplinary experts think and write.

Here's an example from my own discipline, English literature. Novice students often don't realize that literary critics assume the meaning of a literary work is not self-evident, that even when a poem or play overtly states its aim or intention, it nonetheless requires an interpretation to analyze, "unpack," or "close read" what it means or how it functions. So in class I make this assumption and the critical skills it requires explicit for students. As a result, many of my responses to students' papers focus on helping students develop this expert ability. I circle key parts of the evidence they've quoted and challenge them to draw out its meaning. I poke and prod them to go deeper into the evidence, to *see* as experts in my field see. My responses become a means of showing them how to attain the expert skill of inductive reasoning and to attain, slowly and a step at time, disciplinary expertise.

And close reading is only one of the fundamental skills my novice students must learn. As I teach them textual analysis, I also teach them how scholars in my discipline select and weigh the evidence, how they develop and evaluate claims, how they incorporate and address counter-arguments, how they summarize and build on prior scholarship, how they connect and use theories, how they imagine and engage a reader. Even this abbreviated list shows the extent of disciplinary expertise my novice students need to write successful papers. No wonder they struggle.

The specific critical moves and writing conventions of your discipline probably differ from mine, but your discipline certainly has them and when teaching them to students becomes your aim, your responses to their writing will take less time and be more effective. No longer will you have to transform novice papers into expert ideas. Instead, you can focus on the novices themselves. You can use their writing to teach them the next thing they need to know as novice historians, philosophers, or anthropologists. Given that they're novices and

you're an expert, that thing is almost always obvious to you, although not to them. And instead of feeling disappointment and exhaustion with your students and their writing, you can see this next step in their learning and them as full of promise, the promise of novices learning to think and write as experts do.

Resources

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