

Chapter One

The Grading Game: Reading the Teacher Instead of the Text

I define *traditional teaching* as teaching in which the focus is on the content, about which the teacher is understood to be an expert, and which must be “covered” in such a way that students will be able to show that they have acquired a certain body of knowledge. Student activity is that of watching and listening to the teacher. Students speak when called on in response to teacher questions. Student conversation with other students is generally unauthorized. Product, not process, is the focus of this form of instruction. For me, the most heartbreaking problem with traditional teaching is that it interferes with authentic learning, even while students are socialized to believe that they are learning. Over the long term, I maintain, the habits of dependency and submission to authority that students develop in traditional classrooms undermine the chance for genuine democracy in our society.

I call this set of habits *teacher-pleasing*, and I begin with an analysis of teacher-pleasing as my theoretical framework. The chapters that follow examine the step-by-step processes I have developed over time for encouraging teacher education students to become

Note: Much of the material from this chapter (and the next) comes from an unpublished study, “Teacher-Pleasing, Traditional Grading—and Learning?” that three colleagues—Trevia Foley, Judy H. Holmes, and Jeffrey Wallowitz—and I have presented at several scholarly conferences.

aware of the effects of teacher-pleasing and for helping them overcome it, at least for the time that they are with me. My hope, of course, is that once they realize what has gone on for them, they will decide to transform their own practice, as university students, as citizens, and as teachers.

“I wasn’t really taught or expected to think or analyze—just memorize.”

Children in school learn well, and very early, that grades are the teachers’ ultimate power over them. So they do what they have to do to get what they need. That orientation is very different from, and I believe inferior to, an orientation toward authentic learning, which I define as an intense desire to follow leads, discover connections, and explore how something works—all activities that characterize the way very young children naturally learn when they are on their own, or before that natural creative process gets reduced to school learning.

Because the work they do in traditional classrooms is usually not of their own choosing, either in content or in process, it is easy for students to disengage from it and learn (against their nature) to be satisfied—because the teacher usually is—with skimming the surface of any topic, as the textbooks do. Traditional teachers are (or at least seem to students to be) concerned with right answers, proper grammar, and correct form rather than full development of original ideas, both in classroom “discussion” and in student writing. Even by the time they are in graduate classes, students have rarely had the chance to be heard talking through their ideas, perceptions, or misperceptions. As a result, they stop trying and just give the teacher what they think she or he wants.

That kind of manipulation is a basically dishonest occupation. But I think it is ultimately what we encourage children to do, for their own survival in school. At least, that is what most of the students I encounter in my teacher education courses indicate in their writing that they learned to do:

- I saw school as something to be survived and I did whatever was necessary to ensure that I got out of school with a diploma ASAP.

- In high school, I rarely read the entire book, and I tended to listen carefully to what the teacher commented on and then studied only that for the tests. (It worked pretty well.)
- I always played the system. . . . I didn't have to do the reading, because the teacher "spoon-fed" it.

The extent to which that behavior becomes a habit into adulthood has grave ramifications for learning, for teaching, and for democracy:

- I found that the only way I could get the attention and the respect of older people, or express any sort of opinion at all, was if I took the consensus adult opinion as my own, whether I agreed with it or not, . . . to massage their egos.
- I learned to change my opinions to suit others, to avoid the humiliation of being left out. Today I find myself giving in to the majority opinion rather than concentrating on divergent thinking.

When I taught English composition at state and community colleges in the early and mid-1980s, I first realized that a number of students saw divergent ideas as un-American. My encouraging them to try out possible ways of seeing that didn't match the "right answers" they had been given seemed to threaten their entire worldview. The same was true of writing. It has been very hard for students to feel right about using "I" in their writing, or to talk about their own life experiences in an academic setting.

Carefully maintaining an academic distance and saying everything right can cause a student to forget what he or she meant to say in the first place:

Writing a sentence was like assembling something on the production line, entitled "what the teacher wants to see." It didn't matter what I wrote; it only mattered how I wrote it. Thus, writing was a very cold, logical, distant activity.

The sanctions against speaking in one's own voice, and the rewards for learning "proper" ways, are clear, but the person disappears, and so does meaningful learning:

- I hate academic writing, though I have spent countless hours in the past two years cultivating just that. And what for? I don't know. . . . I do know that it has not been without sacrifice that I can now knock out a dry and colorless execution of ivory-tower points without a tremendous effort. And people will read it and be very impressed.
- I know that experience of trying to explain something while having my grammar adjusted several times along the way. Knocks the wind out of what you have to say, doesn't it?

But what happens if teachers try, in their high school classes particularly, not to do that to students? For one thing, a cooperating teacher politely tells a university supervisor of student teachers, "We have to train them to write this way; it's what they'll get in college." And when I say, "No! It's not so! I teach college writing, and that's not what I've been looking for!" I am told, "Well, that's just you." But I know that not many—or any—college professors want to be reading defensive, distancing, safe, self-protectively obfuscating papers that essentially say nothing, as long as they are grammatically correct.

Teacher-Pleasing and Student Dependency

In order to go to the core of what learning could be, instead of what most of my postsecondary students over many years have reported it to have been for them, it seems to me that teachers and teacher educators have to begin by clarifying our goals. For several years I have done an activity in teacher education classes and staff development workshops.¹ I ask participants to freewrite and then brainstorm. I ask them, "What do we want the children we teach to be like when they're adults?" Each time, when they report, we cover the board or several pieces of chart paper with some thirty to fifty words that they have generated. The list always includes "independent," "honest," "caring," "being problem solvers," "compassionate," "lifelong learners," and "responsible." In some sessions, a student will offer "courageous," but usually not, so I suggest it. When everyone's thoughts are on the board, I ask, "So how does schooling help them get there?"

That question often puts them into conflict with their own schooling and their own teaching. When they're stumped, I ask them to back up: "Well, then, how did you yourselves acquire these characteristics?" Some reflect that they acquired almost all of them after their schooling was completed. Most say, essentially, "I'm not there yet." Even practicing teachers are stunned by the realization that although they have successfully reached their undergraduate goal of having finished college and obtained a job, there are undeveloped parts of themselves that they have not yet worked on, or thought about, and which were never addressed in their own schooling.

Then I ask them to notice the list. I ask, "Where's being able to recite random bits of factual information?" Sometimes "knowledgeable" makes it to the list. When I ask for what that means, groups quickly offer their insight as to how useless merely acquiring and reciting are, compared with being able to use, connect, and apply understanding of relevant pieces of information.

And then I ask, "Where's 'obedient?'" They're surprised. It's never there. Some insist that it is implied in the others. Some want to add it; they say, "Even as adults you have to obey—your boss, the rules, laws." So a conversation begins about moral development and about what freedom and citizenship involve in a democracy. We look at the difference between those socialized behaviors with citizens in a community allowed to function together, on the one hand, and citizen's blind obedience, on the other hand.

The impulse of some teachers and preteachers, every semester, to protect their right to demand the absolute obedience of children—as was required of them as children—frightens me, because these are teachers, or people beginning a program to become teachers. How is it that we call ourselves preparing students to live in a democracy, if so many teachers and preteachers accept the inevitability of their own essential powerlessness within their careers and within the larger society? Is democracy not about having a genuine voice? In fact, it has to a great extent been my own fear for the demise of democracy in America that has led me to begin our sessions together by generating this list of long-range goals.

Most conscientious teachers will say we want our students to be responsible, eager, self-directed young people. When we think about their social behaviors, we want them to be considerate of

each other as well as of us—what we generally call *respect*. Most basically, however, teachers seem satisfied if students “do their work,” “learn the material,” and “do not interfere” with the learning of others or with the teacher’s agenda.

But to what end? We might even go so far as to say that we want them to think for themselves: to consider, imagine, connect, reflect, consult, explore, create, and actively engage in constructing their own knowledge, even to take intellectual risks. So we are frustrated to find ourselves year after year involved with students, even “the best” students, who, although hardworking, quick, and eager to give right answers, are often not active, original, or complex thinkers. And how do they treat each other, even as they may be fawning to us? In part of our minds, teachers wonder, Is he or she saying what I want to hear? Am I being manipulated?

That’s “the best.” What about the others? “Unmotivated”? Is it, in fact, something innate in the children themselves, or is it something inherent in what we’ve always called “teaching”? In teacher education students’ reactions to my classes, they reveal, and reflect on, their own deep socialization to dependency:

At first I could only think about what *you* expected. It’s what I’m used to.

And this, from a successful student in her thirties:

This was so hard for me at first, trying to . . . stop trying to figure out what it was that the teacher *wanted* me to learn, to know. . . . The concept of pleasing the teacher, the parent, or whatever authority figure you choose is deeply ingrained in me.

Habits That Interfere with Genuine Learning

The premise of this book is that the structures that characterize traditional teaching, from elementary school through graduate school, undermine the very characteristics we wish our students to develop. The full development of our students, therefore, has to begin with teachers’ and professors’ rethinking of our own practices. And that has to begin with personal reflection on our own schooling.

For the most part, we were the successful ones. Most of us consider ourselves to be the model for what we want our students to

be like. We want them to be as excited about learning as we remember ourselves to have been. We may even be inclined to say, “I made it through traditional schooling. Those who didn’t make it were the ones who just didn’t want to learn, and that’s the case for our students who aren’t making it now.”

The outcomes of traditional schooling experiences are especially apparent to me as I work with undergraduate and graduate students in teacher education courses at a university. Though most of the students say they went to “good” schools, when I invite them to read for meaning most have no idea of what that is about. Few have the habit of reading in any way other than the collecting of “tidbits” of information. Most have always waited for the teacher to tell them what it all means.

Within traditional structures, students are not expected to be risk takers intellectually; they’re expected to “learn” what we have defined as “important” to know. That learning consists of committing fragments of “right answers” to short-term memory. Students overwhelmingly report that such information is soon lost, making room for the next batch of facts to memorize for the next test. It is not available for later connecting or reinterpreting thought. This definition of learning lasts through college, even graduate school, unless a course taught nontraditionally interrupts and causes them to call into question that whole arrangement. But the work of uncovering is not easy, because there is first so much embedded habit and expectancy to undo:

This was probably one of the hardest courses I have ever taken. It was such an *internal* type of learning. I have never taken a class where my thought patterns were changed, or where I actually grew as a person. It would have been easier to me if I were given tests and quizzes.

In traditionally structured classrooms such as the ones in which the task is to locate right answers and be ready to recite them verbatim, the real task is to produce a product, not to engage in a meaningful process. The result is that students have not developed—or have lost those they had in very early childhood—the skills and habits of figuring out, exploring, wondering, and asking. Even in adulthood, but certainly in the late adolescence of conventional undergraduate years, many students remain reluctant to speak in

class, made fearful from years of experience of saying the wrong thing and being humiliated by the teacher, or by fellow students, or seeing that happen to others:

Many students do know the answer to many of the questions posed by the teacher in class, but it comes down to the idea . . . that children/students tend to be afraid to answer a question for fear of being wrong and looking stupid. I still am.

Fear of Judgment Can Paralyze

Ultimately, the goal of schooling for most students seems to be to get through it—to survive the experience with the least amount of humiliation and failure and the greatest amount of acceptance and praise. That is what students report as “success.” Hardly ever do they speak of achieving the joy of accomplishment that comes with genuine intellectual understanding. Even the most successful students hardly question that their survival depends on their becoming excellent at the game of teacher-pleasing. That, in fact, is what they have learned to be good at.

I know this deeply because, for one reason, my daughter, now having finished college but still hating school, has, since most of her early elementary years, felt both pressured and insulted by what schooling expected of her. A good memorizer, she consistently achieved high grades throughout her schooling. Paradoxically, this was at great cost to her sense of self and her respect for what is to be learned from most written text and from most teachers. Her considerable authentic learning came through whatever active field experiences and internships she was allowed, especially from a stretch of several years in actual work between her first and second tries at college. Though the format when she returned to college continued to be memorizing and test taking, she had finally developed for herself a framework into which some of the memorized material could fit. Still, she felt insulted and trapped, as she had felt as early as fifth grade, because even though her teacher that year gave exciting multidimensional projects, the pressure of teacher judgment took away my daughter’s pleasure and sense of adequacy. With sad solemnity she told me, “Even the fun stuff, we get graded on it.”

So powerful was her early socialization that even in that lively, caring, innovative teacher's classroom, my daughter's expectation of teacher judgment impeded and distorted her learning process and dampened her motivation. By then, and thereafter, she had become used to experiencing what teacher education students later described (in 1993):

In high school I always felt that I wasn't learning anything. What I was doing was memorizing all the information for a test (swallowing all the information the teachers fed me), knowing the information for the test and forgetting it again thereafter ([after] regurgitating it back to the teacher).

Maybe that is why my daughter developed severe stomach problems in association with school. No chance to digest? For how many is schooling about the simplistic process of what one preteacher called the process of *plug and chug*? As another student wrote,

In my experience, I found that things that I would have liked to learn and remember, I did not have the chance to because I was too busy memorizing the facts and worrying about what was going to be on the test and how I was going to do on the test.

While my daughter was in elementary school, I was seeing from the other side the same phenomenon in my freshman composition classes at a community college. My goal was to have students find their voices on paper. At first, most papers were careful, correct, and empty. When I realized that their fear of my judgment was getting in their way, I removed that in the most dramatic way I could: I removed grades and just gave conversational feedback as a stimulus for rewriting. Two things happened. One, the students who had not been successful with writing in their former schooling appreciated the freedom just to talk on paper, as I urged everyone to do. Their papers were full of life and energy. One fireman in his forties, finding for the first time that he in fact had a voice that could emerge on paper, said, with relief and joy, "The pressure is off." For them, the work of the class was no longer about the game of proving themselves to a teacher so that they could "do well." No longer a game at which they would surely lose, writing became no game at all, but a way to work out what they were thinking.

However, many students felt lost at first, especially those whose success in their former schooling had come from performing their perfect grammar and perfect five-paragraph theme formula. The rules had changed; in fact, there was no longer a game. It was hard for them to figure out that *what the teacher wanted* was whatever they were thinking (see Figure 1.1). Their habitual goal, of course, was the grade. With that gone, what was there to aim for?

Figure 1.1. Guidelines for Reader Response

You are asked to respond to each of the assigned readings with one of two kinds of reader response. A *reader response paper* is one to three pages typed double-spaced, with two photocopies to share in class and a list of questions, as described in the following. A *reader response journal entry* can be in very clear handwriting, and it can be somewhat shorter. Both, however, must follow the guidelines that follow.

What a Reader Response Isn't

It is not (1) the traditional summary or "book report" of the reading. The only functions of a summary are (a) to inform or to refresh the teacher's memory of the book, or (b) to prove to the teacher that you have done the assignment. But (a) I will have read all the texts, and (b) I fully expect and trust that you will have done the assignments.

It is not (2) the traditional judgment of the reading, or arguing a position. Agree/disagree statements are inappropriate here, because, having not had the experiences that the authors have had, you cannot judge whether they're describing those experiences accurately. All you can say is (a) whether what they describe speaks to experiences you have had or not had, (b) how you relate to what they describe, (c) whether their conclusions make sense to you, given the evidence they provide, and (d) what questions and feelings they raise for you.

But this is not about censoring your reactions. If the writer's viewpoint makes you uncomfortable, *say that, and say exactly why!* You're not in debate with the writer, not out to win or defend your position; you are in the process of figuring out why you think what you think. Being in collision over ways of seeing is a

good way to examine that. Be open—not to swallowing whole whatever you read, but to rethinking assumptions.

What Is It, Then?

It is the written record of a personal engagement with the text—of having really listened to both someone else and oneself. A reader response starts from thinking about what you already know about what the writer is talking about, from your own personal, direct experiences with learning and teaching, in and out of school. But it does not stop or get stuck there. It's multidimensional seeing, active reading.

Step-by-Step Process for Reader Response

Active Reading

(1) Even as you're reading, *start right away talking back on paper!* As long as it is your own book, you will have to get used to writing in the book—another taboo. Jot down notes on your own thinking in the margins, or on separate paper if it's not your own book. Underline. Your job is to engage with the book or the article or story. Allow yourself to have a conversation, a mutually respectful dialogue, with the writer, to whom you're listening carefully. See what she or he is saying, trace interesting patterns, and find connections with what you already know or think you know.

Don't rush to finish the text. Listen carefully to your own reactions as you read. Don't brush them aside; take time to hear them and record them, and especially take time to sort out and record where they might be coming from. This is the stuff that will be uniquely *your* response to the text, because no one else has lived your exact life. Go back and forth between the text and your own remembering, reflecting, wondering, and so forth, including whatever else you are reading and directly experiencing in this course and any other. Making connections is the key. You may have to get used to reading this way, but the struggle itself may give you some useful information about how you've been taught to read and what that might mean for *your* teaching.

(2) While you're doing all of that, keep an ongoing list of all the questions you hope the text will have answered by the time you

finish it. What are you not getting? What confuses you? What do you need more information about?

(3) Keep some sort of record of compelling passages from the text that you think you will want to return to.

When You Finish Reading

(4) Now go back and skim your own marginal notes and your underlining, trying to be sure you really understood what the writer meant, and that you can differentiate the writer's voice from your own.

(5) Next, capture your notes of dialogue on paper, in no particular form. At the same time, revise your list of questions to take account of those the text answered for you, and then think through and ask more completely about those things that you are still puzzling over. These questions will form a substantial part of the group conversation when we discuss the text in the next class session. Questions may come in separate from the paper itself, or they may be included in it, but they should not be all that the paper does.

(6) Do a freewrite that shapes and develops the notes you've taken. *Your* thinking is what we're after here, with lots of specifics from both the text and your own experience. Let yourself discover, as you write, where the new ideas have taken you. Remember, this may be a new way of writing from what you're used to—not to prove anything or sum anything up, but to figure out what you think about some possibly new ideas and why.

(7) You may want to revise, based on what you find—or not. But at the end, do proofread—and fix! I do not want to have to wade through a heavily corrected draft, but I appreciate seeing penned-in changes in spelling and punctuation on a typed sheet. They indicate that you have read the final copy you want me to read. This stage is like dusting just before company comes, after you've constructed or remodeled your house.

Involving the Self While Being True to the Text

To do these writings, it is necessary that you feel free to use the word *I*. At the beginning of the semester, you may have to strug-

gle to give yourself permission to do that. I do not want you to distance yourself from these readings. You don't need to worry about "saying something intelligent" in these papers; you do need to let yourself be passionate, reflective, thoughtful, and careful of the text (which means that skimming is not enough), so that what comes through in the paper is your personal experience of reading the text.

There are no right answers. We need everyone's responses.

Note

1. I began this practice even before I read in his book *Beyond Discipline* (1996) that Alfie Kohn also does this in his workshop sessions with teachers. Each of his writings confirms and extends my own thinking.