Why I Stopped Writing on My Students' Papers

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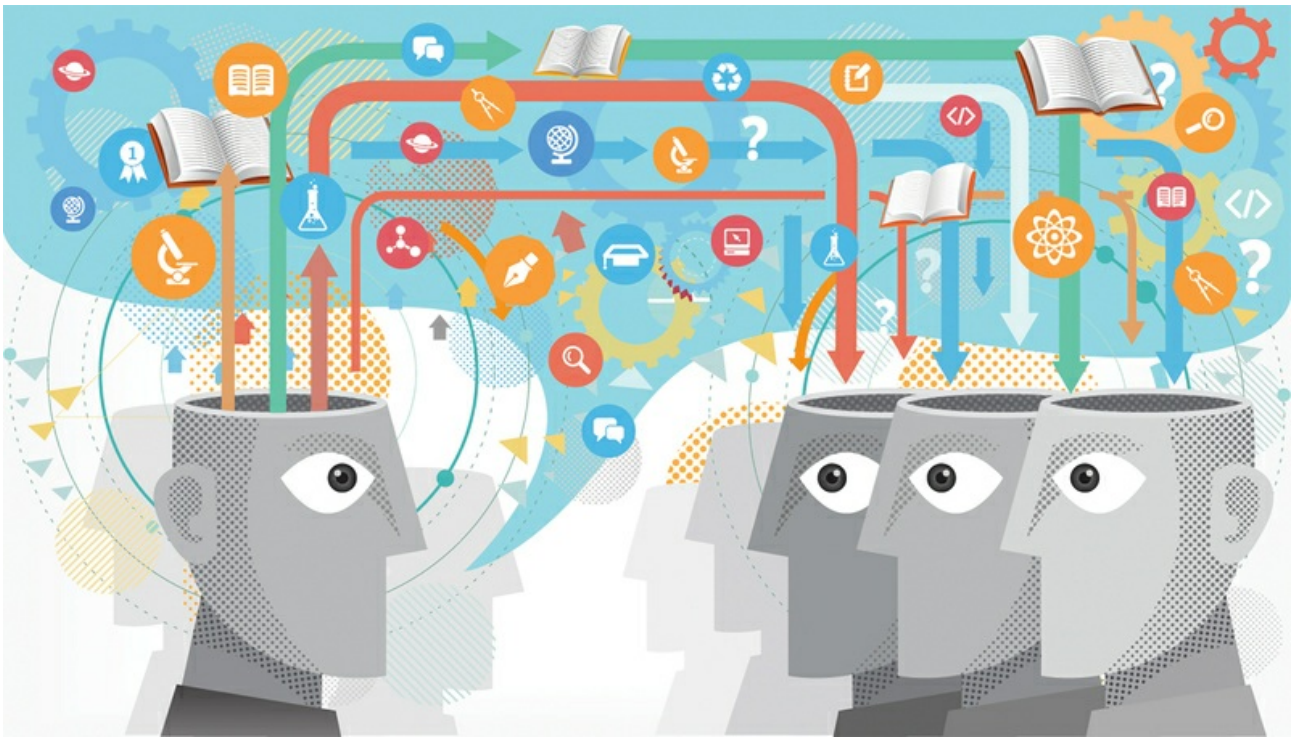

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By Michael Millner

For 25 years, I have diligently, thoughtfully, and fastidiously written comments on my students' essays. In my neatest hand, I've inscribed a running commentary down the margin of page after page, and at an essay's conclusion I've summarized my thoughts in a paragraph or more. I've pointed out problems in the argument and explained basic mistakes of grammar and style. I've demonstrated my enthusiasm for a sharp idea and a well-hewn sentence. I've carefully moderated my tone, combining praise with correction. I've read papers that moved me to tears, literally, and others that left me frustrated — and tried to be sensitive in letting my students know that in either case.

During my first year teaching I wrote so many comments on their papers that one student remarked that I'd "made his paper bleed." With that quip I stopped writing in red ink, and I started to think carefully about what a student needed to hear to improve. Over the years, I've experimented with different ways of writing on student essays — rubrics, audio files, apps.

But no more. This past fall semester I stopped writing on my students' papers in any way, shape, or form.

During the summer, as the new semester approached, I took a moment to imagine what might be most energizing, and most enervating, about the forthcoming academic year. Visualizing the good stuff was easy. The bad visualization looked like this: I was standing at the front of a classroom returning papers, and a dead silence settled over the room. The silence came from the students' sense of dread — and mine, too.

Something had to change. I had actually been feeling this way for a long time, but I hadn't been able to face it head on. As I write, I have some amount of shame in admitting that I've stopped writing comments on student papers.

For months I haven't spoken to a single colleague about this decision. I am an English professor, and responding to student writing is what we English professors do. The teaching of literary history, the introduction of students to the politics of culture, the close readings of Melville and Morrison are essential to us, but at least as important is the experience of writing critical essays about works of literature and culture. It is through writing that students in our courses wrestle with their ideas and develop a sense of their own intellectual agency — at least in theory.

To say that I wasn't going to respond in kind to their essays — that I wasn't going to write back — felt like a kind of betrayal, like not replying to a letter from a friend asking for assistance or advice.

At first, I must admit, I put the onus for my decision on the students. Most students seemed to spend little time taking in my comments on their papers. They quickly skimmed, looking for the grade, and then shoved the papers into their bags. When I've asked students to respond to my comments with their own paragraphs, I've been surprised at how little they seemed to have gotten out of what I had so carefully written.

It never felt good to blame my students — especially these students. So many of them (usually of traditional college age and often first-generation college students) work nearly full time outside of full-time college. I'm often amazed they can hold it all together, and too often they don't. Some work security all night at the UPS depot in the next town over and show up for my 8 a.m. class because it's conveniently on the way home. Many work in malls and others in child care or elder care. When the economy is good they work on their uncle's construction crew; when it's not, they spend their time scrounging for any job.

During my rather privileged undergraduate years, I delivered pizzas one evening a week for beer money. I wanted to be, well, an English professor (or, maybe a poet, or possibly, in my most far-flung dreams, a film director). My students may well want to be English professors, too, in their far-flung dreams, but their most immediate concern is getting a college degree so they can find any job better than the one they currently have.

Such daily conditions of life shape their responses to a teacher's detailed essay comments. Both in their work lives and as students in large, bureaucratic institutions, they are ever so familiar with transactional exchanges. Perhaps they were trying to tell me something when they shoved their papers into their bags.

In the face of all that, I didn't know what to do, but I did know that I wanted to stop commenting on essays and replace the comment with something involving more process and dialogue, which is what English professors spend a lot time preaching when it comes to writing.

So in the fall semester, I decided to experiment. Instead of writing comments on their essays, I would invite students to my office to discuss their essays and grades one on one.

The visits were no easy thing for the students to schedule, given their work commitments. More saliently, at my fairly large public university, there is no tradition of visiting your professor's office. Students would come by to talk about courses for the next semester but rarely to discuss ideas. Meeting with a prof one on one for 20 or 30 minutes to talk about a paper boded a new and scary experience for many.

I felt a little uncomfortable, too. I wasn't really sure how to begin these sessions. I read each paper through just before the student arrived, but I wasn't looking merely to recreate a written comment verbally. Rather, I was trying to reconceive the whole form of commenting.

I decided that when the student walked through the door and sat down next to my desk I would say something completely vague — like, "How do you feel about your paper?" or "Tell me about your essay?" or "What was the experience of writing this?"

What happened next varied. Sometimes there was uncomfortable silence, and sometimes there was confusion. Sometimes I did have to redirect and ask a different open-ended question — "How did you get interested in this topic?" or "What do you find most interesting here?" Eventually we would get going but not necessarily in any way that I could have imagined or anticipated.

One student told me he had started to think about the paper by asking himself what the guys he worked with at the butcher counter would say about Emerson's "Self-Reliance." Another began by explaining that she had been brought up in her church to believe in heaven and hell — that you were going to one or the other — but that everything we discussed in class focused on ambiguity and ambivalence. She wasn't exactly sure how to approach a topic where ambiguity ruled. Another student explained that writing this kind of paper was difficult for her to conceptualize because it took so long to figure her way through the muck and jumble presented by any given novel or poem. She was more interested in pursuing work with clear answers that could be put to pragmatic use.

I would never have known any of that from simply reading their papers. I'm not sure that the students knew any of it before they started talking in my office.

They were talking about their own — often very complex and conflicted — investments in the essays they had written, and it seemed to me that one of our primary tasks could be figuring out how to incorporate those investments into the papers themselves.

In our meetings, I didn't completely leave aside explaining a comma rule here and there, or suggesting a rewrite of a particularly clotted sentence. And I did give them grades, however now I had to look them in the eye when I did so.

What was most important — and most rewarding — for me and for my students, I think, was that I stopped pointing at things and they stopped expecting me to point. Instead, they were able to see their papers as part of an interesting and continuing collaboration with me and ultimately with themselves. Pointing is a well-established model of pedagogy. But my students and I were developing a different model — one that involved a lot less pointing.

All of this took extra time. I could read and write down my comments on a paper about 20 percent faster than I could read and meet with a student. But the time felt dramatically different. A sense of liveliness and dynamism replaced the sense of dread. I am (blessedly) not overwhelmed by the number of undergraduates I teach (40 to 50 each semester), however, I did cancel one class session so as to open up time for our one-on-one meetings. I made that trade-off hesitantly, but it seems to have paid off.

I also recognize that there is nothing particularly innovative about conferencing with students about their papers, although typically the meetings happen *before* the essay's submission. What was different was the abandonment of the comment as a form of communication, and its replacement with a completely different kind of interaction.

I'm not exactly sure what effect all of this had on my students. Perhaps this semester I'll more formally ask them to comment on the turn away from commenting. But I do know that on my end-of-semester course evaluations last fall, several students spoke of what they called my "passion" for the class and material.

At first that struck me as strange. Students sometimes remark on (among other less complimentary things) my knowledge and command of the material, but they don't often highlight "passion" as key to my pedagogy (or personality). And my passion for the material and the class activities hadn't changed at all from the many similar courses I've taught over the years.

But I think I understand what they were getting at, although I wouldn't necessarily call it passion. Rather, I came to have a better sense of my students' lives and experiences and how all of that might connect with the work we do in the classroom. I didn't blame them anymore for quickly glancing at the grade on their papers and skimming my comments. They were making a point about this way of communicating, which was on a perfect continuum with their worlds of work schedules and bureaucratic managers.

When the written comments disappeared, and a more relational dynamic developed in its place, student and professor alike discovered something new.

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