

“I STILL THINK IT WAS A GOOD PAPER”: A STUDY OF STUDENTS’ EVALUATIONS OF THEIR OWN WRITING

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INTRODUCTION

Over six years’ time, I collected evaluations of their papers from students in my freshman composition classes. In these, the students selected their best and worst papers of the semester and gave the reasons for their choices. After doing this myself for a number of years, I wondered how the evaluations of students on other levels might compare with those of my students. And so, I asked two colleagues—one who taught high school English, the other who taught language arts on the elementary level—to give their students the same task to perform. In looking over all the evaluations, I made some interesting discoveries about what causes students, at any grade level, to value their own writing.

My interest in students' perceptions of their own writing grew out of my graduate school experience with the process movement in composition. The process movement, which focuses on the processes a student goes through in writing her papers, as opposed to looking at qualities of the finished text (the product), coincided with my entry into graduate studies. Descriptions of the creation process, like that of Lynn's in Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*—so different from anything I had encountered in my traditional literature background—fascinated me, for they made me conscious of an aspect of my own experience as a writer that I had never attended to. And for me, as for many others, the opportunity to consider my own mental processes as a subject of inquiry, to acquire what Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987) call “personal knowledge of the cognitive process,” (335) was innately appealing. I think we are all fascinated with learning about ourselves.

Taken as I was with the process approach, I began to think that the students I would be teaching as a teaching assistant in composition would also find this self-exploration interesting and useful. And so, I decided to make attention to the composing process a regular part of my course. Having read of Sharon Crowley's (1977) use of composing logs, I decided to ask my students to keep diaries, as her students did, describing their experience as they wrote their papers for my class. We spent time in class sharing their entries, and I looked at them at various points in the semester. Like my response to accounts of Lynn's process, I enjoyed reading my students' descriptions and being given a window into their experiences in creating a paper. Many of these narratives of struggle and creation had innate drama and interest: “I then started thinking back to those many nights that I woke up to a thunderstorm, and started jotting down the images that came to me;” “When I start to think about a topic for a paper, I have a million ideas floating around my head. . . . The final choosing is the difficult part for me. I get so frustrated I could scream sometimes. It is like trying to get a lid off a jar with something good inside and you can't.” Sometimes, I confess, the account of the writing of the paper was more interesting even than the paper itself.

As time went on, and I taught not one but four composition classes a semester, I gave up the unwieldy composing logs for

questionnaires, which asked students to provide in shorter form descriptions of their writing experiences and their judgments of the papers they had produced. These they filled out with every paper they wrote for the course—either just after writing the paper at home or in class on the day that it was due—and turned in with the finished paper. As before, I read these with great interest; while I often put off my reading and commenting on papers, I eagerly read the student descriptions and evaluations as soon as I received them. It was like getting “inside information” into their perceptions—what they thought of the assignment and of the paper they had produced. In addition to answering questions just after they wrote their papers, my students were asked, as a regular procedure at the end of the course, to bring in all the papers (marked and commented on) that they had written over the semester and to perform a final evaluation task (Figure 1): to rank order their papers from the one they thought was “best” to the one they thought was “worst” and to give their reasons for their choice of the top and bottom choices.

Figure 1
Summary Rank and Evaluation Form

<p><u>PAPER ASSIGNMENTS</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Significant Experience Narrative 2. Comparison of Collected Significant Experience Narratives 3. Interview Paper 4. Culture Paper 5. Journal on Stories and Novel 6. Question Paper on <i>Animal Dreams</i> 	<p><u>RANK ORDER</u></p>
<p><u>REASONS FOR CHOICE OF “BEST” PAPER</u></p>	<p><u>REASONS FOR CHOICE OF “WORST” PAPER</u></p>

This was, in my view, a successful procedure, for even my least motivated students evidenced a “writerly” pride as they shuffled their papers, placing them in various positions to get just the right order, the one that best reflected their judgment of them, and then gave their rationale. It made a good ending to the course: gave students a feeling of authorship, gave me a view of their final perceptions of their work, gave all of us a sense of closure. Once again I gained insight into the human story behind the written product—the journey through their frustrations, discoveries, and satisfactions—a story with emotion and drama and one that I could relate to as a fellow writer rather than as teacher or judge.

THE STUDY

After six years (1984-1989) at a full-time job (teaching freshman composition at a two-year campus of Penn State University), I had collected more than 400 of these forms—all of which I had read with interest and had taken into account in planning the next semester’s assignments for the course. Now, it seemed there might be value in trying to make sense out of this information, in going beyond the interest of the story and what it revealed about the particular students and assignments, to make some general observations about students’ perceptions of their writing—what they value in their writing and what causes them to be satisfied or dissatisfied with a paper.

And so, I decided to analyze the six years’ worth of forms I had collected. I analyzed about 60%, randomly selected, of the 1984-1989 evaluations. Trying to make sense of the student responses, I noticed that they fell into groupings. These categories follow to some extent the time line of producing a paper. Category 1 refers to **topic**: 1a, topics from outside sources (“The fact that I liked the book made it easy to do a paper.”); 1b, topics that draw on personal knowledge or experience (“I enjoy writing about myself and my family.”). Category 2 refers to **process**: 2a, the process of researching and/or generating content for the assignment (“I learned a lot about my grandmother and a lot about times during the war.”); 2b, the process of organizing and writing the paper (“I enjoyed writing it. I took time figuring how to set it up, and it wasn’t hard to write.”). Category 3 refers to the **consequence** of the writing: 3a, the

finished paper (product) and its characteristics (“I was really satisfied with the paper. I liked how it was developed, my originality, and my observations. I feel I got my point across.”); 3b, the outcome of the paper—on the reader, on the teacher, or the grade (“I felt that the reader would enjoy reading it,” “I didn’t get a good grade on it either.”). In addition to being placed in one of these three categories (six subcategories), each comment was also categorized by the attitude it expressed, either positive or negative.*

The basic unit to be counted was a point made by a student about his writing experience and/or the paper he produced. Sometimes two sentences would make the same point and would be counted as one unit: “I chose the connection between Welty and me as the best because it brought back fond memories. When someone gets to write about a fond memory, they tend to enjoy writing it more” [topic]. Sometimes one sentence would make two points and these would be counted as two units: “I think I was the most satisfied with the Outsider Paper because I put a lot of time and effort into it [process] and because it was something familiar [topic].

I continued the study in the academic years of 1990 and 1991, adding in more students (69 in 1990, 57 in 1991) and extending it to include the students of a high school colleague (70 in 1990 and 63 in 1991), those of a fifth grade teacher (66 in 1991), and those of a second and third grade teacher (90 per year in 1990 and 1991). The high school teacher taught senior high school English classes in an upper middle class suburban school district in the North Hills of Pittsburgh. The fifth grade teacher taught language arts in the same school district. The second and third grade teacher taught language arts at an elementary school in a large urban school district.**

At this time, the high school teacher and I further refined the investigation by adding two additional procedures. In addition to doing the “best/worst” rating at the end of the semester (the

*A coding reliability of 87 1/2% was determined by comparing judgments of two raters about the evaluations of a class of nineteen freshman students. (Similar reliabilities were obtained from pairs of student raters in 1990, 1991.)

**Penny Lery, second and third grade language arts teacher, contributed and helped analyze data for this study.

retrospective), students now also rank ordered their papers from “most” to “least enjoyable” and explained their top and bottom choices. Students also answered judging questions just after (*post hoc*) writing their papers that corresponded to those in the final retrospective: “how much did you enjoy writing this paper; explain your answer” and “how satisfied are you with the paper, and why?” The full procedure (post hoc questions, double retrospective questionnaire) was used by both college and high school students. All the retrospective and some of the post hoc questionnaires were analyzed. For practical reasons, the young students (2nd, 3rd, 5th grade) answered only a single questionnaire (“best”/“worst”) at the end of the term and did not fill out a questionnaire just after writing the papers.

RESULTS

The big finding of the initial and later studies, the one evidenced by students across the grade levels, is that the experience—the personal drama—of writing the paper is what is memorable to students. When asked to explain their choices of their “best” and “worst” papers, students found more significance in and attended more to what happened during the processes of generating ideas, researching and writing their papers than to the finished product or its effect on others. In their reflections on their writing, students displayed a response analogous to Louise Rosenblatt’s (1978) “aesthetic” readers, whose “primary concern is with what happens during the reading event . . . what he is living through” in contrast with the “efferent” reading, where the reader is concerned with “what he will carry away from the reading . . . [where] his attention is directed outward” (24).

Students at every level and under every condition focused on process in their evaluations. In my original study, the one in which 400 Penn State freshmen explained their judgments of their best and worst papers over the semester, *almost half* (47%) of the judging comments concerned *process* (the processes of researching and writing the paper). With my newest results, those of Fall, 1991, *more than half* of the reasons given by both high school and college students for choice of “best” and “worst” papers concerned *process*. Likewise, for the elementary students (second, third and fifth grade students combined), *just*

under half of the judging comments concerned *process*. Interestingly, students' concern with the qualities of their finished products was strong just after they wrote them in the two-questionnaire study. However, by the end of the semester, when judging the quality of their papers, students' concern with product had decreased significantly, while their concern with process had substantially increased. In contrast to the shift over time on the best/worst questionnaire, the *process emphasis remained strong* for high school and college students on the enjoyment questionnaire, both immediately after and long after writing the papers. In the discussion that follows, we'll examine our students' attitudes toward the following features: grade (included in category 3b, outcome), process (categories 2a and 2b), topic (categories 1a and 1b), and product (category 3a).

DISCUSSION

1. Grade

Perhaps the most striking implication of the powerful role that process plays in students' judgments of their writing is the relative unimportance of grades to them in selecting their best and worst papers. Students are widely believed to be motivated primarily by grade, to be "bottom line" people. In our teaching experience, many of us have been disappointed to find students more concerned about their GPA than about learning. Some research supports this popular intuition of teachers. Williams and Alden (1983) found in their survey that more students were extrinsically rather than intrinsically motivated, and that for all of their subjects "Grade was the single most important reason given for working hard on an assignment . . . In fact, 73.6% of all subjects reported that their desire for a good grade is what causes them to work hard on an assignment" (109). And in Susan Miller's (1982) study of self-evaluation, students implicitly referred to grade in attributing the success of a writing to the teacher's judgment: "Almost all of the students I surveyed . . . thought of their good writing as writing the teacher likes" (179).

Therefore, it is surprising that grades were so seldom mentioned by the students in our study. In my six-year study, grade was mentioned in less than 3% of the total number of comments in the study. With our newest (1991) subjects, only 4% of the

total comments of the college students and only 3% of the total comments of the high school students referred to grade. [Since most of the elementary children received no grades for their writing, grade of course was not mentioned by them.] Further, even in the few times that grade was mentioned, it appeared to be an add-on to other comments, as in the following: "My grade was good but the main reason I enjoyed this paper was because it helped me personally with some problems." A few students even disregarded the grade the teacher had given in choosing their best paper: "I believe it was my best paper even though it received a lower grade;" "Even though I didn't receive a very good grade, after reading over it, I still think it was a good paper."

Students' deemphasis on grade is good news in terms of learning. For, grade is considered to be an extrinsic motivation for writing—that is, an external goal, especially a tangible reward (Maehr, 1983). In contrast is intrinsic motivation, in which the learner values learning for its own sake, not as a means to some other end. Another label for intrinsic motivation is task involvement, a condition in which "learning is more inherently valuable, meaningful, or satisfying, and attention is focused on the task and strategies needed to master it . . ." (Nicholls, 1983, 214). This condition is considered beneficial for learning, for when learners value tasks, they learn better; that is, they choose tasks of appropriate difficulty, grow intellectually, respond creatively.

Our finding that students emphasized process and deemphasized grades indicates, we believe, more intrinsic motivation on the part of students than they are generally given credit for having. Perhaps the reason the motives of our students differed from the grade-minded students in the Williams and Alden study (1983) is related to the procedures of our study. Williams and Alden asked their subjects general and hypothetical questions about their goals in writing: "When your teacher returns a paper to you, which do you consider more important—grade or teacher's comments? Would you work as hard on writing assignments in a class that is pass/fail as in one in which you are given traditional letter grades?" By contrast, in our study, students were evaluating the actual papers that they had produced in that term's work; they were arranging these finished and graded pieces on their desks in order to do the rating task. Thus, their

judgments were anchored in concrete products; they were not describing what they generally did or speculating about what they might do. Also, the open-ended questions of my study gave students more freedom in forming their answers than did the more restrictive format of multiple choice questions used by Williams and Alden. Students seem to give a different and more positive picture of their motivations when they are dealing with the actual results of their own efforts and when they have the freedom to create their own responses than when they are generalizing or selecting from a limited set of choices.

2. Process

Further proof of students' intrinsic motivation is found in the nature of their process comments, many of which focus on discovery and learning. This finding too contradicts the general perception of students' values as well as the results of other research. While Miller's (1982) experienced writers valued a piece of writing for what they had learned in the process of creating it, her student subjects rarely gave discovery as a reason for judging a writing best (179). Few entering freshmen at Skidmore (Marx, 1991), as indicated by their responses to a survey, were aware of writing's value as a learning heuristic (9). By contrast, the students in our study frequently cited learning and discovery as the reason for their choice of a paper as "best" or frustrations in these areas as their reason for judging a paper "worst." The large number of process comments (college: 53%; high school: 57%; elementary school: 49.3%) on the best/worst retrospective questionnaire indicates, we believe, a great deal of intrinsic motivation on the part of our students. By and large, these comments show students to be task involved, that is, finding value in learning and focusing on the writing task they were performing and ways of doing it well (Nicholls, 214). While one might expect students to emphasize process on the enjoyment questionnaire (since the word "enjoyment" directs them to experience), it was notable that they also emphasized it on the best/worst questionnaire (where the words "best/worst" would seem to direct them to the finished piece). Some samples follow.

Working with Regan gave me an open mind. I was not as partial to my ideas. By taking both of our viewpoints and

experiences and combining them, taking some ideas and leaving others out, we were able to make the best use out of our theories. We even came up with our own theory of how we felt the prejudice was formed. (college, best/worst, 1991)

Once I started finding information, it seemed more like I *wanted* to find more out than [that] I *had* to, (college, enjoyment, 1991)

I was interested in the subject and I feel that I accomplished my goal of becoming informed about the Viet Nam War. (11th grade, best/worst, 1991)

The reason that I enjoy writing about my personal experience is because I like remembering good times in my life. Even though my story wouldn't sound as good to someone else, it sounded great to me. It was fun to write about. (10th grade, best/worst, 1991)

It was my best paper, because I learned alot about bears and other animals. (2nd grade, 1991)

A characteristic of task involvement described by Csikszentmihalyi (1977) is "flow," an internal state that creative people (rock climbers, dancers, composers, etc.) experience when they are totally involved in what they are doing and it is going well (Larson, 39). Some of our students mentioned flow directly in their judging comments:

It kept my attention; I sped right through it. (college, 1990)

It [also] went together so well with so little effort it was as if I weren't really writing it but sat back and let the words flow onto the paper. (college, enjoyment, 1991)

The fact that so often (47% of the time for college students, 40% of the time for high school students) the choice of best and most enjoyed paper was the same suggests a link between enjoyment and what students perceive as good writing that a few researchers (Larson, 1985; McLeod, 1987) are now suggesting ("we found enjoyment to be a strong, independent predictor of the grades students received" [Larson, 1985, 39]).

While we did not investigate whether the paper selected as best by students was in our judgment best, for the students there was a definite connection between the paper they enjoyed writing the most and the one they thought turned out best. It also seems reasonable to us that if students enjoyed writing a paper, they would put time and effort into it and, therefore, produce a better paper than they would if they disliked or were indifferent to it.

3. Topic

Topic was also mentioned by students in judging their writing, but not as frequently as process. In my original study, where a single questionnaire (best/worst) was used, topic was strong, appearing in 32% of the comments. In the 1991 study, our younger students mentioned it frequently: 33% of the time (on the enjoyment questionnaire) for high school, 36% of the time for elementary students. The comments that follow illustrate the interest in topic of students across the grade levels.

I think it was the best because I enjoyed reading the book so when I wrote the paper, I wasn't trying to write about something I had no interest in. (College, 1989)

It was about my family, something I know a lot about. In a way I became an expert in something that no one else in the class could. (11th grade, 1991)

I liked this paper because I got to write about what I wanted to write about with few limitations. (10th grade, 1991)

It was my best because I did a animal report on the cheetah and I like the cheetah (second grade, 1991)

[this was my worst paper] because the person I wrote about is my worst enemy now." (third grade, 1991)

Researchers of young children (Hilgers, 1984; Woodworth, 1979; Potter, 1987) found that affective response to the subject or topic of the writing was strong in the self-evaluation of their subjects. For Woodworth, "content was the deciding factor for the majority" (4), and Hilgers' students frequently reacted "not to a written text per se, but rather to memories . . . of their

own experienced cued by the text” (371). Because of the strength of this type of response, both he and Woodworth concluded that it was important for people to write about what interests them (“people will seldom write well about something they do not like” [Hilgers, 382]). Based on our findings, we also believe that, to some extent, writers’ judgments of the quality of their work and of their enjoyment of the writing experience will inevitably be colored by their attitudes toward the topic or content.

4. Product

Students do comment on the qualities of their finished papers, their products, but not as much as one would expect and not as much as they do on the process or experience of doing the writing. One might expect students to make many product comments because when they were evaluating their papers, they had their actual written products in front of them. Therefore, the product and its qualities would seem to be more accessible to them than the process or experience of writing, which had occurred weeks earlier and was held only in memory. While in evaluating their papers just after they wrote them, students *did* emphasize product, referring to it more than half of the time, when they judged their papers long afterward (retrospectively), their product comments decreased significantly—from 57% to 29% for college students and from 56% to 23% for high school students. Also in my original study, only 16% of the comments referred to product, and for the elementary children, comments about consequence (the category that included product) always took third (last) place.

Others have noticed this disinterest of students in the characteristics of their own products. In his work with second graders, Hilgers (1984) observed that higher level evaluations—comments about completeness, coherence, aesthetics (my category of “product”)—require “complex, cognitive ability” and, as a result, were rare in young children and not all that common in older students (381). With her seventh grade subjects, Woodworth (1979) found that although these students had previously identified qualities of product (depth, conciseness, focus) as attributes of good writing, when asked to judge their own papers, they no longer mentioned features of product, but judged them

primarily on affective response to the content. In her study of the self-evaluation of professional, expert, and student writers, Miller (1982) also noticed how seldom her subjects spoke of the formal qualities of their work in selecting the best and worst thing they had ever written; except for some English professors and graduate students, “none of the writers interviewed, student or professional, noted specific qualities of the sentences, form, dialogue, plot, or style of a piece” (180). While the students in our study attend to product just after writing their papers, by the time of the retrospective, their interest in the qualities of their texts has been supplanted by the greater power of the recalled process or experience of doing the writing.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our results offer both good and bad news for teachers.

As we’ve suggested, one piece of good news is that students in our study were less motivated by grades would have been expected by teachers and researchers. Their chief reasons for valuing or enjoying a paper were internal, not external factors: what had happened to them during the process of researching and writing it, not the grades their papers received afterward. Frequently they valued a paper because, while doing it, they learned something, had the chance to get to understand someone or something better, found it a challenge, or could connect to it in a personal way. Similarly, their comments about their least valued papers spoke of lack of understanding, lack of interest, or problems in finding or assembling information—rather than of poor quality or poor grade. The rationale students gave in their choices should be welcome news, for learning and discovery are the values of writing that most teachers would like their students to appreciate.

While we teachers probably applaud students’ de-emphasis on grades, we may not be so pleased with their equal neglect of the other aspect of the outcome category: readers. Fewer than 3% of the comments of college students and one percent of those of high school students referred to the reader. (Hilgers and Marx found a similar disinterest in audience among their subjects.) The indifference to audience of students in my study makes their preoccupation with their own processes and experiences look a bit self-absorbed. Given the fact that most real

world writing is written for an audience and that many believe that audience awareness is essential to good writing (Britton, 1975; Ede, 1979; Flower and Hayes, 1980), our students (and many others as well) show a need to become more aware of audience. It seems, therefore, that teachers need to stress the value of audience more and find ways to better convey a sense of audience to students. One way to do this may be to respond to students' writing whenever possible as a real reader, not as a judge or examiner (Britton, et al., 1975). Also, opportunities should be provided during class time for students to act as audiences for each other's writing. Finally, college teachers can follow the model of elementary school teachers and create assignments intended to be given out to real readers: a proposal for a change in school policy, for the student government; a letter of complaint, for the company that produced the defective product; oral histories of community members, for the local historical society.

As indicated by the emphasis of their comments, students seem to be more fascinated by the process or experience of writing than by the features of their texts. While their interest in process is commendable, their lack of concern with text has some negative implications. Most of us would agree that a writer needs to know how to judge the qualities of his writing in order to improve his writing, and there is research to show that students are not very accurate judges of their work (Scardamalia and Bereiter, "Fostering Evaluative" 1983; Flower et al., 1986; Ackerman, 1989). It would seem that if students are to judge accurately and improve their writing, they first need to take an interest in the features of this writing. Therefore, our challenge may be to help them attend to and value the qualities of the products they produce—not just to the process and experience of writing—so that they can become more skillful writers.

It is encouraging to note that students have shown that they *can* attend to features of the written product when they evaluated papers or texts that were *not their own*. In the studies of Woodworth (1979) and Potter (1987), students did cite characteristics of the product as reason for their judgments of good writing in general (Woodworth) or of other people's writing (Potter), although they shifted their criteria to associations with the content (topic) of the piece when they judged their own writing. Likewise, the reasons Busching's (1989) fifth graders

gave for rating the four texts that were provided for them were overwhelmingly product-based. Very few of them concerned process or personal association with the topic—even though the researchers had included those categories in their scheme for analyzing their data. It seems that evaluating one's own work is quite different from evaluating the work of others. With one's own work, the attributes of the written piece seem to be overpowered by other stronger concerns: the processes one went through in writing the paper, as I found in my study, and association with the content or topic (as in Hilgers, Woodworth, Potter).

To summarize, we think the important findings of our study are the following:

1. In judging the quality and enjoyableness of their writings, students of all ages attended primarily to what happened during the researching and writing processes; process dominated the evaluations.

2. In contrast to the general perception, outcome was not important to students. Grades did not play a significant role in their judgments of the quality and enjoyableness of their work. Students also rarely considered the reader in judging the quality or enjoyableness of their writing.

3. Interest in the topic of the paper, particularly pronounced in young children, remained a factor in the evaluations of high school and college students.

4. The characteristics of product, their written texts, do not interest students as much as the process of writing. Their products were of interest to students just after writing, but lost impact by the time of the retrospective evaluation.

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