these experiences to grow as an educator? Additional discussion questions for each chapter can be found at the Elon University Center for Engaged Learning's website.

CHAPTER 4

Restorative Writing Pedagogy

Repairing Harm and Developing Agency in the Writing Classroom

Margaret Gonzales, *Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science*

INTRODUCTION

Each semester, the stories my students tell me about their writing experiences are not new. For the last ten years, the students in Advanced Composition have expressed their frustration and anger about the way they were taught to write, mainly in high school. They have been taught to perform writing for standardized tests and to think of test scores and GPAs as their greatest achievements. This focus on extrinsic rewards has, as they and I argue, alienated them from the many other purposes that writing can serve, including self-expression and critical thinking. Most of them believe that they are bad writers, unable to perform to the standards that their teachers have demanded of them. First-generation and minority students struggle the most with the sense of inferiority brought on by years of test-driven instruction. By the time they get to Advanced Composition in their junior or

senior year of college, they are alienated from academic writing and are only taking the class because it is required for graduation.

Before going any further, I want to make it clear that I am not blaming teachers, who are doing the best they can under the circumstances, but to instead understand why so many students feel this way about writing, to critique the practices that lead to their alienation, and to offer a way forward. For my students, the way forward requires a seismic shift in thought and practice, no easy feat considering that, although it's made them miserable, what they've been doing has worked for them in terms of grades and achievement. But, as they realize, the achievement has come at the price of their individual voices and agency. To help restore their voice and agency, I have taken a restorative approach to the teaching of writing, one that seeks to repair the harms many of them have experienced in the hands of well-intentioned teachers who are preparing them for tests and, or so they believe, college.

Over the years, many students have written the stories that have contributed to the development of this approach, and I am grateful for everything they have taught me about teaching and learning. Here, I will include stories from students in the fall 2022 section of Advanced Composition, used with the generous and kind permission of my students, who gave their written consent and agreed to have their full names used so that their contributions could be recognized. I have deliberately left their sentences as-is since one of the main tenets of my teaching is to value students' voices and individual forms of expression over grammatical correctness for its own sake.

BACKGROUND

In 1999, as a first-semester graduate student seeking an MA in English Literature, I was required to take a class in composition pedagogy and practice before I was assigned to teach my own section of Composition the following semester. Three quarters of the way through that class, I realized that I wanted to switch my concentration from literature to composition studies because I felt, for the first time, that not only did I understand the purpose of my education, I could also explain that purpose to students. Like me, many were first-generation college students who had perhaps loved to learn but had no idea why they had to take certain subjects, like composition, especially when they were majoring in something like math or biology. Writing, or so I thought, was a practical skill, unlike literary analysis, and was relevant to every career. After all, one needs to be able to write for one's job, whether that job is chemical engineer or physical therapist.

My own experience as a writer differs from the vast majority of my students. I was a natural, drawn to both reading and writing from as young an age as I could remember. When needed, my teachers would show me how to do things that would improve my writing and thinking and because I took some honors English in high school, I was given far more leeway to analyze texts and create my own arguments instead of regurgitating the ideas of others. Of course, I still needed to meet the requirements of the genre, write in grammatically correct sentences, and cite my sources properly. While the feedback I received was helpful for advancing a particular essay and avoiding things like run-on sentences, no one ever explained why I had to do things a certain way, and I never asked. I did know that sounding and thinking

like a teacher was a requirement for college, and college meant better prospects in life. I was still very lucky. Because I took honors English in high school and standardized tests had not yet taken over the curriculum, I had teachers who could focus on ideas rather than counting sentences or paragraphs.

Eventually, however, I reached the limits of my natural talent. Some time between the last couple of years of undergrad and that first year of graduate school, writing had become negatively associated with grades, and grades were associated with my financial aid status, future career, and intellectual abilities. In my first semester of graduate school, I hit a wall. I did not know how to make the leap from writing 8–10 page papers to 20–25 page papers. I did not believe that I could make the kinds of arguments I felt that my professors expected of me at that level. I took an incomplete in my first graduate-level literature class because I was overwhelmed by the fear of failure. The effect was nearly paralyzing and I spent most of my graduate career trying not to fail.

I did not know how to ask for help, either. I, like many first-generation students, assumed that to do so was a sign of weakness. No matter how kind my professors were, I assumed that if I took them up on the offer, I would be found out as an imposter and a fake, a kid from a working class family on the south side of Chicago who didn't belong in academia but had managed to trick everyone into thinking she had some talent. Eventually, writing became one of the hardest things about my life; not knowing how to make progress in my own work or how to view feedback as anything other than punitive, I struggled to complete my master's thesis and my dissertation, all the while trying to help first-year students complete the essays I assigned them. I was much better at preaching than practicing.

Eventually, I moved on to teaching at a community college, during which time I finished my dissertation, driven by desperation to leave a toxic work environment. Degree in hand, I accepted a tenure-track faculty position at a small liberal arts college, Texas Lutheran University, where I would teach writing and direct the composition program. It was there that I would develop what I later came to realize was a restorative approach to teaching writing that would attempt to repair the harm that my students had experienced in their previous English classes. I was driven, in part, by my own experiences, but also by the stories of so many students who had come to loathe writing and resent required writing classes. Many, like me, felt that writing was a struggle when once it had been such a pleasure. I didn't know when that shift happened for me, but I was determined to make sure my students did not feel as stuck as I did.

WHAT IS RESTORATIVE WRITING PEDAGOGY?

Restorative writing pedagogy is based on the practice and philosophy of restorative justice, an alternative approach to addressing criminal behavior that focuses on acknowledging the harm that has been done and repairing it as much as possible. Restorative justice requires participants to think differently about the problem "by asking who experienced harm, how the harm impacted people and relationships, and how the various stakeholders can see a community response to the harm as opposed to fueling further polarization of those involved" (Winn 2013, 127). While the practice of restorative justice has been adopted to address disciplinary issues within K–12 schools with high rates of suspensions and expulsions, it is not often utilized in the classroom as a means to

address the harm created by previous experiences with punitive and authoritarian teaching approaches.

Research into the practice of restorative pedagogy is not extensive, and what is available is not centered on one discipline, largely because it is a practice that extends beyond any particular subject or classroom. In the classroom, a restorative approach, which intersects with the critical-liberatory practices of Paolo Freire, provides teachers and students with the opportunity to reflect on the harm that was caused and work to restore agency (Fine 2018).

A restorative writing pedagogy specifically seeks to invite all students "into a writing community where they [can] foster literate identities without fear, limitations, or judgements" (Winn 2013, 130). Through the use of inclusive strategies and Freirian critical pedagogy, teachers can create a space for "relationality, interconnectedness, and non-punitive approaches" (Fronius et al. quoted in Fine 2018, 105) to writing that have helped students to 1) locate and examine the root causes of the harm they experienced, 2) reflect on how this has informed their relationship with the subject, teachers, and their approach to education in general, and 3) emerge as critical agents who feel empowered to write in, and value, their own voices. In doing so, students feel that the writing classroom is a place for them, one where they not only belong, but can thrive without having to abandon who they are and what they think to satisfy a set of standards that they did not create and often do not understand. The classroom becomes a critical space in which those standards are critiqued, analyzed, and considered before being put back into use, modified, or rejected.

While the ideal of restorative pedagogy is at the core of my practice, it is not enough to change the way students think about and do their writing. There are, I argue, three essential structural

components of the writing classroom that are necessary for restorative writing pedagogy to work: building relationships and trust; assignments, processes, and feedback that promote and value writers' agency and voice; and labor-based grading contracts that neutralize the punishment aspect of writing that is often at the core of students' anxieties and beliefs about their writing abilities. When these elements are at the center of a teaching practice that is informed by the concept of restorative pedagogy, the classroom and the discipline itself can be an inclusive space in which all students can thrive. In the restorative writing classroom, students can finally see writing as something they do, not something that has been done to them.

BEYOND THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Before I continue, I want to make it clear that what I discuss in this chapter is not limited to my particular discipline, class, or institution. Writing is not the only subject that students either profess to hate or see as utterly pointless given their majors. As undergraduates, my fellow English majors and I had no idea why we had to take College Algebra. We were not "math people," after all, otherwise we would not have majored in English. I deliberately avoided becoming an English Education major in part because I didn't want to take the required Intro to Physics class. I also didn't want to teach at the high school level, but the required physics class didn't exactly serve as a selling point for the program. It also made no sense to me. Exactly when would have used what I learned in a physics class as a high school English teacher? I couldn't make the connection, and no one I knew could do it either. Even though I would have had a guaranteed career path as a high school teacher, I opted not to go in that direction.

This view of required courses is common and often expressed by my students about my classes. In a first-year writing class I taught one semester, a student voiced his frustration with having to take the course because, as he believed, he "wouldn't have to write in a computer science job." Because we had a good relationship, I responded with "How many computer science jobs have you had?" He acknowledged the point, and then we had a conversation about what really happens in most jobs held by college graduates (there's usually a lot of writing). I also felt it was my duty to make the connection between the essays he was writing for class and the kind of writing he'd be doing in the workplace. To do anything else would have been a missed opportunity to help him see how this class could be useful to him in the future. Most students, however, never have that conversation with their instructors. Students are often told they have to get the required class out of the way and that's that. So it's no surprise that students resent taking classes they struggle in or think are irrelevant. Compound that with the pressure to perform, i.e., grades and their associated consequences (scholarships or punishments from parents), and other barriers to learning, including stereotype threat and exclusionary teaching practices, and you have the recipe for building resentment and hate toward not only the subjects students don't want to learn in the first place, but sometimes also classes within their own majors.

These lessons usually don't start with us, but they can end with us. We should not, after all, be in the business of stoking students' resentments toward and hatred for learning any subject, especially those we have dedicated our lives to teaching. Since we cannot change the past, we must consider what we can do to reframe and revitalize their learning. How can we repair the harm caused by years of test and grade-centric teaching and learning? How can we make classes and subjects relevant to all of the students in our classes, not just our majors?

A restorative approach, one that interrogates, with the students, their feelings toward the class and the subject and seeks to repair harm, can be one way to tackle the issue even in disciplines where discussion and reflection are not typical. Restorative pedagogy has been used in college-level education courses (Hollweck, Reimer, and Bouchard 2019; de los Rios, Martinez, and Musser 2019; Canady, Camangian, Quijada 2019), English as a second language (ESL) classes for refugee learners (Ogilvie and Fuller 2016), college-level criminology classes (Sweeney 2022), and high school gender studies classes (Fine 2018). It does mean, however, that instructors will have to change the structure and nature of their classes, moving away from a more didactic, lecture-based delivery toward a model that actively engages students, not only in the course material but also in ongoing, value judgement-free conversations about their learning.

In order to help students be successful, we should be actively removing barriers, including those that were erected in previous classes, irrespective of discipline. This requires open dialogue between students and teachers and a willingness to interrogate what has come before. At the heart of restorative pedagogy is relationship building and trust, but students can't learn to trust their instructors until they confront, on some level, why they have learned to distrust them. Instructors must also be willing to engage in critical reflection of problematic teaching practices, biases, and assumptions that they have relied on to explain poor student performance or attitudes. Just because they learned their subject in a particular way, for example, doesn't mean all students will be able to learn in the same way.

To help students exam their assumptions and biases about a given course, instructors could begin the semester by asking their students to consider the following: "The faculty who designed the general education curriculum believe that, regardless of your major, you will benefit from taking this class. They are not doing it simply to give themselves more work to do. Why do you think you are required to take this class? What purpose will it serve given your major and/or your own life and interests?" Making the reasons for the course transparent will go a long way toward promoting student buy-in. Building a safe classroom where learning from mistakes and taking risks is rewarded is another step in the right direction. Additionally, asking students to share their thoughts, ideas, and views in class discussion and in their assignments is a significant move toward helping them to connect with the purpose of the class and subject.

Ungrading, typically done in the form of labor-based grading contracts, which will be more extensively discussed later in this chapter, is another strategy that transcends disciplines and opens up a space for students to make mistakes, revise, learn, and develop transferrable skills beyond one class or one discipline. Grading contracts and ungrading, once limited to college writing classes, have moved into other disciplines, and not just in the humanities. Instructors in chemistry (Jarvis 2020), biomedical engineering (Dosmar and Williams 2022), educational psychology (Greenberg, Sohn, and Moret 2022), and neuroscience (in an honors seminar combined with classical studies) (Meinking and Hall 2022), have used grading contracts and ungrading with great success. Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh, a chemistry instructor at Central New Mexico Community College, switched to grading contracts and realized that once she "divorced grades from feedback, students were more likely to absorb her advice on

improving their performance" (Jarvis 2020). The grading contract turned grading on its head, and meant that "midterm exams and quizzes could be a learning experience for the students, not just a way of assessing their progress" (Jarvis 2020).

Finally, for those who teach in other disciplines, it is important to note that if you assign writing, you are teaching writing. What I mean by this is that students learn lessons from how you talk about writing, what requirements you have, and what kinds of feedback and grades they receive. If, for example, the grading criteria is heavily focused on or over-penalizes for correctness, form, and required numbers of words and citations, they learn that the most important thing about writing is not how effective you are at communicating with your audience, but that writing is about meeting a set of specific requirements on an assignment sheet. While we may think that we're preparing them to be professional communicators in the workplace, we are actually teaching them that what they are communicating is less important than how they communicate it, and that how they communicate it can be reduced to a set of formulaic requirements. There is a dangerous imbalance here that may actually do more harm than good in the workplace for several reasons.

First, what we consider to be professional in terms of grammar, punctuation, syntax, and word choice is based on standard white American English. When we evaluate people based on their ability to follow the rules, we set students and professionals up for either significantly more work or shame and judgment for not meeting the standards. For most forms of written communication, this is an unrealistic and unnecessary approach. It would be better to emphasize meaning and coherence; in other words, can I understand the message as it is written? Is my response to the issues in the writing driven by the way I was taught to value

certain elements of writing or is there a real problem with my ability to understand the text?

By encouraging students and people in general to write in their own voices, we teach them and ourselves to value the great variety of writing and speaking styles available to us. More importantly, we encourage the kind of linguistic diversity that we should value as much as any other kind of diversity. As Vershawn Young writes, code meshing of primary and secondary discourses "has the potential to enlarge our national vocabulary, multiply the range of available rhetorical styles, expand our ability to understand linguistic difference, and make us in the end multidialectical, as opposed to non-dialectical" (2009, 65).

These changes are not easy to make since they require fundamental shifts in approach and belief about what matters most. Many instructors in disciplines that are more lecture-based may worry that a restorative approach will steal time away from content delivery. It is true that adding restorative practices to a course will require time, but the value may be in better performance and learning from students overall. While more fully developed arguments for reducing or eliminating fully lecture-based classes are outside the scope of this chapter, I do hope to show that restorative pedagogy, ungrading, and an approach to writing that values agency and voice can be rewarding for those who are interested in restoring students' sense of belonging as well as their desire to learn and engage.

EVOLVING INTO RESTORATIVE WRITING PEDAGOGY

Early on in my teaching career, like many new writing teachers, I focused on all the things that seemed important at the time: grammar, punctuation, format, citations, transitions, and many

of the mechanical things that I thought would be their ticket to success in college and in life because that's what I had believed, too. I gave them feedback about their content, but like most students, they struggled to see this as anything other than punitive because of its association with a grade.

In 2010, a colleague introduced me to Peter Elbow's and Jane Danielewicz's article "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching," which discusses the use of labor-based grading contracts in writing classes (2009). What if, Elbow and Danielewicz dared us to consider, you could do something that would get students to focus on their writing instead of their grades? What if you could, at least until the end of the semester, shift their mindset toward the intrinsic rather than extrinsic value of writing? Many of my colleagues were skeptical; they thought that students could not live without the grade as a form of feedback. They remain skeptical to this day, but the grading contract revolutionized my teaching. Instead of focusing on mechanics and adding up points, students could focus on drafting and revision and improving their writing through process. Because early drafts did not receive grades, there was no punishment for making mistakes as they tried to figure out what to say and how to say it. Given that the classroom is a space for learning, it made sense to me that early efforts should not be penalized for being unable to exhibit what had not yet been fully developed.

It didn't solve every problem, largely because of the baggage that students brought with them regarding what constitutes improvement as well as my lingering attachment to certain standards and expectations. Students come to college-level writing classes with a long history of writing instruction that relies heavily on punishing them for errors in grammar, formatting, and citations rather than rewarding them for process, development,

or depth of thought. Well-intentioned instructors enforce the standards of written English they were taught and that they feel they must pass on to students, especially first-generation and minority students. Teachers believe that they must prepare these students for college by teaching them to write in a generic, white, middle-class academic voice that will ensure that the students are not marked as outsiders. Consequently, the students who make it to college are well-trained in suppressing their own voices and agency. As Vershawn Young writes in an article that I assign in Advanced Composition, students, especially those who are encouraged to use code switching, learn "that there is an acceptable way to communicate in this nation, and their way isn't it—at least not in official, graded school assignments, in public, or at work" (2009, 64). A grading contract alone could not undo more than twelve years of negative reinforcement.

To restore students' agency, I would need to change more than how I graded. It took several years of teaching First-Year Writing and Advanced Composition before I began to really see what the problem was and to determine what I could do about in the short time that I had with students. It would require a significant change in the classroom dynamic. I would need to shift away from a traditional teacher-student relationship and toward a model where "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" and "arguments of 'authority' are no longer valid" (Freire 2005, 80). Grading contracts were the first step in this shift, but I also needed to critically examine my own beliefs about writing, teaching, and learning. I needed to abandon the idea that I was doing them a disservice by not explicitly enforcing standards (especially for grammar, syntax, and punctuation) that they would need to follow in other classes and in their workplaces. I needed to reject the kind of standards-based writing that had always been touted as being "fair" and to move toward an approach that was more flexible and accounted for individual expression and choice.

ADVANCED COMPOSITION

The majority of students who take my 300-level Advanced Composition course are not English majors. They are mostly Education majors specializing in music, history, kinesiology, social studies, and sometimes math. I also get history, psychology, communication studies, and political science students, but it is an elective for these majors.

On the first day of class, I ask the students to introduce themselves. Lately, I have taken to asking them to tell us their names, majors, pronouns, and one thing they like about themselves. The only thing that bombs harder than that last one is "tell me something good that happened to you this week." They usually play it safe by saying things like "I like that I like baseball." The juniors and seniors seem particularly reticent; they don't trust me and I don't blame them. Then I ask them to raise their hands and tell me how many of them hate writing. I emphasize that I won't take it personally; most students do hate it and deliberately choose majors so they can avoid it. They are fine with sharing their feelings about writing: it's no secret that they'd rather not be there. Usually, they all raise their hands. Occasionally I get a student (usually the lone English or political science major) who says they don't hate it, but they don't love it either.

Every semester for ten years, a group of fifteen students, with few exceptions, has told me they hate writing, by which they mean academic writing. (They don't think of all the non-academic

writing they do as writing in this context.) Many have chosen to major in a discipline that they believe does not require much, if any, writing. Their degree plans require them to take Advanced Composition because the professors in their department know they will have to write for their jobs. They must know how to write emails to students' parents, one colleague told me. The subtext is that they need to write like they're college-educated adults, not like they're shooting off a casual text to a friend.

When the students say they hate writing, they are not being hyperbolic. They write about it extensively in their first essay, which is an academic literacy narrative that focuses on their experiences as writers for as far back and in as much detail as they can remember. As Joel Zuckerman, a student in the class, writes of his high school experience, "Because of this, I convinced myself I hated to write. I hated lacking a connection to what I was writing. I hated being forced to write when I otherwise wouldn't choose to."

The goal for the academic literacy narrative assignment is to locate the root causes of this hatred because no one starts off their educational career hating writing. In fact, many of them write about how much they loved to write creative stories and essays in second or third grade, before the start of standardized test prep. Once the test prep begins, it's all over for many of them. In his academic literacy narrative, Israel Vargas specifically takes issue with the AP test-prep they went through:

> Aside from the numerical grade, all that mattered was the structure of my essays. The quality and substance of my essays were set to a low standard. I just had to follow a formula. In 11th grade, I was in my first AP class, AP English and Composition. My teacher...was unforgiving and stringent. There were no late work submissions, no forgiveness, and impossibly high standards. She greatly helped me to improve my writing, but it was a difficult and arduous process. We had 40 minutes to write an entire essay, and retrospectively this seems like a ridiculous amount of time to even write an introductory paragraph. Nevertheless, it was what was expected of us. I always felt like a loser. All my peers would seem to get it. They would finish their entire essays in the 40-minute time span, and I would still be on my outline. As we got up to turn in our little essays, I never had enough. I would get 20/100 as a grade on each one.

Those who hold on to some positive feelings for writing usually learn to have control over it rather than be controlled by it—they love the ability to write perfect sentences, well organized paragraphs, a clear three-part thesis, with one to two quotes per paragraph. It is orderly. As Abigail Roalson notes in her academic literacy narrative, "These writing rules set me up for success in some ways," but those lessons were not without their limitations: "throughout these classes, even if I had no clue what I was writing about, I could still get great grades on my essays because they were so formulaic. And due to this, writing felt incredibly unpersonal for me at this time." For some students, the formula is almost a comfort and it has served them well, even if the writing is not particularly interesting to them or to their audience. If it checks all the boxes on the assignment, then it is usually considered a job well done by teacher and student alike because it has achieved the aim: getting a good grade.

For those students who have not learned to control it and play exactly by the rules, writing is best avoided. And they usually do avoid it, until they reach Advanced Composition and have no

choice but to suffer through. Caleb Mosier represents this view rather well:

> To be completely honest, at the start of the course I had no idea what I was doing in this class and why I had to take the class. Throughout my academic career I have disliked writing, not only because it takes a lot of time to put together an essay but because I never felt like I was very good at it. I am a procrastinator and I wait until the last minute to do things, especially essays, so this made writing much worse for me. As I have explained in my academic literacy narrative, I had a fear of a bad grade and along with the voice in my head telling me "you are not good enough" or making me doubt on my own writing. This fear of a bad grade just amplified the voice in my head, making the whole process of writing that much worse for me.

He does have one other choice: change his major. Others have done it before, in part to avoid classes like Advanced Composition.

The conditions that lead to this kind of hatred for writing seem like a new phenomenon, but it is not. Historically, writing instruction has often led to the alienation of students, especially those whose primary discourse is not college-level, standard white American English. In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the largest professional organization for first-year writing teachers, acknowledged this in their "Statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language," a document that seems to have been largely ignored by the vast majority of college-level writing teachers up until it was revised and reissued following the 2020 murder of George Floyd. The statement includes the following:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

In 1977, Mina Shaugnessy published her seminal work in the field of Composition Studies, which further highlighted the potential harm that writing teachers inflicted on students by enforcing standards of academic writing:

> Neglected by the dominant society, they have nonetheless had their own worlds to grow up in and they arrive on our campus as young adults, with opinions and languages and plans already in their minds. College both beckons and threatens them, offering to teach them useful ways of thinking and talking about their world, promising even to improve the quality of their lives, but threatening at the same time to take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world, to assimilate them into the culture of academia without acknowledging their experience as outsiders. (292)

The only thing that Shaugnessy gets wrong is that this is no mere threat. It happens repeatedly for students who are told that college is their ticket to a better way of life, but they must learn to speak and write in approved ways if they want what college has to offer. At best, they get taught to code switch or they learn to do it to preserve their connection to their family and friends. In a broader social context, written literacy has been used as a means of excluding those who cannot conform to the standards of middle-class, educated, white American English grammar, form, and structure, from public and civil discourse. As Peter Elbow writes in 1999,

> The most common attitude toward "wrong" language is to want to get rid of it. Citizens of all sorts—whether they are teachers in schools, college faculty, members of the mainstream general public, spokesperson for culture, or legislatures—are likely to agree that a teacher's job is to "improve" students' language. And students often feel the same goal for themselves—as we ourselves are likely to feel in relation to our own speaking and writing; if the words that come naturally to your mouth or pen are labeled wrong, we feel ourselves to have a problem. (642)

Despite the recognition that there is something deeply wrong with the focus on grammar and "correctness" in the teaching of writing as early as the 1970's, in the age of standardized testing, the emphasis on form and correctness has only been strengthened. (After all, how else can a machine grade an essay?) And within this approach to evaluating students' writing abilities according to countable features and form, the legacy of exclusionary literacy practices remains, negatively impacting students' performance and perception of themselves as writers. It is no wonder that

students turned eagerly to things like ChatGPT to write essays for them; if artificial intelligence can produce a boring and meaningless five paragraph essay that checks all the boxes, why waste time writing it yourself?

Rather than merely accept that they are wrong and their teachers are right, students are more likely to view academic writing as a largely pointless hoop that they are required to jump through to fulfill the real purpose of their education: obtaining a degree that will get them a job. In which case, the formula will do just fine or they'll take the C if they can get it. As Myla Mitchell says in her literacy narrative,

> When following the formula, I did not have to worry about how I would structure my essay. I could easily create an outline with the formula and fill in the blanks with whatever content I specifically needed for the class I was writing for. But even with this comfort, writing still felt suffocating. I was not writing something from myself, rather I was going through the motions as I always had with writing.

In the process, they have learned that their voices and thoughts don't matter in academic writing; they are there to get the job done as best as they can while they internalize the judgment and criticism of their primary discourses. During our class discussions, Katlin Ramirez became aware of just how much this had impacted her. Coming from the southeast side of San Antonio, she had been made conscious of her voice as something that needed to be changed or altered to meet the standards of the academic context. As she writes in her literacy narrative,

> I feel, in a way, teachers try to restrict our voices by trying to make us all sound the same. If they see little individuality, they will brush it off, but the moment

> they see a huge difference, they try to suffocate it. I believe students should be able to use their voice no matter what their voice might sound like.

This sentiment comes through again and again in that first essay, which is intended to help them locate the harm so that they can begin the repair process, which ideally leads to a rediscovery of their voices, the opportunity to express their thoughts, and a renewed sense of agency. They may not learn to love writing by the time they leave Advanced Composition, but some do and others make at least a kind of peace with it. Most importantly, they feel that, for the first time, they have control. As Israel Vargas writes in their final essay for the class,

> I was able to take a step back and observe my routines and thought processes from both past and present. I was able to discern the limits of a five-paragraph essay, and by finding freedom from one discourse, I was able to identify another discourse and dwell in it. I was able to think about my writing processes in a way I had never done before in high school. I was able to let go of my pressures to be perfect. In fact, I was able to be open to more serendipitous moments in life, ones on which I could learn the most.

Many of them are also future teachers, and they leave with lessons that go beyond writing. They are committed to minimizing the well-intentioned harm they may do in the name of college preparation or standardized testing. They may not be able to avoid standardized testing or a tightly prescribed curriculum, but they can teach their students to think critically about the system and open up paths for creative expression and agency within the confines of state and local school board mandates. The desire to do so is strong. As Myla Mitchell writes,

> It starts with me. Taking initiative to break the "rules" in my writing and consciously write papers that speak to me and a greater purpose than just a good grade or to get it over with. And then in my career I would strive to change my own students' perspective on writing and prepare them for actual college writing in the ways I hadn't. I would look for growth and depth of thought rather than checked boxes on my grading rubric. My motivation for inspiring this wave of change in my future student's writing comes mostly from the idea of wanting to be the teacher I wish I had had. The kind of teacher I wish had caught me earlier on in my academic career and encouraged me to write honestly and with purpose and to not feel restricted by "rules" that aren't even truly binding.

This is a remarkable shift considering how anxious Myla was at the beginning of the semester about the class, the grading contract, drafts, and assignments, all of which are designed to remove the safety net of the formula and encourage students to make their own choices.

How is this possible? How can students' hatred for writing be reduced or even reversed in one semester? How can they learn to shift their thinking about writing and learning in such a short amount of time? How can they so quickly go from feeling excluded to included? This is accomplished through a commitment to restorative writing pedagogy, as well as three main elements that I will discuss next: relationship building and trust; assignments, processes, and feedback; and labor-based grading contracts.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND TRUST IN THE CLASSROOM

None of this works until and unless students realize that my goal is not to punish them for what they do not know, and instead reward them for the progress they make. The first step in the process is getting them to see me as a person/reader, not just a teacher/grading robot. I have to humanize myself in real and meaningful ways.

The vast majority of students I work with do not see me as a reader. What I mean by this is not someone who reads their essay—they know I do that—but rather as someone who might enjoy reading what they have to say in the way they have chosen to say it. By the time they get to me, they have come to view their teachers as graders, not readers, and have learned that the purpose of writing is to check all the boxes on the assignment or risk being penalized. It has never occurred to them that a teacher might enjoy a joke or clever turn of phrase or might give them feedback that engages their ideas. If it has, then they have probably been punished for it by either not approaching the assignment correctly or being too informal. Given their experiences, it is crucial to shift their view of me as a reader to change the relationship they have with me and, by extension, their writing. In learning to think about their audience as a real person whose reading is informed by preferences and experience, they learn one of the most crucial components of any writing task: how to engage a reader.

But first, I have to convince them that I mean what I say and to work with them on building a different kind of relationship. Restorative justice is a "philosophical approach that views harm as a violation of people and relationships" (Zehr as quoted in Hollweck, Reimer, and Bouchard 2019, 246). It is thus necessary to build a "climate of care, trust, and autonomy" (246) before any repairs can happen. This does not have to be done by giving up complete authority over the classroom, but rather consciously resisting the approach that privileges the teacher's authority over the students' experiences, knowledge, or voices (257). Classrooms thus become sites for "relationship-building, peacemaking, and peacekeeping" that allows students to focus on what matters most: learning (Winn 2013, 127).

According to Smith, Frey, and Fisher, "restorative practices provide a framework for building trust and rescuing trust when it has been lost" (2018, 76). In restorative pedagogy, classes "predominantly take the form of workshops, rather than formal lectures, help[ing] to remove power imbalances within the classroom by positioning the person teaching as facilitator, rather than a lecturer. In doing so, promoting that learning and knowledge production is a process of investigation immersed in dialogue, humanization, and collaboration" (Sweeney 2022, 11). In many cases, this involves circle discussions, a typical feature of restorative justice practices and pedagogy. The structure usually involves teacher and students arranging "their chairs in circles so they face one another, pushing aside desks or other physical barriers,"(Smith, Frey, and Fisher 2018, 76) which then allows students and teachers to first learn about each other and create a non-threatening environment. The circles can then move on to broader discussions that ask students to "process complex ideas and dilemmas," drawing extensively on their knowledge and experience. "Using circles allows every voice to emerge and gives each member opportunities to connect and to appreciate others' contributions" (2018, 78). As a result, "students get used

to speaking their thoughts—which helps them take risks academically in speaking or writing challenges" (2018, 77).

While circles are typical, I argue that the form itself is not essential to building trust and creating meaningful relationships. These things can be accomplished any number of ways, but the most important feature of this practice is that everything that happens in the classroom is done with transparency and consistency. It also involves taking a more humanized approach to teaching and learning than traditional authoritarian models allow for. In the authoritarian model, the teacher holds power over their students and there is significant emphasis on what students should not do rather than what they can do. Alternatively, "the restorative classroom seeks to actively engage learners by providing participatory learning processes that balance the need for limits, boundaries, and structure with engagement, support, and nurturing" (Bailie and Adamson 2016, 77). The nurturing is perhaps the most difficult change in the move away from authoritarian teaching, which requires the teacher to appear impersonal or "professional" and always in control of the class.

Nevertheless, Winn argues that "circles are catalysts for blending communities in which facilitators are committed to eliminating hierarchies based on academic prowess or social and cultural capitaI. There is a particular kind of power-sharing in circle processes that is undeniable and necessary for establishing concepts" (2013 128). While this is undoubtedly true in some cases, I am conscious of two things when it comes to conversation circles in the classroom. It is, in general, difficult for some students to be vulnerable and open in front of their classmates; they may be more reserved or shy about sharing their experiences for a variety of reasons. It is particularly difficult for first-generation and minority students to speak up and speak out if they have felt

like the classroom is not a welcoming and inclusive space for them. Instead, students should have the option to share their own experiences or thoughts if and when they're ready. They should also have other paths to participation in which they feel confident and comfortable. The goal, after all, is to "engage students in participatory interaction and dialogue," which can come in many forms (Bailie and Adamson 2016, 75).

As for the professor's authority, it can be mitigated by seeing students as interlocutors, rather than receptacles of the professor's wisdom. In Advanced Composition, classroom activities center on discussion, asking students to contribute their perceptions, knowledge, and experience related to course materials. For example, I assign Richard Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire," a chapter from his book *Hunger of Memory*, which describes his experience of growing up as the son of Mexican immigrants who later finds himself unable to write his dissertation because he realizes his education has turned him into a mimic who is incapable of thinking his own thoughts. He describes painful scenes in which he rejects his parents or feels rejected by them (1982). Our discussion might begin with me asking students if anyone in the room identifies with Rodriguez's experience and, if so, why. Myla Mitchell writes, "Much like Rodriguez..., I felt I had to do better, be better to prove a point—to show that I belonged in the classroom and to step into the 'better life' [my family] had sacrificed so much for me to have. I, too, managed an 'odd success'—I was a low income, first-generation student preparing to apply to college in just a few short years." Others don't like the way Rodriguez treats his parents and judge him accordingly. This presents us with an opportunity to question why the author might have disclosed such details knowing how it made him look and to think in more nuanced ways about his

particular social and historical context. We consider, for example, what Rodriguez helps us understand about the process of literacy development, especially for a first-generation son of immigrant parents in the 1950s.

We also look at the passages that students selected and analyze the writing choices in the passage to understand its impact. Rodriguez also serves as an example for how to write their first essay, as Katlin Ramirez points out, "When taking a set back and reviewing his work in a new way, you can see him thinking through it all and in a way relate to it as well which opens our eyes to what we are doing. Like Rodriguez, we did the same kind of work in our first essay… . During this essay, I felt I found a new way of freedom that I had never felt before in my past writing experiences." Students thus learn lessons about writing not by focusing exclusively on mechanics, but by taking the natural path of a reader followed by a more analytical approach that focuses on the author's rhetorical choices and their impact on meaning.

Regardless of the form the discussion takes, a class that embraces a restorative approach does its best to recognize and question the role of the professor as authority over them and their writing. The goal is not to eliminate structure or class policies, but to give students a sense of agency within the constraints of the class. This includes involving students in decision-making processes, which can mean soliciting their feedback, adopting their recommendations, and being transparent about the reasons why a decision has to be made one way versus another.

Transparency is a particularly important part of restorative pedagogy, although it is never explicitly mentioned as such. I have been relying heavily on the TILT (transparency in learning and teaching) framework for encouraging buy-in to my courses. According to Winkelmes et al. (2016), this approach has been

shown to improve student retention, levels of engagement, and levels of completion in courses. The goal is to ensure that students understand the purpose of what they're doing, what they are being asked to do, why they are being asked to do it, and how they will be evaluated. The reasons don't have to be entirely noble either. I play the game Password, which involves pairs of students trying to guess a word or phrase using a one word clue, with students when we're going over key terms in order to vary the way we approach discussion, keep them busy and off their phones, and have some fun while talking about things that may be difficult to comprehend or that might be vital to their writing assignments. They play for meaningless points to keep things competitive but with very low stakes. Nothing about the activity is a mystery, nor should it be unless the mystery is a part of the lesson, in which case, that would be explained to students.

Another critical aspect of restorative teaching practice is making a conscious effort to avoid value judgments about writing practices and mistakes the students would typically have been penalized for in the past. For example, students have learned to judge themselves harshly for procrastination. As a procrastinator myself, I know that shame, tips, and tricks have never worked to change my behavior. I will procrastinate. Instead, we talk about why we procrastinate—I have a hard time getting started because I assume any writing task will take longer than I want to spend on it—and I suggest that they build time for procrastination into the process since we know it will happen no matter how much we try to resist it. I also ask them what other strategies work for them to get them started. I encourage them to view writing as an idiosyncratic process, one that must be tailored to each writer's working style and needs, and there is no approach that is better or worse if it works for them. The only thing that seems to work

for most writers is drafts and revising based on feedback, which is why the course is built around it. The goal here is to subvert the one-size-fits-all approach to writing they've been taught and encourage them to think instead of what might work best for them to accomplish their tasks, thereby encouraging agency. This approach encourages action instead of reaction, re-framing instead of shaming. As Jill Spiller, a student in the class, writes,

> Recently I was reminded by Dr. Gonzales that I could embrace being a procrastinator and instead incorporate it into my plan for writing. Which has actually worked throughout the semester. While I do not think this is the healthiest long-term solution for doing assignments, it's interesting to hear that procrastination can be incorporated into a plan rather than being told it should never happen.

While there is still a judgment about procrastination in the quote, it is clear that Jill no longer blames herself for not being the perfect (and, I might add, imaginary) student who never procrastinates.

To build trust and to position myself as a human reader rather than a robot-teacher-grader, I routinely share my own experiences as a writer and a student with them. I tell them about a terrible case of writer's block I had when I was working on my dissertation—I worked on one paragraph for a month because I thought if I could get it right, the rest of the dissertation would follow. Turns out I would need to abandon it for two years instead. I share with them the things I did as an undergraduate to meet the length requirement for assignments. Before electronic submissions, one could simply adjust the font from 12 point to 12.1 point without any notice. It might buy you a line or two. I also ask them what they think I would find interesting, appropriate, and funny in an essay based on what they know about me so far. It seems like a simple question, yet it is not one they have considered in a classroom context.

In a further attempt to humanize myself, I don't fuss about my own grammatical mistakes and typos in the feedback I give them; in fact, I don't bother to hide errors by spending way more time than I have proofreading. My goal is to normalize the behavior of actual writers who live in the real world and are busy people. By outing myself as a person who has made a career out of writing but still struggles and makes mistakes, I bridge the gap between them and me, a necessary step in repairing the relationship between student-as-writer and teacher-as-audience. We can then move away from the "authoritarian, coverage-focused, teacher-centric pedagogy" toward "a fertile space for healing and transformation" (Fine 2018, 115) that values them as authors and is a more open space for learning and development.

ASSIGNMENTS, PROCESSES, AND FEEDBACK

By the time I meet students in my Advanced Composition class, they have had many years of prescriptive writing assignments that place more value on form, structure, and correctness than on the content or their ideas. They learn, very quickly, that any attempt to deviate from the requirements or to put more emphasis on their thinking is the best way to get a bad grade. According to Ogilivie and Fuller (2016), "in contemporary education where accountability measures, performance on standardized tests, and preparation for competitive global economy have been emphasized, the needs of learners are often portrayed in instrumental terms" (90). Joel Zuckerman , a student in the class, confirms this as he writes,

Often, I felt my essays were more focused on fitting the model expected of me and less on the content I was asked to write about. I wrote not with the intention of thinking deeply about a question and finding new ways to understand a subject, but to write an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. The level of thought that went into writing the essay mattered less than following the formula.

With an emphasis on instrumental writing, students learn a lesson that is hard to forget: writing is boring, formulaic, and neither the reader nor the writer seem to matter as long as the assignment has five paragraphs, a thesis statement at the end of the introduction, the required number of sentences and quotes, and a conclusion that restates the thesis. There is almost no writing in the world that is written in this style and enjoyed by audiences, yet it seems to have become the dominant form for teaching writing in high school because the emphasis is "on compliance over engagement" in classrooms and in writing (Fine 2018, 114). This causes a harm that is not only about "the brokenness of the relationships between teachers and students but also about the brokenness between learners and what they are supposed to be learning" (Fine 2018, 115).

As part of the effort to repair the harm caused by the broken relationship between the teacher-reader and the student-author, I design assignments and provide feedback that values the writer's voice and ideas while still leaving a space for the reader to be engaged. When the reader gives feedback, it is a teacher-reader, rather than a teacher-grader. The difference here is that the teacher-reader engages the content of the essay, seeing only possibilities and offering suggestions and recommendations based on expertise. The teacher-grader tends to focus on the problems, leaving students with a sense that they've done it all wrong.

Before we get into the reading, we generate a list of what they've been told constitutes good writing. The list usually contains the following: don't begin sentences with and, but, or because; don't use "to be" verbs; don't use "you" or "I"; don't use slang or jargon; don't use contractions; don't have run-ons or fragments; always put your thesis at the end of your introduction, etc. More varied advice is given about how long a paragraph should be: three to five sentences or five to seven. In addition, there should be either one or two quotes per paragraph depending on the teacher. The list is comprised mostly of don'ts and quantifiable objects makes and is restrictive and reductive, turning writing into something that is easy to grade but not particularly worth reading. Once the list is as complete as we're going to get it, we go through the items and we talk about why the rule exists. Mostly, they don't know and it was never explained by the teacher other than to say that this is just how it's done. For the students, every rule is about checking a box, not about successful communication or learning. We talk about why rules are merely conventions and point out the obvious: that most writers break these rules consciously and to great effect. The students' favorite thing is learning that they can begin a sentence with "and," "but," or "because." This is where they begin to turn away from what not to do toward what they can do.

For class that day, we discuss a chapter called "The Basics of Good Writing in Any Form" from the book *Tell It Slant*, which is intended for nonfiction, non-academic works, but I take "any form" to be an opportunity to broaden our understanding of what is possible in an academic essay (Miller and Paola 2012). The basics include scene, character development, metaphor, details, and specificity. We talk about how these concepts might apply to the academic essay, which is what they will be working on

all semester. Because we are trying to undo the harm caused by tightly prescribed assignments and rubrics that boil writing down to its countable features, I assign the genre that students have learned to hate the most: the academic essay.

Their first writing assignment is their own academic literacy narrative. They are asked to write about how they developed their academic writing skills and to compare that purpose of what they learned to the purpose of student academic writing that Scott Crider argues for in his book *The Office of Assertion: The Art of the Academic Essay* (2005). According to Crider, who talks about the academic essay in terms of rhetoric, the purpose of writing is to lead souls. "Such soul-leading," Crider argues, "is a liberal power, one which in its finest and fullest manifestation is a form of love: the finest rhetorician not only loves wisdom, but also loves others who do so" (2005, 12). I assign this reading primarily because it offers a shocking contrast to the utilitarian view that students have been presented with when it comes to writing; they have certainly never associated essays with love. Throughout his book, Crider explains the rhetorical purpose of different parts of the essay, not to give students another formula, but to show them how and why certain choices are made by the author. He encourages readers to find the organization that works for them and what they are trying to communicate rather than follow any pattern of organization dogmatically. His book is not perfect—Crider's views on language usage are not exactly consistent with the trends in composition studies that promote students' right to their own language—he does offer a new way for students to view writing beyond just following requirements and getting a good grade. He ends his book with a powerful quote that resonates with students when they read it near the end of the semester: "An education for economic productivity and

political utility alone is an education for slaves, but an education for finding, collecting, and communicating reality is an education for free people, people free to know what is so" (2005, 123).

The first few chapters of Crider's text offers them an alternative view of the academic essay that they consider in their academic literacy narratives. The assignment asks students to move beyond blame or praise toward understanding why the system works the way it does, what it values, and why that may be beneficial, harmful, or something in between. The goal of this assignment is not to condemn high school teachers and college professors. I want to prevent, as much as possible, "further polarization" by opening up the complexity of the situation rather than blaming any one person (Winn 2013, 127). Since many of my students are going to be high school teachers, I encourage them to think about the position teachers find themselves in as they are increasingly pressured to teach to the test and are overburdened by bureaucratic processes. This aligns with the goals of the restorative classroom where students learn "empathy as well as how to build healthy relationships through learning about themselves and each other" and to "engage in a process that promotes literocracy" (Fisher as quoted in Winn 2013 133). In my feedback on their drafts, I ask them to consider, broadly, what the long-term implications their academic literacy narrative might have for teaching writing specifically and teaching in general. Through this assignment and others, they learn that the goal of restorative, critical pedagogy is to "help learners identify, critique, and transform oppressive power structures" (Fine 2018, 107). The other assignments contribute to their more nuanced and complex understanding of the purpose of college and their place in it. They are asked to consider the role that non-discipline specific classes play in their literacy development and to consider

how one achieves the highest stage of literacy development, critical literacy, in which an individual

> needs to learn not only how to understand and produce meanings in a particular semiotic domain that [is] recognizable to those affiliated with the domain, but, in addition, how to think about the domain at a "meta" level as a complex system of interrelated parts. The learner also needs to learn how to innovate in the domain—how to produce meanings that, while recognizable, are seen as somehow novel or unpredictable. (Gee 2003, 23)

They finish the semester with a reflection essay in which they consider what they have learned, how they have changed (and/or haven't changed), and why it matters. All of these assignments are designed to "draw students' experiences and emotions into conversation with theory, position them as agents of structural change, and engage them in complex thinking" (Fine 2018, 113), one of the key features of restorative pedagogy. The result can be transformative.

Each assignment requires a minimum of three drafts and evidence of substantive change between each draft. Instead of a numerical or letter grade, students receive a completion score (1 = complete, 0 = incomplete, unrevised, or not submitted) and extensive, individualized narrative feedback. I recognize that this is labor-intensive and not sustainable for high school or community college teachers who often have 100–150 student writers to respond to. I will address that issue later in the chapter. For now, I will focus on the nature of the feedback. First and foremost, I make very few comments in text. This is a deliberate choice because students are all too accustomed to receiving this kind of feedback, which makes them focus on sentence-level concerns

rather than looking at the essay holistically. Instead, I focus on the arguments, evidence, and ideas from the text, offering students suggestions and recommendations for how they might address questions that I, the reader, have about their arguments or ideas. My goal is to get them to think deeply and critically and to make conscious choices as writers. They can reject my feedback and recommendations as long as they are able to say why. After they receive the feedback, I talk with them individually to determine if it worked for them, to offer clarification if requested, or to respond to whether I think a different approach might work. The purpose of this approach to feedback is to illustrate that "the process of knowledge creation is dynamic and social in nature and [should] underscore notions of agency, contribution, and connectedness; learning is a collaborative endeavor undertaken with students" (Fine 2018, 120).

Agency does not mean, in this case, that they are allowed to completely ignore the concerns or responses of the reader, whether it is me or their peers. After all, "restorative practices do not negate the formal power of authority figures, leadership, or hierarchy" or, I might add, expertise. "Rather, restorative practices seek to limit authoritarianism through highly participatory processes…that encourage power sharing and collaboration in learning between educators and students" (Bailie and Adamson 2016, 79). This involves a "co-construction of new agreements based in a framework of reciprocal obligations" (Fine 2018, 116). Students are asked to consider: What does my reader need from me and what do I need from my reader? In order for this to work, I must be a reader that they trust and respect enough to consider.

LABOR-BASED GRADING CONTRACTS

For years, labor-based grading contracts were often found only in first-year writing classes at colleges and universities and were only used by the most radical of writing teachers. When I first began using contracts in my classes as a professor at a community college, I was routinely criticized and/or met with skepticism. When I moved to a small liberal arts college, this criticism and skepticism remained and was even mentioned in my third-year tenure review because a couple of students expressed their frustration with non-traditional grading in my teaching evaluations. The main critique that students and others had was that students could not cope if they did not receive grades immediately and regularly. There was little acknowledgment of the copious amounts of feedback students received on their drafts or in progress reports. When students have never encountered a grading contract before, especially as first-year students, it can feel frustrating, a point I acknowledge with my students while also encouraging them to seek me out if they are afraid that they are not doing as well as they would like.

At the beginning of my grading contract, I explain the purpose to students:

> This document is going to tell you exactly what you need to do to earn an A in this class.
>
> This is probably the most important thing you need to know about how this works: during the semester, you will not receive a letter or number grade on your drafts.

> The reason for this is simple: I want you to focus on becoming a better writer, not on just doing what you need to do to earn a specific grade. The advantage is that you will be able to take risks, make mistakes, and practice writing without having to worry about an early grade bringing down your final grade. In other words, if you are producing C quality work at the beginning of the semester and A quality work by the end of the semester, you will earn an A as long as you have fulfilled the requirements for an A.
>
> You may be worried about knowing where you stand in this class, but you don't have to be. You will get feedback—lots of it. You are expected to use feedback to help you improve as a student and writer. If you are reading the feedback, consulting the contract, asking good questions, keeping track of your work, and putting the right amount of effort into your work, you should be able to earn an A in this class.

One of the main goals of the labor-based grading contract is to shift students' focus away from checking off items on an assignment sheet and toward thinking about writing as a means of communication and learning. While it seems that there should be a focus on both, ultimately students feel that their ideas don't matter when they lose points for grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Grading contracts like this help to dismantle the harm done by punitive grading approaches. While I am unable to eliminate grades entirely, I can shift the way students think about grades and the purpose they serve in education. In the writing classroom, grades most often serve as a form of punishment that runs

counter to the restorative pedagogy approach to education and, one could argue, to the purpose of learning in general. Writing under the threat of a bad grade discourages students from taking risks and making mistakes. Students are expected to turn in a perfectly polished piece of prose that fits the requirements of the assignment with little understanding of the process of revision. As Myla Mitchell writes,

> the idea of a "shitty first draft" [a phrase coined by the writer Anne Lamott] seemed downright unattainable, humiliating even, to me. I could not afford to not get it right the first time. I wanted those around me to not know of anything but my success and to now know I was capable of anything other than perfection.

For students like Myla, at best revision means proofreading, cleaning things up so that the teacher will not mark them down for minor errors.

The fundamental difference between labor-based grading and traditional grading is that students can also be evaluated individually on their individual work and progress rather than on whether they have achieved an arbitrary set of standards for what constitutes "good writing." This does not mean that they are not responsible for drafting, revising, and ultimately creating texts that meet the expectations of the assignment. It does mean that what that looks like will be different for every student.

The grading contract also does not lead to a free-for-all in terms of the writing students submit. It does, however, make the expectations clear and, if designed well, flexible. The contract for Advanced Composition students specifically asks them to meet the following goals by the end of the semester:

- Appropriately respond to the assignment with original work that you produced specifically for this class.

- Productively address feedback you received from your instructor and peers.
- Improve the overall quality of your writing by making obvious and substantial changes and improvements.
- Have a complex controlling idea or thesis statement.
- Have organized, coherent sentences and paragraphs.
- Show obvious awareness of your audience.
- Consciously attend to language choices, grammar, syntax, and punctuation.
- Go above and beyond in your use of source material, including the texts from the class as well as outside research if required.
- Engage in a meaningful and complex conversation with your sources.
- Cite sources correctly and as needed. See syllabus for academic dishonesty and plagiarism policy. Provide necessary polish for final drafts.

Notably, these are all things that teachers desire in academic writing, but the way they are described represents a shift in how we ask students to think about writing. Rather than saying I want "five to seven sources," I ask for students to focus on what they do with their sources. Otherwise, they might have the correct number of sources, but none are used in a way that actually contributes to the overall purpose and quality of the essay. Quantity, after all, does not equal quality. They still have to cite sources "correctly," although what that means is less about formatting and more about giving credit where credit is due. We have a long conversation about the ethical treatment of the work of others and why citation matters in terms of their own ethos. "Coherent" sentences means that I can understand what they're trying to say, not that they are writing in perfectly correct standard academic

English. This encourages them to think about how they will get their point across to the reader. The goal is for them to think about their writing in conscious ways, to demonstrate agency and deliberate choice, to understand and utilize or reject conventions in an effort to communicate with their audience. They are discouraged from reverting back to the formulaic writing of the past and instead invited to consider what works for what they are trying to communicate. What this looks like for every writer will depend on where they began, where they want to go, and what they can accomplish given the constraints of the semester and their busy schedules.

Throughout the class, these expectations are clarified in both the feedback and in conversation. When students inevitably ask me how many sources they should have, I say "As many as will do the job you need to do." This is frustrating for them because they are used to being given a number, but I explain that the number doesn't matter. They can use two sources well or five sources badly. I am also encouraging a kind of maximalist approach to writing because they have, for the most part, engaged in a minimalist approach, meaning they will do as much as they need to meet the requirements of the assignment and nothing more. In another text we discuss in class, "Learning to Read Biology," Christina Haas (1994) describes the rhetorical development of a biology student who, as a freshman, takes the "low investment strategy" to writing, which means "waiting until the last minute and then [relying] on a minimum number of sources, sources selected mainly because they were easy to locate and convenient" (365). This was driven by the student's lack of awareness of how writing a research paper for a freshmen class would be useful to her in her pursuit of a biology degree, but also by a very human

approach to juggling a busy life and is something we all do if we think that the task at hand is not that important.

Critics of grading contracts are concerned that students will take advantage of the lack of grades and try to turn the work in toward the end of the semester, or that they will turn in work that is slapdash and incoherent. The one thing that is made very clear to students is that their grade depends on their engagement, which includes submitting work on time, meeting minimum requirements for each draft, and making progress between drafts. I have two minimum requirements for the first draft: they must meet the minimum word count and appear to be addressing the assignment they were given. In other words, they cannot submit an essay on elevators if the assignment asks them to write about literacy. If their readers (myself or their peers) cannot understand what they're trying to say, this too is something that must be addressed in the next draft. So yes, a student could submit a draft that is "slapdash" and "incoherent," and sometimes they do so because they are busy (students often have jobs and the only time they have to work on their drafts is in the car during breaks), they forgot that a draft was due, or they procrastinated. They are not penalized for it because that would be the least helpful thing for addressing the circumstances under which the draft was produced. Instead, they are given feedback and encouragement for producing the next version. We might also have an honest conversation about what happened and how to avoid it next time if circumstances aren't beyond their control.

Some students will miss assignments, and while I have a late work policy, I tell them that as long as it does not become a habit, the occasional late assignment is not an issue. In fact, I encourage them to talk to me if they think their assignment will be late in order to figure out the best time to submit it so they

can do peer review or receive feedback. When lateness or lack of completion does become a habit for a student, I meet with them individually to try to determine the root cause and to see if there is support that can be offered. If none of the interventions work, I may drop the student from the course knowing that they will not be able to recover sufficiently to earn a passing grade in the class. This is a compassionate move and prevents the student from bombing at the end of the semester. Some may think it would be fine to let them turn everything in at the end, but this only sets students up for failure in multiple courses as they struggle to do the work for mine while ignoring the others. When I make the decision to drop a student from the course, I explain the rationale in detail. Almost no one has argued the point. They know when it is sensible to throw in the towel, but they need someone to help them make the most appropriate decision. It is important for them to learn that quitting is not a sign of failure, but rather the appropriate choice to make if and when their obligations become unmanageable and unsustainable. The point is to work with the students, not against them, to model flexibility and responsibility, and also to know when it is time to call it a day.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

It would be very easy to throw high school teachers under the bus either in the classroom or this chapter, but what happens in high school is not the fault of any individual teacher nor any group. High school English teachers often have too many students and too many mandated requirements from school districts and Boards of Education that are obsessed with standardized testing. Most high school teachers have good intentions, but neither the time nor the power to do other than what they have been doing, which

is often the best they can do with limited resources. It would be next to impossible, given the number of students, for them to give individualized, substantive feedback on 100–150 essays. We should not take issue with teachers but rather with the systemic problems they face in secondary schools that are governed by state legislatures and Boards of Education that continuously attempt to restrict their ability to teach their students and don't provide enough funding to reduce class sizes. The problem is bigger than any one teacher or any one school.

College and university faculty do, however, have more control over what we do in the college classroom. The first thing that ought to be carefully examined is notions of professionalism that we insist on for ourselves and our students. Often faculty members are afraid to share personal experiences that students would connect with because they don't want to appear vulnerable or fallible; we have decided that these are somehow the antithesis of professional behavior. Sharing personal experiences does not mean having no boundaries; there is a level of sharing that is inappropriate for most classes. Nevertheless, if we want our students to see us as people they are writing for, not just writing at, then humanizing ourselves is an essential feature and we need to share something about ourselves in order to do that.

It is critical to acknowledge that what sharing means for faculty members will also depend on institutional culture, the instructor's position within the faculty (pre-tenure and adjunct faculty may feel their positions are more precarious), as well as the instructor's age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other variables that may make it more challenging to have a more personal relationship with their students. In short, a restorative approach, which relies heavily on changing the power dynamic between teachers and students, may not be easy or possible in

certain institutions and classrooms where faculty members do not feel safe because they are not supported by administrators. Institutions should work harder to ensure that adjuncts, pre-tenure faculty, non-tenured faculty, faculty of color, women, LGBTQIA+ faculty, and younger faculty are appropriately protected from harassment or censure.

We should also reconsider our efforts to try to prepare students for the workplace by insisting that they get everything in on time and that it be done perfectly. Classrooms are not workplaces and teachers are not bosses. If we want students to get things in on time and to submit polished work, then we need to have a better reason why than "this is what you will be required to do in the workplace," because honestly, it may not be. In my professional life, I almost always either give myself an extension or get an extension if I need one. The reality of most workplaces is that some things can be postponed if they're not ready. Just ask anyone who has been on a flight that's been delayed because of mechanical problems. A delayed flight, however, causes all kinds of other issues, which is how I present late work to my students. We need to keep things moving along, but realistically, some deadlines are looser than others, and I prefer to give them extra time if they need it rather than to have them turn in something that is not ready or has to be written under extreme duress. We should be flexible where and when we can be given the realities of students' lives. Chapter 2 of this book includes additional discussion of flexible deadlines.

Faculty members may also struggle with the restorative approach because they will need to reconsider what they value most in students' writing. This begins with questions that may require intense reflection about their own experiences. They may have had teachers who were sticklers for grammar and they have

come to believe that it was for their benefit, all the while perhaps feeling alienated from their primary discourse. Nevertheless, they must ask themselves: why does form, grammar, and syntax seem to take such precedence? Are we actually frustrated by these things or frustrated by the apparent lack of care that students put into their writing? Instead of creating increasingly specific requirements for student writing and inflicting even harsher grade penalties for what we perceive to be a lack of care, it might behoove us to take a step back and ask ourselves why students don't seem to care about the writing itself. In what ways are we contributing to the problem? What are the conditions under which they are producing writing and how are we contributing to those conditions? What can we do to encourage students to see that their writing assignments are not about the grades, but about learning, creating, and sharing their understanding of the world?

Finally, there are elements of this approach that may be difficult to pursue for teachers at the college level who may have 150 or more students across five or six sections of first-year writing. I do believe, however, that this approach can be modified in a way that retains the spirit of restorative pedagogy without creating more work than any one instructor can handle. Rubrics can be a useful way to manage feedback on drafts for large numbers of students, and those rubrics can be based on the goals stated in the grading contract. Transparency can and should be the norm: if you're asking students to fulfill a certain requirement, the answer ought to be better than "because this will be expected of you in your other classes/workplace." We can and should do better than that when discussing the purpose of what we are teaching and assigning.

CONCLUSION

In Fine's (2018) study, the teacher invited students to:

> participate in constructing their own meanings and in shaping the "what" and "how" of the work. The implicit messages that students received in this process resonate with the RJ [restorative justice] framework: their experiences matter, theory and critical analysis can help them understand these experiences, those in positions of power can be authoritative without being authoritarian, and those in disempowered positions…have a real and important role to play in helping dismantle oppression…[which helped] to establish a positive relational culture—one that supported many students in experiencing transformation in their relationship to the curriculum, as well as to themselves [and to their teacher]. (121)

Every semester, this is the goal I have for my students, particularly those who are headed to classrooms themselves. Israel captures what I am hoping for in their final essay:

> Now that I am self-aware of my rhetorical decisions, I will be particularly careful about placing my sentences in the way that best connects the audience to my argument. This is true art—and the artist is me. I now look at writing as an art, which will help me calm my worries about getting the perfect grade, and now I will be able to inspire others.

They are thinking about their sentences not as the things that have been critiqued and red-inked, but as tools to build connection with their audience.

REFERENCES

Bailie, John W. and Craig W. Adamson. 2016. "Transformative Graduate Education Through the Use of Restorative Practices." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 147: 75-86. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/tl.20201.

Conference on College Composition and Communication. 1974. "Students' Right to Their Own Language." Accessed December 4, 2023. https://prod-ncte-cdn.azureedge.net/nctefiles/groups/cccc/newsrtol.pdf.

Crider, Scott. 2005. *The Office of Assertion: An Art of Rhetoric for the Academic Essay*. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing.

de los Rios, Cati V., Danny C. Martinez, Adam Musser, Asha Canady, Patrick Camanigan, and Patricia D. Quijada. 2019. "Upending Colonial Practic*es: Toward Repairing Harm in English Education." Theory into Practice* 58 (4): 1-9. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1626615.

Dosmar, Emily and Julia Williams. 2022. "Put Down the Grade Book: It's Time to Consider Ungrading." *ASEE Prism* 32 (1): 53-53.

Elbow, Peter. 1999. "Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond 'Mistakes,' 'Bad English,' and 'Wrong Language.'" In *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, edited by Victor Villanueva and Kristin L. Arola, 641-672. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Elbow, Peter and Jane Danielewicz. 2009. "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 61 (2): 244-268.

Fine, Sarah. 2018. "Teaching in the Restorative Window: Authenticity, Conviction, and Critical-Restorative Pedagogy in the Work of One Teacher-Leader."

Harvard Educational Review 88 (1): 103–135. https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-88.1.103.

Gee, James. 2003. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Greenberg, Katherine H., Brian Kelleher Sohn, and Lauren Monet. 2022. "Life in an Ungraded Course." *College Teaching* 71 (4): 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2022.2046998.

Haas, Christina. 1994. "Learning to Read Biology: One Student's Rhetorical Development in College." *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Ellen Cushman, Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, 358–375. Boston: Bedford St. Martin's.

Hollweck, Trista, Kristin Reimer, and Karen Bouchard. 2019. "A Missing Place: Embedding Restorative Justice and Relational Pedagogy into the Teacher Education Classroom." *The New Educator* 15 (3): 246–267.

Jarvis, Claire L. 2020. "Chemistry Educators Try 'Ungradng' Techniques to Help Students Learn." *Chemical and Engineering News.* Accessed May 15, 2024. https://cen.acs.org/education/undergraduate-education/Chemistry-educators-try-ungradingtechniques-help/98/i16

Lamott, Anne. 2007. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life.* New York: Knopf.

Meinking, Kristina and Eric E. Hall. "Letting Go of Grades: Creating an Environment of Autonomy and a Focus on Learning for High Achieving Students." *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 10. https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.10.21.

Miller, Brenda and Suzanne Paola. 2012. *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Ogilivie, Greg and David Fuller. 2016. "Restorative Justice Pedagogy in the ESL Classroom: Creating a Caring Environment to Support Refugee Students." *TESL Canada Journal* 10: 86–96.

Rodriguez, Richard. 1982. *Hunger of Memory*. New York: Bantam Books.

Shaugnessy, Mina. 1977. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Dominique, Nancy Frey, and Douglas Fisher. 2018. "A Restorative Climate for Learning." *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).* https://ascd.org/el/articles/a-restorative-climate-for-learning.

Sweeney, Rowan. 2022. "Restorative Pedagogy in the University Criminology Classroom: Earning about Restorative Justice with Restorative Practices and Values." *Laws* 11 (58): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3390/laws11040058.

Winkelmes, Mary-Ann, Matthew Bernacki, Jeffrey Butler, Michelle Zochowski, Jennifer Golanics, and Kathryn Harriss Weavil. 2016. "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success." *Peer Review* 18 (1): 31–36.

Winn, Maisha T. 2013. "Toward a Restorative English Education." *Research in the Teaching of English* 48(1): 126–135. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24398649.

Young, Vershawn. 2009. "Nah We Straight: An Argument Against Code-Switching." *JAC* 29 (1/2): 49–76.