

Feedback From First Grade

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I have an artifact from my childhood that I treasure: a little blue book with wide-lined pages. My first grade teacher, Mrs. Bassett, wrote my name, Sandy Y, in big black letters on the front cover and gave to it me. I penned my first stories in my own handwriting in that book, and I am particularly grateful for the lessons it has taught me all these years later about the significance of teacher feedback.

At the end of one of my stories, "The Strange Thing from Mars," Mrs. Bassett wrote, "Great job, Sandy! I'd like to know more about how the boy felt when he found this strange thing. What did the strange thing look like?" Mrs. Bassett's comments obviously made an impression on me; all I have to do is turn a few pages ahead and read one of my next stories.

"The Strange Thing from Jupiter" has a predictable familiarity to it, with a few exceptions. In this story, you can see where I made an effort to incorporate Mrs. Bassett's feedback from the Mars story. Clearly, Mrs. Bassett's comments invited me to dip deeper into my imagination's well and trust that I could develop a story further.

Mrs. Bassett was the first in a long line of teachers whose feedback respectfully encouraged me in my process, and the long-term effects of such thoughtful reinforcement cultivated a Ph.D. in poetry, a gratifying publishing career, and most importantly, a rewarding faculty position directing Evergreen's Writing Center.

In graduate school, I read an article that also made a lasting impression on how I approach commenting on students' writing. I now share this article with students who take my spring quarter class, *Cultivating Voice: A Writing Tutor's Craft*. Nancy Sommers' "Responding to Student Writing" illuminates a study she conducted regarding faculty comments on student

papers. The findings reveal the confusion that well-intentioned faculty can inflict on student writers when faculty offer feedback that is inconsistent with their students' writing process. Sommers identifies that when "[the] processes of revising, editing, and proofreading are collapsed and reduced to a single trivial activity. . . the students' misunderstanding of the revision process as a rewording activity is reinforced by their teachers' comments" (151). In a single paper, a student writer can recover from the potential confusion; over time and as the stakes get higher, however, the accumulation of these experiences tends to dishearten, instead of empower, a writer. Sommers' findings echo what Evergreen writers have shared with me and other Writing Center staff.

Sommers also notes that this awkward textual exchange between writer and teacher is not indicative of a teacher's desire to inflict harm on the writer, but instead a reflection of the faculty's lack of effective training in "the process of reading a student text for meaning or in offering commentary to motivate revision" (154). At Evergreen, faculty members clearly value the significance of using writing as a mode of inquiry: each year faculty report assigning writing in almost every program on campus. And while some faculty are amazingly adept at commenting on students' work, what we in the Writing Center hear from students and witness in their papers is that faculty comments often discourage students from continuing to pursue what they want to say.

As a student, how can you change this dynamic? Poet, essayist, and political activist Muriel Rukeyser suggests that "we need to know our resources and ourselves" (Rukeyser 8). A powerful resource designed to lend support to your authority as a writer is a document I've asked my students to include with each piece of writing they share with me or their peers. The Author's Note will take you ten minutes to write, but in that ten minutes, you can request feedback appropriate to the current stage of your writing process and redirect faculty from ineffective commenting practices.

The three components to the Author's Note include:

A history of the draft, including how you arrived at your ideas, what stage of the writing process you currently are in, and how your draft has changed, if this is a revision of a previous draft;

An identification of the draft's current strengths, so you can acknowledge your best practices and hopefully learn to repeat these;

An acknowledgement of areas where you believe you can improve, including questions you have for your reader. These questions will assure that you receive at least some feedback that addresses your current concerns.

If you find the third section difficult to write, you might try something Keith Hjortshoj, Director of Writing in the Majors at Cornell University, once shared with me: Imagine you are turning in your paper. Your faculty asks you to consider what you might do to your draft if you had another day to revise and edit. Now take these answers and transform them into questions for your reader.

In the years since I've introduced the Author's Note to students, I've never heard a report of a faculty member being upset with a student for including this additional reflection. In fact, students often have commented that they felt the Author's Note improved their chances of a stronger evaluation since the presence of the Note suggested a student's deeper engagement with critical thinking.

I'm imagining now how different my strange stories in first grade might have been if I had been encouraged to share even briefly how I came up with these ideas. I'd not only have the story as an artifact, but I'd also have a portal, a window into how a precocious seven-year-old girl in Bloomfield, Connecticut in 1971 began to understand the development of her imagination. Alongside Mrs. Bassett's comments printed in large letters in blue ink at the end of the story would be my comments, my voice, my ink, emerging, forging ahead to the future here at Evergreen.

Works Cited

Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Life of Poetry*. 1949. Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 33, No.2 (May, 1982): 148-156

