INKWELL

TEACHING WRITING: FACULTY RESPONSES TO STUDENT WRITING AT EVERGREEN

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As a tutor at the Writing Center, I wonder, how do faculty's experiences in academia and with publishing inform how they teach writing at Evergreen? All faculty assess our written work, yet few faculty members at Evergreen are trained explicitly as writing teachers. Their expertise in academic writing has been developed through their graduate work and academic careers. Teachers write articles, give presentations, compile bibliographies, and defend dissertations within institutions of higher learning. They have edited their peers' academic work, written books, and edited volumes. In some cases they have written articles for peer-reviewed journals, published in literary journals, and given lecture tours. Their academic writing is part of their career-long learning process.

The faculty I talked to are busy with a variety of writing projects. Andy Buchman, who is doing archival research on American musical theater and film, says, "You really have to write about your field or discipline to become an expert." At the time of this interview, he is planning to present his research on the musical *Hair* to a conference in Sheffield, England, and his work will be published by Oxford University Press. Nancy Koppelman is writing a paper on the history of technology entitled "Hierarchies of Energy on the Streets of New York: Movement by Machine as Social Capital, 1868–1903" to present at the European Social Science History Association Conference in Valencia, Spain. Stephanie Coontz has just revised her book, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, originally published in 1993, to reflect significant changes in marriage and family life over the past two decades. Alejandro de Acosta has just prepared a lecture called "Beyond Sexuality: Queer Kinship" to deliver at Whitman College. And Miranda Mellis is working on a book review of *Counternarratives* by John Keene for publication in *The Believer*. I conclude from this sampling that although many faculty at Evergreen are not writing teachers, they are clearly experienced in the writing world.

Responding to student writing is a process in which many aspects of a teacher's pedagogical values come into play. From talking to faculty in one-on-one interviews and at the Academic Fair, it seems like this can make the work rewarding, but also difficult and time consuming.

I find myself asking: to what standards are faculty holding student work? What are the campus-wide practices for responding to student writing? What is it like to respond to student work, in general?

Biologist Donald Morisato says, "I'm just not convinced that the comments I write will do anything to help students' writing." He remembers the sustained efforts of his father who stood over his shoulder as a kid while he painstakingly edited his school work, his father telling him, "Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite."

But some believe extensive written comments can help. Both Koppelman and Coontz write page-long, single-spaced letters to their students. They summarize what they think the student is trying to express and speculate on where the student's lines of reasoning might be headed. In her letters, Koppelman tries to convey that their writing is worthwhile: "It is absolutely my responsibility to do that. And I've seen incredible growth in people who have never been taken seriously in that way before." Koppelman also sometimes does the same assignments as the class, which gives her added insight into what a writer might need to complete assignments well.

Coontz says that in addition to writing students letters, she asks them to submit a letter of their own before turning in their second draft. They are required to outline what they will change in response to Coontz's letter, which not only saves her time, but helps writers clarify their thinking. "They really have to sit down and say, 'Oh, I'm not just revising or rewriting in the abstract.'" She tells students that they don't have to agree with her, but if she's flagged something for revision, they have to defend their choices.

Koppelman finds that the letters produce valuable results, but that a round of eighteen drafts takes her approximately eighteen hours, time she is responsible for budgeting in addition to planning out class meetings and lectures. Adam King, a computer science faculty new to Evergreen, says that responding to seventy drafts is intimidating, and he asked for advice on how to approach this challenging task. Koppelman says, "It's the grunt work of teaching, it really is!"

"I always try to offer something I see as a real positive and something I think could have gone further," says Buchman, whose commenting style falls on the less loquacious side. He says that some students think that his comments are too brief or too general: "I'm very wary of doing harm with students and their writing. Frequently they've gotten some negative criticism, especially on mechanical errors." That negative criticism can discourage students from thinking that their ideas are the most valuable parts of the paper. He says that if

students want more critique from him, they should re-submit their work and he would be happy to give more detailed feedback.

In terms of responding to common errors, Koppelman says, "My theory is that most students actually know how to correct their own writing, but they just don't do it. So I circle things that basically just point to the errors." Mellis says that she finds herself responding to the same syntactical and grammatical issues often enough that she wishes she had a stamp. But mechanics are not her primary concern: "Sometimes people don't have it all together in terms of grammar, but there are incredibly lively turns of phrase happening—and there's real engagement and thought. It feels like in those cases, we can work on grammar and syntax later. And sometimes [grammar and syntax] can be also a source of play."

Though faculty at Evergreen have trod similar pathways as faculty at other institutions to get to their positions, different tasks are required of them. They are often team-teaching interdisciplinary programs and coaching students through Evergreen-specific writing like self-evaluations and the Academic Statement. I asked: how does the environment of this college, specifically, affect the task of responding to student work?

Buchman says, "'Interdisciplinary faculty' means just that—we're not going to all have the same discipline. We're going to have a variety of perspectives on writing." Koppelman describes science and humanities writing as engaging different modes of thought: "I think that scientists tend to be more data-driven and hypothesis-driven, and writing something up happens after that work gets done. Whereas in the humanities, writing is part of figuring out what you think." However, she says that effective team-teaching has more to do with teaching style than the disciplines themselves. "I had a great experience teaching with EJ Zita. We found we were very compatible teaching writing together, even though she's a scientist. We're going to teach together again."

De Acosta credits Anne de Marcken and Miranda Mellis for introducing him to the writing culture at Evergreen that emphasizes process. At other jobs he saw coming up with interesting prompts as his primary task, and students would usually respond with a standard, five paragraph essay. "The big shift coming into Evergreen was that there was a lot more thinking about steps and stages in writing assignments, in-class writing and all of that. Because I've done work as a writer and a translator, I am interested in these questions [about process], but I just hadn't had a whole lot of opportunity to do that in the classroom."

Regarding team teaching, Mellis said, "In the more conventional situation, you don't necessarily have anyone to talk with about student work except the student—which is great, the student is the important person to talk to. But to get another person's way of reading and marking student work expands what's available to me as a responder." Mellis says that while she might respond to writing according to her own disciplinary background, when she

team teaches, she also responds as a co-learner, and her comments can't help but reflect that dynamic.

Because our work as students is both to think through new information and to write to demonstrate our thinking, there can be tension around what academic writing should sound like. As a writing tutor, I sometimes meet writers whose work engages with class material and clearly shows their ideas, but isn't written in an academic voice. I asked faculty how they respond to the use of common vernacular and slang.

Coontz says, "I think most academic writing should be more plain English. I will often say to people, including academics, 'Write this for a fifteen year-old niece or nephew.'" She continues, "If we really know the field, we can't imagine what it's like not to know it. And therefore we cannot explain it to people. And the reverse happens for people who don't know a field: in an attempt to build their lack of knowledge into something that impresses, they embroider it with all sorts of things that mean to sound impressive. So to my mind, the simpler the better, and if it takes [common] vernacular to do that, that's great."

Koppelman also upholds the clarity of thought sometimes available in more casual writing, but adds, "You've got to adjust to your audience. It's a decision you make as a writer. Sometimes it can cause audiences to take you less seriously if you write in a [common or slang] vernacular." She says that if she's teaching an upper division program and the focus is on academic writing, she'll mark slang and common vernacular as wrong.

De Acosta says, "I think that there are many writers whose writing makes more sense when you speak it out loud." He gives recent Daniel J. Evans Chair lecturer Donna Haraway as an example. She revealed to de Acosta that she uses lecturing as a tool to condense her ideas, and because of this process, her writing retains what de Acosta calls a "talky, wordy" feel, even when the ideas she discusses are dense. He says, "Basically I feel like there's something wrong if teaching people writing means getting people to stop using vernacular, and then get really good at some supposed form of formal writing, and then re-introduce vernacular at a different, later stage as a 'technique.'" He says that helping students become aware of what effects their writing has is more important to him than specifically steering them away from slang. He says that some people want to use vernacular or slang for many sets of reasons, such as keeping in community with their class, or culture: "It could be really damaging to suggest to people that they shouldn't [use common vernacular or slang]."

However, he went on to say that if someone wanted to be a lawyer and write legal briefs, for example, he would certainly tailor his comments to suit their goals. "Trying to dig around with what the student wants to be doing . . . is what's important to me. It's not as much about 'this is good,' 'this is bad,' 'this is interesting,' 'this is not interesting.' It's more about reporting back to [students] what you think they're doing."

I also wondered: is there a clear border between creative writing and communicative writing at Evergreen? Should students present their learning in a standard academic form, even when their ideas are leading them to write in a creative mode? Writing assignments are usually for technical writing (e.g. lab reports, abstracts, technical summaries), critical writing (e.g. critical summaries, exegetical essays, synthesis essays), or creative writing (e.g. poetry, performance, creative prose, experimental forms). To what extent can a student blur these categories in pursuit of their richest thoughts? What does it mean for faculty to respond to students who write in the borderlands?

Amy Cook, biologist, suggests that to develop skills as a writer, time needs to be dedicated to each genre independently. She says, "There is a place for both creativity and communication in the sciences, but unfortunately, not much time in college to practice both." She does, however, emphasize "finding the pitch" when writing any scientific narrative[1] and suggests that students read *Don't Be Such a Scientist*[2] to develop the skills to tell engaging stories, the ones that underpin all scientific research.

Mellis says, "Poetic logic is rigorous and challenging and difficult in different ways—it makes different demands and requires a different kind of disposition: a willingness to follow language." She continues, "In 5th century Athens, and going forwards, lawyers would learn their practice, their language art, by reading and studying poetry." She says that even though the aims for poetic and persuasive writing are different, by attending to how language works, one can develop strong rhetorical skills. She says that questions of interpretation, audience, and authority are very important for understanding all writing, including science writing. She says, "You see so much metaphor in scientific writing. . . . Isn't it possible that the writing could have a really different kind of impact if that writer has the capacity to think imaginatively about that which they are studying—and to think about point of view—things that we think about in fiction and storytelling?"

For Coontz, it doesn't matter whether the form is explicitly creative or explicitly instrumental. She says that even if a poet ends up writing in an opaque way, she is going to write a better poem "if she can step back from what she's writing and say, 'Mom, this is the feeling I'm trying to get across.'" Coontz says that the clarity of her writing has been most improved by this rule: "I have to be able to tell it to a neighbor who then . . . can repeat it back to me or a friend in a way that I would expect."

De Acosta says, "[The idea] that the main point of writing is to communicate ideas takes too dominant of a role. For me, I'm as interested in questions of form as I am of effective communication. Or to put it differently, a lot of times the medium is the message. I think

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[1]   James F. Cahill, Devin Lyons, and Justine Kars, "Finding the 'Pitch' In Ecological Writing," *The Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* 92, (2011): 196-205.

[2]   Randy Olson, *Don't Be Such a Scientist: Talking Substance in an Age of Style*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2009).

that somebody can make tremendous progress in [writing by] reevaluating what forms they're using. Even if the result comes out confusing or garbled to me." He says, "I think it's important to have sufficient trust, where people can try something out and know that I'm going to read it generously." He says that he often asks students to write in genres that they are unaccustomed to in order to broaden their skills. For de Acosta, students are not required to comply faithfully to his prompts or to make a kind of sense that isn't part of their chosen form, but instead to exercise new capabilities and strategies that are relevant to them as writers.

Whether faculty see creative writing and critical writing as somewhat separate or overlapping, and whether they believe that the writing should communicate primarily through its form or its content, the faculty members I spoke to agree that students should have the basic skills necessary to communicate their ideas. Koppelman says that whole societal structures are at stake: "How do I synthesize what I'm learning with my own point of view to say something that matters to me? That's a big puzzle. . . . It's what citizenship is supposed to be about, it's what democracy depends on, it's what communities need from people who are going to be participating in them and making them thrive. That's supposed to be the bedrock of what it means to be an engaged person. All that depends on communication. The other side of communication is letting other people be the writer and [learning] how to listen to them."

While most describe the Academic Statement as a high-stakes document that is used to persuade the reader of the worth of a student's education, both Buchman and Morisato seek to calm the anxiety that the Statement can arouse. Morisato says that it's more than the student's writing that defines them as a valuable future employee or graduate student. He says, "The science faculty sometimes don't like the self-evaluation and Academic Statement because they say students 'look bad' if they have a badly written [self-] evaluation. But that's somewhat patronizing to me as a reader. The Academic Statement and self-evaluations tell me only some things about a student and not others."

Buchman says, "There are 2,000-year-old stelæ where people inscribed important sayings of K'ung-Fu-tzu, or Confucius as he's known in the West. You can think of the Academic Statement as something that will be the same in forty years. It's just going to live quietly in a cave at Evergreen. . . . Not all my colleagues agree with this, but I tend to remind people that this is just a portrait of yourself in this moment in time." Morisato, Joe Tougas, and Buchman all heavily emphasize the Academic Statement's benefits as a reflective practice and
de-emphasize its importance as a final document. Buchman says that maybe one person on a graduate school admissions board will read your transcript, and that they are more interested in the letters that are written specifically to them as part of your application. In regards to a job: "They're hiring the person they met in the interview. They might not have even read your transcript. So I remind students that this is not as high stakes in some respects, for

some careers, as it may seem. It's just the fact of having become a college graduate . . . that college graduates make twice as much as people without BAs."

Mellis says, "The stakes of certain genres of writing can be the difference between making a living or not, being able to get a job, or to get into school, to persuade a person to give you something." She says that in these cases, writers rely on ". . . that rhetoric that Aristotle defines as the art of ethical persuasion." She sees the Academic Statement belonging to a category of formal writing that emphasizes persuasive communication, but also sees how writers could want to take a more poetic approach. She says to make a [formal document] that is satirical, deeply personal, or playful could be a useful method for critique or a useful exercise in creative writing, "but as a professional kind of document, it tends to be counterproductive to be hybrid about your CV.[3] I say that because that's not always obvious for students." She says that studying the essay as a form will help students with writing the Academic Statement and other forms of writing that straddle the line between formal and personal: "The academic essay can be a really lively, interesting piece of writing. And at the same time, it's not necessarily the place to bare all."

Is there support for faculty in learning how to help students with the Academic Statement? The common response is, "Not enough," even if faculty are relaxed about the role of the Statement itself, and even if they have their own established approach for teaching it. What resources or changes would faculty need to feel supported in teaching the Academic Statement?

Mellis says that the Mentor Council (a group of faculty, staff, and students who organize Orientation Week and help to create support for the Academic Statement) has posted lesson plans online for faculty to use for in-class Academic Statement workshops.

Cook would like to find support for making Academic Statements appeal to employers and graduate schools in the sciences, perhaps through interviewing HR departments and admissions boards. She'd also like to see the Academic Statement contest board recognize summative, formal writing appropriate to the science community through their selection of prize winners.

De Acosta says that creative writing workshops led by his co-teacher, de Marcken, focused on examining the characteristics of the Academic Statement. These workshops seemed to help his students become more comfortable with the idiosyncratic form of the Statement. His last encounter helping a student with their Academic Statement was on an All-Campus Mentoring Day. He says that although he feels like he's a better responder the more familiar he is with a student, responding to the writing of a stranger emboldened him to make more cut-and-dried remarks about maintaining a formal style. Even so, he was careful not to

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[3]   Curriculum vitae: a formal document, much like a resume, summarizing educational and work history.

assume what the priorities of the student were. He describes looking over the work of one student, for whom English is a second language, and seeing some negligible grammar irregularities. He responded mostly to the content, but finally the student asked if they could hear feedback on grammar. De Acosta says, "It seemed like that's what she wanted, possibly even more than my first round of comments." He says that the remainder of their time was spent correcting the minor errors.

Buchman says that he's in favor of the implementation of a final review process for all students, like the one required for Independent Learning Contracts which must be reviewed by the academic deans in order to allow students to pursue accredited learning in their contracts. This idea hasn't been approved yet by the administration, but bringing in a final review board has been discussed. Buchman sees a last pass over the Academic Statement by "somebody who reads a lot of them and gets feedback from outside audiences about how they are used" as an asset to students.

Koppelman directed the Mentor Council, which implemented the Academic Statement. She says she is confident that reflective practices strengthen a liberal arts education. But she also says that there is still not enough support for teaching the Academic Statement—nor for teaching writing in general. She says that this is especially true for faculty who teach subjects where writing is not the top priority: "We don't have requirements at Evergreen, but we graduate people who can't write. And I really think that's bad." One of her solutions is "summer institutes . . . where [teachers] look at actual student writing, and talk about how to read it, digest it, and not spend three hours on a three-page paper. How. To. Do it."

Almost all faculty took responsibility for engaging with and responding to their students' written work, even while asking for support from people specifically trained in teaching English composition. Coontz described a radical revision to the academic catalog and new hires: within a sixteen-credit program, students could have the opportunity to gain four credits through a writing workshop linked to their program's topics. She says, "I'd like to have two or three people at this college . . . who'd be willing to teach four-[credit] classes that we could integrate with other programs. . . . We could have them specifically for creative writing, for social science writing, and . . . for science writing. But somebody who's trained in teaching writing."

Mellis, who has taught composition at ten colleges, and Koppelman, who has also taught composition extensively and who leads workshops on reading and writing, both say that designing a writing foundations class is challenging. Koppelman says, regarding teaching writing, "There's really something to it!" But while Koppelman suggests writing prerequisite classes and workshops for teachers as steps towards helping students gain writing skills, Mellis is more circumspect, looking to the root causes of writing that is not at college level. She says that some students need a few more years of reading behind them "just to get a more lived, quotidian, practical sense of reading and writing" to work comfortably at a college-level. She describes the complex terrain that teachers at all levels face: while some

students were read to often as children, and had early and intermediate schooling that prepared them for college, others did not. In addition, due to funding cutbacks, mandates to "teach to the test," and thus an increased usage of product-oriented pedagogy, the public school system is producing a sizeable group of students whose relationship to writing is less about exploration, curiosity, and process, and more about reproducing expectations. She says that if there were to be a prerequisite in writing at Evergreen, she would want it to be influenced by the three-week intensive workshop at Bard College (which she has taught on and off since 2006) called *The Language & Thinking Program*, founded by former Evergreen faculty Peter Elbow. It emphasizes writing as a process of inquiry through which students develop writing skills. Mellis also supports those aspects of the Writing Center that are similarly process-oriented.

As part of the school's mechanism for helping students become better writers, the Writing Center's work is not beyond reproach. Writing doesn't always come back to faculty showing the types of improvement they expect. And Koppelman and Coontz were concerned that the Center might prioritize a writer's voice over argumentative skills and conventions to a deficit. Several faculty reported that they were undereducated about the services the Writing Center offers, and would like to learn more about peer tutoring and the general operations of a session at the Center.

But for the most part, the Writing Center is considered an essential and even celebrated location for student support on campus. Buchman says, "I love having a core connector come in, especially in lower-division programs. You have a particular face and person to go see. We have a huge crew of independent individuals, but a great lesson at Evergreen is that you do have to ask for help." He says that he tries to stay informed about which tutors are interested in the topics he's teaching, including tutors at the QuaSR[4], some of whom specialize in music theory. He goes on to say, "In my time at Evergreen, I've seen Sandy Yannone's leadership of the Writing Center, and Vauhn Foster-Grahler's of the QuaSR, be so transformative. Those places have become welcoming spots and I love going to visit. And I cheerfully advise my students to go visit." He says that he likes that a peer relationship is developed in tutoring sessions, and that there are positions available at the Writing Center for students after they graduate. In general, he speaks affirmingly of on-campus jobs: "Media Loan, the Info Shop, the Scene Shop or the Costume Shop—those jobs on campus are such important ways of becoming an expert and also serving the community. This place wouldn't work without all the students who work here."

Koppelman especially suggests that students go to the Writing Center if they lack confidence in their writing and need to develop a relationship with someone who can support their

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[4] The QuaSR shares a space in the library with the Writing Center, and its acronym stands for "Quantitative and Symbolic Reasoning."

efforts in a more personalized way. She says, "Don't just go once, but find someone who's interested in the class and see that person repeatedly."

In addition to telling students to visit the Writing Center for peer tutoring appointments, faculty said that they tell people to apply for Cultivating Voice, the class that leads to an internship to become a tutor. Mellis happily reports, "I am always recommending that students go to the Writing Center, and then am proud to say that students go work there." She recognizes that there are pressures on the Writing Center to address the needs students have in developing their writing, and thinks that the Center could use more support, but is impressed with peer tutors, whether they are visiting or enrolled in her class: "We had on the order of five tutors [enrolled in one program] and they worked with students regularly and it was so awesome. So I am so grateful for the resource of the Writing Center."

Almost all of the faculty I interviewed recommend that students become writing tutors when, through observing in-class, peer-editing activities, they notice that a student is skilled both in understanding what needs to happen to improve their own or their classmates' writing, and in communicating those changes to other students. Though students do not need one to become tutors, a faculty recommendation can be an extremely effective encouragement. Buchman says that he takes making the Writing Center a vibrant place very seriously, and wants to support as much diversity in the tutoring staff as possible.

Students and alumni can take their work to the Writing Center to see their writing through to its next stage. But where do faculty turn for support with their writing?

In some cases, their work is edited through a formal, high-stakes, bureaucratic process. When Coontz writes for *The New York Times*, items are unceremoniously cut, edited, and then quickly published. Peer-review[5] processes in some ways epitomize the idea of high-stakes writing, as peer-reviewers can possibly unravel the work of years of research if they find that the work is unsound. And though Mellis regards the feedback from her editor at *The Believer* to be helpful and insightful, she is still told to cater to the publication by lowering her word count.

But faculty writers are supported overwhelmingly by close friends, former teachers, friends made during undergraduate and graduate school, and small writing groups. Coontz runs her writing by her husband, who helps her prune it to suit her audience. Koppelman, too, credits her husband (also a writing teacher at Evergreen) with helping her to keep high standards for her writing, a practice that started when they were both students at Evergreen. Buchman and Koppelman both mentioned getting support from former teachers and colleagues. Mellis

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[5]   A peer-reviewed article is one that has been through a process where qualified readers in the author's field assess its ideas, methodologies, data, and wording to ensure that the author is using practices legitimate to the field.

says that though she has had talented and influential writing teachers, she has learned as much or more from her peers about writing. De Acosta says that at any given time, he is working with a small group of six to twelve friends and acquaintances who will read his work, and visa versa. These partnerships and small communities provide valuable, long-term support for the slow and ongoing process of developing one's writing. Taking the faculty I interviewed as examples, I believe that the relationships students are building now can help and inspire them much later down the line.

"Each faculty member at Evergreen has strongly held values around pedagogy, and it's one of our great strengths at this institution," says Buchman. Obviously, these interviews only graze the surface of our faculty's values and practices, especially considering that I was only able to interview a small number of them. Just as faculty at Evergreen are diverse in their teaching styles and backgrounds, each student comes from a unique educational and cultural environment. Faculty can only begin to respond to the collection of histories and aspirations, ideas and matter, that constitute each student. The pedagogical relationship is like any other: a messy meeting of experiences and expectations.

But from this cross section, I can stipulate some conclusions: Evergreen faculty prioritize critical engagement and intellectual reflection over mechanics. They seem to care, primarily, that they see active thinking that reflects on the troubling, exciting, and puzzling things that come up in academic discussion—"A mind at work on the page," as Mellis puts it. But, as educators, they do care about mechanics and grammar, and so does the majority of the literate world.

Like faculty, I want to help my peers write from their chosen perspective with the style, voice, and skills to carry their writing where they want it to go. But, as a tutor, I also want to help my peers communicate with faculty who are still learning, themselves: from their continual involvements in their fields, from their co-teachers, and from students—from you. Faculty spend so much time reading our work, and we spend so much time writing it, that we should all benefit from feedback as a collaborative process. We should be able to look on our work as writers with a sense of accomplishment.

Only you know what you must give voice to, yet only another reader can report back to you how it is heard. What do you need from faculty feedback to improve your writing? What would it take for your writing assignments to help you make meaning of your experiences at Evergreen? ◊