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Teaching from the Sidelines: Using marginalia to encourage good writing

Louisa Danielson

There's nothing like a cheering section. Let's say that the person who is being cheered is the activist – the one committing the action that is being applauded. Now, the activist can be an athlete or an artist – but the point of the cheering folks in the sidelines remains the same. The audience is there to encourage the activist's work. In the same way, a writer has his or her own sidelines. Especially in the case of the student writer, those sidelines are where the student learns whether or not his paper made sense – whether it was appreciated by the audience. To the student writer, the sidelines are just as important – if not more so – than the sidelines for an artist or an athlete.

Nancy Sommers, a Harvard professor of English, and James D. Williams, who wrote *Preparing to Teach Writing*, offer some great advice for the fledgling writer/teacher. While they make it clear that writing and grading are not always easy, there are some steps to take to make the process manageable.

According to Sommers, the first thing to do when grading a paper is to see if it said something. “We want to know if our writing has communicated our intended meaning,” she says (“Responding” 148) In other words, she is looking at student writing as though it was an extension of her own written work. That's a good point to mull over: writers like to know that someone understood their work. If that applies to the world of professional writers, why should it be any different for student writers?

Next, Sommers says that the teacher should convey to the student the effectiveness of the paper. This is where the teacher is allowed to put written comments in the margins. When this marginalia (writing in the margins) is done

correctly, the student is made aware of the reality of his or her written audience. And the written comments can serve as a didactic dialogue between the teacher and the student. Since it would take too much time for the instructor to go through a conference for every student and every paper, the comments help guide the student in thinking about what is already correct and what he or she could change.

Ultimately, the aim of an instructor who writes marginalia is to help clarify the student's paper. "Our goal in commenting on early drafts should be to engage students with the issues they are considering and help them clarify their purposes and reasons in writing their specific text" ("Responding" 155). This means that the instructor becomes sort of a composition mentor, probing the mind of the student to urge his or her writing towards greater communicability. Effectively, the teacher is helping the student to see his writing with a critical eye, looking for opportunities to express his or her thoughts in a better style.

Put bluntly, the teacher is guiding the learning process of the student. The teacher acts like the bumpers in a bowling alley. When the bowling ball of the student's written thoughts seems to trail over to one side too heavily, the teacher can correct it. The student is learning how to send a direct message (the bowling ball) towards the audience (the pins) in order to make the most impact (a strike). In his book, *Preparing to Teach Writing*, James D. Williams discusses the physical process of learning – what the brain does when it learns something new.

In the brain, there are a myriad of neurons (information nerve centers, waiting to be tapped to access information). In order to process an idea, these

neurons have to connect in order to make the entire thought sensible to the human mind. The connectors are called dendrites and axons. If Neuron A is tapped by the mind to recall some kind of information, it will send out an electric impulse through its dendrites. This electric impulse acts like a magnet, hunting for the matching neuron that will complete the electric “thought” of Neuron A. When the dendrites find a complementary neuron, the two neurons connect via an axon – and there! A synapse happens. The thought has been completed and the brain has processed a new idea. According to Williams, “When a person learns a new word or concept, the brain’s cell structure changes, literally growing the network to accommodate the new knowledge.” (210) In other words, in order to learn, the brain must grow.

Can you imagine then, the position of a writing instructor? What a tremendous responsibility, to assist the human brain in its growth! And part of this learning/growth process is done through what the instructor writes in the sidelines of the paper. What then will serve the student best on his or her written papers, to help him or her to become the best writer possible?

According to Sommers, in her paper entitled “Across the Drafts,” there are several things the good instructor can do. Summarized, they are as follows:

1. It is more effective to pose a question than to issue a command
2. Give only one major teaching point per paper
3. Comment with an eye towards future papers - develop writing skills, not just finish-the-paper thoughts
4. Qualified praise is more effective than criticism
5. Save grammar corrections for last

Let's examine each point. Why is it better for a teacher to write a question in the sidelines? When a student receives a paper marked with all the corrections, there is no thinking left to do – the teacher has evidently proofed the paper and has found all the problems. If the student just runs over each page and adds the corrections (comma here, fragment there), then he or she is not learning – he or she is only fixing. Also, the questioning process can be less intimidating than a command. Instead of “This makes no sense,” the teacher can open a dialogue with the student by saying, “How will this point help you to make your argument?”

How can a teacher give only one teaching point per paper? Notice that the instruction is for the teacher to give only one *major* teaching point per paper. “By ... teaching one lesson at a time, and not overwhelming them by asking them to improve all aspects of their writing at once, instructors show their students how to do something differently the next time.” (“Across” 253) Think of it in this way: when the teacher decides to focus on one major issue in a draft, she is trying to shore up a foundational problem with the work. When the student fixes the major problem, many of the smaller problems resolve on their own. For example, if the thesis of the paper is cloudy, once the student is able to more clearly define the main point, the organization of the paper should be able to fall in place. If the student doesn't do this on his or her own, then the teacher can add more comments to the next draft, making organization the teaching point of the second draft of the paper.

How can a teacher's comments have an effect on future papers that the student may write for other classes? When a teacher is helping a student learn a new method of writing communication, she is teaching the student how to

think and process new information. She is teaching the student to be a critical reader of his or her own writing. And the teacher is helping the student learn how to deal with instructions on unfamiliar formats. If a teacher helps a student only learn how to fix a paper for her particular assignment, the student is getting no help at all – it’s like the questions versus commands concept: the student will learn to fill out a paper to this teacher’s specifics. The student will not learn how to deal with future papers in other classes with other teachers. If a student can be taught to successfully analyze instructions and assimilate their intent, then the student has been equipped for a life of success.

What makes qualified praise better than criticism? If a student can see that the teacher put forth effort to read and comprehend his or her written work, that is a gratifying experience. And if the teacher can add comments like “You really made the topic relevant to me,” it validates the student’s place in the class. It makes the process of learning valuable for the student – he did something right! She connected with her audience! It’s that connection with the audience that makes the writing process real. When the student knows that someone cares about his or her work – not just for a grade, but also for the content – this makes the effort of writing valuable.

Finally, why should grammar corrections be saved for last? According to Sommers, grammar is the final part of the writing process. She suggests that if a student sees his or her first draft marked up for many grammar mistakes, then the grammar – and not the content of the paper – becomes the focus. Grammar is important, but according to Sommers, the student should be guided in clear writing that leads to good comprehension before he or she fixes all the misplaced commas in the paper.

It is important to note that writing for the collegiate world is not natural. As Sommers put it, “academic writing is not a mother tongue” (“Across” 254). The teacher must guide the students in the various and scrambling ways of clear communication. It is perhaps most rewarding when the teacher and student assume an instructor-apprentice relationship: the teacher expects the student to be able to produce good work with some assistance, and the student knows that the teacher expects him or her to do well. It is an open system of trust that allows budding writers to flourish.

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