WRITTEN COMMENTARIES AS A WAY OF LEARNING ABOUT WRITING

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It has become one of the tenets of the process approach to teaching writing that students can be their own best critics—if we allow them to be. As Donald Murray has written,

> Our students will teach each other . . . Often a student will understand another student's problem and its solution better than the instructor, for the student is working on the same level. It is the student's job to try to learn and to be a constructively critical audience so his classmates will learn (141).

For many of us, that's hard to argue with. We believe it. Our experience tells us that students know a great deal about writing and can be good critics—if they have the chance.

But how often have we given them that chance, in conferences, in workshops, in journals, only to get responses like these:

It's pretty good.
I liked it.
I can relate to it.
It's boring.
It stinks.
I hate it.

"Why do you hate it?" we ask.
"I dunno. I just do."
We try again. "What do you hate about it?"
"Everything."
"What do you think you can do to make it better?"
"Revise it." And so on.

It's a difficult and often frustrating road from those very common responses to this, which Diana, a high school senior, wrote after beginning a second revision of a short story she had been working on for her English class:

> It's easier each time I go back to my first paper. It's gone through stages. My first draft was extremely emotional and I didn't touch it for months, then more things happened and I wrote an emotional second paper. But things got easier and I combined the two for a third [draft]. The emotion is still there but now I can edit what sounds corny or too emotional without feeling like I've changed too much. . . Now I'm trying to create the best story I can even if the changes are small details, they make a difference. So maybe that's important to get a sense of detachment from your writing—I think it's just being able to write something you care about and are involved in when you're writing it, but you are able to put it down and forget it and it becomes just a story after. . . I think it's important to realize the difference between forcing writing and making it work. It's good to get writing on paper, but bad to try and force it into a mold—because writing is not like solid matter—it does not have definite shape and mass. It's more like a vapor, with no specific volume, mass or confinement.

That's a big jump from "It stinks." Despite some errors in this passage (which I did not edit), these comments suggest that Diana is thinking in depth about some important issues related to the writing of her story. In addition, she's learning about writing and revising in general; she has made a key discovery about "forcing writing and making it work." And she graces the passage with a rather engaging simile.

That's the kind of response to writing I want from my students. And that's the kind of response I began to get from them after I started using something called *commentaries*.

Commentaries are, quite simply, written comments about writing. They are the writer's feelings, concerns, and questions about his or her writing. For my juniors and seniors at Vermont Academy, a small high school where I taught until recently, they were the page or so of writing about writing that I required every week.

The idea comes, not surprisingly, from Donald Murray, who introduced it to his students (mostly teachers) in a graduate course at the University of New Hampshire in the summer of 1987. Each week Murray asked us to submit commentaries about our work in the class. As the 6-week course wore on, the commentaries became the predominant text in the class. In them, we sparked discussions, created and resolved controversies, raised and focused issues, and voiced common concerns about writing. Moreover, the commentaries were a forum for our own thoughts, insights, ideas, and problems as we struggled with our writing. Many of us were impressed with these commentaries; all of us, I daresay, enjoyed them. By the end of the course, I was convinced that commentaries should be part of my high school English classes. I wanted my students to feel, as I had, the satisfaction of expressing my concerns about writing each week and getting responses to those concerns. More important, I wanted them to do the kind of thinking that the commentaries encouraged me to do about my writing and the writing of others.

At first they were skeptical: Was this another one of those schemes to "make us write"? they asked. No, I assured them. "Well, then, what do you want us to write in them?" Whatever is on your mind about your writing, I replied.

They took me up on it. The commentaries, although burdensome for some at the outset, became a forum for concerns that students rarely voiced in class—concerns that might make them sound too vulnerable in front of their peers; concerns that they weren't sure I wanted to hear. For many it was a relief to realize that I wouldn't penalize them for admitting their weaknesses as writers. Steve, for example, wrote this during the second week of the school year:

> I am beginning to understand my writing more and more each day. I tryed a new way to go about writing. I just wrote what was in my head onto the paper. I didn't even think about how it sounded. The truth is that now I have a lot

of work to get the piece organized. I am not sure I like this new technique. Yes, it gets my ideas on paper but when I go back and read I feel like throwing it away and trying again. I also have a problem rewriting stories or drafts. When I rewrite I see a different way to tell something. By the end of the draft I have changed the whole essay. Is this normal? I suppose anything is normal in writing if the writer is happy with the results. And I do feel good with myself after totally changing everything. I think it sounds better. Is it just me or does everyone do it.

In his commentary, Steve confesses to some difficulties with writing and revising that are common among inexperienced writers, though he apparently doesn't know that they're common. In expressing the concern that he changes "everything" when he revises, he validates his own process: "I do feel good with myself after totally changing everything. I think it sounds better." He is beginning to understand how he writes. He still wants reassurance, however, and in my brief reply, I let him know that writers often feel this way.

What's important from my point of view as a teacher of writing, though, is that Steve is grappling with this problem on his own. I did not identify the problem for him; he identified it himself. Steve thus has a personal stake in trying to solve it. Moreover, he has already begun to do so. He has decided that he likes the new "technique" and implies that he'll stick with it. As his teacher, I can encourage and guide Steve as he perfects this "technique."

Throughout the school year, the commentaries helped me identify the problems that the students were facing in their writing. I could, therefore, focus my energies on addressing their specific concerns about writing. Often, one student's commentary would identify a problem that other students were having but hadn't expressed. The students began to see that others were experiencing the same kinds of difficulties, and I saw more clearly where they needed help. Sometimes, the students themselves found the solutions.

In late September, for instance, Meredith, a junior, wrote the following commentary:

> This week I had a rough time and still am, because I like the idea for my topic but I just don't know where to begin. I've already written a rough draft but I hate it. It takes three

> pages to get to the part where I really wanted to start. I don't really know how to fix that either because I need the background information but I can't keep it the way I have it. I was wondering if flashbacks would work for the background information that I need? It's always worth a try.

Meredith's problem is one that many students face when writing a personal narrative: how to work in background information in a chronologically organized essay. What's noteworthy here is, first, the way Meredith zeroes in on the problem and, second, how she comes to a potential solution. It's obvious that she has a clear idea of what she wants to do in the essay, but she doesn't quite know where to begin. Moreover, she realizes that it takes her too long to get to "where I really wanted to start." That realization leads her to a solution: flashbacks. Meredith has identified a problem with her essay *on her own*, and, without any feedback from me, she tentatively decides on a strategy for revision. All that remains for me to do is to reinforce her thinking and to answer her questions about how to use a flashback. After I shared Meredith's commentary with her class, several other students tried flashbacks in their own personal narratives. It's important to note that I had not planned to "teach" flashbacks in that class.

I would argue that the kind of critique Meredith has done here is a result of the act of writing the critique itself. Janet Emig has pointed out that "writing serves learning uniquely because writing as process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies" (123). Emig goes on to suggest that "higher cognitive functions, such as analysis and synthesis, seem to develop most fully only with the support system of verbal language—particularly, it seems, of written language" (123). In other words, writing can become for a student like Meredith a means to the analysis and synthesis of ideas—in this case, ideas *in* her writing and *about* her writing.

In this way, the writing of the commentary becomes a vehicle for learning about writing, and not simply through practice; that is, Meredith isn't learning about writing in the way that an apprentice carpenter learns about carpentry, simply by practicing carpentry. Certainly practice is essential to eventual mastery of the skill of writing. But on another level, writing in this context is a means to a deeper understanding of the act of writing. Fishing might provide an appropriate analogy: a fisherman learns and

perfects the methods of fishing through practice, but his understanding of his trade deepens as he learns, through the act of fishing, more about the sea, the weather and the fish and how they affect the success (or failure) of his efforts. So, too, with writers and writing.

It is in these connections between writing and thinking that I find the most convincing rationale for using commentaries. If, as Emig says, "writing is a mode of learning," then the act of writing a commentary is a way of thinking analytically about a specific piece of writing or about a specific problem in writing—a way of learning about writing. As Meredith writes her commentary about the difficulty she is having with organizing her essay, for example, she goes beyond merely recording the problem or stating a feeling about her writing ("I hate it"); she begins to think more critically about her writing, using her sense of the concept of organization in her analysis ("I need the background information but I can't keep it the way I have it."). In the process, she perhaps begins to gain a fuller understanding of that concept as it applies to writing; at the same time, she has begun to solve the practical problem of how to improve the essay.

As teachers of writing, we sometimes overlook this kind of analytical thinking. Our concern with helping students learn strategies that will enable them to produce good products overshadows the thinking behind those strategies. Certainly one of our goals is to help our students write effective essays. But in the process of creating the product our students can critically analyze their own work, thus exercizing their critical thinking skills. Commentaries are a good way to encourage, record and reinforce that kind of thinking.

Consider the following commentary written by Joe, a senior, prior to revising a science fiction story he had been working on:

> I like the story somewhat. What I don't like about it is that it is too general in some places, yet too detailed in others. I need to spread out my detail to make it more flowing and consistent, I think. Also, I like the idea of switching from one place, in the same time frame, to another, yet do not know how to present this all that effectively to my readers. Also, I want some type of conflict between the General and the Ogre, yet at the end of the paper allowing the General to triumph, even though he may not live . . . I need to give

more background information on the situation, yet do not want to give all that much attention to it, concentrating upon the present conflict of man vs. machine. Possible changes are to have several officers presented in the first person (General, Lt., Sgt., Pvt.) and present background in that form. [But] this would terminate the possibility of the private (mental) battle between the Ogre and the General.

I see Joe's comments as careful analysis of his essay. He quickly zeroes in on some central issues in his essay and begins to suggest strategies to overcome the problems he sees. He moves from local concerns (use of detail, transitions) to global concerns (the central conflict of his story). And he begins to consider a significant revision: to write the story in the first person from the points of view of several different characters. In determining the potential effects of this proposed change, Joe must consider the theme of his story and how that theme is brought out in the story. He recognizes that a change in point of view will significantly affect the very element he wants to emphasize (the conflict between two of his characters) and he must take into consideration whether that change will ultimately undermine his purpose. Would Joe have completed such a careful analysis of his story if I had simply asked him to revise it? I doubt it. But through the act of writing his commentary, Joe uses writing to understand his writing more fully—and, ultimately, to improve his writing as well. (He perhaps also comes to a deeper appreciation of such elements of story as theme, plot, and point of view, which might help him become a more astute reader.)

Written commentaries, then, as I have presented them in this article, serve three main functions:

(1) they provide students with regular risk-free opportunities to express and record their thoughts and concerns about their writing;
(2) they serve the teacher as a tool for discovering and understanding the difficulties and successes students are experiencing as they write;
(3) they are a forum in which students can use writing to think analytically about their writing and in which students can learn about writing through writing.

Commentaries are also rather easy to work into daily classroom routines. In my classes, they involve four steps:

(1) students submit commentaries at the beginning of class each Friday (written according to guidelines that I provide for them in a handout);
(2) I read the commentaries and write brief comments on each one before class on Monday;
(3) at the beginning of class every Monday, I read to the students several selected commentaries (chosen because they were well done or because they addressed an important concern about writing) and, sometimes, distribute copies of these;
(4) at the end of the marking period, I assign grades to the body of commentaries for each student based on effort, consistency and length. (I don't grade them for "correctness.")

I think it's important that the commentaries are shared regularly, so that they become a common body of work that the entire class knows about and contributes to—as was the case in Don Murray's seminar. When shared among a group of student writers, commentaries can spark discussion about important issues in writing—issues which the writing teacher will probably want to raise at some point anyway. In this way, over time, the commentaries become an important shared text.

There are pitfalls to the commentaries, of course. Students can "blow them off," for instance (although this will adversely affect their grade). Commentaries can also add to the already burdensome paper load. And teachers might find it difficult to set aside class time for sharing commentaries.

Despite these problems, I've found that students, even my less motivated ones, seem to appreciate the opportunity to discuss their writing and reading—which many wouldn't otherwise do. (They also realize that commentaries are an easy way to improve their course averages.) As for the paper load, I haven't found that to be too troublesome. An hour or so usually gets me through fifty commentaries. For me, the time is a worthwhile investment. I enjoy reading what the students have on their minds, and it can be a useful pleasure to see them working through their problems in writing. It should be obvious, too, that commentaries can be worked into English or Language Arts classes at any level for a variety of purposes.

Above all, the commentaries regularly encourage students to think in greater depth about their writing. It's gratifying to see them using writing to learn on their own, as Emily, a junior, did after I had asked her class to write a modern version of a heroic tale. In the commentary she wrote after completing her first draft, Emily complained that she needed "guidelines" to write a good tale. I resisted providing such guidelines, since the purpose of the assignment was to encourage the students to learn about heroic tales through reading several classic heroic tales and then writing their own tale. In her next commentary, after a lengthy explanation of her revisions, Emily wrote this:

> . . . I'll finish up this week by telling you that I'm glad you didn't tell me what to do on my tale. I figured something out on my own and I think it's probably better than what I would have come up with if you had given guidelines. So I guess this is an official retra[c]tion of my statements from last weeks [sic] commentary. Thank you for not telling me what to do.

Given the chance, Emily did what we want all our students to do: she learned about writing on her own. In the end, she was—and is—her own best critic.

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