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What Do English Teachers Want?

Virginia Downs

“I don’t understand what he wants!” I hear this statement often from English students who come into The Writing Place bearing papers which have been returned by their teachers for revision. I use this as a cue to find out how well the student understood the assignment in the first place, and then to see if he or she understands the remarks which the teacher has made up and down the margins and between the lines.

Now that many papers have passed through my hands, I find a similar question inching its way into my thoughts at least once or twice each week and it is a question I am uneasy with: “What do English teachers want?”

The first time the question formed itself clearly in my head, I was working with an English 101 student who had been asked to write a paper on an event which had affected him deeply. He had written an account of his older brother’s sudden illness and the shock he had felt at seeing this person who had been not only a specimen of physical fitness, but a source of personal strength to him, suddenly weak and helpless. He described the trauma of walking into the hospital and finding his brother propped in a hospital bed, attached to tubes and I.V. hook-ups. Moreover, desperately ill people in adjoining beds added to his fright, as it was his first time to see what serious illness is really like.

The paper was full of fragments, run-on sentences, and information out of context. I felt these problems were the ones on which we should begin to work, but it was impossible to get to this point for a long time. He could not get beyond such notations as: “I don’t care what you saw—I want to know what you *felt*.” He couldn’t see that he hadn’t shown that—nor could I. It was there, poorly organized perhaps, but almost leaping from the paper in its very disorganization. I sensed his agitation; first, at trying to deal with such an upsetting subject, and then, at being asked for something more graphic, more revealing, more



wrenching. He had been given “No Credit” and asked to revise.

I spent most of the first session getting him settled down emotionally. I let him talk about the incident, doing no probing, simply accepting as much as he volunteered. I also let him express his feeling that the teacher was unsympathetic and over-demanding, not agreeing or disagreeing with him, but listening and hearing him out. After this he was able to go over the paper with me and we talked about ways to improve clarity of expression; such as, better sentence structure, more attention to sequential narration, less abstraction, certain matters of mechanics. He left in a good frame of mind and, I felt, with a pretty good sense of what he should do to smooth out the paper and try to express his feelings in a more organized format.

He returned the next week with his revised paper, which the teacher had returned, again with “No Credit” and a request for revision. When I looked at the paper, I was surprised at the improvement he had made in syntax, organization and clarity. This time the teacher’s remarks centered on his use of language: “What do you mean ‘placed him on a pedestal’?” The student believed (and I agreed) that that expression was perfectly clear. I cannot, at this point, remember what other requests for “meaning,” or “feeling” were made, but they were there. The student was puzzled and demoralized; he seemed unwilling to pour more of his time and emotional strength into this first piece of college writing.

This beginning writer certainly needed to learn that we become better writers by a process of revision. However, since the first paper I saw was a third revision, and two more had been asked for, I felt the fifth paper, relatively free of serious error, might have been given a grade, letting the student pass on to something fresh. I believe he would have come to a second writing assignment with a better outlook and with some extra input to help him, rather than in a state of resentment and discouragement.

We did work through another revision which was accepted. He recently brought in an argumentative paper and has gained enough confidence with The Writing Place to let me play “devil’s advocate” against his arguments, but still expresses insecurity about how the teacher will view almost any statement he makes.

In the first weeks of school, several members of The Writing Place staff worked with Jane, who was writing a paper on her career choice. Her two drafts of a proposal for the assignment had been returned for revision and, at this point, she simply gave up and turned in a draft of the paper itself. It was this draft she brought to The Writing Place. She wrote in long, involved sentences, so convoluted they lost all meaning.

She had, of course, been asked to revise and we set about trying to show her how to write simpler sentences which would express her thoughts more clearly. She had other problems—lack of organization, unclear diction, a tendency toward abstraction rather than specifics.

By this time, Jane was weary of the whole project, but willing to try. This revision at length came back with “No Credit” and request for another revision. Several sessions in *The Writing Place* helped her bring it forth and she felt relieved and even confident when she turned it in the third time. The next week (it was now past mid-semester) she came in at the point of tears. She had a grade—C, which I tried to explain was not a bad grade for a first paper. What seemed even more distressing to her was that from top to bottom the left margins contained solid columns of notations of slight errors in diction (two words used twice in same paragraph), criticism of sentences deemed too short (the ones she had worked so hard to put into correct syntax), others I can’t now remember. I could only feel her valiant effort had somehow been negated, but I went over each notation with her, trying to point out why the teacher might have felt this was important.

This session appeared to make her a little less discouraged and she went off for a conference with the teacher in a calmer frame of mind. She has since brought in a Sociology paper in which she seems much more at ease in her writing. When I mentioned this, she stated she felt more relaxed writing for another teacher.

At this point in the year I can see that very often in *The Writing Place* our first job has been to overcome the sense of an impossible goal brought on by requests for repeated revisions, either in content or according to high standards of compositional mechanics. It is apparent that some students increasingly hate and fear the writing process itself. I am feeling strongly that we need to acknowledge we aren’t going to turn out an F. Scott Fitzgerald in the first term. If students learn to write good standard prose, with reasonable clarity and organization, that seems a very worthwhile goal to achieve. Those with talent will go on to write with the verve and imagination we seek as the ideal. I don’t believe any level of ability improves from being pushed to the point that writing becomes an intolerable burden. Teaching writing as a process is supposed to ease the student’s anxiety, but we have to be aware that the process can be pressed only so far before we bring about a situation of diminishing returns.