A Reply to Medlicott: Evaluating Writing

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Professor Medlicott’s article “Cassette Commentary: An Approach to the Teaching of Expository Writing” contains several ideas I would like to take issue with and, more importantly perhaps, prompts me to present my own theory of evaluating advanced writing.

The fact may be that this generation of college students is “more attuned to electronic visual images and the spoken word” than the generations which preceded it, but I am not sure that our response should be to encourage this lack of familiarity with the written word. In fact, it may well be students’ alienation from written words and writing that has contributed to the decline in verbal skills that classroom teachers have witnessed in the past decade. Perhaps one reason this is true is that students have received the message that few people care about language any more. We need to correct that misconception. In both our written assignments and our written comments on student papers, teachers of writing, especially advanced writing, can provide models as lovers of language for students to follow. Professor Medlicott’s statement that the conversational tone of his recorded comments “is intended to show—to tell—my students that some of the strategies of the spoken word are things they ought to consider in their own writing” seems to me to be a delusion. He has just made the point that students do not make this language transfer from other media—from television or film or radio; why, then, does he assume such patterning will derive from his spoken comments on a tape recording?

More important than the use of cassettes versus written comments, however, are two other concepts about evaluating writing that surface in the paper. The first is Professor Medlicott’s use of student papers to teach writing. He uses, he says, “essays that are patently bad or remarkably readable.” I am sure the students catch on to this dichotomous scheme very quickly and can perceive whether the essay under consideration is “patently bad” or “remarkably readable.” Rather than teaching them to form their own judgments about the quality of writing, this process is more likely to teach them how to guess whether any given paper is a good or a bad paper and then say things that will reinforce the instructor’s evaluation. Although he does reproduce for discussion some good papers, the emphasis in Professor Medlicott’s system is essentially negative; the focus in his directives to the students is to lead them to “seeing their friends’ flaws.” This process is not likely to foster a true workshop attitude of cooperation among a group of writers sharing an experience that will help them improve their writing. What is important, especially in an advanced writing class where the students can be presumed to have some knowledge about and sophistication in the use of language, is a writers’ workshop in which all students have a chance to receive feedback from their peers. This way the students develop critical skills in evaluating writing other than their own, learn to give and receive both positive and negative criticism, and learn valuable copy-editing skills in the process.

Professor Medlicott’s essentially negative approach to the evaluation of writing is also reflected in the kinds of comments he makes on student papers. According to him, the comments on the tape “are directed primarily to content rather than form.” What is marked on the paper—the only writing by the instructor that the student sees—are “the obvious flaws in grammar, syntax, spelling, and the like.”
ie. negative comments. In addition, in the taped comments cited in the article, all the remarks on what Professor Medlicott refers to as "the general quality of the paper's content" are again negative: Joe has failed to develop a thesis statement fully. Anne's example is not pertinent or convincing. Tom's paragraphs seem to float in space. Thus the verbal reinforcement provided by the instructor, whether in written or spoken form, is almost entirely negative. Quite apart from the whole issue of recorded comments versus written evaluation are the more serious underlying assumptions about how writing should be evaluated.

What is it that we value about writing beyond the freshman level, and how do we go about communicating these values to our students? If we think about the professional writing that we have read and found valuable, there are several qualities that come to mind. The first quality almost certainly will be that the piece of writing said something to us that we thought was important, and second, that it conveyed a sense of its significance to us through the personal commitment in the voice of the writer. Thus we value in writing not just what is said but the manner in which it is said. Manner has to do, of course, with such mundane matters as grammar, mechanics, and sentence structure, but equally important are the somewhat less easily defined qualities of tone and style. We need to let our students know that we value not just the bare minimum of competent expression but the development of their own personal style, a style that will touch and move the reader with its sense of conviction, its integrity, its honesty.

In order to develop a personal style, students in our advanced writing courses are going to have to take risks, and I think we want to show them in our comments and in our own personal writing style that we value risk-taking. It requires a certain amount of courage to depart from the formulaic five-paragraph essay or its variants that have probably served our students well enough in most of their academic courses, but they will never write really well unless they are willing to let go of the merely serviceable and take risks with form and style in their writing. If we value originality—and I hope that we do—then we have to encourage our writing students to stray from the straight and very narrow path of formulaic academic prose and experiment with a more spacious style. One of the ways we can do this, and at the same time encourage them to explore more difficult and complex ideas, is to welcome their attempts at writing in progress, to be willing to look at drafts of papers, not just final products. This way we can help them sort out their ideas, suggest forms that grow organically from content, encourage their attempts to play with language, and give them some positive reinforcement for the risks they are taking in their writing.

Writing is a way of knowing, a way of learning. This is as true for instructors of writing as it is for students. It is too easy for us to be casual when we talk our thoughts about a student's paper into a tape recorder. If we are forced to consider our words, to put our own thoughts into writing, we are likely to be more careful about what we say. If we are to encourage our students to develop the qualities of good writing that I have mentioned, then rather than "giving in" to the media-orientation of our students, we should try to cultivate in them, by our own example, a love of language and respect for the written word.

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