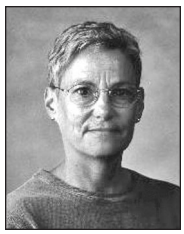
The Legacy of Teacher Comments



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In Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt,* Aase observes that her son acts as though the fairy tales she told him were actually true: "Who would have thought," she says with a sigh, "the stories would cling to him so?"

As a teacher, it does not surprise me that I have a repertoire of stories from years of teaching English that cling to me—Roger and his first-day-of-school handshake, Sue and her gift of windmill cookies during *Don Quixote,* and Claire who applauded herself at her understanding of *Ivan Denisovich*.

What does surprise me is that I still have stories from my experiences as a *student* that cling to me in unexpected ways. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, in *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), writes about the importance of recognizing the echoes from our lives as students that influence our actions as teachers. I tell this story of Mr. Berg, a teacher who has cast a long shadow into my career, as a teacher telling a story of being taught. What does it mean to write a simple comment on a student paper? And what does it mean to receive it?

In tenth grade, searching for an identity, I wound up in Mr. Berg's class. As usual, I sat near the front of the room in the first row by the door. I elevated English teachers to heroic stature. They had an uncanny ability to bring me into words and worlds that matched what I was groping for but could not articulate. So, I was prepared to take careful note of Mr. Berg when he leaned over the lectern the first day of class, stared into our midst, and declared, "This is Sophomore English."

When Mr. Berg announced that we were going to undertake a research assignment and write a major paper, I had no idea what a defining incident the enterprise would be. "Stock up," he said, "on notecards and paper. Pick a topic, and make an outline about what you want to study." With little money for notecards, I snitched some of Mom's unused recipe cards, rationalizing that if a few were missing each day, she would never notice. My research topic: Alternative Schooling.

Mr. Berg gave us six weeks to do our work on this project while, at the same time, we were working our way through the required American literature textbook. I saw this time as a long fishing line stretched out in front of me with plenty of play for diving and swirling and surfacing and diving again. Realizing that my enthusiasm for the investigation also put me in danger of becoming hopelessly entangled in that line, I sought something to help me get organized. I have since forgotten how I stumbled across a copy of the Campbell and Ballou guide for theses and dissertations, but I did. It was not likely I would be going to college; if this was my chance to do a collegiate research paper, why not stretch the role playing to a worthy limit and do the research paper in dissertation format? The table of contents looked like a logical way to organize my study: statement of the problem, review of literature, design of study, analysis of results, discussion of results, and suggestions for future study. And every Friday Mr. Berg nodded approvingly and would say he had reviewed our progress reports and found them sufficiently on task. A few new things to remember, he would enjoin: scrutinize footnote form, follow outline rules—no 1 without a 2—and indent long quotes. But proceed.

In six weeks the notecards were filled with handwritten notes (one idea per card), subject

headings (linked to my outline entries), and bibliographic numbers (keyed to my reference page). They were dutifully stacked and banded together. My outline had been mercilessly checked for any stray 1s without 2s. Text lines were counted to anticipate how many footnote entries could be typed at the bottom of each page. Commas, periods, and extra spaces were all in their proper places in the bibliographic notations. The title page had Mr. Berg's name and the phrase "in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Sophomore English," just as Campbell and Ballou directed. There were five chapters, properly headed, filled with flawless text scrupulously pecked out on the manual typewriter set up at home on the kitchen table.

The two weeks between turning the papers in and getting the results back were filled with doubts and second thoughts. I knew it was foolish to pretend I was a college student. Anyone with *any* sense would not turn in a paper critical of traditional schooling to a public school teacher making a living doing the very thing being countered. The day the papers were returned to us, I sat in rigid anticipation and waited for Mr. Berg to pass down our row. The paper hit my desk first and then the stack of banded cards was slapped down on top. The sleeve of his suit coat brushed my shoulder as he dropped the work onto my desktop, and the familiar scent of Brylcreem and Aqua Velva lingered as he moved methodically to the next desk. The title page held no indication of either a response or a grade. I moved the cards carefully off the paper and turned to my Table of Contents. There, written in a strong hand over the word "Contents," was the grade, A. Underneath, in a flourish of red ink scrawled across "Statement of Problem," were the words, "More than necessary."

More curious than necessary? More intense than necessary? More studious than necessary? More words than necessary? My academic extravagance had been exposed and labeled. Mr. Berg stood tall behind his lectern. "This unit," he said, "is over." Stunned by the slap of his strong hand writing strong words, I waited for any public accounting he might offer of our collective work. There was only an announcement: "Next, we'll write haikus."

I knew I hadn't played the game right and, as a result, this English teacher was being forced to plod on through the next curricular element with little apparent reward for his efforts; it seemed the best he could hope for was a better crop of sophomores next year. I hung back after the bell rang that day, maybe seeking some clarification of those words, I can't remember. More Than Necessary. Period. What I do remember is that he walked by me to exit the classroom after the others had left. He poked at my paper with his index finger; the paper was still open to his comment. "What made you do *that*?" he asked rhetorically as he moved by. The color of my face changed to match the color of his ink, but his back was already to me and he lumbered away. I had no audible voice to respond; none of my words followed him out of the room that day. "Dreams," I said to myself in a voice I did not recognize, "I've got more of those than necessary."

Linda K. Shadiow is professor of Educational Foundations and director of Northern Arizona University's Faculty Development Program. She has taught English in schools and universities in Minnesota, Montana, and Arizona. She is currently interested in how teachers' personal biographies influence their teaching biographies.