Where Does Spite Fit into the Rubric?

Wondering how—or if—her feelings toward a student should play into an evaluation of the student’s grade, author Moore offers readers an honest look at a teacher’s struggle.

**Anna Moore**

I might have been explaining the abstraction ladder, demonstrating style maneuvers on the overhead, or assigning students to editing groups when Theresa walked in ten minutes late, as she did nearly every day. During quizzes, she whispered to the boy behind her. When she noticed my stare, she steadied her mouth and pretended to be leaning idly back. When I asked her to sit up during class discussions, she said, “I’m listening,” her bony chin resting without concern on her forearm. More often, though, she raised her hand in response to every question, whether she had completed the reading or not, and when I solicited responses from other students, she kept that arm high, her petite elbow locked in place—unless she bent it to steady her hand over her eyes. Hangover, I assumed. And you can bet I judged her for it.

I judged her for every hint of inattention, every excuse for late work, the latter offered in an irritating high-pitched whine: “My allergies,” sniffling; or, “My stomach.” I judged her when, at midterm, she requested a signed grade-so-far for her sorority and asked me to lie. I judged her for having a car and a cell phone, possessions I learned she had when she called me from her cell phone in her car to explain how she had gotten “so-o-oh sick” the night before from Mexican chicken—could she come turn in the paper now? I judged her for being smart but undisciplined, for skillfully twisting up her hair (something I could never master), for having groomed fingernails (my cuticles were gnawed), for having extraordinarily thin thighs (opposite image unnecessary), for plainly refusing to respect me or the body of knowledge I was trying to teach.

Of course, Theresa reminded me of myself about fourteen years ago, minus the car, the cell, and the thin thighs. Her partying, class-skipping, and essays with great ideas and themes but little effort roused certain memories. (One in particular of a class session in which I rudely dominated a discussion of *Frankenstein*, a book I have never read.) But the point of this essay is Theresa, and as I sat at my computer, typing numbers into my rubric to determine her grade—70 percent essays, 20 percent class participation, 10 percent reading responses—she had earned a 69.7, just millimeters below a C-. I found myself staring at that number rather than penciling a D+ into her square on the grade sheet laying unambiguously on a folder to my right.

My first semester of graduate school, I received a C from a fiction workshop professor because he disliked me. He had demonstrated his feelings when he, very much out of character, maligned my work in class. A few days later, when I sat in his office and asked for an apology, he refused and said, “I will have to consider your grade very, very, carefully,” his tone crooked with revenge for what he referred to as my cockiness. I often remember him when I’m angry with my own students. I like to think that his misdirected emotions enable me to grade fairly. But Elaine Long Scott says that impartial grading is impossible: “A truth
Where Does Spite Fit?

Teachers know and may not talk about enough is that instructors inadvertently use grades to reward and punish students for their behavior, attitude, appearance, family backgrounds, and life styles, as well as writing ability" (215). Scott is certainly right about our reticence on this subject. When I searched for articles about teacher bias, I found plenty having to do with race, class, and gender. But discussions on plain, old, ordinary student dislike were conspicuously few—ironic, if we consider its frequency. Lacking other sources, I consulted a few colleagues. "I hated that student. Hated him," says Jim of a young man who read a newspaper in his front-row desk during class for a week, ate potato chips for another, and then joyfully refused to read a book written by a homosexual. Jim failed him. The student's work, he told me, never reached passing level. I asked if he was sure about the grade and watched the muscles in his face grow limp. "I thought I was doing the right thing at the time," he said, looking into the wall behind me, "but..." He paused. "But now I think that if another teacher looked at his portfolio, they might have given him a passing grade."

Unassisted emotion can be a detriment to all teachers, but particularly, I think, to teachers of writing. For example, a student receives a C on an essay and a C on a multiple-choice test. Her mistakes on the test can be corroborated with text, either a book or notes she took in class. With the essay, however, she relies for the most part on her teacher, whose limitations as a paragon of objectivity are certainly more apparent than those of a textbook, with its law-like claims and logically striated organization. Writing rules and standards do not apply tidily to any piece of writing, yet in evaluating writing, we are expected to be objective. We are not supposed to penalize students who make us angry. "How could he be so unprofessional?" we might say of Jim, or of me. So unprofessional as to allow feelings to take over in a writing class or to express dislike for a student through her written work—a freshman, even, who confronts complex transitions, unmanageable institutional expectations, and numerous obstacles derived from her educational background! (Rose 1989, 184-5).

The boundaries of professionalism for a teacher, however, are blurred. We can dress formally or casually. We can be a friend but not too much of one. We're encouraged to express positive emotions toward our students—satisfaction, joy, delight—but impatience and annoyance are to be suppressed. We can ooh and aah over our favorite texts, even weep at their power (as does my father when he teaches Tullie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle"). But when it comes to grading, we must suppress everything from enthusiasm to rage. "If my dislike gets in the way of [successful teaching]...I'm not a professional," says Jean, a twenty-year teacher of freshman composition. To maintain professionalism, Jean draws on language when describing students: "I tend to [use] appealing rather than like and inappropriate rather than dislike. I try to reserve like and dislike for friends and social situations." Another teacher curbs emotion with logic: "You can't grade someone's tone of voice," he says. And of course, we can't. We shouldn't.

But Theresa's tone had incensed me. I sat there, staring at my rubric, breaking slowly into a sweat. Her actual writing remained tellingly absent from my thoughts—as did her accomplishments in the course. The truth is, she had revised almost every paper at least once, and although she talked too often (as I might have done that day about Frankenstein, or perhaps that other day, when I kept interrupting that student who claimed that we live in a democracy) what she usually said was exceptionally insightful. But what I remembered, as the black and white on the screen began to meld into gray, was Theresa's smirk, her quiet little giggles, her casual lateness, and her lies. Right to my face. All indicators to me of her superficiality, of her rebuff, of her lack of respect.

"Respect is overrated," said another colleague. "Who cares? As long as they learn." And I had attempted to adopt this position. So all right, I thought, they can implicitly insult me all they want. As long as they learn to write. How good that made me feel, selfless, as a true teacher should be.

"They might deserve a C," says another colleague, "and also deserve to burn in hell, but whether they burn in hell or not has no bearing on their grades." But what continued to drive my emotion—and my teeth to my cuticles—as that damn rubric became grayer and grayer, fading into the background of a stack of gradeless portfolios that tilted just barely toward me, was that model that gets all of us into trouble, especially if we're teachers. That relationship of mentor/mentee, of expert/apprentice, of parent/child, of manager/employee, of doctor/patient. Respect your elders. Respect your professor. Respect your mother. Respect your grandfather. Respect your superiors. Respect your teacher. Don't talk back. Don't question me. I deserve your respect. In this civilization of hierarchy, it is extraordinarily difficult for us to think in ways that transcend this dynamic. And
should we? Respect is important—but if it's not mutual, should it factor into any kind of equation at all?

And what about graduate school? I thought. If you're merely late for an appointment with a professor, you'll be on her list forever. You bet you will. (Wont you?) So shouldn't we prepare our students for the real world?

Graduate school is not the real world.

Okay, then, the corporate world. That's real.

Not necessarily.

Okay, then—shouldn't we teach them not only how to generate interesting ideas, develop them effectively, unearth their voices, use and cite sources, critically think about every printed word or oral opinion that comes their way, and, in addition, teach them the imperative, boilerplate lesson about respect and maturity? Shouldn't we show our students how to behave? Especially freshmen, especially writing students, who will inevitably use the skills they learn in English in so many other ways?

I remember the words of my former teacher Carolyn Matalene, director of freshman English at the University of South Carolina, full professor of composition and rhetoric, a woman with breadth of knowledge, class, and wit, the kind of woman that so many of us novice teachers aspired to be. "You don't have to like your students," she said from the head of the table, a notebook in her lap, fine hair trimmed perfectly around her face, earrings glinting. She pointed at us with one finger, the nail filed into a perfect square, painted a pale cream (the color I had always wanted to wear when I stopped biting mine to the flesh). "But you have to love your students." Love Theresa? I couldn't recover Carolyn's mantra or any thoughts in the realm of the rational. Emotion had taken over. I resorted to calling my husband and explaining my dilemma.

"Did she do the work?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, blinking into the blank screen. The rubric had vanished.

"Is it passable?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then she passes. What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know," I said, but I was listening. Theresa had done the work. So she had been late. So she lied. She was eighteen. More than a few eighteen-year-olds are late liars. They can be flaky, irresponsible, and disrespectful, sometimes intentionally, sometimes by accident. Should I punish them for this?

My own undergraduate performance was far from exemplary. Professors granted me passing grades despite once-weekly attendance and undeveloped essays. They hadn't punished me too severely—except for that straight C trimester from drama professors during repertory theatre. (But I had probably earned those grades since I scantly memorized lines, refused to participate in acting exercises that I deemed stupid, and sewed virtually nothing in the costume shop so I could chat with a muscled sophomore in set design.) Had those professors sat at their computers as I sat now, rubrics fading before their eyes? Had they "given [me] a low grade with a sense of satisfaction?" (Scott, 213). Had my professors—any of them—sat at their computers, eager to give me a grade that might teach me a lesson—the one about values, reverence, punctuality—something like that?

Obviously not, I thought. I wrote in a C-for Theresa and filled in the corresponding bubble. I reached for another portfolio, and the rubric popped vividly back into its place.

References


Notes

1 This professor has alleviated her worries by grading essays anonymously, a method worthy of teacher consideration, especially when we might want to elevate grades because of more complicated biases, like the knowledge of a student's significant effort or personal turmoil (Scott, 215).

2 Names of those who I interviewed have been changed.

Anna Moore teaches at California State University, Chico, where, in addition to her composition classes, she works on book-length projects for which she harbors abstract visions. She is a teacher-consultant with the Northern California Writing Project.