The Letter Exchange:
Balancing Responsibility in the Writing Classroom

by
MARGARET PERROW

It is 8:10 a.m. on a cold, rainy Monday morning in a basement classroom at UC Berkeley. Fourteen first-year students and I crowd around a small conference table. There is a little muffled talking, a little snoozing, several blank stares and a couple of expectant glances. Some of these students are athletes and have been up since 5:30 at football, track, or swimming practice. Others have apparently been awake the entire night, and 8 a.m. comes all too early. “Good morning,” I say, self-consciously aware that my voice — energized by a full night’s sleep and a brisk roller-skate to campus — probably sounds annoyingly energetic to them. But heads lift from the table, and we begin a discussion of the book This Boy’s Life. On this morning, a guest might well conclude that I do most of the discussing.

As a college writing instructor, I struggle to balance the responsibility for learning between myself and my students — a significant challenge since I teach first-year students who hesitate to take charge of their growth as writers and have not yet learned to think about how they learn. Many are passive recipients of an education who feel themselves at the mercy of the teacher and the gradebook. As the semester gets underway, they ask, “Could you just tell me how to fix it?” and “Exactly what changes do I have to make to turn this into an ‘A’ paper?” “I didn’t know what you were looking for,” they complain. In class, body language signals passivity: a chair pulled away from the table, a baseball cap clamped over the brow, eyes that make no contact. They “forget” to complete homework assignments — or even to write them down in the first place.

In turn, I often feel overly responsible for my students’ learning. It’s the “I didn’t do enough” syndrome again; I berate myself after each session for things I forgot to say, topics or skills we didn’t cover, encouragement I didn’t get around to offering. I obsessively draw up lists of things to remember to include in the next class meeting. Last year I instituted weekly printed assignment sheets so students would have no excuse for forgetting. I even asked them to date each item as they completed it and jot down any relevant notes about the assignment, an attempt to introduce “metacognition” into the process of completing assignments. When they didn’t complete reading assignments, I blamed myself for overloading them. When they performed poorly on writing assignments, I blamed myself for not teaching them enough. When they came in bleary-eyed at 8 a.m., I felt responsible for their lethargy. Gradually I came to realize, however, the more I acted the control freak, the more I encouraged the passive behavior that was troubling me.

These issues were on my mind when I attended a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) workshop last year. There I listened to Toby Fulweiler discuss the success he’d had using letters in his college writing classes. It sounded simple: He periodically asked his students to write to him individually, and he wrote back to all of them collectively. Might this be a two-part solution to my two-part problem of under-responsible students and over-responsible instructor? Letters, I thought, would encourage students to reflect on their own learning, to
take responsibility for their work both inside and outside of class. In fact, "the letter exchange" proved remarkably simple to implement, and looking back over that semester I can say that it did significantly shape the balance of responsibility for learning in my writing class.

Here’s how it works. Every two weeks, I ask students to write me a thoughtful, typed letter about matters pertaining to the course. Students discuss their progress, voice their frustrations, comment on their writing processes, react to a reading, or ask general and specific questions.

I read the letters and respond in a single letter of my own, addressing their concerns. I often quote students in these letters, and try to respond to something from each letter. This is not as time-consuming as it may sound, since frequently several students raise related issues. My letter also gives me a chance to recognize and encourage students' work. At the beginning of the next week, I distribute my letter to the class and provide a few minutes of reading time.

The Beginning
At first, students were confused about what to write and had difficulty describing how they learn. Writing about the class seemed strange. Some deflected responsibility, making statements like, "I really don't know what I'm supposed to write," while others wrote lengthy descriptions of their social and romantic tribulations or achievements.

For their first letter, I had asked students to tell me about themselves as writers and students. One student, whom I will call Jake, wrote the following:

Dear Margaret,

I really do not know where to start so I am going to write freely like Peter Elbow [author of “Freewriting,” which the class had just read] suggested. My name is Jake and I... attend the University of California on a tennis scholarship. My first semester at college was out of control to say the least. The experiences that I encountered were completely different to what I had used to. I ended up having to take 100 percent control over my life and I didn’t have anyone to look after me the way I was used too. Many problems where faced that I never had to face before like where my next meal was coming from. I’m still living and hopefully have not been scared for life, so in the end things didn’t work out that badly...

The type of student I am is hard to say because I have had two completely different semesters. The first semester was a disaster because I was having too much fun playing tennis and going out at night with my new friends. The more friends I got and the better I played tennis the less attractive class become. I started to miss a lot of class because I was having too much fun doing other things. My second semester was completely different because if I failed this semester I was going to be thrown out of school. I completely turned around and became studious and got rewarded by getting really good grades. Hopefully this semester I can get a compromise between the two semesters.

This is my first English class at Cal because I am not very good at it and I kept putting it off because it is supposed to be so hard. Anyway I have not read to many essay since being at Cal for some reason. The easiest essay to write is one where all the facts are outlined and the essay can flow without much thought. The essay I have actually written at Cal have been average for the amount of work I put into them. Hopefully this class can help improve my writing...

...writing this letter was hard and it took a lot of time. ...

Jake, like many of his classmates, spoke about his newly increased responsibility for his actions and his ambivalent feelings toward this sudden change in his life. Ironically, as I was bemoaning their apparent lack of initiative in the writing class, students were feeling heavily burdened with new responsibilities. Jake's letter seems to me insightful and articulate on this point. These letters put into perspective what in retrospect seems obvious. Reading letters like his early in the semester, I appreciated my students more and panicked less over what had seemed their lack of responsibility.

Jake's first letter, like those of most of my students, is also articulate on the subject of Jake himself as a student. "The more friends I got and the better I played tennis the less attractive class became," he writes. He claims it is hard to assess himself accurately as a student, since he has "had two completely different semesters," each of them representing, by his own account, a different extreme. Jake is coming to know himself as a student. For now he has no certain answer, but he has effectively
posed the question of his identity as a student at UC Berkeley, in itself an act of responsibility.

On the subject of himself as a writer, Jake has more difficulty expressing himself. He dismisses his skills by writing, “I am not very good at it”; his essays are “average.” It is not clear from this letter precisely what aspect of writing is difficult for Jake, or even what he means by “the easiest essay to write.” Writing for him clearly involves contrary ingredients: large quantities of work and time, but writing, ideally, “flow(s) without much thought.” The writing process, for Jake, is a bit of a black box containing the amorphous dimensions of time and work. His writing on the subject of writing is laced with expressions of dread such as, “It is supposed to be so hard”; bafflement, “for some reason”; claims of inexperience, “the essay(s) I have actually written”; and half-hearted optimism, “hopefully.” Like Jake, other students were only able to discuss themselves as writers in general terms:

I am not a very strong nor confident writer.

As far as my experience with writing is concerned, I feel that I am at an average level compared to my peers.

I enjoy writing when I am genuinely interested in my topic ... I feel that my writings are pretty good...

As I wrote letters back to my students, weaving their voices into my observations, I began to feel more connected both to them and to myself as a teacher. Most all of my letters shared common ingredients:

1. Cheerleading

This is a diverse and exciting group, and I'm looking forward to us getting to know each other better in the weeks to come ... I am delighted by your enthusiasm for discussing ideas, and I can see that we will be learning a great deal from each other.

2. Attention to a common writing problem

A number of people mentioned (procrastination), so I guess it would be a good idea to devote some time in the next couple of weeks to talking about ways of dealing with it. Nancy says, “Okay, my biggest problem in writing is procrastination.” Tom agrees: “Procrastination is the biggest problem for me.” If

it's any comfort, procrastination seems to be an ordinary human characteristic. ... I think part of the solution involves getting realistic about how much we can do in a given amount of time, and that comes from experience. So, as you work on the first essay please keep track of all the time you spend on it (use the form). This way, we'll be able to discuss ways of dealing with procrastination realistically ...

3. Discussion of other class problems

Actually, it seems that some of you knew each other before this class began. As Trevor pointed out, this could contribute to the comfortable discussion atmosphere that has already emerged. Please keep in mind — especially if you came into class knowing others — that not everyone has this advantage.

4. Explicit statements about my responsibilities and theirs

... Trevor would like to “hold [me] accountable for a steady devotion to the discussion of our readings and in-depth views into it” and that sounds good to me! Since there’s never enough time to explore the readings as much as I would like to in class, this will work best if you come with annotated texts, especially questions the reading raised for you.

5. Reflection on class activity

Koa eloquently points out that he “learns best from examples, as opposed to being made one.” This seems to me true for most of us. In this course, we will often hear/read a piece written by a member of the class, or dissect a sentence from one of your papers. Although the whole class can benefit from this process, I never want to make anyone’s work into a ‘bad example.’ I hope you can think of examples in this class as opportunities for everyone to try out choices and changes in writing ...

The Middle

Students continued to write letters every two weeks reflecting on their writing. By the middle of the semester, many of the students' general, vague comments about writing had changed into specific observations and questions. One batch of letters, in which students wrote about the experience of assembling a mid-term portfolio, included these representative comments:
I was amazed by the connection I made between my papers. I did not intentionally do that!

In my mid semester portfolio introduction, I just criticized myself at first, but after some time, I thought I need to write some good things about my writing. However, I don’t know how to.

I’ve realized I tend to start revising before I finish the first draft. What shall I do?

Understanding better the choices
Jake and his classmates were making relieved me of the nagging feeling that I was completely responsible for my students’ learning process. The letter writing made this understanding possible.

These students are making discoveries about their writing processes. The first student is delighted to find, in retrospect, a link between her papers, a process beneath her consciousness working to connect her ideas. Similarly the second student, looking back, realizes that he tends to say only negative things about his writing. He understands now that he would benefit from recognizing some of its positive features. “However,” he writes, “I don’t know how to.” He is making an indirect request for assistance. Knowing now that he needs this direction, I model for him the process of identifying his considerable strengths as a writer. The third student also states a realization about the sequence of writing and revising, and asks the direct question, “What should I do?” — a question I was able to answer. All these students gained new perspective on their writing. In two of the cases, they asked questions that pushed forward their writing skills and self-awareness.

On the other hand, Jake’s letter from this same week does not show a similar level of reflection:

Dear Margaret,

Well, a lot has been happening since my last letter, and that is to say the least. Tennis has been unbelievably hectic. We have played five matches in the last week and a half. Straight after class last Thursday we left for the airport in the bus... Today, we played the University of Utah at Hellman tennis courts. But that is not the end of our tennis endeavors because straight after class we are leaving for the airport. Actually the team already left on the eight o’clock flight this morning and I am making my own way down to Arizona, straight after class.

I also want to ask you for an extension, for handing in my revision outline for my essay. I was going to do that on Monday afternoon but, my girlfriend had a car accident and, I spent five hours at the emergency room with her. So if it is possible maybe I can hand in my revised version of my essay...

Anyway, my term paper is coming along very slowly as I have had little time to work on it in the last week and a half. But in saying that, I spent three hours at the library yesterday doing research and I think it is getting on track now.

Jake

Here the only detail about his writing process is the number of hours he recently spent in the library. However, his focus on his tennis matches is a way of demonstrating to me that he is taking seriously his class responsibilities. Although his teammates have already left for Arizona, he has postponed his departure until after class, and he takes pains to inform me of this point. He also wants me to know that he is assuming ‘adult,’ non-academic responsibilities like accompanying his injured girlfriend to the hospital. In this transition to the world of adult responsibilities, we see Jake weighing his obligations and making choices about his priorities. Understanding better the choices Jake and his classmates were making relieved me of the nagging feeling that I was completely responsible for my students’ learning process. The letter writing made this understanding possible.

The End

By the end of the semester, the student letters contained many insights into the process of writing. The following excerpt from one letter was written by the same student who, a month earlier, had written, “I was amazed by the connection I made between my papers. I did not intentionally do that!” Her writing had, in fact, become more intentional; here she expresses her new feeling of control over the process:
Dear Margaret,

Well, well, well. We have come to the end of the road. As I looked through my essays the last half hour, I see the improvement that I have achieved through rewriting them. This is a practice that I never used to do when writing my previous papers, which were not the greatest literary works.

The third essay I wrote was titled "Famous Native American Speeches," which I thought was very appropriately named. This was an extremely hard essay to write because as you know I have a problem with summarizing things instead of analyzing them. It was a great learning experience because I was really not familiar with the concept of analyzing and this helped me see the difference.

The best thing about doing the research paper was that the library god was looking over me. I had a great experience with one of the librarians, who went out of her way to send me information about my chosen topic [gambling]. Gambling has always held my interest as long as I am not losing my money, and as I was in the library, this was not a high possibility.

I would just like to thank the "Green Pen Monster" [a reference to my green ink on his papers] for all your help throughout the semester.

Yours sincerely,

Jake

Jake here acknowledges his significant progress in revising, reflecting, titling, and learning the difference between summary and analysis. He does so in a letter that sustains his unique voice and sense of humor, and in a tone that is personal and conversational. Compare this thoughtful and detailed letter with Jake's vague and uneasy discussion of the writing process early in the semester. Reading letters like this at the end of the semester, I am convinced that our work towards a balancing of responsibility for learning had been worthwhile. Let us hope that this new perspective can be carried to other semesters, other courses, other life experiences.

Margaret Perrow is an instructor in the College Writing Program at U.C. Berkeley.