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### Dialogue in the Margins

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Mike Rose discusses the phenomenon of “botched performances,” whereby, “as writers move further from familiar ways of expressing themselves, the strains on their cognitive and linguistic resources increase, and the number of mechanical and grammatical errors they make shoots up” (188). One of the ways cognitive resources are strained for any writer is when they are thinking at high levels of abstraction. As James Moffett observes, when the subject becomes more abstract for the writer and the audience grows more distant from the writer, the cognitive load grows, and the writing is likely to show the strain. Teachers value this disconnect between thinking and writing because it demonstrates that students are, in fact, thinking, even if that thinking obstructs clear and fluent prose. Sheridan Blau argues that we want students to value and embrace their confusion, because it leads to advances in thinking as they struggle to discover and clarify their thoughts and the sources of their confusion. Our job as teachers, then, is not to have students avoid complications in their thinking, but to help students use their confusion generatively.

The problem we are describing may be seen in writers at any age and at every level of schooling. Our approach to addressing it is in its principles equally relevant to students and classrooms across the grades, though our examples and our own experience are drawn from the two extreme ends of the spectrum of college writing classes, with Smith reporting on experiments conducted in basic writing classes at an urban community college and Amatea reporting on her experiments with in-service English teachers in a Master’s program at an Ivy League University. Our students experience similar, or at least parallel, problems when their writing reaches beyond their customary and familiar thinking: They wrestle with the complicated ideas they are required to write about and then struggle with how to convey those ideas in writing. One way we have helped students untangle their thinking is in the way we respond to student drafts and in the way we encourage our students to respond back to us—a process that helps our students understand how drafts are stages in the refinement and clarification of thought and that revision must therefore focus largely on content (and intent) and not just on elaborate proofreading.

### Smith: Track Changes and Footnotes

In Smith’s basic writing class, students go through a series of drafts, the second of which is a significantly-revised draft that is submitted to an online plagiarism prevention site that also allows for electronic commenting from teacher to student. Through the site, Smith makes several content-based comments to each student, and students are then required to choose the most difficult changes they made in their papers and explain in footnotes why they made those changes. She also requires that students use the “track changes” feature in their word processing program to show what they both deleted and added since the time she commented on their online draft.

Below is the prompt from a basic writing class, whose students were all part of a Learning Community comprised of courses in developmental English, art history, and student development (a student success and orientation to college course). This paper assignment was an experiment designed to break students of rigid organizational structures and to give students the opportunity to play with language. It was a creative writing assignment with an art-related focus, which stemmed, in part, from discussions students had on the first day of classes about what art is:

*A buyer is looking to purchase a piece of art. He/she is intrigued by the piece of art you will write about, but is not quite sure why someone would call this an artwork. Your job is to persuade the buyer to purchase the piece of art, and you need to do so as though you are the artwork itself. In other words, as you are describing yourself and your history, you are trying to sell yourself by persuading your potential buyer that you are, indeed, art.*

Below is the student’s final revision, after considering Smith’s comments (which are italicized in brackets inside the student excerpt). This student chose to be “a unique piece created by a popular anonymous graffiti artist”; the strikethrough shows what she deleted, and the underlined designates what she added. The footnotes are her comments about her changes.

One thing special about me is that I was created on New York City newspaper before I was attached to my canvas. The artist used the articles of lost children in New York City posted on the same day he created me. So in a sense you hold a part of history as well as a dedication to the children if you consider to purchase me. . . .

~~The abstract throw-up is not as obvious as some of the other pieces of artwork. Some of these details are positive because it will help you too see NYC in a new light. [How? Why?] Being born and raised in NYC, you Anybody who appreciates what NYC is could have a connection to the piece a regular tourist can never have. You can learn to see graffiti from my artist perspective [because . . . ] because a lot of media work was put together to create me. Such as spray paint, photography, NYC newspaper, and a collection of colors that make up my canvas. This can open your eyes to focus on a different modern type of art.~~<sup>3</sup> You may just want to purchase it as ~~a dedication to those lost children right around your area. Your peers may also be interested in the piece as they enter your home. [If you combine the ideas in the last few paragraphs into one, coherent paragraph about why this piece of graffiti is art, it’ll help your readers better understand what you are saying.]~~ I have a sentimental and significant value to my artist and New York City being that I’m a dedication to those lost children around the area. If the public open their

eyes, they can see the city covered in beauty and hopefully realize how much art we abuse daily by not appreciating all that graffiti has to offer. I can brighten up any home, or even be purchased as a background for an advertisement that focuses on modern art and NYC.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In this revision, my reader said the sentence was moving to quickly. What is it that I wanted the readers to learn from this? Most of what I meant was missing, leading my readers to fill in holes. I expanded on this sentence by combining the emotional aspect of my piece, by using the lost children of NYC as an example of a sentimental value to the city. I also added 2 examples why people would want to purchase me. I branched out to the commercial world by explaining how I can be used for advertisements, as well as accommodating life at home by explaining how I can brighten up a modern home, since I am modern art.

<sup>4</sup> I took a couple of sentences from my previous paragraphs, and combined them together to better explain why my buyer would want to own me. Instead of jumping around in the last few paragraphs, I condensed it all into one coherent paragraph. This will accommodate my reader by getting all the information I want to put out, in one easy order. The topic stays together and my reader won't have to put much thought into what I meant about art.

Readers can see from this student's excerpt that she is learning to think about the choices she is making in her writing, even if she is using some of the language Smith gives her in the comments. She "knows" what she is trying to say and why she wants to say it, yet she still struggles with communicating—in the essay proper—exactly what that is. But the point is that, through the dialogue she has with Smith in the footnoted margins, she is metacognitively thinking about why she needs to revise and how best to do so, and is making progress in refining and clarifying her thinking.

### **Amatea: Commenting Feature**

While Smith uses footnotes as a way for students to engage in a dialogue with their reader, Amatea uses the "Insert Comment" feature in a word processing program that allows her to engage in a real written dialogue with her students. The exchange of dialogue that occurs through this commenting feature helps students better grasp their thinking about the theories they study in Amatea's class.

In the first major writing assignment for their in-service class, the middle- and high-school teachers were asked to complete a case study of one of their own students. The in-service teachers were asked to choose a struggling writer and then study that writer in depth through at least two one-on-one meetings. In these meetings, the teachers examined their students' attitudes toward writing and writing practices, conducting interviews with the students, observing the students in the process of writing, revising the work with students, and encouraging

their students to reflect on the whole experience. Below is a brief example of the changes in thinking Amatea's students underwent as they carried on a dialogue with her in the margins of a paper:

The in-service teacher originally wrote: "I find myself saying 'be creative, you can do it' when students run out of ideas, and plagiarism is viewed not merely as easier than originality but as a moral regression against the world of academia, against the teacher, and against oneself. In my analysis of Student A's paper, however, I have to note that my writing instruction does not expect or allow my student the ability to be creative in terms of true originality. I have to admit that when I ask students to artfully craft an argument, I am asking them more to synthesize than create."

Amatea commented: "How would you define 'true originality'?"

The student then responded: "I think I would be the best art scholar in history if I could answer this question, so maybe it's the undoing of my entire argument here. To me, true originality is (to reuse the clothing metaphor) pairing chuck taylor's purchased at a drug rehab thrift store with a cashmere poncho I (sort of) swiped from my grandmother and new, unblemished, delicious leather leggings. Each of these style decisions harkens to previously constructed 'style' images and reinterprets the idea of class in a new way-- so maybe I shouldn't be so hard on usurping ideas after all?"

Readers can see in reading the student's response a clarification in her own thinking about what she means by "originality" and a growth in the way this student is thinking about the progress of the subject of the case study. By asking the student to look closely at and then discuss her own writing, Amatea is encouraging revision as a practice of metacognition, rather than a process of copy-editing.

Amatea found that this method of digitally "conferencing" not only encourages students to evolve actively the clarity of their thinking and writing in their papers, but it also keeps a valuable record of that evolution, which can help them reflect on their thinking and writing earlier in the process for their next paper. Additionally, it is easier to implement digital conferences than to schedule individual face-to-face meetings with each student because it is often less intimidating to students than a formal in-person meeting, with an equal value to both the writer and the writing. Through her comments and questions, Amatea is able to draw the students' attention to specific places in their work, and because they are then asked to refine or revise as they reply, thinking about their writing also becomes a process of thinking about their thinking. As with Smith's students, the writers, when asked to reconsider or defend their choices, are often able to be clearer than in the original text, better able to say what they really wanted to say; this conversation in the margins becomes a text about a text that reveals thinking about thinking.

## Seizing the Margins

We both subscribe to Donald Murray's and Peter Elbow's ideas about responding to and conversing with students in the margins of their papers. We agree that the role of the instructor is less to give directives to the student about what is imprecise or infelicitous in the thinking or mechanically flawed in the writing than to provide responses from an authentic reader about what is going on in our head as we read a student text. We also believe that by providing digital comments and asking students to engage in a digital dialogue in response to those comments, students become more aware of their revision choices, leading them to accept or reject their instructor's reading with full awareness of their own intentions. However, even though technology is central to both of our uses of this practice, we would emphasize that there are many possible applications of this practice in non-digital format. For example, modifying the practice of double-entry journals to fit essay writing and comment-conversations might be a place to begin.

Through our conversations about holding dialogues in the margins of student papers, we realized that there can sometimes be an advantage to moving students into the margins, where their marginalia constitute a productive and active dialogue about their own thinking. In both our classes, the marginalia demonstrates clear and difficult thinking, written in prose that represents an advance in their thinking. So even though our students are on completely different ends of the academic spectrum, the dialogue we create with our students through our comments and their replies helps both sets of students become more metacognitively aware of their thinking as writers and readers of their own texts.

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## About the Authors

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## Writing and Revelation: A call for support for the California Writing Project's summer institutes

Jonathan Lovell

The small but heavy cardboard box had been opened, closed, and put aside-- part of a larger project to plow through the accumulated debris of twenty-eight years of marriage. Its moving label read "Home Office. Books. His." My daughter Stephanie called me to ask if I might pick it up as part of my upcoming trip to Berkeley. Why not?

Steph's husband Mike, mindful of my weak lower back, hefted the box into the back of my car. I'd had no occasion, therefore, to examine its contents until I arrived home later that afternoon and carefully set the unopened box down in the center of our living room rug.

The first items surprised and amused me: the "subfusc" gown -- a black vest really -- that I was required to wear while attending tutorials at Oxford; an endearing picture of me at about age five; a somewhat disorienting picture of my father at a younger age, looking for all the world like a young girl; a college sweat shirt; my framed BA diploma.

Then came the books. As soon as I saw the top one I knew exactly what they were. The red cover with the words "poems," "ballads" and "sonnets." And then that oh so familiar frontispiece: an oval lithograph of the poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, with his large expanse of forehead, short beard, and well trimmed mustache. His left hand holding a felt hat tipped provocatively "open" to the viewer; his right clutching his dun colored vest; those deeply inset dark eyes once again looking out menacingly at me.

I was back, almost instantly, to New Haven in the summer of 1979. Rossetti's "Poems, Ballads and Sonnets" were sitting on my high drafting table. I was reading over a chapter of my dissertation that I'd written the previous summer. Even with my kindest critical eye, I could tell it was painfully convoluted and overwrought: a prime example of what Oxford's Dame Helen Gardner called the "lemon squeezer" school of literary criticism.

The house was quiet. Stephanie and her mother were abroad on a fellowship-sponsored research trip to Paris and Venice. My younger daughter was at a summer kindergarten program just a few blocks north from our downtown New Haven home.

My feeling in looking over my previous summer's work, and reading over the poems that would serve as the focus of my next chapter, was of nausea. Overwhelming nausea. As a poet and as a man, Rossetti was a difficult person to like. He was self-absorbed, obsessive, demanding of others' attention, given to long bouts of depression. To me, his poetry seemed to reflect these attributes: it had a hot-house quality that I found particularly distasteful, seeming to demand that the reader allow himself or herself to be drawn into the poet's lushly overwrought interior spaces. I did not wish to be drawn into this world, either by Rossetti's poems or by his equally lush and overwrought paintings. What in the world was I doing writing a dissertation on this man's poetry and paintings?

What compounded my problem, however, were the consequences of NOT finishing my dissertation. I'd just finished my second year on the faculty at Teachers College, Columbia University's graduate school of education, and I loved what I was doing in my newly discovered field of English Education. If I