
CALMING THE CONFRONTER

*Meeting students' human needs
outside the classroom can smooth
academic progress.*

It was Friday afternoon; I had just finished my last class for the day and was looking forward to the weekend. I pushed open the swinging doors to "Teachers' Alley," greeted two student readers as I passed them at their desks, and put my key into the lock of my office door. Just then I heard the swinging doors whoosh open again, and I turned to see one of my students stomping toward me, face flushed, one arm jerkily waving his theme paper.

"You're absolutely wrong about this paragraph! You just don't understand what I'm trying to do here."

"Come in, Jeff. Have a chair. Let's look at it again," I offered.

"I don't have to sit down and listen to your criticism!" he shouted, standing in the corridor, feet spread to anchor his angry body. "I know why I wrote it that way, and it's worth an 'A', not a 'C'. You teachers are all alike. You tear our writing apart because you think it doesn't conform to some phony standard you have in your heads. You wouldn't know a good piece of writing if you bumped into it. I like this paper just the way it is, and

you can just keep your stinkin' comments to yourself."

I let him vent his spleen for a few more minutes while my head signaled my own anger to simmer down. After all, this wasn't the first time a student had reacted negatively to my "tactful" marginal comments, but I must say, he sounded pretty violent. I tried to recall the content of Jeff's paper but drew a blank. When his rage began to subside, I waited for a chance to invite him again to let me review his paper.

"I have some understanding, Jeff, of your frustration. You feel you have said what you wanted to say and that you said it well. You feel my written comments are totally inappropriate. Would you mind sitting down with me now and going over the sections of your paper that you feel have been treated unfairly?"

"Well, maybe you'll see it my way if you take the time to read it over again. You probably have to grade a million of these papers every week, and maybe you were in too big a hurry when you read mine."

He pulled up his chair beside me and spread out the paper on the desk in front of us. "Why don't you read it, Jeff. Hearing it out loud will help me remember it. Start at the beginning."

He read confidently, eager to sell me on the paper's high quality. The first paragraph was good, and for a second I was almost persuaded that I had graded

his paper in too big a rush. But as he read on, I remembered some of the problems it presented—a lack of focus, a shifting of person, tense, and point of view. I let him continue.

He began to stumble on one sentence, not quite able to figure out what he had been trying to say. "Oh, I guess that should have been *gone* instead of *went*, and let's see, who is actually talking here?" He read silently for a moment,

BY MARGY GEMMELL

might not be fair unless I gave the opportunity to all 90 of my students to redo this assignment. But if the rewriting of this paper improves your writing skills, that improvement will show up in future papers, and your overall grade will be raised."

"If I revise it enough to make it worth an 'A', you ought to give me the grade it's worth."

I folded the paper and handed it to him, not having made any rash promises about possible added points. I stood, an unnecessary signal that the interview was over, and Jeff made a quick exit. After he was out of hearing range, both student readers turned toward me with sympathetic looks. One commented, "Wow! How can you put up with him? I thought I wanted to be a teacher, but if I'd have to listen to that, I'd rather be a plumber."

"He was pretty angry, wasn't he? But he'll come around," I prophesied.

The next week, in his usual front-row seat, Jeff looked as stony-faced as ever, but now and then he gave me a little eye contact as I lectured, led discussion, and even attempted some entertainment in the Freshman Composition class.

On Friday I made an unexpected announcement: "Last night I had no papers to grade, my kids didn't need to be carted hither and yon, my husband had an evening class, and I decided to do some cooking. Now Friday is a little late to invite people for Sabbath lunch, but since some students get tired of cafeteria fare, I thought I might invite four of you to help us eat up those apple pies and other goodies I made. The first four hands I see will consider themselves invited for lunch tomorrow."

How could I miss Jeff's big hand waving wildly right in front of my face? The next day he and three other male students arrived at our house. They all ate like famished refugees. As the meal progressed, I watched the ice around Jeff's attitude melt. By the end of the afternoon, he was as comfortable with our family as a long-lost cousin. And the transformation of his in-class behavior was remarkable. His writing also improved, partly because he now felt free to come to my office for help (with much less confrontation), partly because he became better able to accept suggestions for improving his compositions, and partly because he liked my apple pie. □

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penciled in a few minor changes, then read the corrected sentences aloud. "Yeah, that's better," he muttered under his breath. He picked up the paper and read a little further but again ran into difficulty. He blundered on, becoming more embarrassed as he read. Finally he

put the paper back down on the desk with a tentative, "Well, maybe it does have a few goofs, but I still think it isn't as bad as a 'C'."

It was my turn to make an offer. "Jeff, do you think you could improve it? I don't guarantee I'll change your grade. That