

5 Managing Discourse in Classes, Conferences, and Small Groups

Some colleges and universities have a surprising course requirement for students who are preparing to become teachers: they must take a beginning course in acting and directing. But the need for good teachers to be effective actors and directors should not be surprising. A substantial part of the art of teaching consists of knowing both how to present yourself to the “audience” of your class and how to “direct” the activities of your “cast of characters,” the students. This is not to say that the teacher must be overly theatrical or the class merely an occasion for performance. It is just that effective teachers are people who have learned to present themselves well and to stage their classroom activities.

Faculty members in all fields must learn to play several roles, but the need to strike a balance between teacher presentation—commonly called lecturing—and student interaction—both traditional discussion and innovative forms of collaborative learning—is especially important in writing classes. There is an adage that no one ever learned much about how to write by listening to someone talk about writing, so instructors must fight the temptation to stand in front of the class and lecture too much. The prevailing wisdom in writing instruction for years has been that students learn most effectively by *doing*—by writing frequently, sharing their work with others, getting and giving feedback, and revising. But even these process-oriented activities have their dangers: some students, either by nature or by convention, are hesitant about interacting with others in class, and instructors need to learn how to guide these students into the participatory stream.

The nature of this interaction has, in recent years, become even more important with the increasing use of collaborative learning and small-group work in the writing class. Working with students in groups entails benefits and drawbacks. The principal benefit is that students working collaboratively have the opportunity to become active learners, to teach each other, and thus to learn more effectively. The major drawback is that, in a group, not every student is going to share the workload equally, and often questions may arise concerning who ought to be given credit for what work.

As is the case with managing small groups, learning how to interact

with students in private conferences requires some savvy. First, instructors need to remember that most students in writing courses, especially beginning college courses, have *never* had a student-teacher conference before unless they were in some kind of trouble. Because high school teachers' workloads are so heavy and their time so booked up, most of them simply do not have the chance to work with students individually or in groups. In addition, instructors need to realize that meeting with students in conference alters the interpersonal dynamics that the classroom establishes. In other words, students often see a different person sitting at a desk in an office than the person they see in front of the classroom.

The scenarios in this chapter offer new teachers the opportunity to discuss issues of managing one's roles as an instructor: how to guide the class, how to set up and manage small groups, and how to interact with students in private conferences. Although not exhaustive in their coverage of these issues, the scenarios should prompt discussion beyond the boundaries of their content, to the larger issues of professional role, character, and direction in writing courses.

Master Thespian

Keith Delattre is a second-year teaching assistant assigned for the first time to teach the introduction to business writing. Keith's first year of teaching was marked by general success—his students liked him, he felt very much engaged in their learning, and his evaluations were, for the most part, above average. Several minor problems came up during the year, including a discrepancy in his grading criteria and a complaint from a student who did not understand Keith's (unwritten) policies on turning in rough drafts; but these he handled fairly and diplomatically.

Keith's teaching style follows a general pattern: typically, he begins his classes with a short (fifteen-minute) presentation, which he calls a "minilecture" and then he asks the students to apply the principles or concepts from the presentation to their own or each other's writing, usually in small groups or individually. After moving about the room during the activity, he reconvenes the whole class for ten or fifteen minutes of discussion. For Keith, this pattern not only helps him organize his class, but also provides a model of learning which he hopes his students can use in other contexts. He even has names for each stage: "Introducing" is the stage at which new ideas, perspectives, or theories are presented in their raw form. The second stage, "Applying," helps the students to integrate new ideas into the old through direct application to

their own work. The final stage, "Reinforcing," helps him to strengthen the students' tentative links between theory and application by recapitulating the new ideas in the context of what the students did (and what he observed them doing) in the application stage.

Keith also believes that his minilectures must be as animated as possible because "even fifteen minutes of one-way, teacher-to-student talk is usually enough to lull most students into semiconsciousness." For this reason, observers of Keith's classes characterize him as "almost theatrical" in his demeanor. He moves quickly about the room in an animated way, varies the pitch and loudness of his voice, peppers his talk with jokes and asides, and often uses an overhead projector, which allows him to gesticulate toward the screen or move between it and the blackboard to "keep the students' eyes open." Whenever he can, he wants to turn his minilectures into "something like a blend of educational TV, standup comedy, and charismatic preaching." Several students have pointed out in his course evaluations that this style takes some getting used to.

Keith has been teaching his business writing class for less than two weeks. The students have seemed energetic and interested. It is about midway into the first short paper, in which the students must draft a letter applying for a job they would love to have. To do so, they must research positions in their field of interest by locating newspaper ads and analyzing the stated criteria.

It is Wednesday, and Keith has spent more than an hour planning his class session. The students are bringing rough drafts of their job application letters, and he has decided to focus his minilecture on the principles of revision: what he means by *revision*, why he thinks it is essential in all writing, and what sorts of specific questions students should ask about each other's papers in order to improve them.

Keith feels very strongly about his theory of revision: students should learn to throw out first attempts, cross out whole sections of prose, and look upon their early work as messy and tentative. He feels that most students do not understand revision and think that a decent first attempt is all they *should* attempt. He also believes that students need to rethink the idea of "owning" a text, especially their early drafts. If other ideas, people, and so forth influence the progression of the draft, he reasons, no one yet has a rightful claim to its words or ideas. Drafts are, in other words, communal property, and anyone can "write on and into them."

Toward the end of his minilecture, Keith is feeling especially confident. The students seem to be in generally high spirits, laughing at his

jokes, attending studiously to his points and his carefully prepared overhead illustrating the main principles of revision in business writing.

At the end of his presentation (and after one last joke that meets with a burst of laughter from the class), Keith pauses and asks if there are any questions before the students form small groups to read and respond to each other's drafts. Pam, a young woman who usually does not volunteer to talk, hesitantly raises her hand. What should someone do, she asks, if their draft doesn't need any revision? Privately horrified that the student has not attended to a word he has said, Keith asks what could possibly have possessed Pam to think that her first attempt, no matter how initially effective, would not need any further revision. Nervously, Pam explains that her draft is actually a letter she wrote several months before for a part-time job at a large local law firm. She knows the letter was effective because she was instantly granted an interview and then hired for the position.

Keith, who has now moved over toward Pam, asks for her letter. Backing up to the middle of the room, he holds the letter in front of him with outstretched arms. Feeling the tension in Keith's demeanor, the class seems to be holding its breath in anticipation.

"Do you know what we do with drafts like this?" Keith asks, a devilish smile on his face. The class is riveted to him. Pam sits, motionless, her eyes fixed on the carefully typed draft now dangling at the very ends of Keith's fingertips. "We do like this!" And, with one clean motion, Keith tears the page into two almost identical pieces. There is an audible gasp from the class. He moves precisely over to Pam, as if measuring each motion, and lays the torn pieces neatly in the center of her desk. "Any questions?" he asks.

Within a few seconds, Pam has turned bright red. Her eyes brimming with tears, she quickly gathers her papers and notebooks and dashes from the room. The class listens, paralyzed, as her sobs echo down the hall of the building. Without mentioning the incident, Keith proceeds to form the students into small groups.

The next day, Keith receives a note from the director of his composition program. Apparently, Pam has asked to be transferred to another section, but the program usually frowns on this practice because most of the other sections are full and a switch would require over-enrolling someone else's course. The note ends with a request to set up an appointment to discuss the matter.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- Given Keith's beliefs about revision and text ownership, was his action justified? Why or why not?

- What should Keith tell the director when he meets with her? How should he explain the incident?
- What should Keith do about Pam? Should he set up a conference with her? What should he tell her in this conference? Should he persuade her to stay in his class? Why or why not?
- Should Keith privately apologize to Pam? Should he publicly apologize to her in his classroom? Should he say anything about the incident to the class, and if so, what? Is he at “fault”?
- Keith’s theatrical teaching style lent itself to his tearing up Pam’s paper. Should he change this style? Why or why not? How much should teachers avoid making spontaneous remarks or acting on the spur of the moment in a teaching situation? Should Keith slow his pace?

“Chill Out, Gringo Fool!”

In teaching her writing class, Jane Baker often used outside articles, essays, and editorials as well as student texts to raise questions that students might answer in an essay and to show how others frame their arguments for certain readers. She was particularly interested in strategies that persuade; she wanted students to realize that listing facts, employing a logical progression, and establishing authority are not the only tools of argumentation.

During the first class of a week early in the term, she had discussed several logical fallacies: *ad hominem*, begging the question, circular reasoning, false analogy, *non sequitur*, *post hoc*, red herring, and slippery slope. Students constructed their own examples of each type of fallacy, wrote them on the board, and discussed them. Then she turned to the uses of humor and wordplay in persuasion.

In preparation for this part of the class, Jane told the students to read Barbara Ehrenreich’s “Farewell to Work,” an article on the debate about the English Only amendment. This was a timely topic because some states were considering amendments that would restrict stores from operating in Spanish. As a prereading activity, Jane asked the class to consider how Ehrenreich’s audience might differ from the audience of a regular newspaper story or scholarly article. She wrote their ideas on the board. She also asked them to consider what strategies Ehrenreich might use to address this audience. The students suggested that humor as well as facts would attract the audience they imagined.

In light of these predictions, the class was to read the article carefully, responding to the humor and marking Ehrenreich’s construction of her arguments and her use of the strategies discussed previously. Jane did not say so, but she hoped the students would note

the humor in Ehrenreich's use of a mock narrator like the one in Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. She particularly hoped they would note the wordplay and humor in the hyperbolic arguments that the word *quiche* should become *egg pie*, that bilingualism has made Canada "large, cold, and boring," and that all our national woes began with the importation of words like "existentialism, fascism, and french fries."

When the students came to class the next day, Jane could feel the excitement in the atmosphere. She assumed they were enthusiastic about discussing the arguments in the article. But what happened was that the usually thoughtful class degenerated into a series of personal invectives against people who speak Spanish. Some students complained about having trouble understanding those they had encountered in their personal experiences: shopkeepers, clerks, attendants. Comments were generally along the lines of, "Once I was in a store and I couldn't buy a blouse because the sales ladies were all speaking Spanish." Others in the class agreed and wanted a chance to list their grievances. Although Jane generally welcomed personal responses, she was disturbed by their stereotyping, prejudice, and sweeping generalizations. She tried to bring the class back to a discussion of Ehrenreich's arguments—her reasons for urging cultural diversity, her point that English is already composed of other languages, her humorous argument that hostility toward non-English speakers often represents a misguided paranoia (for example, that *no fumar* means "chill out, gringo fool"), and her extreme future scenarios of a strictly "English" language.

One student, Sam Jorgensen, the most talkative member of the class, persisted in arguing against any of Ehrenreich's claims that Jane attempted to point out. Her exasperation must have shown, because he blurted out, "Why are you looking at me that way? Don't you want to hear our opinion?"

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- How should Jane respond to Sam's outburst and to the cultural biases of the class?
- How explicit should Jane's own opinion be in the classroom?
- Should Jane allow a discussion to continue when she perceives the students' opinions to be "wrong," or at least ill-informed?
- In general, should conflicts that occur in class discussion be addressed directly or in private conference?
- Jane chose this article to highlight specific argumentative strategies.

Is it realistic for her to expect students to suspend their feelings about the topic of an article while analyzing the ways in which the topic is presented?

“I Prefer Not To”

When Rhea Sorkon took a graduate-level seminar on teaching English to prepare to teach her own sections of the university’s introductory writing course the following term, she learned how to use a popular technique called “author’s chair.” The technique is very simple: one day each week, a student brings to class enough copies of a rough draft he or she is working on to distribute to every member of the class. Then the student stands in front of the class and reads the paper aloud while the others follow along. As they are reading, class members put a straight line beside any portion of the draft they feel is specifically praiseworthy, and they put a wavy line beside any passage they think needs reworking. Finally, each student writes a comment on the bottom of the paper, and the reader gets all of the other students’ marked and commented-upon papers back to consult during revision.

When Rhea first saw this technique being demonstrated, it worked beautifully. The author for the day read her draft clearly, slowly, and loudly. The instructor whose class Rhea was observing had obviously used the technique before and had taught her students how to offer concrete, specific responses that would really help the author revise her draft. Rhea listened attentively as the class members praised the author’s clear, distinctive thesis but pointed out one idea that most believed ought to appear earlier in the essay and one passage where she needed to provide more examples. They also commented on the author’s successful use of an occasional short sentence for emphasis but noted her tendency to overuse the sentence fragment so that a couple of passages seemed almost telegraphic in style. And they noted the author’s intelligent linking of related clauses with conjunctive adverbs like *however* and *therefore* but pointed out that using such words to join clauses requires a semicolon.

Aha, Rhea thought, here finally is writing as a social activity. Student writers are trying out their drafts with an audience of their peers. The students are responding adult to adult. They are not picking at each other’s work; they are not merely pointing out mistakes; they are collaborating. This writing is *real*, Rhea thought. And she was determined that when she taught her own section of this course next term, author’s chair sessions would play a central role in her pedagogy.

Rhea's class got off to a rousing start the following term. She had a full complement of twenty students, so she planned to have two students conduct author's chair sessions every Friday, beginning with the third week. That would give everyone a chance to have his or her paper critiqued at least once by the end of the term. On Friday of the second week, Rhea brought in a draft of an essay she was writing for a course so that she could sit in the author's chair. She wanted to do this for two reasons: first, to show her students that she, too, was a writer learning her craft and, second, to model for them the kinds of responses she wanted to get from the students during these sessions. She did not want the students to become just picky error monitors. She wanted substantive, helpful responses. It worked exactly as she planned. The students were amazed to see that their teacher was a practicing writer herself. They learned during the session how to respond to a paper first holistically and then analytically, considering in order a paper's quality, organization, and development of ideas; sentence style and diction; and spelling, punctuation, and usage. So far, so good, Rhea thought.

On the following Friday, the students began taking the author's chair. Rhea had determined to proceed alphabetically through the roster, so Ruby Alvarado and Marcus Brown were up. Although both students were a little embarrassed to go first, they performed bravely. Both read their papers a little too fast and indistinctly, but Rhea succeeded in slowing them down and improving their diction. In response to Ruby's paper, many students still wanted only to correct her punctuation and point out words she had misspelled, so Rhea had to work hard to elicit commentary on issues of a higher level as well. The students caught on to the idea of holistic and analytic response again, and their comments about Marcus's draft were much fuller and more directed toward helping him revise his paper at all levels—ideas, style, and “grammar.”

The two students scheduled to “get the chair,” as the students playfully put it, the next Friday were Binh Cho and Pamela Curtis. This was the fourth week, and Rhea was getting to know most of the students, but Binh was a mystery to her. He never said a word in class. She learned from the course roster that he was a junior majoring in engineering. There was one other upper-division student in the class, but the other eighteen were freshmen. The essay he produced for the in-class, diagnostic writing sample during the first week was short and full of first-language interference problems: the use of articles was erratic and incorrect, the verb forms were often wrong, and many of the sentences were fragmented. Rhea had noted these problems and, without filling his diagnostic with red-ink corrections, had urged Binh to be sure to go to the university's writing center for help on his essays.

His first paper, which he turned in on time at the beginning of the third week, was not quite so riddled with first-language interference problems. Clearly, she thought, Binh can do better if he has time to revise and if he gets help.

When Rhea arrived in class, she found twenty copies of Binh's draft sitting on her desk. She conducted a little class business—reminding students about their assignment, asking to see a couple of students during her office hours—then asked Binh to come to the front of the room, read his draft aloud, and get into the chair. Binh did not move. He did not even look at her. He sat slumped in his chair, staring straight forward. Rhea began to pass the copies of Binh's paper around and asked him again to come to the front of the room to read. Still no response. The tension in the room was palpable. "Okay," Rhea announced, "let's have Pamela go first today."

This seemed to break the tension. Pamela Curtis came forward, handing a stack of her papers to a fellow student to start distributing as she left her seat. She read her paper, and the class spent a productive twenty minutes offering her specific praise and suggestions for revision at the idea, style, and mechanics and usage levels.

Then it was Binh's turn again. "There's no more delaying, Binh," Rhea said, trying not to sound annoyed. Binh did not flinch, and the tension was back in the air. "Very well," Rhea said, her voice rising, "I'll read your paper aloud for you." Rhea took a look at the first paragraph and saw that all the first-language interference mistakes from the diagnostic essay were back in this draft. In the first paragraph alone, there were articles misused and missing, incorrect verb forms, egregious sentence fragments. Without pausing, Rhea began to read Binh's paper loudly, slowly, and distinctly, exactly as it was written. The missing and wrong articles were completely evident; the incorrect verb forms and the sentence fragments sounded totally ludicrous. Rhea paused at the end of the first paragraph, wondering whether she should continue. She looked up and made eye contact, first with the class as a whole and then with Binh. During this brief pause, a few students in the back of the room began to giggle quietly.

Binh shot up out of his seat and strode from the room, slamming the door on the way out.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- What should Rhea do the very minute after Binh has slammed the door to the classroom?

- What should Rhea do, if anything, to try to make contact with Binh after this session?
- Should Rhea stop using author's chair in this class? in future classes? Why or why not?
- Assuming that Rhea continues using author's chair, how can she avoid such unpleasant situations?

Slices of Professional Life

What follows are some "slices of life" taken from the experiences of several first-year teachers of college writing courses. Each of these brief scenarios raises questions about managing classroom discourse.

What's in a Name

Frieda Stolz is a twenty-four-year-old beginning doctoral student in English and a teaching assistant. As a TA, she teaches two sections of the introductory writing course at her university. Near the end of the first class session in the semester, one of the students raises his hand and asks politely, "Excuse me, uh . . . I have a question, but I don't know what to call you?"

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- How should Frieda respond to the student's concern?
- Does it matter how students, especially in a writing class, refer to their teachers in direct address? Why or why not?

Young at Heart

Steve Moriarty, a twenty-three-year-old graduate student and teaching assistant, also teaches introductory writing courses regularly. He is one of those people who will look young forever. Moreover, as a student himself, he frequently dresses very casually: in warm weather, shorts, a tee shirt of some sort, and tennis shoes or sandals. One day near the end of the first week of a semester, Steve had just begun teaching a class session. At five minutes past the hour, he was distributing a handout and beginning to explain it, when a young man who had not yet attended the class came strolling into the room. In a loud voice, this new arrival crowed, "This Comp. 101, section 88456? Yo, looks like loads of fun, don't it?" Steve replied quickly, "Excuse me! Yes, this is Comp. 101, 88456, and we're trying to get class started. Please have a seat, if you're in this class, and see me personally at the end." The stranger looked Steve over carefully. "Well, *excuse me*, Mr. Teacher," he said, doing a pretty rotten Eddie Haskell imitation. "I have mistaken you for one of the pupils in this enterprise!"

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- How should Steve respond to this student?
- Since Steve is and looks so young—like a contemporary of his students—should he do anything about his appearance or behavior to establish himself as the instructor?

Pre-Prof

Gwen Sweeney is in her first year of graduate school and her first year of a teaching assistantship in the department of English. During the first term, she taught an introductory writing course. During the second semester, she is leading a discussion section for an introduction to literature class, and she enjoys a good bit of freedom in what goes on in the meetings of the discussion section. The first week, she had her students read Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Walls” and required them to write a short essay explicating the theme, “Good fences make good neighbors.” She intended to use these essays as her opportunity to get an initial assessment of the students’ writing abilities.

In her commentary on the essays, Gwen focused only on the students’ organizational abilities, style, spelling, usage, and mechanics, and not on their main ideas, their notions of what “Good fences make good neighbors” means. Nonetheless, as she was returning the papers in both classes, she felt compelled to comment on two or three really aberrant readings of this line: “Well, I’m only a TA, but that isn’t what that line means to me.”

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- Is there anything wrong with Gwen’s prefacing her comment about the papers in this way?
- If you are a teaching assistant, what should you say to your students—explicitly and implicitly through your behavior—about your title, your duties, your responsibilities, your “power,” and so on?

A Student Trashes an Office Mate

As a first-year instructor, Michael Barrientos shares his office with two others, Luther Bridgeman and Angela Hills. The arrangement is not

too inconvenient because the three instructors' schedules are different enough that each is almost always alone there for student conferences. Their students, however, sometimes have a tough time remembering their instructor's office hours, and often a student will come searching for one of the other two when Michael is in the office. He has gotten to know a handful of Luther's and Angela's students from these passing encounters.

One of Angela's students, Bobby Pryzinski, presented a problem for Michael. The first time Bobby came looking for Angela, he struck up a conversation with Michael. During this talk, Bobby learned that Michael and Angela were teaching different sections of the same introductory composition course. About a week later, Bobby showed up again, ostensibly looking for Angela, and was carrying a copy of a paper she had recently returned. Bobby looked terribly upset, and Michael asked him what was troubling him. Bobby blurted out, "She just gave us back our papers, and the bitch gave me a *D*. She doesn't know what she's talking about. I bet you wouldn't give me a *D* on this paper. Would you read it and tell me what you think of it?"

ISSUE FOR DISCUSSION

- What would you do if you were Michael in this situation? Explain your course of action.

Virginia Teaches Barthes

Virginia Oldham discovered contemporary literary theory in her second year as a doctoral student in English. During one semester, she read major works by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Luce Irigaray, applying their concepts to both "canonical" and "marginalized" literary works. It was an exhilarating experience for her: no longer did she see literature as comprising a body of standard works, whose themes, motifs, and techniques she would have to learn by heart. Literature was now a dancing of signifiers, a dialectic of aporias and closures, a working out of deep psychosocial complexes. She was thrilled with the vigor of her graduate work. All the while, she was teaching her requisite two sections of general, introductory college composition. Early in the term, she decided to give a lecture on the phallogocentrism of the five-paragraph theme. When a student asked her to clarify the theme of a short story they were reading in class, Virginia cried out in despair, "Oh, you can't mean you want closure, can you?"

ISSUE FOR DISCUSSION

- What do you think is the ideal relation between what graduate students learn in their courses and the principles, methods, and materials they use to teach their introductory classes?

Coco Feels Raped

Several days after the end of his introductory writing class, Terry Macewicz was in his office, tidying up from a hectic semester, when Coco Stebbings walked into the room. The students in his class, both men and women, thought Coco was absolutely gorgeous, and Terry had had trouble on several occasions keeping the male students focused on the classwork when he put them with her into small groups. He knew that some men in the class were constantly talking about Coco and were riveted to her when she spoke out in discussions. The women, for their part, seemed preoccupied with Coco's expensive clothes and chic hairstyle. All the attention to Coco's appearance was, Terry felt, unfortunate because she had a keenly analytical mind and an articulate way of speaking, but the other students seemed to pay much more attention to her good looks than to her ideas. Now she was in his office visibly upset.

"Hi, Coco," Terry said. "Congratulations on the A."

"Look, Mr. Macewicz," Coco replied firmly, "I haven't come to complain about my grade or anything about your teaching, and I did get a lot out of the class. But I feel that you have absolutely no sense of protecting people's privacy in your courses. First you suggested that we exchange phone numbers with members of our conference group so we can get together outside of class. Well, you should know that ever since the first week of class I've been getting nuisance calls in my dorm room and both my roommate and I are terrified. Then I started getting lewd notes under my door, and when I got together with Tom Bonaventure to work on our group project, all he did was try making a pass at me and I had to finish it by myself. Then you read my paper about my ski trip with my boyfriend out loud to the class and I got all sorts of remarks from several guys in the class every time they saw me. Then you left our papers in a box in the hall outside your office where everyone can get at them, and someone has stolen my final project. And to top it all off you pinned your grade sheet up on your door where everyone can see my address and social security number and my grade. I feel like everything you've done in this class has just stripped me naked. I feel like I've been raped."

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- How should Terry respond to Coco's accusations?
- Which of Terry's actions do you find unacceptable in the context of Coco's rights to privacy? How would you describe those rights: psychologically? politically? as a matter of personal safety?
- Are any of Terry's actions defensible and, if so, on what grounds?
- What are Terry's legal responsibilities to maintain his students' right to privacy? Do you know of specific institutional policies where you teach that bear on Terry's actions and related activities in and out of the classroom?

Swearing Up and Down

Jim Sites collected his first set of papers the second week of the semester. He knew that his responses to these first papers would set the tone for the whole term, and he had conscientiously set aside most of the weekend to read them leisurely. He was feeling surprisingly confident as he moved through the first six or seven essays, but then he read a paper that hit him like a punch to the solar plexus. One student, who had never given him much cause for concern during class, had unleashed a vicious stream of obscenities on the page. The invective was not aimed directly at Jim, but rather at life's unfairness in general, his ex-girlfriend's unfaithfulness, and the stupidity of the assignment. Jim sat, stunned, staring at the paper.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- What would you do in this situation? How would you respond to the student?
- Should Jim consult a mentor or supervisor? Why or why not?

Coming Out

Norma Prather is an energetic, take-charge sort of person. For two years before entering the graduate English program, she worked as an editor for a trade publication. During those years, her social life had been completely separate from her professional life. She was looking forward to combining the relaxed social environment of the graduate community with the rigorous intellectual challenge of her graduate career.

Early into the semester, Norma sought out the gay and lesbian graduate group on campus and made time to participate in the group's

activities. She was quite open about her sexual orientation among the graduate students in her department, but she wondered if she should share this information with her freshman writing classes. One of her gay colleagues who had done so said it had made his teaching more difficult, but another had argued that the students actually appreciated his honesty and had thought more deeply about the issue of sexual orientation in connection with some of their position papers.

ISSUE FOR DISCUSSION

- If Norma consulted you for advice, what would you suggest about this issue?

Psyched by Style

In place of a standard handbook in his freshman composition course, Tony Dexter decided to use Richard Lanham's book on style because he liked its brief but memorable devices for helping students improve their sentence structure. One day he asked his students to work on a sentence-rewriting exercise in the book. In this exercise, Lanham showed how he rewrote a sentence that he had found in a psychology paper. The original sentence had several nominalizations and a passive verb; Lanham rewrote it to eliminate the nominalizations and recast the verb to active. Several of Tony's students protested, arguing that if they were to write like Lanham in a psychology course they would not get *A*'s but *C*'s.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- How should Tony respond?
- To what extent should a writing instructor critique the concepts of good writing or the grading policies of another discipline?

Collaboration or Collusion?

Peggy McIngalls was teaching freshman composition at a large university for the first time. Her approach, common in her department, was a mixture of writing-as-process and writing based on the critical analysis of various readings on social and political issues.

At the start of the course, Peggy spent some time explaining how students should cite material from the readings in their papers. She devoted two class sessions to the various ways that a writer can incorporate someone else's words and ideas into a piece of original writing (summary,

paraphrase, quotation), as well as the procedures for citing this other work (footnotes, endnotes, in-text references, and so forth). The students practiced these strategies, using sample texts until Peggy was satisfied that they not only understood the importance of documentation, but also could manage the citation process with reasonable facility.

For the second paper in the course (a “problem-solution report”), Peggy formed the students into working groups of three or four. Each group was to choose an issue from the course readings, search for additional material on the topic in the library, and then create a single, collaboratively written paper synthesizing the views on the issue and making recommendations for its possible resolution. Peggy knew she was taking a certain risk, never before having navigated her way through the complexities of assigning group grades and assessing individuals’ performance in the group. She reasoned that her emphasis on gathering, critiquing, and documenting outside texts would be reinforced by the need for students to accommodate each other’s ideas and weave their separate voices into a single, seamless paper. Final papers were to include a “process overview,” which would summarize and assess the contributions of each group member to the project. Unless a group reported an imbalance in its members’ contributions, Peggy planned to assign a single project grade to all the members of the group.

In the first, narrative unit of the course, one student—Matt Wentz—turned in an account of his experience growing up with an alcoholic father. After reading a few paragraphs of this paper, Peggy immediately suspected it was plagiarized, so powerful and moving was the piece next to Matt’s short assignments, which were poorly written and betrayed a general lack of sophisticated thinking. In an early informal assignment that asked the students to discuss their feelings about writing, Matt had confessed to disliking composition and to having struggled in most of his high school English courses. “I guess writing just isn’t my bag,” he wrote. As Peggy glanced back through Matt’s rough in-process material, she noticed that Matt’s early drafts showed only minor changes up to the final piece. His brainstorming notes, however, seemed a genuine conceptual exploration of what appeared in the paper. Thus, although Peggy had no evidence that Matt had plagiarized the paper, she decided to discuss its sophisticated style and ideas with him in a private conference.

The meeting was a disaster. At first Peggy tried not to accuse Matt or even suggest that she thought the paper was plagiarized, but simply to understand how Matt’s style and ability could have changed so dramatically in just a few days. Yet Matt became immediately defiant and defensive. Sensing Matt’s anger and feeling a little intimidated by

his large figure, Peggy began backpedaling. "I just wanted to wait until I had a chance to discuss this with you before I assigned it a grade," Peggy said, realizing the meeting was going nowhere. "Look," Matt replied, almost thrusting his paper toward Peggy, "if you think I ripped this off—and I know you do—prove it. And if you still don't believe me, come on over to my parents' house sometime before dinner and have a couple of Scotches with my dad." Then he stormed out of the office.

Concerned about the apparent discrepancy between Matt's early assignments and this first major paper, yet lacking any proof that Matt had borrowed its language from some other source such as the files of papers and old exams at Matt's campus fraternity, Peggy decided reluctantly to give Matt's narrative the *A* it deserved (as a text) and wait to see what he would do on his next assignment.

During the unit, Peggy circulated among the groups, giving support and advice, answering questions, reading draft material, and even, on request, providing some written comments on sections of some groups' papers. Each time she tried to join Matt's group, however, she felt an air of tension, as if her presence somehow shut down their participation. Once she left, the group (the only all-male one in the class) would soon resume its chummy, almost boisterous interaction.

Over the two weeks of the session, Peggy felt herself less and less drawn to Matt's group and tried to cover her avoidance by seeming to become more immersed in the problems of other groups. At one point, interrupting the class to make a few important remarks, she noticed how three members of Matt's group sat almost scowling at her, their arms folded over their chests, although one of the members, Bob Webber, seemed his usual friendly self, fully engaged in Peggy's short presentation. Nevertheless, she came away from the class agitated, suspecting that Matt had somehow worked his will on the rest of the group and alienated them from her as a teacher.

After two weeks of hard group work, the class turned in the final drafts of their collaborative papers. Now, the papers in front of her, Peggy was interested to see what sort of project Matt's group had submitted. She glanced at the title, shaking her head: "Untitled Environment Article." The group had focused on the problem of deforestation by the timber industry in the Northwest. The first section seemed capably written but oddly void of any documentation, even though the details (especially some facts and figures) must have been extracted from some other source. Reading on, Peggy sensed something else, a kind of stylistic echo of a document she had read before. As she continued working her way through the first few pages, it slowly

dawned on her that she was hearing bits and pieces of an article on endangered owl species in Oregon which she saw in an issue of *Time* a year or two before.

The next day, she managed to locate the issue she remembered and found the article, "Owl vs. Man." Glancing over the first paragraph, she was instantly struck by the similarity in style of the two documents. By the end of the first page, she had already located a block of four lines almost identical in wording to a passage from Matt's paper:

None among these creatures is more vulnerable than the northern spotted owl, a bird so docile it will descend from the safety of its lofty bough to take a mouse from the hand of a man. (*Time*, June 25, 1990, p. 56)

This bird, that is so docile it will come down from the protection of the high trees to grab a mouse from a man's hand, is becoming a menace to loggers. (Matt's group's paper, p. 2)

A quick reading of the paper side by side with the *Time* article convinced Peggy that Matt's group had plagiarized from at least this one piece, and possibly from several others as well, with no attempt at proper documentation.

When Peggy turned to the group's "process overview," she read the following short paragraph, insufficient in terms of her requirement that each group explain in detail the nature of their individual contributions:

Process Overview

Written by Bob Webber for the Group

We all worked on this paper together, no-one did more than the other. We wrote small sections and then brought them into class and tried to decide where they should be fused together. We made copies of all the articles for all of us and then worked on the pieces we had written, separately. This way the paper involved all of us equally.

When Peggy returned to the paper to conduct a more careful comparison with the *Time* article, she found that almost all of the plagiarized excerpts appeared in the first two and a half pages of the paper. The rest, while in a similar style and level of detail, clearly did not borrow from the article.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- Matt's group provided a written testimonial that they all had contributed equally to the project and presumably stood collectively

behind it. Should Peggy confront any or all of the group members? If so, how should she proceed? Should she convene a group meeting or talk with each member individually? Easily intimidated, how should she handle the meeting?

- Peggy sensed that only one member of Matt's group, Bob Webber, decided not to oppose her instructionally. Should Peggy act on these feelings? Should she, for example, try to talk with Bob first, before confronting Matt or the others?
- How serious is the form of plagiarism evident in the paper? Given Peggy's situation, should she be concerned that this might be a case of simple ignorance rather than the willful theft of material from a copyrighted text?
- What would you advise Peggy about using this method again? What potential political and interpersonal issues emerge from our culture's insistence on the individual ownership of texts? How does such a view sit with the recent emphasis on the process of collaborative writing and learning?

Behind a Closed Door

Ann Redwin was nervous about teaching her first introductory writing course. A twenty-two-year-old beginning graduate teaching assistant, she had been an excellent student as an undergraduate and had even won the departmental award as the outstanding graduating English major. She had done very well on her GRE, and, beginning graduate school, she felt well versed in the standard canon of English and American literature, sensitive to the structure and functions of language, and confident in her abilities as a writer. But this business of *teaching*—that was another matter completely.

Before getting her own class, Ann had enrolled in a workshop on pedagogy, had observed several classes like the one she would be assigned, and had even done some limited “practice” teaching herself. Still, she was worried about her ability to control the classroom situation. On the day before her class was to begin, she brought her concerns to the director of the program. “I don’t know how to behave,” Ann told the director. “One of my friends who’s been teaching for years told me that I’ve got to come down hard on the students right from the beginning and let them know who’s boss because the students will be constantly testing me to see what they can get away with. She told me I shouldn’t even smile until midterm.”

The director, a veteran of twenty-five years of undergraduate teaching, tried to reassure Ann, whom she recognized as a level-headed, bright, dependable person.

“Just be yourself,” the director said. “Treat your students like adult acquaintances. Smile if you’re moved to smile, look distressed if you are. Just don’t let the students know that you’re scared and you think that because this is your first time teaching you expect to screw up every minute. Your students must see you as confident, poised, and in control.”

Ann left the conference with her spirits buoyed, ready to begin the new term. The first two days of the class went beautifully: Ann felt completely in control, and her students responded by doing exactly what she wanted. On the first day, Ann went over the course syllabus and requirements and had the students write about their previous experiences in writing classes. On the second day, the students wrote an in-class essay in which they were to introduce themselves to one of their peers and speculate about their educational plans for the next four years. Ann told the students that she would read their papers that night and provide them with an initial assessment of their writing on the next class day. Maybe the first two sessions went so well because Ann had planned and conducted them well, but maybe they went well because Brian wasn’t there.

Brian Holinger made a pretty spectacular entrance on the third day of the term. About ten minutes after class began, he appeared in the doorway and just stood there. “This section 24702?” he asked, glancing first at a piece of paper he was carrying and then around the room. “You Miss Ann Redwin?”

Ann said yes and signaled for him to come in and sit down. “Hi, kids. Hi, Annie,” Brian sang out. He grinned at Ann, winked and made a kind of clicking sound, and moved to an open seat precisely in the middle of the room. Ann felt herself redden but continued with the class. She had returned the initial essays at the beginning of the hour, using a handout of examples from the students’ papers, and was going over successful and not-so-successful passages. She gave Brian a handout and he read it over quickly, whistling softly and chuckling occasionally. Then, as Ann worked with each example, Brian would utter, *sotto voce* but loud enough for everyone to hear, comments like “You gotta be kidding me” and “That’s pretty lame, isn’t it.” Soon the class was far more fixed on Brian’s responses than on Ann’s instruction.

With about ten minutes left in the class, Ann finished going over the handout and Brian’s hand shot up. He wondered, he said, whether he could introduce himself to the class since he hadn’t had the opportunity to write one of these introductory essays. “Well, I suppose,” Ann uttered, and Brian in a flash was standing behind the podium.

He launched into a spirited narrative about how he had enlisted in the army right out of high school, how he had become the star recruit in basic training, how he had passed his tour of duty largely “gittin’ drunk and shootin’ pool.” He had the class eating out of his hand, and he timed his peroration perfectly, declaring just as the bell rang that he had spent “six of the best years of my life protectin’ democracy for you co-ed and frat boys, and now at the ripe age of twenty-four I’m gonna become one of you.”

The next week was pure hell for Ann. Brian wisecracked his way through Ann’s lecture on the purposes and modes of writing on Monday, through her exercises on prewriting techniques on Wednesday, and through her discussion of a model essay on Friday. He was so quickwitted that the other students would turn in his direction at the slightest pause in the class to catch his show. Ann tried to ignore the problem and did her best to call on all the students to contribute except Brian, who constantly had his hand in the air. More than once, when a student did not respond to Ann’s prompt, a group of students in the back row would say in unison, “Well, Brian?” and there would be a torrent of laughter.

Late Friday afternoon, Ann once again came to the director of the program for help. Describing the situation vividly, Ann cried out, “What can I do? He’s got control of my class.” The director saw nothing to be gained from confronting Brian in front of the class. That would simply give him the audience he wanted, and certainly Ann would have a difficult time keeping her cool in such a confrontation. “Ask to see him in your office hours,” the director said, “and speak to him as one adult to another. Tell him that his constantly clowning around is distracting to the class and nobody profits from it. Don’t get mad—just be firm with him.”

The following Monday Brian was up to his typical hi-jinks, but after class Ann asked him to see her in her office one hour later. He complied and arrived precisely on time. Ann asked him to come in and sit down, and she shut the door. She laid out the situation to Brian exactly as the director had recommended. Brian was a model of humility. He blushed slightly and looking at his shoes muttered that he was sorry. “Sometimes I guess I’m pretty full of it.” Ann accepted the apology and told him that she would see him on Wednesday. “From now on, we’ll work together,” he said on the way out.

The turnabout in the class was amazing. Brian’s wisecracks were gone. When students looked at him for response, he simply looked down to his notebook or ahead to Ann in the front of the room. After a couple days without the jokes, Ann felt she could call on Brian to respond in a class discussion.

He did so seriously, intelligently, and calmly. Whereas previously he had captured the students' attention with his clowning, now he was becoming the model student. As the fourth week of the term ended, Ann congratulated herself on how well the class was proceeding. Most of the students were conscientious: they attended regularly, did their homework, and participated in the class. On that Friday, they had just handed in their second formal essay for the term.

At about three o'clock that afternoon, Ann was sitting alone in her office. She intended to leave about an hour later, so she thought she would read quickly through as many of her students' papers as she could. She had just gotten started when Brian showed up at her door.

"Uh, I wonder if I could talk to you about the paper I just handed in," he asked in a hushed voice.

"Sure," Ann said, "I haven't gotten to yours yet, but if you have a seat, I'll look at it right now."

Without a word, Brian sat in a chair beside her desk. She leafed through the stack, found his essay, and began reading. Quickly, a lump formed in her throat and she began to feel herself redden again. The essay was a story about a twenty-four-year-old army veteran college freshman who falls in love with his composition instructor, "a beautiful, twenty-two-year-old brain who showed me how to be a man."

Ann looked up from the paper in disbelief. Brian put one hand on top of hers and said huskily, "What do you say let's go have a beer. I'd really like to talk to you about how I feel."

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- What should Ann do at the very minute the scenario ends?
- Did the director of the program give Ann good advice at the beginning of the term, when Ann came to her initially? What about the second time, when she counseled Ann to confront Brian directly but privately?
- If this incident were to happen on your campus, should somebody be told about it? Who?
- To what extent does the situation described in this scenario bother you?