I never had to ask when the students got their very first academic paper drafts back. I taught a writing workshop for newly matriculated first-generation college students, and in it we worked on revising the papers my students were writing for their other classes. Invariably, on the day my colleagues first returned those trial balloons, our workshop vibrated with fear, with self-doubt, and often with tears. I could see in at least one empty stare that a student was already on the freeway back to her parents' house.

So I created a unit called “Dealing with Professor Feedback.” I invited a former student to come talk about how she had navigated the mystery of professor comments. She was funny and frank, and much of her advice put the burden on the shoulders of the students: don’t get defensive; visit office hours. “The professors are trying,” she said, “to tell you something about how they read your essay. You just have to figure out what.”

Her language gestures toward our scholarly conversation about responding to student writing: when we comment, we model audience, collaboration, conversation. But I hear in the echo of my students’ language something beyond the axiomatic, something about how we read. Maybe what we write in the margins is a story about learning to read. What would it mean to understand each marginal comment as a tiny literacy narrative, a story of the professor’s experience learning to read not only a student’s essay but also a more and less clumsy tale of becoming more and less literate?

Literacy Narratives in the Margins

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CCC 67:4 / JUNE 2016
“I don’t understand,” a professor might have written, or, far less charitably, “bad word choice,” and I would try in our workshop to help his distraught students figure out what he was trying to tell them, where literacy had faltered, and how, and why. He had struggled reading; they were struggling reading his comments; I was struggling as a translator: this collective struggle suggests marginal comments are more than professorial shorthand. They are all, I propose, colliding literacy narratives, super-compressed stories of our own coming into literacy running headlong into the literacy narratives of those who try to “figure them out.”

My title nods to the many aspects of marginalia and marginalization we encounter teaching writing, “the forces of class, race, geography, and historical events,” the obstacles to joining a community of practice (Prendergast), but here I mean to be literal. What does it mean to think of our grading marginalia as a literacy narrative? What does it really mean to comment, “I don’t understand,” or “bad word choice”? How might we lift the burden of interpretation from students by helping them learn to read these comments as our literacy narratives, narratives even we don’t fully comprehend?

I propose that each comment I have ever written in the margins is a bit of a narrative: moments of “Ah! Your point here makes me think of . . .”; “I am not sure if you mean […] or […] here?”; or when language has failed, and I just mark “?” What do I mean about my own ability to read when I point out that the antecedent of a pronoun is unclear, when I give in to “awk,” when I reflexively add a comma? Consider the professor’s “I don’t understand.” What story is that blunt confession of incomprehension telling? If literacy narratives “prompt students to explore and reflect on how their past experiences with language, literacy, and schooling inform their perceptions of themselves as writers and literate beings” (Alexander 609), what reflections, what perceptions does this marginal comment reveal?

To answer these questions, I coax out the backstory of one of my own marginal comments. Then I think about the student’s literacy narrative: while I can’t presume to tell her story, what we know of literacy narratives—and what we do with them—tells us something about what it means that our two stories briefly share a page. And finally I want to consider how we might reconsider the literacy narrative as a crucial part of grading, of responding to student papers, of being the collaborators and coauthors we tell ourselves we’re trying to be.
In the draft of a paper arguing that the word *love* is overused in American culture, a first-year expository writing student writes,

This national holiday is centralized around love as its main theme, Valentines Day sells more candies and chocolate, cards, heart shaped balloons, and more propaganda promoting love then any other occasion in the United States.

In the margin I put a question mark, write “show more clearly that cause (V-Day) = effect (overused word love),” and I circle the comma. I might do other things in my terminal comment: show her where she makes claims unsupported by data; put pressure on the relationship between “use of a word” and “commercialization of a concept.” Perhaps I try to help her understand comma splices. Here, though, a question mark, an injunction to “show more clearly,” a circled comma.

I’m telling her about the way I read this sentence, what I know about grammar, how I learned to think about argument as an undergraduate English major, how I was taught to use punctuation when I was small, or how I wasn’t taught but maybe “osmosed.” I am also telling her something about the way I *would have written* this sentence, something about my own complex literacy, its history, and its collision with her own. The question mark means several things at once. “Who says? What is your ethical appeal here?” And really who says: where is your evidence? I have been taught not to take claims on faith, however intuitive they seem. So who says this? You? Common sense? Popular wisdom? I might believe you provisionally if we were griping as friends; as your teacher I can’t just believe you, because I have likewise learned that there are different standards of evidence for different rhetorical situations. So when I read this, I get it, wink, but I’m putting a question mark here to signal that I only “get it” in one version of my reading.

I also reveal my question about the claim itself: does this holiday *really* sell more candy than, say, Halloween? Or does “propaganda promoting love” (the alliteration of which I like, but I don’t mention liking—why not?) modify at once candy, chocolate, card, and balloon, and so this is a very specific kind of absolutely-not-Halloween candy? The correlative “and . . . and . . . and” structure means this isn’t the case, but as I read I think I know what she intends—that she means to subordinate all of these other nouns under “propaganda.” So my question mark isn’t actually “what do you mean here?” It is something more like, “do you understand that the structure of your sentence might not reflect accurately your intended content?” I also wonder as I read this what it has to do with the overuse of the word *love*—her paper’s title and nominal claim. I
have a sense that she means to assign cause and effect between the material commerce of Valentine’s Day and the propagandistic mobilization of a word because— I imagine—she and I grew up in the same American culture and because in this culture I learned to read words used to sell things as propaganda. And then I get nervous because even though my sense as a teacher is that “overuse of the word” love is vague and only associatively related to Valentine’s Day, and my sense as a popular reader is that yeah, Valentine’s Day is a crock, I could also probably tease out a way to think of a Marxist argument about use and commerce and exploitation and love and maybe send her in that direction. But because of my experiences in graduate school I lack confidence in my own chops as a Marxist critic, so maybe I won’t bring it up. Or I’ll shelve it, tuck it into a corner of that question mark.

Then that circled comma. I don’t write “comma splice,” because I can’t assume that will mean anything to her. So why do I circle it? Because as I read it as wrong and want to signal that something is amiss; because it snags my attention, and I need to note that but am too tired, or too hurried, or am writing on my lap, or can’t think of the words to write out in full that “this comma is joining two independent clauses, which makes it a comma splice. In order to communicate effectively here you need to use either 1) a comma and a coordinating conjunction, 2) a semi-colon, 3) a colon, or 4) a period. I favor the semi-colon because it suggests a relationship the period would obscure.” I don’t say any of this even though the comma splice evokes this part of my own literacy story: I learned this. But maybe I am also nervous about articulating all of it—I’m not exactly comfortable with the terminology; I always forget exactly what clause means, even if I remember the independent part: I learned this, but not exactly—and here I am as a writing professor feeling suddenly like I need to go google the word clause. So I’ll deal with this in the end comment. Maybe.

Is my student supposed to be able to discern all of this from my question mark, my degraded cursive, my circle? Can she possibly know the density of the narrative colliding with her own sentence here? And why didn’t I circle the incorrect then?

The moment of my encounter with her sentence is only a tiny facet on the prism of my own literacy narrative. I might here also talk about what I learned as a young reader and writer from Nancy Drew or Stephen King or Sandra Boynton or Mr. Murphy’s eighth-grade English class in Topeka, Kansas. Or I might talk about the socioeconomic class crisis I had when I went to graduate school, a crisis that made my writing bold and aggressive in ways I could
not, would not speak; I might talk about the grammar worksheets I stuffed, undone, into my second-grade desk. Surely all of these things are suspended in the fragile circle around her comma.

If I say none of the things I’ve just written in the margins of that student’s paper, they matter nonetheless, and when she tries to figure out what I am trying to tell her, might she need to know them? I don’t know. But what would seem far more imperative for her understanding is the second part of the story that ends in my marginal comment: the story of my learning to read and write as a teacher, which is to say as a grader. In teaching I first started to see writing as a “displaced form of conversation” (Bruffee 641), to understand writing as a truly collaborative process, and to understand how difficult it could be to navigate between how I learned something and how I might teach it. I also began then to understand the “gifts” embedded in the writing brought to me for my care and attention, gifts of thought, time, memory, of story, of good will, of knowledge.

My education in care, conversation, and writing-as-gift remains in tension with a parallel education in grading—the institutional, social, and even student demand for “ranking” (Elbow, “Ranking”). Learning to grade, to respond to student essays, to teach writing by writing in the margins, has been a process of reconciling care, humanity, gratitude—Peter Elbow’s “liking”—with so many other things: the awful necessity of the letter grade; the “contraries” of my commitments to what Elbow identifies as “the student” and “knowledge itself” (“Ranking”; “Embracing” 327); the shameful indulgence in thinking, as Gordon Harvey puts it, “why are you doing this to me?” (45); the feeling that no student will read what I’m writing in the margins, anyway. And learning to grade has also been a process of learning to see into, see through, and respect each of the layers and functions of text and address in front of me.

In fact, learning to grade is its own literacy narrative; consider Nancy Sommers’s recent public look “back across a quarter century of [her] own drafts,” her confession that she couldn’t have known then what she knows now, and her changing marginal comments attest to this (“Across” 248). I grade differently now than I did ten years ago, two years ago, last spring, because of what I continue to learn. That story of my shifting style adds up to a part of the literacy narrative that is my restrained circle around a comma, my arithmetic plea for a more visible cause/effect relationship.

Those two stories—learning to write; learning to grade—are, as I began by saying, only half of the story. My literacy narrative collides with my student’s own. She reads my comments, tries to understand my circle, and must do so
through the kaleidoscopic glasses of her own literacy history, of which I know little. We can ask students to write literacy narratives, but the form only imperfectly tells us what we might need to know. As many scholars observe: the various “literacies” students bring into the classroom cannot be captured in a single narrative; the form itself is not neutral and may encourage students to invent a “progressive narrative” in response to perceived social and educational pressures (the “literacy myth” we may unwittingly perpetuate as teachers); these narratives are neither linear nor static; and much is at stake in performing one’s own literacy (see Graff; Eldred and Mortenson). The brief history of our classroom has also become part of each student’s literacy narrative, and although I may feel in control of what I’ve taught on commas leading up to the moment of that circle, the cumulative history of literacy studies assures me I am not.

But the realization that every mark we make in the margins is itself a literacy narrative colliding with the student’s own allows us to see that we have a tremendous opportunity to coauthor with our students a mutual chapter in our learning to read and write and that without seizing this opportunity we risk using what is in the margins to marginalize still further. I’ll end with two points about these marginal narratives and the coauthoring they invite.

The September 2012 NCTE Council Chronicle features a report on “Robo-Grading,” the outsourcing of evaluation to machines. The premise is that computers will be able to “learn” what real graders do (Culler 6) and reproduce this. Not only will this be more efficient, the idea goes, but also more objective and predictable, evoking Sommers’s 1982 observation that the “reasonable language of the computer” contrasted with “the mean-spiritedness of . . . teachers’ comments” (“Responding” 149).

But if we understand evaluation as itself a process of learning to read and write, as a literacy narrative, we see that the machine is limited by its inability to keep learning. And so, if literacy, as Prendergast claims, “is about learning, about the economy, work, gender, race, and class, [and] also a mode through which we experience gains and losses that are personal [and] unpredictable,” understanding our own grading as part of that personal, unpredictable learning
makes the robot at best a ghost grader, stuck forever at one moment in time. Understanding marginal comments as literacy stories, tales of what I thought here, what I didn’t understand, or what I came to understand, might help us see that the ethics of responding to students is inextricably bound up with its humanness.

And further, in offering our students the chance to see our marginal comments as miniature versions of the literacy narratives we ask them to write, we show them that our narrative hasn’t ended but is now part of and influenced by their own, and we make them part of a real conversation, one that “[draws] energy from the outside world and support[s] a rich and interactive composing process” (Soliday 49). Now coauthors, we share with our students the personal literacy narrative they are helping at that very moment to write by helping us to read, to see how what we’ve written in the margins might be marginalizing and that however sensitive and careful we are as teachers, we can’t possibly know exactly what story we’ve just written ourselves into.

**Note**
1. The language of the “gift” appears again and again in scholarship on grading: see, for example, Sommers, “Across”; Bloom; Geller et al. I can’t help thinking of Walter Benjamin’s “Storyteller,” an essay concerned with precapitalist economies in which stories are offered as counsel and can be passed along (I take it) as gifts.

**Works Cited**


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