

# Creating Coherence from Fragments: A Developing Teacher Frames Her End-of-Semester Evaluations

As teachers, we *become* the stories we choose to tell. – Mary Jalongo and Joan P. Isenberg

## Texas Christian University

**Spring 2018, ENGL 10803 Intro Comp:Writing as Inquiry Section 035**  
Instructor: Kelm, Sara (Primary)

### Student 1

nothing the class has nothing to do with the work that you are tasked with, as the class after is what talks about the homework not the one before you try to do the homework. Class is boring and dull, if attendance wasn't required, i would never be in this class. There are too man readings. she asks for too pages for each class, she teaches as if she is the only class on her schedule and therefore many kids don't do the readings. even thought people do not do the readings there is enough room to bs a majority of the talk as long as you are semi competent. reading 20 pages about what a primary source is, is the dumbest thing.

She needs to not teach, find someone else, she only a graduate TA so it can't be that hard to find someone else in all of TCU, or even the DFW area.

### Student 2

The information Ms. Kelm provided during each 1 hour and 20 minutes class period could easily be explained in under 10 minutes. Class is very boring and easy to lose focus because each one little thing is explained and dragged on for 20 mins. It seemed as though Ms. Kelm was just coming up with little things to explain on the spot just to fill the class period time slot. Would be more suited to the needs of Kindergarteners.

As most university instructors know, anonymous course evaluations can be a place where students provide helpful feedback, or they can also be a place where tired, stressed, and disgruntled students express their frustrations. Regardless, the results are often used as a measure of an instructor's efficacy. Evaluations can be particularly challenging for graduate instructors who often feel divided between their roles as students with their own schoolwork and instructors with professional, advisory, and grading obligations. The comments above are from evaluations of my writing course at Texas Christian University in Spring 2018. What follows is my attempt to understand, interpret, and frame these critical comments according to different audiences, assessing and reflecting on the success of the course, the semester, and myself as a teacher.

## Context for Evaluations

Texas Christian University is a private liberal arts university in Fort Worth, TX.

Established in 1873, the university has an enrollment of 9,445 undergraduates and 1,473 graduate students, for a total enrollment of 10,918. The university's mission is to "educate individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community."

The university is an R2 research university, boasting 36 areas of doctoral study. The student/faculty ratio is about 13:1, and the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate is 91.5%.

Estimated annual cost, including tuition, fees, room and board, books, and supplies is \$60,704.<sup>8</sup>

*ENGL 10803 Introduction to Composition: Writing as Inquiry* is a class for first-year students. Students may test out of the class due to transfer credit, CLEP (55 or higher), or AP scores (3 or higher on Language or Literature exam). The course satisfies the Written Communication 1 requirement in the TCU Core Curriculum. The learning outcomes are as follows: students will demonstrate the ability to write in a range of genres, using appropriate rhetorical conventions; students will demonstrate competency in reading, quoting and citing sources, as well as competency in balancing their own voices with secondary sources; students will demonstrate the ability to employ flexible strategies for generating and revising their writing.<sup>9</sup> Themed sections on a range of topics may be offered and will be designated with a descriptive course title.

In spring 2018, sixteen sections of ENGL 10803 were taught. Eleven were taught by graduate instructors; two courses were themed. Each section had a maximum enrollment of twenty students. Graduate instructors are encouraged to ask students for feedback throughout the

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<sup>8</sup> Texas Christian University. "TCU at a Glance." *TCU: About*, 2018. [www.tcu.edu/at-a-glance.asp](http://www.tcu.edu/at-a-glance.asp).

<sup>9</sup> Texas Christian University Composition Program. "TCU Core Learning Outcomes WCO 1." *Graduate Instructor Teacher's Guide 2017-2018*, p. 10.

semester; many instructors ask students to complete informal midterm course evaluations.

Graduate instructors are also encouraged to provide students with class time at the end of the semester to fill out their final course evaluations. Graduate instructors include and reflect on course evaluations in their annual teaching portfolio, reviewed by the Writing Program Administrator. The teaching portfolio serves as an application for the graduate teaching award, and as a chance for graduate students to begin drafting job materials they will eventually need.

Nineteen students were enrolled in ENGL 10803.35 during the spring semester of 2018. The class met in Reed 120 on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:30 to 11:00 AM. The class's theme was online digital writing; students published their work on their personal Weebly websites, which they designed and created. The major projects of the class were an analysis of the student's own social media presence, a collaborative TCU-pedia page, a profile of an online community, a revision of that profile into another form, and three rhetorical analysis blogs. Attendance was not required, though missing more than three weeks of the course was grounds for failure; no students approached the attendance limit.

Sixteen students in ENGL 10803.35 completed end-of-semester course evaluations. Silent work time was offered to students during the final week of class, during which they could work on their revision projects or complete their course evaluations. All nineteen students also completed a reflection on the course and their participation; this reflection was submitted during the final period and worth 5% of students' final grade.

### **Frame 1: Graduate Instructor Teaching Portfolio**

*Audience: TCU Writing Program Administrator*

I submitted this themed version of ENGL 10803, “Writing for Online Communities,” for approval by the composition committee in fall 2018, and the course was approved to be taught in spring 2018. Given that I had not taught this themed course before, I asked students to provide feedback throughout the semester, including at midterm and the end of the semester, along with the university-wide anonymous course reflection. The students’ final reflections of the class, submitted with their names appended for a grade, were largely positive. They revealed the class had a heavy workload and the reading was not always helpful—information I had already realized and planned to revise for future iterations of the course—but students indicated they enjoyed learning about composing online. The main goal of this themed course was an increased intentionality in engagement with online environments, so from these reflections I felt the class had been successful.

The responses on the anonymous course evaluations were more mixed. All responses indicated that I treated students fairly and with civility and respect (selecting either Strongly Agree or Agree). The majority of students also indicated that I encouraged active involvement, students felt welcome to seek help from me, and I provided good feedback, though response was mixed about my preparation and provision of clear explanations. In the majority of these categories, one or two students marked disagree; these individuals made the three highly negative comments included at the beginning of this section of my teaching portfolio.

Since this was the pilot run of this course, I agree that at times my explanations were not as clear as possible. The refining of prompts and rubrics is a process, and I learned valuable lessons throughout the semester about how explicit to be about expectations and how to teach students to create online content. The next time I teach this course, I would hope the percentage of students who consider my explanations clear and lessons well-prepared would rise.

The students and I had good camaraderie, which I worked to foster through being personable, approachable, and starting each class asking students what was making them happy that day. I communicated to my students that I was a graduate student and I was doing classwork and research as they were. I had no problems with any students in my class, and attendance was good (much better than my fall 2017 class). Students seemed mostly engaged in classwork and projects, both whole class and small group. As such, these particular negative comments surprised me with their frustration and dissatisfaction, as no students approached me to express concerns like the ones recorded above, nor did these concerns appear on any in-class reflections. However, criticism from students is valuable, even criticism that is unexpected.

The first comment made by Student 1 indicates classtime had nothing to do with the work of the class, though the majority of classtime was devoted to the practice of concepts students would be employing in their unit projects. I explained early in the course that homework was to prepare students for conversation and discussion, yet Student 1 indicates they<sup>10</sup> felt homework should be done after the class period in which we discussed the concepts. The student's point is valid, and I will consider how I might reorganize information to provide students with the information they need to do homework well. I recognized early in the semester I did not effectively hold students accountable for the reading. Student 1's comment about too much reading may indicate I should have discussed strategies for reading and skimming in class, providing students with the skills to manage reading loads. Additionally, perhaps I was overly positive in my responses during discussions, even when students clearly did not read adequately, thus providing them encouragement for their "BS"ing.

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<sup>10</sup> I will use "they" as a singular pronoun, given I do not know the gender identities of the anonymous students. See Merriam-Webster for more on the use of "they" as a singular pronoun: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/they>.

Student 2 also indicated that my explanations were too extensive, though other students reported they felt the course moved quickly and they needed the amount of explanation I provided. Perhaps from this comment, I can extrapolate that for an hour and 20 minute class, I need to provide more dynamic movement and change throughout the class period; while I did break up the class with discussion, short presentations of concepts, and group work, perhaps more activities would help the time go by more quickly and in more successful ways.

The final comment from Student 1 regarding their opinion that I should not be teaching due to my graduate student status counters the choice I made to reveal my graduate student status to my students. The fact that I am in a graduate program, doing research alongside my students, makes me a fellow seeker of knowledge, and I believe the research, reading, and scheduling required with my enrollment in coursework helps me empathize with and relate to my students. However, the risk is always that students will consider me less qualified to teach their course, though I have an advanced degree, have been teaching for twelve semesters at the college level, and consider composition pedagogy the core of my research interests. However, explaining to my students what makes me qualified to teach might seem defensive, a stance I wish to avoid in the classroom, and so I will consider in the future how I reveal my graduate student status. I do imagine there will always be students for whom my student status means I deserve less respect, regardless of the other degrees I have earned and the work that I do.

Ultimately, these evaluations are not as positive as I would like, particularly for a class that I so carefully crafted and enjoyed teaching. However, I am grateful for the time that students took to respond, particularly the positive comments that are easy to forget alongside the critical comments like the ones above. Over the past two years, I have worked to critically reflect on my teaching, exploring how I do things, why I do them, and how they might be better for both

myself and my students. Yet that critical reflection always falters a bit at the end of the semester, especially when I’m balancing my life as a graduate student with my life as a teacher, when seminar papers and grades are due all at the same time. Over the summer, I will do more reflective work to process and interpret what I can from the comments provided and improve this course and my teaching in the semesters ahead.

## **Frame 2: Rhetorical Analysis**

### *Audience: Fellow Graduate Students/Classmates*

Students 1 and 2 use a number of rhetorical strategies in their course evaluations to mixed success. Student 1 did not feel the need to use proper punctuation or syntax, which may indicate they did this evaluation in a rush, did it on a phone (where it is easy to fall into “text message speak”), or did not care enough to proofread. Missing words are also apparent, and while comprehension is still possible, the writer’s ethos appeals have lessened, at least to their academic audience. The student’s reference to the student and his classmates as “kids” is unique as they do not apparently consider themselves an adult speaking to other adults. This rhetorical choice parallels the somewhat petulant tone, also revealed in the phrase “the dumbest thing.”

Student 1 does not appear to have any qualms about referring to their comments in class as “BS” (common colloquial abbreviation for “bullshit”), indicating the student’s perception that their comments did not add to the conversation, nor were they meant to. A logical outcome of this line of reasoning is that the discussions themselves had no purpose, only filling time. The second student takes up this theme, indicating the class was “very boring” and concepts could have been explained in as few as ten minutes. This comment devalues the activities and discussions of the class. The student indicates that those elements just filled time, instead of

being vital and crucial to the knowledge-building of the “ten minute” concepts. The overall goal of class, for this student, was knowledge transfer from the instructor to the student, and the student feels this transfer could have happened more efficiently. Student 1 does not appear to consider themselves part of the knowledge-creation process, despite frequent in-class activities and co-learning/small group opportunities, which this student coded as “busy work” rather than work in pursuit of knowledge.

Student 2 does refer to the instructor as “Ms. Kelm,” rather than simply “she,” indicating a higher level of respect and understanding of context and audience than Student 1. The second comment is also more carefully composed, though the final fragment “Would be more suited to the needs of Kindergarteners” is a bit rhetorically puzzling. Is the student saying the class content, concerning writing in online environments, was more suited to young children? Or the over-long explanations? The activities? While an interesting comparison, it ultimately both reduces the importance of the class content and refers to the instructor as a Kindergarten teacher (which is an important position within the educational system, but in this case seems intended as a slight). This comment may also be gendered, as it is unlikely that a male instructor would be implicitly coded as a Kindergarten teacher, due to the stereotypical perception of an elementary school teacher as female.

Lastly, the final comment of Student 1 is a run-on sentence with both declarative and imperative components. Thus we return to the concept of audience; Student 1 seems to indicate they believe the evaluations will be read by someone with hiring and firing capabilities. The student also refers to the instructor’s graduate student status, calling her a “graduate TA” (while also missing a verb), indicating that someone else—whether inside TCU or in the larger Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex—could do the job of the instructor. While assumedly this student would

require that the replacement have an advanced degree, require less reading, not require attendance, and be less dull, the student seems to also indicate that anyone would be better than this particular instructor, and also that nearly anyone else could do her job. This imperative, boldly asserted by a first-year university student, is impressive in its confidence, while being unfounded by clear evidence. Together, these two students present interesting rhetorical cases for the inadequacy of their writing instructor, as revealed through a close reading of their comments.

### **Frame 3: Doctoral Advising Session**

#### ***Primary Audience: Director of Graduate Program***

In my final semester of coursework as a PhD student in Rhetoric and Composition at Texas Christian University, I took Modern Rhetoric with Dr. Ann George, and my final project concerned the scholarly treatment and reclamation of Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. I hope to continue this research and revise this article for publication. I also took Research Practices with Dr. Brad Lucas, during which I designed a research project studying the use of reflection in the composition of graduate instructor teacher identity and a bibliographic review essay about the use of autoethnography in the field of rhetoric and composition. I plan to revise this article for publication in *Rhetoric Review*. Additionally, from this class came a proposal with two colleagues for a panel presentation about the teaching and learning of diverse research methods. This proposal was accepted, and we look forward to representing TCU at the Watson conference in Louisville, KY, in October 2018.

Along with my coursework and research, I taught a course of my own design, a themed writing as inquiry course based in online digital writing; I was observed twice by tenured faculty, and observation letters are available on request. Additionally, I served on the composition

committee, on the ENGL 10803 curriculum revision committee, and as secretary for TCU’s chapter of the Rhetoric Society of America. I presented at CCCC in Kansas City, MO, over spring break, and I will be presenting at RSA in Minneapolis, MN, next month. I also compiled my comprehensive exam lists; they were approved by my committee, with tentative exam dates in early November 2018. This summer, I will be reading for exams, attending conferences, working at the AP Language Exam Reading, and teaching three online courses. I am confident moving into the exam phase of my PhD, though I am still exploring options for my dissertation research. I also plan to concentrate more on publishing in the remaining time I have before beginning my job search.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Frame 4: Personal Teaching Journal**

##### ***Primary Audience: Myself***

I hate end-of-semester evaluations. My practice when getting the email notification about viewing the evaluations is to file the email away instantly, not reviewing the feedback until about a month before school begins again, when I finally need to finalize my syllabi for the fall. I have a deep aversion, one could say a fear, about students’ anonymous feedback; this deep aversion is what I feel when I think about Parker Palmer calling education a “fearful enterprise.”<sup>12</sup> I felt the same aversion when I got a test back in elementary school or a paper back in college. I would hide the test in my notebook, and wait until I was in a safe place to look at the grade. Somehow every paper, grade, assessment, evaluation, had the possibility to destabilize me. Palmer knows this feeling; bad classes make him afraid, not just that he is a bad teacher but that he is a bad

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<sup>11</sup> This list of commitments outside of teaching echoes Doug Hesse’s description of how the field has changed in its expectations of those on the job market. Hesse, Doug. “Sustainable Expectations.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2013, pp. 16-18.

<sup>12</sup> Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach*. Jossey-Bass, 1997, p. 36.

person, “so closely is my sense of self tied to the work I do.”<sup>13</sup> At the end of each semester, when I am at the end of my emotional reserve—staying up late to grade papers and finish papers, waiting for my own grades and trying to calculate the grades of others—I feel this palpable fear that I am a “fraud as well as a failure,” in Lad Tobin’s words,<sup>14</sup> that students will have spent fifteen weeks hating me and their hatred will be revealed in course evaluations. And that will be the end of my teacherly confidence and my future career.

I was really proud of this 10803 class; I did not feel like a fraud or a failure, on the whole. Most days I didn’t quite know what I was doing, but I was often so proud of the work my students did, especially their Wikipedia pages and their social media self-analyses. The class finished strong after being engaged and responsive for the majority of the semester, and their final reflections on the course, which they handed to me during the final period, articulated what they had learned and the fun they had. Some noted the pace was too fast, the reading too heavy and not integrated with the course. But nothing in those reflections led me to think anyone would write these three comments. Reading them right after a final hard semester of coursework that left me no remaining emotional bandwidth, I was stunned, instantly heartsick. I cried. I texted my best friends. I decided to give up on everything. I felt afraid.

I spiraled, ignoring all other comments that praised my feedback, my accessibility, the help I provided. I had only eyes for these three negative comments. What did they mean? And what class did these students sit in for fifteen weeks? It surely was not my class, the vibrant and engaged class with which I spent three hours a week. I could not even determine which two of my students felt my class an utter waste of time, composing diatribes while I discussed the importance of line breaks when writing online. Would it be better to know, or worse? Ultimately,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 36

<sup>14</sup> Tobin, Lad. *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants*. Heinemann, 2004, p. 79.

it does not matter; these two students recorded their perception of the course. They submitted their truth, and I hope that they felt heard. Perhaps the students have forgotten they wrote them, and they will only remember when a friend mentions my name as a potential professor.

Looking at these comments now, after a few weeks have gone by, I can rationalize them. They're not *that* bad, really. I know fellow instructors who have gotten much worse feedback. These comments are not derogatory about my appearance or body. They are not profane or explicit. These three are among the worst comments I have received in my twelve semesters of teaching, which makes me lucky (or blessed). My students have been kind, which I attributed to my teaching ability, to the care I showed my students, to the environment we fostered together. And yet.

The class is over and done. I know what I can do better next time. Mary O'Reilley reminds me there is only so much I can control.<sup>15</sup> And I am not alone in feeling this devastation. Jane Tompkins has a chapter in her book *A Life in School* in which she reflects on a class she taught that she loved, a class that was criticized mercilessly by her students at the end of the semester. In that chapter, Tompkins says, "Each course has its own trajectory, its own momentum. You can talk about scheduling the moment of breakdown and self-criticism so it lands where it's suppose to, but things aren't like that."<sup>16</sup> The next class will break down too, in different ways, and the corrections I make will only need to be corrected again for a different group of students. That is part of teaching. But I will hold these comments with me at a deep level, down where I am continually molding and remolding my perception of myself as a teacher and educator, the place where my continually remade cohesive, undivided identity as a good teacher lives. The thing that has held me together through these divided years of graduate work, a

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<sup>15</sup> O'Reilley, Mary Rose. *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. Heinemann, 1998, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Tompkins, Jane. *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*. Persesus, 1996, p. 178.

foot in two worlds—one as a student, one as an instructor, a novice and a professional—is the idea that at least I can teach. And if I can't? What then?

The semester is over, and I am still mulling over these words, trying to find the truth in them, trying to find what I can critically reflect upon and learn and grow from. Sure, I am concerned because I may someday be judged by these comments in a job interview, but I am more concerned that I will not be able to go into my classroom next semester, look at my students, and think, *This will be a good class. You will learn something. We will do this together.* Instead, I might think, *How do I make you like me, think I'm organized, explain enough but not too much, not be boring?*

Jerome Bruner writes, “Self is a perpetually rewritten story. What we remember from the past is what is necessary to keep that story satisfactorily well formed.”<sup>17</sup> We continue to recreate ourselves with each new experience, and what we remember is who we create ourselves to be. I cannot stop remembering these words, and maybe writing them down and breaking them apart, in different ways, over and over for pages and pages in my teaching journal isn’t helping. Or maybe it is, as I try to frame them different ways. Maybe by doing this, and by representing this experience, these comments in different ways for different audiences, I am finding cohesion. Or, rather, coherence. Charlotte Linde talks about this in her explanation of the many different accounts she gives people of why she’s a linguist. She says the more accounts she gives, the more coherent her profession becomes within the entirety of her life. She says, “The existence of so many multiple accounts seems to assure that the choice of profession is well-motivated, richly determined, and woven far back in time.”<sup>18</sup> I wonder if this is what it means for Parker Palmer

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<sup>17</sup> Bruner, Jerome. “The Remembered Self.” *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*, edited by Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush, Cambridge UP, 2008, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Linde, Charlotte. *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*. Oxford UP, 1993, p. 6.

and Mary O'Reilley to talk about teaching from the "undivided self," what O'Reilley calls "mediation," or paying attention to the world outside and world within.<sup>19</sup>

So, maybe instead of trying to reconcile myself as a graduate student and instructor, a good teacher and a boring one, a contemplative and an activist, I can be all of those things at once. With each new experience, new comment, I'll try to rewrite myself to become more than I was: well-motivated, richly determined, and woven far back in time. Being undivided might not mean cohesion; it might mean coherence, both despite and because of students' end-of-semester course evaluation comments, despite and because of who I am. While it doesn't make the words sting less, it helps me put them aside, at least for now, and at least until the next batch of course evaluations.

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<sup>19</sup> Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach*. Jossey-Bass, 1997, p. 15; O'Reilley, Mary Rose. *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. Heinemann, 1998, p. 34.