

Letter from America

Summer 2009

It's funny. When my colleagues see how many creative writing portfolios I schlep out to my car at the end of the semester, the reaction is something like that Edvard Munch painting "The Scream." My backpack bulges; the sharp corners of notebooks threaten the integrity of the carrier bags in each hand.

"Holy crap," their expressions say. But the number of portfolios I have in my possession at the end of a semester now is miniscule compared to when I was teaching in England. Back then, by virtue of my role as course leader, I was the lucky soul whose office was the repository of every final portfolio from every module of the semester. After each of us had marked our students' work, we piled those portfolios onto virtually every square inch of that office's floor space, stacks teetering as we tiptoed our way like tightrope walkers to the chairs positioned around the room's edge. Yellow post-it notes indicated which stacks belonged to which module; smaller pink ones might indicate the first mark or some of the first-marker's impressions. We met in the office in pairs or in groups of three, negotiating the merits of the contents of each of those notebooks, comparing the students' work in order to fine tune the numbers, discussing whether this piece or that ought to go to the external and why. It was, I imagine, a little like the flurry that takes place in a newsroom in the wee hours of the morning.

I often think about that now, imagining what my former colleagues Lucy or Mollie might say about the portfolios I'm reading. But the fact is that second marking only comes in the form of daydreams. Here in the US, we do not engage in second marking or in exam boards. We mark our own students' work, and we submit the marks electronically to the registrar. Usually, that's the end of it. If a student complains or if we have made some sort of error that we catch ourselves, there are procedures in place for changing the marks. However, it's rare for these procedures to be necessary.

I recently submitted my spring semester grades, which got me to thinking about the differences between the systems. I'll be honest. The marking process here in the US is far less work. And of course, I like that. I also like that the university trusts me, my colleagues trust me, the students trust me to be fair and meticulous and competent. The stacks of portfolios are far fewer – only those that represent the three modules I teach, maybe around 40 portfolios. And now they sit at strategic points in my living room, each one adorned with post-it notes – reminders I've written to myself about the strengths and weaknesses of each portfolio and a tentative grade that I can review later. Once I've spent a few days poring over everything several times and I've tallied all of the other marks for the semester on my calculator, I finally march upstairs and submit the grades on my computer. My own practices are pretty normal – most other faculty are at home grading, too. During that final week after classes are over, the campus is a ghost town. Everyone sort of resurfaces, blinking into the bright light, for the commencement ceremony. I guess one of the things that occurs to me is that, owing to the differences in the two systems, the grading process in England is a public and social affair that takes

place on campus – second marking, exam boards, and thus lunches and coffees. In the US, it is utterly solitary and is almost universally located in faculty members' homes.

One of the comments I often hear from colleagues is “I don't know how you can grade creative writing. It must be so subjective.”

My response? “I understand why you say that, but it's not as subjective as you think it is.”

Before I taught in England, I had an unsubstantiated intuition that there were some more or less universally held ideals about what makes creative writing effective and successful. Participating in the British system of marking may have helped me to articulate some of those criteria more clearly (though I think this was also simply a function of becoming more seasoned). More crucially, it provided evidence that my intuition was correct. When I marked work with other creative writing lecturers, we almost never gave the same piece of work wildly different marks. In fact, it was uncanny how, quite often, we gave the same mark or used identical phrases in our written responses to the work.

Now, when I sit in my living room-cum-grading factory, I mark with confidence, with peace of mind, with the chorus of former colleagues' voices in my head saying “Yes, that's it exactly.”

And while I don't miss all of the work involved in the second marking and the exam boards, I do miss celebrating student work with my colleagues. I miss the amazement we could share about the progress a particular student made or the turn of phrase she had concocted. Somehow the triumphs in the classroom became more real by virtue of witnesses – they saw with an objective eye the things I hoped might be true.

I do not now have the benefit of witnesses. What I do have is a better ability to bear witness myself. That is the gift the British system gave me and that the US system allows me to enjoy.

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