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## Chapter 6

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# *'Objective' Judgments? — The Problem of Marking Written Work*

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### Acknowledgments

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### Introduction

No-one ever told me how to do 'marking'. It seemed to be one of the many things one was expected to 'pick up'. This study is thus a belated attempt to examine critically (and thus — belatedly also — to improve) the methods I have more or less spontaneously devised for writing comments on students' work.

A number of factors led me to this topic. Firstly, it seemed to be an example of how my role as a teacher involved the use of institutional authority, which a previous piece of work had suggested as a theme that I was more concerned about than I cared to admit (see Winter, 1986). Secondly, I had become interested in Donald Graves' ideas on teachers' responses to children's writing, ideas which pose a radical challenge to the conception of 'marking' as the passing of authoritative judgments (see Graves, 1983). Thirdly, my work on reflexivity formulated both the problem and a method of approach, by suggesting that the sort of judgments involved in 'marking' create the illusion of referring directly to external realities (i.e., in the students' work), while actually relying largely on subjective values and concerns. Altogether, then, a growing sense of unease began to creep over me every time I found myself wielding a pencil over students' scripts.

So I began to collect data. I mainly collected copies of students' assignments and written comments upon them by myself and colleagues, but I also asked one group of twenty students to fill in a questionnaire concerning their feelings about the comments on their work, six of which were completed. All the 'students' referred to were experienced teachers undertaking award-bearing in-service courses. Their written assignments were either critical essays on educational research, reviews of research articles, or short analyses of their own teaching. The sort of assessment criteria involved were, therefore:

- personal insight;
- clear style and organization;
- effective use of reading;
- understanding of the personal relevance of theoretical ideas.

(The sort of criteria which — in various different forms — probably underlie the evaluation of learners' written work in many different contexts, from lower secondary school to degree courses.)

As so often happens when you turn your attention in a particular direction, you begin to notice things happening. In this case there were four key incidents, spaced over eighteen months or so, so that I had time to reflect on one incident (and in some cases to alter my practice) before the next one occurred. The main part of this report is organized around these incidents, which — because they seemed revealing and worrying at the time — I documented as thoroughly as I could. Other data (for example, changes in my own practice, quotations from the student questionnaires) are introduced in relation to the four incidents. The first two incidents in particular provoked a sense of urgency about the study, by suggesting some of the difficulties for students created by the issues surrounding the supposed objectivity of one's judgments as a marker. The incidents are presented here in chronological order, so that the report has the overall structure of a narrative (of which the final phase is the writing of this report).

### **Incident 1: The Case of Steve and Margaret**

Steve and Margaret had each written an essay in which they presented their professional situation in terms of a series of 'role conflicts'. The two essays provoked very different responses, from me and from a colleague, which are the subject of the following discussion. Substantial extracts from the essays are therefore included, and readers might like to note their own reactions. It should be borne in mind, however, that the extracts have been chosen to illustrate the basis of my *negative* response to Steve's work and my *positive* response to Margaret's. It is the *questionable* features of these reactions which will be analyzed. Here are some extracts from Steve's essay.

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts . . .

This oft used citation has frequently been used to introduce the discussion of role, but it is inadequate to circumscribe the multiplicity of functions of the modern pedagogue . . . .

- [X] In the early days of state education, the teacher was an instructor and a guardian of certain moral principles laid down by those in authority. Indeed as recently as 1947 when George Tomlinson, the Education Secretary at the time, raised the school leaving age to 15 . . . the emphasis was on 'instruction and care'. Gradually the teacher has become much more than a conveyor of knowledge. He has become a parent-substitute concerned with children's welfare . . . .
- [Y] My hypothesis, therefore, was that the divergence of the roles of a contemporary teacher . . . (has) led to a situation where his classroom performance is severely impeded, and role strain is incapable . . . .

Robert Merton, the American sociologist, in his theory of conflict in the role set, suggested that 'what is an educational essential for the one, may be judged an educational frill or as downright subversion by the other' . . . .

- [Z] When asked to consider the roles of others most respondents were incapable of objectivity and sanctimoniously sought justification of their own positions. Perhaps the most apocalyptic disclosure of all was the egocentricity of students whose self-absorption recognised only those roles which directly affected their needs (such as the provision of interesting lessons) and appeared oblivious to the needs and demands of other role members . . . .

The 'incident' began when I gave Steve a 'B' for his essay, rather than the 'A' he expected. In my written comments, I criticized, among other things, his logic at point X above; I also suggested that he had not really checked his 'hypothesis' (Y) but had written 'polemically' to justify it, and that therefore he himself was doing what he criticized in others (Z). Steve asked that his essay be marked by another tutor, and indicated that he was not clear on what basis I had given other students' work an 'A'. For example: Margaret's, of which extracts are given below.

I decided to concentrate on the sets of expectations of the tutor's

role partners and role set, and in order to explore how they see the tutor's role I asked them to cooperate in completing a questionnaire. At first I asked two questions only:

- [P] 1) What are your expectations of a tutor? (What do you expect him/her to do?)  
2) What are your perceptions of a tutor? (What does he/she actually do, from your point of view? . . .)

[Q] At first glance it may seem that there is a large degree of consensus of opinion regarding the tutor's role, but when looked at closely several areas of potential conflict come to light: a) All groups stated that they expected tutors to relate theory and practice, and to have regular ward contact for teaching. One senior tutor expected tutors to 'uphold standards of care'. However, the perceptions of the tutors in particular show that they feel the demands of classroom teaching, administration, and meetings leave little time for any regular commitment to the wards. If this is so, then how can they 'uphold standards of care' or 'relate theory to practice'? . . .

[R] Hargreaves says that 'within a single role . . . a hierarchy of obligations . . . dictates which expectation is to be accorded priority'. This sounds quite straightforward until one asks who decides on the order of the hierarchy, and what criteria are used when deciding on those priorities . . .

In my comments I complimented Margaret on her neat distinction between expectations and perceptions (P), on her analysis of the contradictions within her data (Q), and her critical point on the limitations of Hargreaves' observation (R).

A colleague — 'C' — marked the two essays, and we tape-recorded a discussion about our differing responses. C suggested that he would be inclined to reverse the grades. For him, Margaret's work was 'descriptive' rather than 'analytical', because it did not 'explore the wider implications' of her detailed observations. In contrast, Steve's work was an impressive display of 'perceptive analysis' and 'high quality discussion'.

### *Commentary*

My discussion with C clarified aspects of the 'reflexive' problem of marking. Behind our use of categories such as 'analytical' and 'descriptive' and 'A' and 'B' grades lie our own different priorities concerning academic work. C attaches great importance to demonstration of having mastered a

body of reading, and the elaboration of evidence in relation to that reading, whereas my particular interest is in a careful use of empirical evidence. Consequently, what C sees as a 'lack' of elaboration, I see as an 'impressive' modesty in making claims. My general interest in research-based work leads me to value 'description' stripped of prior value judgments, but C, more frequently concerned with the 'scholarly' criteria for essay work, sees 'mere description' as fundamentally limited. Thus, in apparently making statements about the work of Steve and Margaret, C and I are also justifying our own professional lives.

*From the Student Questionnaire*

*Question: What criteria do you think were used in writing comments on your work?*

*Student 1: ... The commentator's own view of knowledge...*

*Student 2: ... The luxury of personal intrusion and comment of the marker's own views...*

*Question: Are you fairly clear as to 'how well' you did?*

*Student 2: ... Not totally convinced. One marker seemed to perceive more weakness in the work than the other...*

*Student 3: ... There did seem to be a measure of inconsistency in the comments of the two markers. For example, P's point (i) compared with R's point (4). Also, P seemed more prepared to agree with (my point of view) than did R...*

The justificatory dimension of marking also took another form. I explained to C that, as the *teacher* of the unit, I was using as a criterion: does the student's work show that they have learned from the course?

*RW: I'm saying: everyone on the course should develop; that what one is giving marks for is not how much they knew before they started; but how much they have moved on from wherever it was they started... There is nothing in what Margaret wrote to suggest she knew anything about (role theory) beforehand, and therefore what she does is starting from a zero starting point: one couldn't have expected any more. Therefore: an 'A'. Given Steve's starting point, which was a long way down the road, one could have expected him to develop more.*

*C: You see, that now raises the question for me: how would you see an external marker, not familiar with the course, just being presented with these two essays, but having to moderate the marking (which is a very important part of our system)? I've always found it difficult to mark an essay where I haven't been involved in the course, and yet I get*

them all the time! So all I have to go on is the title. (As an external examiner) I've just marked a whole set of (X College) scripts: I only have the internal markers' comments . . . Very often I'm working in the dark, so I have to adopt a certain set of standard criteria. I would still maintain, though, that it would be difficult to suggest that a person has got something from a course if they do not give evidence of at least a limited range of reading related to it. Because, surely, when we talk to them . . . we are only raising issues, but we are also recommending broader reading.

RW: In this particular unit we didn't. We specifically said to them, 'Don't bother to read up about role theory; just carry out the task.' So I'm worried that Margaret was paying me a compliment. She was complimenting me *as a teacher*, by doing *exactly* what she was supposed to do, nothing more and nothing less.

### *Commentary*

C, as *external* to the teaching, manages his responsibilities by invoking 'standard criteria' (and particularly 'evidence of reading') which relate less to the course than to C's management of his role as an external marker. In contrast, I am seeking specific feedback on *my* activity as a teacher. Thus I am inclined to compliment Margaret (with an 'A') as a reward for her compliment to me. And yet my 'compliment' is deeply ambiguous. I seem to be quite pleased that she has done nothing less but 'nothing *more*' than the task set, and that she had a 'zero' starting point. ('Margaret' subsequently pointed out that she did *not* have a 'zero' starting point: she *did* have prior knowledge of role theory but decided that the instructions for the assignment suggested that it was not relevant.) Thus, my search for evidence that I have been effective as a teacher denies the relevance of what Margaret could bring *to* the work, apart from compliance with my instructions. In noticing the reflexivity of my response (its roots in my concerns rather than in objective features of Margaret's essay or her knowledge) I am — regretfully — made to recognize an authoritarianism within my practice which previously remained hidden from me — but not, of course, from Steve!

I described to C my response to Steve's work in the following terms:

RW: I felt rather irritated by Steve's essay . . . I felt he was saying to me, by the way he wrote, 'I challenge you to exercise any superiority over me.' So I rose to the challenge . . . things like: 'There is a contradiction in this paragraph'. (See X in

the extract from Steve's essay, above.) He wishes to argue that the teacher's role has *become* broader, that it *used to be* narrower. But what he wrote doesn't actually suggest that, because if you are responsible not only for 'instruction' but for 'care' as well, he's actually saying that teachers *always* had that broader role.

### *Commentary*

The 'rigorousness' of my criticism here is thus activated mainly by an emotional response. Not surprisingly, C rejected the necessity for my criticism, saying:

I interpreted that as, 'And gradually the teacher as *instructor* has become more than a conveyor of knowledge'. That was my interpretation.

The general point here is that the form of attention we bring to an act of reading is a *choice* (on the part of the reader), that readers *invoke* criteria as part of their *response* to what is written. C and I might perhaps agree that Steve '*could* have phrased his point more neatly', but that is not to say that there is a logical flaw *in* Steve's text. I blow my whistle, but C doesn't. One is not supposed to argue with the referee but that is merely a matter of keeping order: controversy over decisions is universal and usually undecidable.

One can attempt to make explicit this interpretive function, by adopting a 'diagnostic' approach to marking, but this brings its own problems:

- C: I was fully aware (that Margaret and Steve had) different starting points. Yet my feeling was really to give *credit* for the fact that Steve started a long way down the road . . .
- RW: Yes, that's one point. Or you could say: where someone is creates different standards by which they are to be judged . . . It's like a Piagetian model of 'stages'. You judge learners by standards that they generate for themselves . . . This is the issue, for me, in how we mark . . . Is it possible to mark *not* the final standard reached in the work, but how far they have developed . . . how much they have learned by doing it?
- C: There's a slight worry I have there, though, as to what you take your starting base from. How do you identify where it is they've started from? Are you saying it shows through in their writing? Is it possible to do that in any sort of accurate way?

Commentary

manuscript

If there is a contradiction between assessing a *product* (a piece of written work) and assessing a *process* (what was learned by doing it) then it is not very convincing to suggest that the process can be assessed simply by assessing the product. (This is clearly exemplified in my assessment of Margaret's prior knowledge.) Producing and marking written work takes place within a complex interaction influenced by an enormous range of factors. Markers bring their own concerns, and learners bring theirs. Steve, for example, said that he had been told to undertake the course in order to gain a qualification appropriate for a position he already held. So it would be quite reasonable for Steve to write an essay with the express purpose of displaying a prior competence: to show that he had learned from the process would have been to concede that he needed a learning experience, whereas from his perfectly justifiable point of view he may well have felt that what he needed was a qualification which would document his *previous* learning. In other words, the meaning of the process of producing written work (whether an essay or a comment on an essay) is a highly variable personal matter. How then could it possibly be reduced to 'how much' has been learned, on a scale from A to E? (incorrect)

This is the general point about reflexivity. For practical purposes, grading from A to E can be made to take place, but only by ignoring the inevitable reflexivity of the judgments on which it is based. For practical purposes these judgments have the apparent form of statements about what is 'in' the piece of writing. But when we have made explicit the reflexivity on which they depend (their inevitably personal significance) a number of alternatives spring to mind, as ways of conceiving of the *relationship* between writers' and markers' concerns. Marking as an assessment of the writer's competence, is one extreme. Marking as a confrontation within a power relationship is another. Marking as rewarding compliance is the other face of the same extreme. In between might lie, for example: marking as diagnosis and the prescription of remedies; marking as the facilitation of development; marking as one move within a collaboration.

Postscript to Incident 1

My considerable sympathy with Steve's irritation was increased recently, when I received a letter from the editor of an academic journal, rejecting an article which I and a colleague had submitted. The referee had commented:

It purports to be a discussion starter, why not, therefore make the issues more clear cut?

(But as far as we were concerned the issues were as 'clear cut' as necessary.)



What is meant by 'clear cut' is a reflexive judgment, relating to the intellectual style (and perhaps even also the personality) of various readers and writers — in this case those of the journal referee and ourselves.)

A promising piece of work cast rather in the form of an outline which needs fleshing out.

(But this 'need' is not *in* our article, but a reflexive reference by the 'marker' to a *different* sort of article that he or she 'would have' written. The ideal amount of 'flesh' is notoriously a matter of taste.)

How do tutors ensure that the biographies are stiffened with relevant theoretical perspectives?

(The phrasing ('stiffened') suggests that, for this writer, manhood is at stake where theoretical perspectives are concerned, a dramatic illustration of how academic judgments are deeply rooted in biographies!) (As is, of course, my interpretation of this comment . . .)

My own sense of irritation (at receiving reflexive statements presented to me as though they were objective judgments) makes it hard for me not to add that the article was accepted, unchanged, immediately afterwards by another journal.

### Incident 2: The Case of Joan

In an effort to be 'helpful', when I mark a piece of work, I put numbers in the margin against particular passages and write a comment on a separate sheet. In an effort to be 'open-minded', I usually begin reading without a precise sense of what I am looking for, but wait until 'something strikes me'. The problems of this procedure became apparent in the following incident. In response to her first piece of written work, Joan received a page of detailed comments. The first *eight* were all negative. For example:

'Somehow I don't seem to be able to understand this sentence . . .'

'Yes. I think you are afraid of saying, "This is my concern and this is how I can see this method contributing to my study." But this has to be said, and supported.'

'This seems a little vague.'

'Careful: you sound very sure of this: how do you know?'

Altogether, out of eighteen comments, four were positive. For example:

'Yes, I like this argument.'

'From here, the next half-page is good — clear and precise.'

'This seems more in keeping with Kelly's approach. It is well

described and clearly linked to your theme. Your best paragraph (I think) so far.'

After I had written the detailed comments, I added, squashed up at the top of the page:

'You have worked hard at this, and there are lots of good ideas. I have been *very* "nit-picking". Can we talk about it after you have read it through?'

Instead, Joan wrote me a letter. She referred to difficult personal circumstances and also to her worry that she had found the set readings very difficult. She concluded that she would not be able to reach the 'required standard', since (among the other factors mentioned) my comments made her feel that she could not understand what it was that I could not understand, and that she was unclear as to what was unclear to me. In the end, Joan decided to leave the course.

I gave Joan's work and my comments to a colleague, 'P'. P's marksheet began with the comment:

There needs to be a description of what the Parental Involvement in Reading scheme is all about, in order that we can appreciate what is to be analyzed.

Altogether P listed six suggestions (for example, 'All of this would have been better placed at the beginning, where it provides the context for your discussion.') and five questions (for example, 'What are "personal constructs" and why are they used?'). She concluded that we were both being 'fairly gentle' and 'reasonably constructive' but suggested that my comments may have included 'one too many "I don't understand's"'. Another colleague, 'N', agreed with P's implication that 'I don't understand' is unhelpful, and suggested, 'I reckon you need to talk her through it and maybe do some positive "stroking".'

### *Commentary*

Surely, N is right. But more interesting is the fact that my final comment, squashed into the space at the top of the page where it was intended as the first thing Joan would read, already expresses an awareness of what N suggests as a remedy: 'You have worked hard and there are lot of good ideas. . . .Can we talk about it?'. So my marksheet contains within itself both the 'remedy' as well as the problem. In this way it presents an implicit acknowledgment of the contradictions within the marking process. It is negative — but acknowledges the need to be positive: without 'encouragement', criticism may well be counterproductive. It presents the students with judgments in a written form (and thus apparently fixed, judicial,

authoritative, unalterable, the 'final' word). And yet it acknowledges that to be of value to the student these judgments need to be negotiated within the teacher-learner relationship ('Can we talk about this?').

Within these contradictions, the ambiguity of 'I don't understand' does indeed seem to be particularly revealing. On one level it seems that the marker is admitting an inadequacy and suggesting that the student will have an opportunity to 'explain'. And yet, as both P and N noted, the comment also seem particularly *oppressive*, a verdict against which — in its Kafkaesque elusiveness — there can be no appeal. Neither can there be a remedy, since the comment refers to what is beyond the control of the student, even though it is supposedly a reference to a feature of her work. This is an illustration of the peculiar *power* and the limitations of the *written* word. When the teacher *says*, 'I don't understand', the learner can explain her thoughts (especially if reassured by a tone of voice), but when the marker *writes*, 'I don't understand', the recipient of the marksheet receives a form of condemnation which renders her helpless.

P seemed to sense similar contradictions when — immediately after noting the problem of 'I don't understand' — she continued:

On the other hand, my own questions may provoke even more anxiety on the part of the writer. What was important in assessing this piece of work is not to be destructive . . .

A marker's 'question' would seem to invite a continuation from the student, but if what is taking place is 'assessment', then a reply to the 'question' may not really be relevant: what appears to be a question is a disguised form of a judgment. Thus P expresses an awareness that her marking, like mine, is awkwardly caught between a process of constructive developmental dialogue and a process of authoritative assessment.

Perhaps the issue, then, is one of *confusion* between different functions which are in contradiction with each other, and which the conventional procedure of 'marking' runs together. Perhaps it is this which generates 'anxiety' (both in the student and in the marker). If so, it cannot easily be removed. Joan's work did not *need* to be 'assessed'. It was an interim piece, not a final assignment that had to reach a set standard in order to 'pass'. P and I could, in principle, have responded with *advice* pure and simple, and avoided explicit evaluation. There are examples of this process in Graves' (1983) work, where teachers pose questions which lead the learner onwards, without any implication that the teacher knows what the learner *ought* to be writing (see pp. 107 ff, and p. 127). But this is with primary age children, where the purely *educational* purpose (of developing all according to their abilities) is not yet explicitly tangled up with the other purpose which determines what goes on in schools and colleges: grading learners in ways which outside institutions can use in order to allocate social roles. Older learners know that they are implicated in this 'social grading' process — though they may be highly critical of the injustice of its outcomes:

they know that it is significant whether their work is 'good enough' (to pass, to get a distinction, to get a reference which will support a bid for promotion), and thus they *want* to be assessed. So this contradiction is part of the structure of education systems, and thus part of the awareness which learners and markers bring to their interaction.

But although both learners and markers are 'aware' of the contradiction, it is learners who are at risk from it, whereas markers — being in the position of power — can perhaps afford to treat it in a fairly routine way. Marking, after all, *is* a routine. Looking back over my marking of Joan's work, I notice that I 'delivered' my comments in the order in which they *happened* to occur, as responses to the text, without considering the balance or sequence of positive and negative impact, until the very end, when I squashed up my positive overall comment in such a way that it must have clearly signalled to the student that it was an afterthought.

Perhaps by carefully analyzing the single routine process of 'marking' into its different contradictory elements we may be able to manage more effectively the various elements and the relationship between them. My immediate reflections in the incident with Joan suggested one practical method of separating out the contradictory elements. It is embarrassing in its simplicity. I decided to begin my notes on individual passages half-way down the space available on the marksheet, leaving plenty of space to add, at the beginning, an overall comment of carefully phrased evaluation, with the emphasis on encouragement. That at least increased my sense of control over the process. Instead of simply delivering an almost accidental sequence of detailed responses, I had a procedure which enabled me explicitly to take responsibility for managing their overall impact.

### **Incident 3: The Case of Sheila**

The incident with Sheila raises another aspect of the marking process which takes the form of contradictory elements needing to be separated out. The immediate issue is quite stark: who is the audience for one's marking? Consider the following extracts from my marksheet for Sheila's end-of-year assignment — a critical review of two research articles:

*Question 1:* This is a most satisfactory critique . . . .

*Question 4:* This is quite an adequate general appraisal, but it is disappointing that so little reference is made to ideas from the course, as was explicitly required.

*General:* Question 1 ensures a pass. Questions 2 and 4 are flawed as answers to set questions, but nevertheless indicate an adequate grasp of the research process and its issues.

*Commentary*

The phrasing here indicates that this was written to my fellow markers — including the external examiners. Its critical vocabulary ('most satisfactory', 'adequate', 'flawed') seems intended to demonstrate a 'judicious' application of standards, i.e., a demonstration of the academic competence of the *marker*. However, there is already an irony here, because it later became clear that what I had perceived as a 'flaw' in the answer was at least partly due to an ambiguity in *my* wording of the question, which the student and the marker had thus interpreted differently.

*From the Student Questionnaire*

*Question: What criteria do you think were used in writing the comments on your work?*

*Student 4: Arbitrary categories legitimated by the achievement of 'consensus' among markers. Who assesses these criteria? . . . To what extent are markers' marks a form of display (of knowledge, status, etc.)?*

The comments I had written about Sheila's work suggest, then, that they were intended for other examiners. However, Sheila herself received a copy — as routine 'feed-back' on her work — and she was somewhat taken aback by what she perceived as its 'harshness', which was, of course, never intended as such. In retrospect it seems surprising that this confusion of the two audiences should have taken place. How could the difference between the two audiences not be treated as a crucial matter? It seemed almost as though — on one level — the difference was not felt to be significant. With this issue in mind I looked closely at a complete set of marksheets relating to the equivalent assignments of the previous year's students.

The group consisted of seventeen students, and since each script was marked by two tutors there were thirty-four marksheets. Of the thirty-four, six seemed to be addressed to a fellow examiner (for example, they referred to 'the student') and twenty-eight to the writer of the assignment (containing such comments as, 'You have not shown that . . .'). This seems to confirm that we had not clarified for ourselves to whom the comments on the marksheets were *supposed* to be addressed.

This ambiguity may explain another feature of the set of marksheets, which relates back to the case of Joan. Of the twenty-eight marksheets addressed to students, not a single one began with an overall encouragement. Instead, all of them began with a comment on a particular passage. Of these opening comments:

Sixteen pointed out a deficiency (for example, 'What are the grounds for claiming the inadequacy of the sample?')

Eight were complimentary (for example, 'I very much agree with all of this')

Four were (perhaps) 'neutral' (for example, 'Having drawn our attention to this, what comment would you make?').

In other words, the majority of the marksheets addressed to students seemed largely to ignore what we otherwise knew to be an important issue: the need for encouragement ('positive stroking'), the danger that negative criticism can be destructive. If we had been *talking* to the students, instead of *writing*, we would certainly have *started* with a general encouragement.

### *Commentary*

It seems that there is a curious ambiguity as to the audience for markers' comments. From the data described above, it seems almost as though the audience *does not matter*. Sheila received comments which were written for an examiner. Of the marksheets analyzed, some were written for fellow examiners and others for students, but students received both marksheets anyway. Furthermore, marksheets apparently addressed to students did not seem to have been structured to take account of students' emotional needs. And yet we are otherwise perfectly aware of students' needs, and know perfectly well that the audience for a statement plays a crucial role in determining its meaning and its appropriate form. Comments addressed to examiners are intended as judgments of academic quality, and thus displays of academic competence, whereas comments for students are intended to be helpful suggestions. The difference could not be clearer. So where does this apparent vagueness as to the audience for markers' comments come from?

Marking, as was noted previously, involves *both* functions and *both* audiences. Students therefore receive suggestions *and* questions as implicit forms of judgment, and judgments as implicit forms of advice. Examiners also note the academic standards implicit in their colleagues' choice of advice and questions. But this familiar combination — familiar as the practical routine of 'marking' — covers two (at least) distinct functions, and Sheila's response suggests that it might be helpful to separate them. Consider, finally, the following plea from one of the student questionnaire forms:

*I think each marker should have put a general comment at the end, in addition to judging stylistic competence, and some guides as to how to remedy the weaknesses in the work. Positive constructive advice on how to reduce errors is not the same as indicating the error.*

#### Incident 4: The Case of Vera

The previous three incidents suggested in different ways the need to clarify, within the marking process, the relationship between judgment and advice. Problems, for students at least, seemed to have been created by the tacit fusion of the two. So when, a few months later, I received a piece of work from Vera and felt worried by the fact that parts of it seemed to me to be 'unclear', I did *not* (this time) write her a list of detailed criticisms and suggestions. Instead, after discussing the problem with a colleague, I arranged a tutorial. This, of course, signalled that I thought there was a problem about her work, and she indicated subsequently that she had indeed felt very worried before the tutorial. However, this would seem to be inevitable: submitting work on a course that can be passed or failed is to 'submit' oneself to academic authority. My problem as an adjudicator of standards was: how 'serious' were Vera's lapses from 'clarity'? If they were 'not serious' I wished to avoid unnecessary undermining of her self-confidence.

Within the face-to-face situation it was possible for us to begin to take control of the tensions involved, through some general discussion in the first few minutes. I then gave Vera her work, on which I had merely placed a tick against passages which seemed to me to be 'clear' and a question-mark against passages which I thought 'unclear'. I asked her to explain and to suggest modifications of the passages I had questioned. This she was able to do quite easily. At that point we were also able to discuss — without apparent tension — what might be the nature of the 'problem', which *she* defined as 'not making assumptions explicit'. She then went on to suggest that an important contributory factor might be the fact that, as the Head of a very small school, she was used to communicating (both orally and in writing) within a small closed community, where — indeed — shared assumptions could be taken for granted. In this way, Vera's 'problem' could be seen, not in terms of an intellectual inadequacy ('lack of clarity') but in terms of being out of practice in the techniques of a certain form of communication: writing for readers who are (theoretically) unfamiliar with — and potentially hostile to — the argument one wishes to develop. Clearly I could not have expected Vera to have practised these techniques before writing her assignment, since neither she nor I (until that moment) could have described the nature of what it was she needed to practise.

In the end, then, there was no real 'marking' (apart from ticks and question-marks intended as merely cues for our discussion). The outcome of the interaction (writing — reading — tutorial) was a specific piece of advice for Vera and a valuable clarification of both her and my understanding of what 'clarity' might mean. I also felt that I had at last taken a practical, as well as a theoretical step forward in my grasp of the contradictions of 'marking'.