Responding to Students About Their Work

Sheila M. Reindl
IN THE COLLEGE YEARS

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS is a collection of essays, teaching materials, and other publications from the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard University. The collection adopts its name from the classic study, Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968) by William G. Perry, Jr., the founding director of the Bureau.

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Responding to Students About Their Work

When I respond to students about their work, I might speak from different roles. I see at least ten roles I might play:

judge or critic
doctor
source of information
reader
supervisor
exercise instructor
coach
witness
fellow learner
wise parent

You can probably think of even more roles one could play in responding to students about their work (e.g., friend, guru, colleague, therapist, fellow human being, guardian of academic standards). Each of the ten roles I list above and describe below have their place in teaching. There is no implied hierarchy of roles — i.e., no assumption that some roles are better than others or that some should be avoided altogether. In responding to a student and his/her work, I might play all of these roles. And some roles overlap — for example, the roles of coach and judge/critic. But each role implies a different relation to the student and to his/her work.

When I respond as a judge or critic or doctor, I respond largely to the text, doing to the student’s draft what I would do if it were my own. There are times when such a response is helpful, times when a

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Note

The first versions of this handout date back to the 1980’s and when I taught Expository Writing at Harvard University and served for a time as Acting Director of the Writing Center there. The seeds of the ideas presented here came from Larry Weinstein, the co-founder and first Director of the Harvard Writing Center and now an instructor at Bentley College, and from the late Kiyo Morimoto, the second Director of the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University. Although I am no longer teaching or tutoring writing, I still love talking with students about their writing in my role as Associate Director of the Bureau of Study Counsel. I write this piece in the voice of a writing instructor since it was in the context of responding to students about their writing that I formulated these ideas.

Sheila M. Reindl, Ed.D.
student wants to know how someone else would approach or solve a problem. But unless I first give a student a chance to try his/her own hand at solving a problem in his/her text, I run the risk of upstaging the writer by playing the writer myself. I leave the student no chance to engage his/her own critical and creative processes.

When I respond as a source of information, I respond to the apprentice scholar by filling him/her in on the conventions and assumptions I work with (the term "apprentice scholar" comes from Holly Weeks, consultant on communication and President of WritingWorks and SpeakingWorks). I assume that what the student needs is correct information.

When I respond as a reader, I respond to a fellow thinker, a maker of meaning. I convey my genuine interest in learning from the student. I am open to being nudged, provoked, taught, surprised, moved — in some way affected — by what he/she is saying. I cannot say strongly enough how important this business of letting ourselves learn from our students is: I am always struck by how powerful it is for students when we let them know that we are genuinely affected by something they have written. "It's as if what I wrote really mattered," I've heard students say.

Even if the student's piece doesn't offer me something wildly new and original, I can still acknowledge what I see as his/her effort in the piece. That is, I can

name what I take to be his/her governing question;

identify what I understand to be his/her approach to the governing question, i.e., the subordinate questions he/she addresses in the service of his/her governing question;

summarize what I see as the headway he/she makes toward resolving the question;

point to what he/she appears to regard as the still unresolved aspects of his/her question; and

note what I take to be his/her sense of why those aspects remain unresolved.

Such a précis of the student's work — whether I write it myself or ask him/her or a fellow student to write it — helps a student experience himself/herself as writing for an audience. He/she learns to ask whom he/she intends as an audience and what that particular audience needs to know to understand what he/she wants to tell them. Students are much more apt to revise (literally, to re-see, to look again at what they wrote) when they understand that their revisions are in the service of helping someone learn from them than when they believe that their revisions are merely in the service of some abstract notion of correctness, clarity, or conciseness.

When I respond as a supervisor, exercise instructor, coach, witness, fellow learner, or wise parent, I respond to the developing person, his/her creative process, and his/her experience of learning.

Here are descriptions of the ten roles listed above and examples of the sorts of comments I might make in speaking from those particular roles. I might speak in the role of

1. a judge or critic . . .

. . . who declares that something is right/wrong; acceptable/ unacceptable; good/bad; enough/not enough:

"You haven't focused this enough."

"Wrong word."

"Good."

"This isn't college-level writing."
"Good idea, but you don't do it justice."

"Excellent! A."

"Awkward."

"Great! I love it! Your best work yet!"

"B."

2. a doctor . . .

. . . who diagnoses, prescribes, and proscribes:

"To focus this, you would need to cut out the part about _______. Take the idea about _______, and do the following with it."

"You mean 'analytic,' not 'scientific.'"

"Avoid the passive voice."

3. a source of information . . .

. . . who informs the student about conventions and assumptions at work in an academic context:

"An expository paper typically begins with an unresolved question and moves toward resolution. For instance, you can't just write about Napoleon. You need to have some question or puzzle or problem about Napoleon that is unresolved and that you want to explore. For example, here, in your draft, you are getting at the question of how Napoleon managed to win the admiration and faith of so many people given that he was such a ruthless tyrant."

"That unresolved question derives from competing observations that lead a writer to pose the question in the first place. Those observations are in tension with one another in the writer's mind. That is, they indicate an apparent puzzle, problem, discrepancy, oversight, mystery, contradiction, or surprise. The question asks how we can resolve the apparent tension, and the response to the question — that is, the paper itself — is the writer's attempt at resolution."

"Many students tend to rely on summarizing, describing, and categorizing and never get around to making a point. While some instructors might recognize an elegant and clarifying summary or a careful and sensitive description or a new categorization as a contribution, others expect you will develop some sort of argument or point. If you do find yourself relying on summaries, descriptions, and categorizations, ask yourself 'What larger question or problem is this in the service of?'"

"Periods and commas always go inside of the quotation marks."

"In academic writing in this field, you need both formal citation and intratextual attribution of others' words and ideas."

"By 'intratextual attribution,' I mean that right in the text itself you need to introduce an idea or a quotation by saying, for example, 'Gilligan observes that . . .' or 'Melanie Klein defines the term as . . .' or 'Erikson makes a distinction between . . .'"

"The format of your citations depends upon the field in which you are writing and even upon the particular journal in which you are publishing. Different fields have different conventions, and different journals use different formats."

4. a reader . . .

. . . who reports what happens in his/her mind as he/she reads and tries to learn from what the writer is saying:

"I'm confused. When I get to the bottom of p. 3, I back up and reread. I was thinking your question was _______. But now it appears to be _______."
"Here you use 'scientific.' Above you use 'analytic.' Do you want me to consider them synonymous?"

"Might someone challenge you on this point by saying that ______?"

"I miss the analogy about ______ from your last draft. It helped me see clearly the distinction you're making between ______ and ______."

"I'm moved."

"Huh? I still don't understand what leads you to this conclusion. Based on what you've said, couldn't you just as easily conclude that ______?"

"I never thought of it that way before. But now that you point it out, I find myself thinking that ______."

"This piece seems to be based on the unstated assumption that ______. It would help me if you explicitly stated that."

"I would love to see you really get into that more interesting question of ______ even if it means cutting some of the stuff about ______."

5. a supervisor . . .

. . . who aims to help the person step back and reflect on the assumptions he/she is working with: to consider the power and limitations of those assumptions; and to consider other ways of working and thinking:

"You seem to be assuming that writing a research paper means using lots and lots of sources. That isn't necessarily the case."

"I wonder if you're trying to make things neater and tidier than you yourself are finding them to be. Maybe the point is not to clear up the complexity but to talk clearly about how and why things are complex."

"You seem to be assuming that providing evidence means proving something beyond a shadow of a doubt. I don't need to be convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt. I just want to see how you are reasoning – what support you have for your way of seeing things and how you regard data that might speak against your way of seeing things."

"What would you say is the one thing you would like people to take away from your paper?"

"It occurs to me that when you ask whether you can use 'I' in this paper, you're really asking a bigger question about how to include yourself – your eye, how you see things, your own observations and reasoning – in this piece."

"You seem to be implying more. Can you say what's behind this idea that ______?"

"What is it you really want to say?"

"What keeps you from saying exactly that?"

"Why are you assuming that you need to have a thesis statement before you start writing? Maybe that's constraining you unnecessarily. Let yourself start your project with a question rather than an answer; let the process of writing help you develop a response to your question. It's your address to your question that will lead to a thesis statement, or at least to a summary of the headway you make toward resolving your question."

"Who is your audience? What is your purpose?"
6. an exercise instructor . . .

. . . who recommends exercises designed to help free up the creative process:

For instance, I might recommend freewriting, i.e., brief stints (5 to 20 minutes) of uncensored writing, in which one follows the associative logic of one's mind (rather than trying to write with linear logic from the get-go). Many writers find it daunting to freewrite facing a blank page or screen and find it helpful to have a prompt for freewriting: one is given the beginning of a sentence, and one completes the sentence and freewrites from there:

When I started this project, the thing that really interested me was . . .

The questions I find myself thinking about these days are questions like . . .

What I really want to know is . . .

I want to figure out how . . .

I have a hunch that . . .

I am confused by . . .

I feel angered or annoyed by . . .

What stands out to me about all the stuff I’ve been reading is this idea that . . .

What I’ve been reading makes me wonder . . .

Dialogue between me and the experts (this exercise comes from writing teacher Eileen Farrell):

This author/professor/theorist/expert says . . .

And/but I say . . .

He or she also says . . .

And/but I say . . .

If I had to put my project/paper so far into the form of a single question, it would be . . .

The observations I make that lead me to ask that question are . . .

What makes my question hard to reckon with or difficult to resolve is that . . .

One way in which I could attempt to reckon with that difficulty of how to resolve my question is . . .

If things were as neat and tidy as I’d like them to be, I would be able to make the argument that . . .

One way in which things aren’t so neat and tidy is that . . .

One way in which I might address that messiness is . . .

I’m stuck. I’m stuck because I can’t figure out . . .

I can see that my method of approaching my question has some real problems, or at least challenges, including . . .

One way I could possibly address that methodological/approach/design issue is . . .

I realize I need to define some terms. If I were to try to define the term ________, what occurs to me is that . . .

[A letter to a friend or to your reader] Dear ____, I’m trying to write this paragraph/section/chapter about ____. And do you know what? . . .

Let me state what I think I know so far, even if it seems obvious or self-evident (in the belief that sometimes it’s actually easy to overlook the obvious and that sometimes the seemingly obvious deserves another look):
Of all these seemingly obvious, self-evident things, the one that keeps catching my attention is . . .

If I think of “theory” as simply another word for “explanation,” I would say that one of the explanations that people have offered for the thing I’m researching is that . . .

But that theory or explanation doesn’t seem to account for . . .

If I could say what I really want to say, . . .

If I could approach this project in the way I really want to, . . .

If I could write about the question that really interests me, . . .

What I wish I could convey to my audience is . . .

7. a coach . . .

. . . who challenges someone and encourages him/her to stretch his/her limits; who fundamentally believes in that person; and who joins the person in his/her effort to do his/her best.

"You're holding back. What are you afraid of?"

"Beautiful!"

"Let's try an experiment. Close your eyes. Now I want you to picture yourself doing it just the way you want to. Picture what you'd do first. And next . . . and then . . . Now feel yourself going through that process just the way you see it. Feel it from start to finish."

"I can see that you're getting it. You're so close. Stay with it."

"I know it's hard. I also know you can do it."

"Let's think back to something else that you were trying to learn that was particularly challenging. What was helpful in learning that?"

"There you go – that's it! Can you sense the difference? Now how did you do that?"

"Don't be discouraged. You're right, that performance sucked. That happens to the best of us. We both know you can do better than that. So let's learn from this – what happened?"

"Let's try that again. This time, I want you to . . ."

8. a witness . . .

...who sits with someone and bears witness to the person's process of thinking aloud, rewriting a sentence, diagramming a thought, struggling to figure out a distinction or connection. (I would play this role in an individual conference rather than in a written comment):

- Company.
- Silence.
- Attentiveness.
- Respect.
- Curiosity.

9. a fellow learner . . .

. . . who empathizes with the student and acknowledges the experience of trying to learn, the pressures and challenges and shake-ups inherent in learning:

"I guess it could feel kind of risky to spend so much time freewriting and have no guarantee that any of it will end up in your paper."
"As if you're questioning your whole definition of what a paper even is. How disorienting."

"So you're questioning something that you used to believe without reservation? That could leave you feeling somewhat wobbly. But it's also exciting!"

"It leaves you feeling like an impostor . . . ."

"Like it's not legitimate to be at this level and not know something that seems so basic?"

"It feels like there's so much at stake . . . ."

"And if you thought it was a good paper, but then it got a C, you could start doubting your own standards."

"Like you've lost the trust that you know how to write."

"It's so frustrating – and confusing – to have your own sense of what you want to do and then to have your adviser miss the entire point of what you're up to."

"Wow! You surprised even yourself."

"Writing is like that sometimes – a long, slow, lonely, painful process. Just because it feels that way doesn't mean something is wrong with you or with your way of writing. Sometimes, it's just that way. At least don't kick yourself about that."

"You know, you assume that your confusion means you're doing something wrong. But confusion is also part of true learning. It's what precedes discovery or awakening. If we want to truly learn something, we have to be prepared to bear some confusion. A friend of mine always says, 'If you're not confused, you're not thinking clearly.'"

“It really matters to you.”

10. a wise parent . . .

. . . who plays the mixed roles of guardian/protector, adorer/encourager, educator about many things (including the necessary tension between compassion and accountability), guide, disciplinarian, role model, and fellow family member:

“I appreciate that you felt in over your head with this one and that you then, in a moment of panic, turned in work that was not your own. I can hear from all you say that you know that that was not good judgment. I appreciate your being honest about it all. I can’t spare you the natural consequences of that choice. But let’s talk.”

“It seems to me your job in this moment is to learn from this experience. In moments of regret and remorse in my own life, I’ve realized that I need to bear the guilt by being curious enough long enough to learn what I need to learn from the experience. To dismiss the matter without that kind of exploration is defensive and protects me from learning, and to endlessly punish myself for what I did is also defensive and also spares me my learning.”

When I am responding to a student, especially a student who is blocked, silent, or struggling as a writer and thinker, I need to be mindful of the choices I make. I need to consider what role(s) I am responding from and what the consequences of my particular response might be for the student. What are my hopes for how my response will engage the student? What are the risks that my response might work to shut him/her down?

The point is not that I must pick the perfect set of roles and responses for each student each time I comment on his/her work; we can never know with certainty how our comments will be received by another person. The point is to recognize what I call my “default posi-
tions,* the roles I natively comment from, and to be aware that while my particular default positions will be a good match for some of my students some of the time, they will not be a good match for all of my students, much less all of my students all of the time. When a student "just doesn’t seem to get it," despite my ostensibly helpful comments, or when a student seems to shut down in response to my comments, perhaps it’s time to try another mode of response.

Sometimes it is useful to be explicit with a student about the various roles in which I am responding to his/her work. Naming my roles frees me to give several very different types of responses to his/her work. For instance, if I am responding to a piece which moved me with its account of a powerful personal experience, but which lacks the depth of analysis that the assignment asked for, I might let the student know that as a human being I was deeply touched, or moved. I might be more specific — recognizing how powerfully he/she described his/her personal experience, acknowledging how remarkable it is that he/she survived that experience, appreciating how essential that experience must be to his/her interest in and understanding of the issues of the course.

But then I might say that as his/her teacher and as a fellow writer, I am aware of the paradox that while our passion can inspire our work, it can also make it hard for us to take the somewhat dispassionate perspective needed to analyze a problem and present it in a way that others will not dismiss as overly emotional. I might say that to my mind his/her paper suffers from this very problem of perspective. I would then elaborate upon what I mean, emphasize that I am not saying there is no place for passion or personal experience in writing, perhaps recommend a piece of writing that to my mind succeeds in using both a personal and an analytical perspective, and invite him/her to talk more with me about how he/she might integrate passion and perspective. I might also say that as someone who cares about how things are going for him/her, I would like him/her to have a place to talk about the experience he/she wrote about if it is still feeling very alive and painful for him/her, and that as a member of his/her community I’d be happy to recommend a counselor or therapist on campus.

I also ask students to let me know what role they would like me to play in their writing. I generally ask them to attach a memo to each draft or paper they hand in to me; the memo is a means for them to let me know what they are trying to do in the piece, what questions and concerns they have about the piece, and what in particular they would like me to attend to in my reading. I remain free to comment on whatever I notice, but I do make a point to attend to their specific concerns. Writing such memos helps students reflect upon their work, articulate what in their writing is posing a problem for them, be mindful of an audience, and regard writing (both the drafts of a paper and the memo itself) as an essential part of the ongoing work of revising and clarifying one’s thinking. Such a memo also helps a student bear the shame that can naturally be attendant to turning in work-in-progress, work that the student knows does not meet his/her own or the instructor’s standards for a final product.

At times I need to let a student know that I cannot play a role he/she might like me to play. I need to remember that the student and I are part of a community — a community that includes other teachers as well as counselors, deans, and other resources. I can work as a member of a team or network and refer a student to other colleagues who can play roles I cannot. For instance, if he/she has questions about research methods or content areas with which I have little experience, I might refer him/her to particular colleagues with appropriate expertise. Even while he/she makes use of such “specialists," I can still remain his/her "primary care" instructor and help him/her to coordinate the big picture of his/her project and his/her learning. To give another example, if he/she seems to be hoping that I will serve as his/her counselor, I need to let him/her know that while I am interested to know how things are going for him/her, I cannot offer him/her the sort of ongoing, regular, and searching conversations about his/her personal concerns that he/she needs and deserves. I can refer him/her to a counselor. Similarly, if he/she seems to be hoping that I will edit his/her writing, I explain that while I can appreciate his/her wish or need for a line-by-line editor, I cannot play that role. I let him/her know that while I will note instances of recurring sentence-level editing problems and suggest possible revisions, I will leave it to him/her to identify and resolve similar problems in the rest of the piece. I might
refer him/her to handbooks on writing, a writing center, or a professional editor. I explain that my role is to attend mainly to how he/she frames his/her inquiry and to how he/she constructs and develops his/her argument.

On a practical and stylistic note, I myself typically make fairly extensive marginal comments and also type up a response to the piece overall. Some instructors use minimal marginal notes; some comment almost exclusively by means of marginal notes. Some handwrite their overall response; others, like me, type; still others prefer to meet with the student and give their responses in person. As a person who writes on-paper marginal comments, I have found it useful to create a legend so that students know what I mean by a check in the margin, a squiggly line under text, a straight line next to the text, etc. I have also found it helpful to keep a copy of my summery comments on students’ writing: being able to refer to those comments helps me to recall a particular student’s efforts and chart his/her progress.

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**Resources**


### Identifying Roles Teachers Play

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<tr>
<th>In the role of . .</th>
<th>I respond to . .</th>
<th>in an effort to . .</th>
<th>in the belief that . .</th>
<th>Examples:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judge or Critic, Arbiter of Standards</td>
<td>the text</td>
<td>assess the work as right/wrong, acceptable/unacceptable, good enough/ not good enough</td>
<td>it is useful for a student to know how I would assess the text if it were my own.</td>
<td>“Excellent.” “Awkward.” “Good idea, but you don’t do it justice.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>the text</td>
<td>diagnose, prescribe, and proscribe</td>
<td>it is useful for a student to see how I would solve a problem in a text if the text were my own.</td>
<td>“To focus this, you would need to cut out the part about ____ , take the idea about ____ , and do the following with it.” “Avoid the passive voice.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of Information/ Cultural Informant</td>
<td>an apprentice scholar</td>
<td>inform the student about the conventions and assumptions at work in an academic context</td>
<td>what the student needs is correct information – to enhance his/her skills, to increase his/her fund of knowledge, and to demystify aspects of learning that need not remain mysterious.</td>
<td>“A piece of expository writing needs to make clear the unresolved question to which it is a response.” “In academic writing in this field, you need both formal citation and intratextual attribution of others’ words and ideas.” “In this field/North American academic writing, the convention is ____ .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader</td>
<td>a fellow thinker</td>
<td>convey how I understand what he/she is trying to say or do in his/her piece, what promotes or obstructs my understanding of the argument, and what responses I have to what he/she is saying it</td>
<td>letting the student know what happens in my mind as I read his/her piece helps him/her to experience himself/herself as writing for an audience (i.e., to ask himself/herself whom he/she intends as an audience and what that audience needs to know to understand what he/she wants to tell them).</td>
<td>“I’m confused. When I get to the bottom of page 3, I back up and reread. I was thinking your question was ____ , but now it appears to be ____ .” “This piece seems to be based on the unstated assumption that ____ .” It would help me if you explicitly stated that.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>a developing person, his/her awareness of his/her choice-making, and his/her ability to reckon with complexity</td>
<td>help the person reflect on his/her choices and assumptions and on the assumptions with which he/she is working</td>
<td>taking perspective on and naming one’s choices and assumptions helps one to consider the power and limitations of those choices and assumptions and thereby develop more powerful and inclusive choices and assumptions.</td>
<td>“Maybe the point is not to clear up the complexity but to talk clearly about how and why things are complex.” “What is it that you really want to say in this paper?” “What keeps you from saying exactly that?” “Who is your audience? What is your purpose?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise Instructor</td>
<td>a developing person and his/her need for practice in his/her learning process</td>
<td>recommend specific exercises and assign specific tasks</td>
<td>practical tasks can aid the creative process and the development of competence.</td>
<td>Prompted freewriting (i.e., giving the student a sentence stem and asking him/her to complete the sentence and freewrite from there — e.g., “I want to know . . . “ or “I have a hunch that . . . “ or “What makes my question difficult to reckon with is that . . . ”).</td>
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*The seeds of these ideas came from Larry Weinstein and Kiyo Morimoto; I cultivated these ideas in my work at the Writing Center and the Bureau of Study Council.*
### Identifying Roles Teachers Play (continued)

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<tr>
<td><strong>Coach</strong></td>
<td>a developing person and his/her potential in a particular domain</td>
<td>challenge someone and encourage him/her to stretch to his/her limits</td>
<td>my believing in someone and challenging and joining him/her in his/her effort to do his/her best will help him/her to experience, believe in, and develop his/her potential.</td>
<td>“You’re holding back. What are you afraid of?” “There you go -- that’s it! Can you sense the difference? Now how did you do that?” “Let’s try that again. But this time, I want you to . . .”</td>
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<td><strong>Witness</strong></td>
<td>a person’s in-the-moment efforts to learn and create</td>
<td>sit with someone and bear witness to his/her process of thinking aloud, rewriting a sentence, diagramming a thought, or struggling to figure out a distinction or connection</td>
<td>my attentive and respectful presence provides a space in which a student can experience his/her own mind and creative process at work.</td>
<td>Company. Silence. Attentiveness. Respect. Curiosity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fellow Learner</strong></td>
<td>a person’s experience of learning</td>
<td>empathize with the student and acknowledge his/her experience of the pressures, challenges, shake-ups, and joys inherent in learning</td>
<td>such efforts dignify the complexity, difficulty, and discomfort of real learning and honor and celebrate experiences of discovery, mastery, and transformation.</td>
<td>“Like it’s not legitimate to be at this level and not know something that seems so basic?” “Writing can be such a long, slow, lonely, painful process.” “You surprised even yourself.” “It really matters to you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wise Parent</strong></td>
<td>a person for whom I play the mixed roles of guardian/protector, adorer/encourager, educator about many things (including the necessary tension between compassion and accountability), guide, disciplinarian, role model, and fellow family member</td>
<td>help the student experience a sense of safety, acceptance, and belonging; experience the challenge to stretch beyond his/her comfort zone; and experience the freedoms and responsibilities appropriate to his/her level of development.</td>
<td>attending to ever-dynamic balances of acceptance and challenge, of compassion and accountability, of reflection and action will help the person to develop a sense of worth; a sense of self, a sense of competence, agency, and resilience; and, ideally, a sense of commitment to something greater than the self.</td>
<td>“I appreciate that you felt in over your head with this one and that you then, in a moment of panic, turned in work that was not your own. I can hear from all you say that you know that that was not good judgment. I appreciate your being honest about it all. I can’t spare you the natural consequences of that choice. But let’s talk.” “It seems to me your job in this moment is to learn from this experience. In moments of regret and remorse in my own life, I’ve realized that I need to bear the guilt by being curious enough long enough to learn what I need to learn from the experience. To dismiss the matter without that kind of exploration is defensive and protects me from learning, and to endlessly punish myself for what I did is also defensive and also spares me my learning.”</td>
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