



Students' conditioned response to teachers' response Portfolio proponents, take note!

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Abstract

Portfolio advocates argue that teacher commentary becomes more meaningful for students with the use of portfolio assessment, particularly because the commentary is unaccompanied by a grade. However, my own study of portfolio classrooms suggests that students continue to regard teacher responses as directives that leave them few options in terms of revisions. My study involved six writing classrooms from the middle school to the university level and included classroom observations, interviews of students and teachers, and examination of student writing and teacher response. The students generally looked to their teachers to show them the "correct" way to write and resisted the notion of making independent judgments about their writing and the necessary revisions, primarily because they could not ignore the ultimate reality of the grade. Yet the teachers generally avoided being directive in their responses. In one instance, the teacher's best efforts to adopt a more open style of response backfired when a sensitive student read the commentary as demeaning. I argue, therefore, that even though portfolios represent a more enlightened approach to assessment, students have difficulty escaping their conditioned obeisance to teacher authority. While this finding should not be read as a condemnation of portfolio assessment, it does indicate that teachers need to be aware of how students read their responses. Otherwise, portfolios alone may not substantially alter the teacher-student dynamics. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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Belanoff and Elbow (1991, p. 25) maintain that comments on papers within the framework of the portfolio approach become more meaningful to students

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without the hovering presence of the grade: "Comments under the portfolio system are more likely to be experienced as real communication: something the teacher wants the student to act on and something the student has a need to understand." While their intent is to emphasize the greater attention that students will give to comments when there is no grade to distract them, Belanoff and Elbow also indicate that they, like most teachers, expect their comments to signal a specific action that students *should* take. What they overlook is the possibility that students will decode these comments as directives that must be unquestioningly obeyed. My own study of portfolio classrooms reveals that students do in fact regard their teachers' comments in this light. Years of schooling have conditioned them to obey what they consider orders from an authority, regardless of their teachers' adoption of portfolio pedagogy and its philosophy of altering the traditional teacher-student relationship.

My study was originally intended to examine the extent to which portfolio assessment promotes student self-evaluation and a sharing of authority between teacher and students, as so much of the literature on portfolio assessment claims. However, my reading of postmodern theory convinced me that I needed to include the impact of power dynamics in the classroom. After all, in order for any sharing of authority to occur, teachers must be willing to step down from their traditional position as authority figures, and students must be willing to accept a role of greater responsibility, which also means abandoning the juvenile status traditionally assigned to them even on the postsecondary level. In other words, such a study must take into account the well-entrenched roles that have been carved out for teachers and students for centuries.

1. The response context

The impact of teacher commentary on students' revising practices has received insufficient attention in composition studies, and the studies that have been conducted have yielded contradictory results. Beach's (1979) examination of drafts produced by 103 high school students in a controlled writing experiment leads him to argue that students will revise effectively only with teacher intervention. By contrast, Sommers (1982), based on the research she conducted with Brannon and Knoblauch on teachers' commentary on student drafts, warns of the danger that teachers will impose their own interpretation on students' texts and that the students will revise accordingly. It is notable that Sommers focuses on teacher response styles, not students' reactions to the commentary or their subsequent revisions, even though she claims the three researchers had interviewed students. In a later article, Beach (1989) describes in detail a method for guiding students toward self-assessment, but he offers no evidence of the method's effectiveness for improving students' self-assessment skills or their revision practices.

Recent studies have categorized teacher responses, such as Connors and Lunsford's (1993) analysis of 3000 marked student papers; Straub's (1996)

examination of responses to a single essay by five teacher-scholars, including such luminaries as Peter Elbow and Anne Ruggles Gere; and Smith's (1997) deconstruction of the end comments appended to more than 300 student essays. While such taxonomies are certainly instructive, we are still left with a void in terms of our knowledge of student reaction to teacher commentary. In a response to Straub's article, Chandler (1997, p. 273) calls for "more research about how individual students 'hear' and understand the comments a teacher makes on their writing . . ." Straub (1997, p. 278) replies that he has published the results of a survey of 142 students, from which he concludes that "... students do discern differences in the modes of comments and, by and large, have certain preferences for the kinds of comments teachers make on their writing." However, we still need to know whether students' "preferences" for certain types of comments translate into productive revision and whether they read those comments as directives or stimulating suggestions. This lapse in our knowledge about how students act upon teacher responses prompts Mathison-Fife and O'Neill (1997, p. 277), also reacting to Straub's article, to argue for research that situates teacher commentary in context, including a consideration of whether "... students interpret teacher comments differently than researchers and teachers . . ."

Two extensive investigations offer considerable insight into student revision practices springing from teacher response. Yagelski's (1995) study of a senior high school class takes into account the impact of context on revision through his use of field notes of classroom activity during a semester, analysis of student essays, and interviews of students and teacher. In this classroom, the teacher, a proponent of process pedagogy, encouraged revision and even rewarded it with higher grades; she also promoted student autonomy through peer response. Nevertheless, Yagelski notes that the students continued to fixate on surface and stylistic features in revision because the teacher emphasized those traits, rather than more global considerations, in her feedback. Thus, the teacher's belief in process pedagogy conflicted with her more traditional values, and the students had to conform to both standards in order to achieve the highest grade.

Onore (1989) offers a different perspective on revision practices through her case study of three students in a college expository writing class. Only one of these students, Miranda, sees the responses to her drafts as an opportunity to reconceptualize her project; although her writing does not thereby improve in the strictest sense, Onore celebrates Miranda's achievement as "the ability to see chaos as generative, to strive to work on the borders of our understandings rather than to work safely within the confines of what we already know" (p. 246). By contrast, the other two writers interpret the comments as directives calling not for rethinking but isolated and specific actions: "Throughout their schooling they have learned, we may assume, that no matter what teachers may say, they are still the final arbiters of quality (and not so incidentally, the final judges who give the grades)" (p. 242). In this regard, Alex's case provides perhaps the most useful insight into how students translate commentary into action; already a strong writer when he enrolled in the class, Alex sees revision

as simply “polishing the surface of an already constructed, non-negotiable text,” and “... the purpose for writing is to get it right ...” (p. 238). Based on these results, Onore concludes:

Comments, even those which take advantage of the best information about composing and revising that is available, are limited in their potential to produce predictable results since their interpretation cannot be fully controlled; neither can the ways in which writers respond and react to them. (p. 237)

With the introduction of portfolio assessment, a new dimension is added to teacher response. The underlying philosophy of this alternative approach to evaluation is that students are encouraged to become more autonomous and to take more responsibility for their work, including the evaluation of it. According to Yancey (1992b, p. 18; emphasis in the text), “Assessment is no longer seen as a process where one party submits his or her work to another with no influence on how the work is performed or interpreted” because “... all the parties are *bona fide* participants, and ... the person whose performance is being assessed is more than an object of someone else’s perusal.”

Portfolio assessment promotes such participation and autonomy by allowing students: to select the work on which they will be evaluated (Belanoff, 1994; Berlin, 1994; D’Aoust, 1992; Weiser, 1992); to reflect on their work, thus allowing students to become more adept at evaluating their own work and guiding their teachers’ reading of that work (Camp & Levine, 1991; Elbow, 1994; Mathison-Fife & O’Neill, 1997; Yancey, 1992a, 1992b); to take control of revision and have the opportunity to produce substantive revision (Hamilton, 1994; Sommers, 1991; White, 1994); to be granted the time to grow as writers (McClelland, 1991; Yancey, 1992a, 1992b); to take risks with their writing (Elbow, 1991; Weiser, 1992; Yancey, 1992b); and to seek advice from peers (Belanoff & Elbow, 1991; Camp, 1992; Condon & Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Gold, 1992). The result is that evaluation becomes a positive force to encourage growth, maturity, and independence, rather than a means of pointing out deficiencies. A power shift can occur because teacher and students are united in a common effort to improve the students’ writing, instead of adversaries in an unequal contest in which one player (the teacher) essentially controls the outcome from the beginning.

Still, to understand the extent of such a power shift, it is necessary to explore the context of power dynamics in the classroom, particularly the teacher’s traditional role as the authority figure. In this regard, the work of Foucault is instructive. Foucault (1983, p. 220) defines a relationship of power as “a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future.” This theory certainly applies to the classroom where teachers must anticipate their students’ reactions to rules and be prepared to institute counter measures, if necessary.

Most pertinent to this discussion is Foucault's (1979, p. 184) remarks on "the examination," which he sees as the culmination of institutional efforts to control behavior: "It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them." By providing a means of measuring performance, the examination transforms individuals not only into subjects of power, but also objects of study: "... it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected" (pp. 184–85). In education, the examination — which should be more broadly defined to include any graded work, including a portfolio — becomes an occasion for a teacher to assess the students' acquisition of the knowledge transmitted by the teacher and to provide the teacher with information about each student: "... the examination in the school [is] a constant exchanger of knowledge; it guarantee[s] the movement of knowledge from the teacher to the pupil, but it extract[s] from the pupil a knowledge destined and reserved for the teacher" (p. 187). In other words, the teacher has the power to decide what counts as knowledge, and the examination provides information about the students' ability to absorb that knowledge. This relationship thus serves to enhance the teacher's power, for "[t]he exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 52).

Students undoubtedly recognize that any form of evaluation, even portfolio assessment, places them in a position of subjection to the teacher's authority and that they become, in a sense, naked before the teacher's gaze as their level of competence is visibly displayed. Typically, students have no choice but to submit to evaluation, and they have no say about the form that the assessment will take. Any evaluation, therefore, can serve as a vehicle for crystallizing the teacher's authority. Even response in the absence of a grade can serve as a reminder of the teacher's superior position, in terms of experience, knowledge, and status.

2. The research design

Six writing classes are included in this study, two at the K-12 level and the remaining four at the university level. I decided to study classrooms and students in both K-12 and postsecondary settings to compare the writing and reactions of students at these different levels of academic life. Table 1 provides an overview of the range of classes involved, the number of students volunteering to participate, and the length of time spent with each class.

I chose the sixth grade language arts teacher, whom I call Cassandra, because her presentation at a teachers gathering convinced me of her dedication to process pedagogy and portfolios, and the middle school in which she teaches is located in my home district in a suburb north of Detroit. In Cassandra's class, the students function fairly autonomously: the students work at their own pace on a piece of

Table 1
Classes in study

Class	Academic level	Participants	Study length
Language arts	Sixth grade	13	8 months
AP English	Senior, high school	12	20 weeks
Basic writing	Freshman, university	10	15 weeks
Basic writing	Freshman, university	13	15 weeks
Expository writing	Freshman, university (Canadian)	10	14 weeks
Intermediate composition	Freshman-junior, university	12	15 weeks

writing as long as they utilize each step of the process stipulated by Cassandra, including prewriting, drafting, self-editing, peer conferencing, and revision. At the end of the school year, the students select the three pieces they want to include in their portfolio, which is then passed on to their seventh grade teachers.

I also wanted to include a high school class to serve as a bridge between the middle school and postsecondary levels. Again, I chose the high school in my own district, but, although the principal was enthusiastic about my project, I had difficulty finding a teacher who was willing to participate. The teacher I have dubbed Terry was interested but would not permit me to observe her portfolio-based senior level class because of possible adverse reactions from the university with which the course was affiliated. She offered instead her Advanced Placement English class which, although not using portfolios per se, did incorporate some of the pedagogical techniques associated with portfolios, such as peer response, self-reflection, and multiple drafts. I decided that portfolio assessment should be considered a continuum since the literature shows that its composition varies from context to context and from teacher to teacher. Merely because Terry did not accord her students the privilege of choosing the pieces of writing on which they wanted to be evaluated should not mean that her class could not provide useful insights into student behavior and attitudes in a course designed to promote student autonomy. I therefore concluded that Terry's pedagogy would harmonize with the goals of my study.

Three of the postsecondary classes were held at a large, urban, midwestern university. The three teachers responded to my request to use portfolio assessment and to become participants in the study. Marie and Guy taught sections of a basic writing course, and Walt, intermediate composition. None of these three had previously used portfolios; thus, they looked to me for guidance. The fourth postsecondary instructor, Jill, was a graduate student at a Canadian university, whose English department had hired me as a consultant to design a portfolio-based expository writing course. All four used the portfolio model that allows students to select the works they wish evaluated to determine their final grade; these teachers did not assign grades to individual essays but collected portfolios at midterm to offer a tentative grade on the body of work. This is the same model I have followed since I first began using portfolios 7 years ago; thus, all four teachers were following my lead.

The method I employed is a hybrid of ethnography and case study in that I compiled extensive data on the context of the classrooms that I studied — with the work and words of all the participants contributing to that context — but I zoomed in on certain students whose experience I deemed significant. Similarly, Brueggemann (1996, p. 35) describes her work as “ethno-oriented case studies” because, while I used ethnographic techniques for most of my data collection . . . the focus of my work thus far has been on individuals, on case study objects within that ethnographic setting.” My aim was to highlight those individuals whom I came to see as symbolizing recurring themes but to position them within the classroom contexts that defined their writing experience for a semester or a year.

In each class, at the teacher’s invitation, I made a presentation to the students about the study and handed out the consent forms, which identified the focus of the study as “factors influencing [students’] ability to evaluate [their] own writing.” I presented this in fairly broad terms so as to avoid planting any preconceptions in their minds. I sought 10 to 12 participants in each class to allow for students dropping out of class or the study and to provide me with a broad range of data. I knew, of course, that ultimately only a few students from each class would become valuable as case studies. Most of the participants decided on their own to be involved in the study, but in some cases, I approached students whom I found interesting, mostly because of their articulate contributions to class discussion, and asked them to participate — none of these students declined. The study began with 70 participants, but only 49 were available for the exit interviews, or, in the case of the high school students, questionnaires.

I interviewed almost all of the students twice (at the beginning and end of their courses) to gain insight into their perceptions of influences on their writing and their evaluation of it. The initial interview sought to discover the students’ attitudes toward writing (attitudes that could affect their performance in their current class), their previous experience with teacher commentary, their evaluation of the peer response they had received so far in the course, and their opinion of portfolio assessment. The exit interview (or the questionnaire for the high school students) primarily asked the students to account for the rationale behind their portfolio selections, the comparative benefits of peer and teacher response, and the growth (if any) in their self-critiquing skills, particularly through the use of portfolio assessment.

Because I also wanted to study the context in which students had to function in order to determine the impact of that context on revision and self-evaluation, I took copious field notes (occasionally supplemented by tape recordings) of classroom activity, particularly teacher-student and student-student interactions. Plus I examined handouts and reading assignments to detect any implicit messages that the teachers might be sending about power and authority. In addition, I had access to tape recordings of conferences that three of the university instructors held with the study participants. To gauge the effect of peer feedback, I taped some group sessions in the sixth grade class and sat in on groups in two

university classes (once the students became comfortable with my presence), but I principally relied on students' written feedback to their classmates.

To learn the teachers' perspectives, I conducted interviews with them at the end of the semester (or the school year, in the case of the sixth grade teacher). These interviews focused on their philosophy of teaching writing generally and for the particular course that I had observed, the success of the course in promoting students' self-evaluation abilities, and their opinions of portfolio assessment. I also asked them to describe their authority style (e.g., assertive, sharing authority) and their students' response to it. I included these questions about authority in the exit interviews with the students from two classes, but, because I had not previously framed my study in this way when I observed the other four classes, I was compelled to contact students by phone for follow-up interviews.

Finally, I brought my analysis of all these components — interviews, classroom interaction, peer response sessions, conferences — to an examination of the students' writing. By comparing the various drafts of a particular writing assignment, I attempted to determine whether changes had been stimulated by the teacher's comments (either written or delivered orally in conference), peer feedback, or the student's efforts at self-critiquing. One way to analyze the teacher commentary would be in terms of the messages it conveys about the teacher's authority. However, I was more interested in how the students seemed to interpret the comments and how that affected both their revision behavior and their portfolio selections. Did a student read the comments as requiring that she pursue a certain course of action? Did she think that all she had to do was follow the teacher's instructions to make the paper "correct"? Or did she believe that there was still an onus on her to exercise her own judgment about what revisions would improve the paper? And what would she do when the teacher's feedback conflicted with that of her peers? Or when either teacher or peers offered advice that ran counter to what *she* wanted to do with the paper? Finally, would she select for her portfolio only those pieces that (she thought) had been evaluated positively or would she choose pieces that were her personal favorites?

3. Results and discussion

3.1. *Finding the "correct" way*

Despite the use of portfolio pedagogy in the six classrooms studied, the students exhibit behaviors suggesting deference to the teacher's opinion and direction and a reluctance to adopt more independent moves. One manifestation of this is the recurrence of the notion of "correctness" with respect to evaluation and revision. Almost half of them share the conviction that teacher commentary indicates the "correct" approach, and revision thus becomes an effort to make a piece of writing "correct." Consequently, Cassie, a Canadian student, worries that with the portfolio approach, "You could be doing revisions constantly, but

you don't know if what you're doing is correct." Laura, an American university junior, rejects her instructor's assurance that the teacher is not the definitive authority in evaluating writing; she prefers to be shown "the correct way" to write a paper, a conviction instilled in her by previous writing instructors. Such comments illustrate Miller's (1991, p. 49) claim that writing teachers are endowed with "overwhelming authority by students, institutions, and the public, who expect even the most inexperienced 'English teacher' to criticize and correct them, even in settings entirely removed from the academy."

All this preoccupation with correctness primarily hinges on errors. For example, Major, who is enrolled in basic writing, equates revision with fixing spelling and grammar ("the way a good paper's supposed to be"), while James, who is two levels above Major in intermediate composition, has a similar obsession with sentence structure. Almost half of all the students in the study identify some element of mechanics when I ask them in the exit interview about improvements in their writing and continuing problems. Yet portfolio proponents believe that students will learn to see editing and proofreading as the final tasks in polishing a piece, not the sole focus of revision. Elbow (1994), for example, believes that portfolio assessment encourages students to ignore mechanics during drafting and to attend to such matters in the final draft, perhaps even seeking help, just as many professionals turn to copy editors. While this is a more enlightened approach to error, it does not take into account the students who have been conditioned by previous teachers to believe that surface features require the most serious attention, as 10 of the students specifically recall — two high school students, four basic writers, two in the Canadian expository writing class, and two enrolled in a university intermediate composition class. It is also significant that some students adopt their teachers' language for discussing error: Terry's high school students using her term "technical control" and Marie's basic writers talking about "sentence-level errors."

"Right" and "wrong," then, are equated in the students' minds with meeting someone else's standards, that is, someone who holds a superior position. When grades are added to the equation, we have a situation in which students strive to do what they are told because they will be rewarded for such compliant behavior. These are attitudes that the students bring to the portfolio classroom. Although Yancey (1992b, p. 17) may envision a portfolio classroom in which evaluation can be "a shared enterprise, another form of making meaning," the students in my study show that they have been conditioned to fulfill a teacher's expectations, not to contribute to the evaluation process and certainly not to see it as a way of "making meaning." Clifford (1991, p. 48) would describe them as "learning how academic discourse and institutional reality proceed: one is assigned tasks to be completed on time and according to the Subject's wishes; those who comply succeed, those who don't deserve to be excluded."

Because students believe that successfully fulfilling their role as students requires them to accede to the teacher's wishes, over half of the participants label as "helpful" or "useful" those comments that clearly signal a teacher's standards

and an action that the students can take to conform. As Dave, a college freshman, notes, "They [teachers] usually see what my problem is and understand and help me with the ways of tackling it." Samantha, Dave's classmate, adopts an even more pragmatic view of comments: "They're [teacher comments] very useful cuz that's what I look at when I rewrite . . . And I just use whatever suggestions they [teachers] have and, like, expand upon it."

The following exchange with Lisa, a college senior, illustrates just how ingrained the desire for commentary that signals an appropriate action can be:

Lisa: If I get comments or suggestions, I try to work it to their advantage, to —

Researcher (interrupting): What do you mean "to their advantage"?

Lisa: Meaning if they give a comment, maybe you should change the way you say this, and I change it and take it back to 'em, and [if] that's the way they prefer it, then I'm trying to work it to their advantage. I mean, the writing is good, but it can be revised of course.

Researcher: Are you saying that you're trying to accommodate what the teachers are saying?

Lisa: Yes. More like, for instance, if they say, "Well, your paper is good, but I think you should, maybe, use transitional phrases or something," I try to throw 'em in somewhere in the best way possible or something.

Lisa's observation is more revealing than she realizes: by repeating the phrase "to *their* advantage," she betrays her willingness to comply with teachers' expectations. She apparently does not, in other words, see revision as an act she performs for her *own* advantage, that is, to improve her writing. Revision for Lisa, as for many other students in the study, is a task undertaken to please the teacher and obtain a higher grade. As Sommers (1982, p. 152) comments, "The process of revising always involves a risk. But, too often revision becomes a balancing act for students in which they make the changes that are requested but do not take the risk of changing anything that was not commented on, even if the students sense that other changes are needed."

Conversely, the students object to responses that do not offer a clear and specific direction. College freshmen, Cecilia and Samantha, protest that their teacher's advice confuses them because he contradicts himself. Three high school students register similar irritation with a previous teacher whose lengthy feedback made her expectations difficult to decipher. The teacher wrote "novels," Heidi complains. "I would never read her comments," Tyler adds, "because she would write so messy, and she'd write just pages of comments, and I would just look at 'em and not read 'em." Becky also notes that this same teacher offered what she classifies as irrelevant observations.

Some of the Canadian students register discomfort with the nondirective nature of the conferences with their current teacher. Phil, for example, concedes that there is some benefit to the requirement to complete a self-evaluation sheet prior to conference, but he still yearns for more specific advice from the instructor: "I've been kinda frustrated . . . because from what [the teacher's] explained, she's kinda got to hold back, but I'd rather her come out and say, 'Well, this is the problem. I'd rather see you go this way with that part of the essay' or something." By contrast, he values the high school teacher who would "pick out points in my essays, or whatever, and say, 'This is what you should have done.'" Frank adds that the teacher's nondirective approach may have made some students apprehensive and perhaps resentful: "They might feel the teacher doesn't care." These students are obviously accustomed to having teachers tell them what to do, and being suddenly thrust into independent behavior makes them uncomfortable.

Another indication that students depend on teacher comments is the preference expressed by about half of the participants for written feedback, rather than oral, so that they can refer directly to the comments while they revise a paper or compose the next one. Without this visual aid, they fear they will forget the teacher's observations and thus fail to respond to them. By contrast, they see oral commentary as complementing written, a way to obtain further explanation or to promote dialogue with the teacher.

3.2. *Revision as conformity*

Because the students are convinced that their teachers know the "correct" way to write, or at least the way they *must* write to succeed in the class, three-fourths of all the students in the study rely on teacher comments to revise their papers and generally to improve their writing. Furthermore, nine participants (ranging from middle school students to college freshmen) identify teacher comments as the spur that moves them to revise at all. Lacking confidence in their own judgment, they look to the teacher for guidance.

For example, Rei, a university freshman, acknowledges that her teacher's comments have had a "huge" impact on her writing. With some probing to draw out this shy student, who is still insecure about expressing herself in English (her family moved here from Japan only 6 years ago), I am able to unearth this explanation:

Researcher: In what way did they have a huge effect on your writing? (after a 15-seconds pause, during which Rei looks to her twin Setsu for help); No, it's your answer, [Rei] (laughs). Don't look to [Setsu]. (after another 4-seconds pause) Can you explain to me what you did when you read his comments? Like, what would you do after you read his comments?

Rei (responding immediately): I'd revise my paper.
Researcher: Based on his comments?
Rei: Yes.

I discover just how accurate Rei's admission of dependence is when I review her portfolio and note several instances of her adopting the teacher's editing and phrasing when she revises. In an early draft of her essay reacting to John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, her teacher had written in the margin "Include an ending statement in this paragraph connecting nudity to women and nakedness to women making women the passive objects of male surveying." Rei dutifully inserts his direction into her paper: "He [Berg] also connects nudity to women and nakedness to women making women passive objects of male surveying."

While one might expect an ESL student to rely heavily on teacher comments in order to improve her writing in a language with which she is still uncomfortable, many native speakers in the study share Rei's instinct to abide by the teacher's sense of what revisions are indicated. Rachel, a high school student, confesses that she follows the teacher's advice "to the letter" for academic writing. And I find examples of that in her research paper. In one passage, she copies her teacher's editing exactly by replacing "Eventually the hysteria gained some self-control . . ." with "Eventually the hysteria died down and rational discussion began." When her teacher directs her to "discuss Preston's book and what it contributes to our knowledge," Rachel responds by adding a half page reference to the book, which she introduces by parroting her teacher's language: "Author Richard Preston contributes greatly to the public's knowledge . . ." Not only does Rachel not face the disadvantage that Rei does in learning to write in a second language, but she is also an accomplished writer who wins a national high school writing contest. Yet she, like Rei, feels compelled to abide by a teacher's comments, which she interprets as directives that must be obeyed.

Some students even see revision merely as an exercise in answering the teacher's questions and fixing mistakes, an attitude represented by all grade levels. Kurt, a sixth grader, says that he "changed what she [the teacher] said." Evelyn, a high school senior and class valedictorian, acknowledges her debt to her teacher: "I respect her input a lot and try to incorporate all her suggestions in my rewrites. I find that my papers really are a lot stronger when I do so." Karen, Evelyn's classmate and a National Merit semifinalist, succinctly echoes her view: "I learned how Mrs. [Clark] wants papers written, and I wrote them that way." Eva, a university freshman in a basic writing class, refers to this approach as a "check and balance system": "You write, hand it in; she comments. You answer her questions that she puts on your paper, fit it in, and give it back to her. You might have more questions . . . Check and balance: she checked, I balanced out, and I passed the class." Amanda, also a freshman but enrolled in an intermediate composition class, observes simply, "He [the teacher] told me I was wrong, so I just tried to basically fix it in my papers . . ." It is noteworthy

that this attitude cuts across the age and grade levels represented in this study; even the strong writers and students recognize the need to conform.

Leder's (1991, p. 132) survey of her student's reaction to the use of portfolios in a business writing class illustrates similar revision behavior. "My instructor left valuable remarks on my graded papers; I simply followed her suggestions and corrected my typos," writes one student. Leder, however, overlooks this disturbing statement and seems to be drawn to the student's expression of pride in his portfolio, apparently the reason why Leder includes this statement under the heading "Positive Assessments."

Although no one would deny that an important part of a writing teacher's job is to offer feedback that will promote effective revision, the troubling aspect of the revision behaviors exhibited by so many students in the study is that they see their own job as blindly following the prescriptions of their teachers. Even more significant is their resistance to developing their own felt sense of what constitutes effective writing. In spite of the fact that the portfolio process grants them the time to rework their writing and to see it with new eyes, the only eyes they seem to trust are the teacher's.

Elbow (1993, p. 196) complains about his own experience with students' slavishly revising in accord with his comments, "making whatever changes my comments suggest but doing it for the sake of a grade; not really taking the time to make up their own minds about whether they think my judgments or suggestions really make sense to them." He pinpoints grades as the source of this compliant behavior, but he overlooks the possibility that years of schooling have taught students to behave like obedient subjects under the control of presumably wiser teachers. Foucault (1979, p. 304) describes this process as "normalizing," an effort to induce conformity that is overseen by the "judges of normality," including "the teacher-judge." As a result, students become unwilling or unable to exercise their own judgment, and they regard the teacher's perceived dictates as unquestionable, some even revising in an almost automaton fashion. As one student, Kristin, says, "*Everything [my teacher] said to correct, I, you know, did my best to correct*" (emphasis mine). Apparently, this attitude prevails in spite of the portfolio mission to make students more autonomous writers.

3.3. *The teachers' response styles*

My analysis of the response styles employed by the six teachers in this study indicates that they generally attempt to avoid being directive in the sense that Nancy Sommers (1982, p. 149) would characterize it: "The teacher appropriates the text from the student by confusing the student's purpose in writing the text with her own purpose in commenting". Of course, merely pointing out problems can be interpreted by students as a direction to address them. However, these teachers use various techniques to soften their voices and to give the students options in revision.

One technique is to offer advice about a possible revision strategy, as when Cassandra, the sixth grade teacher, suggests an ending to Karen's poem when Karen asks for help. The teachers also phrase their commentary in the form of questions, rather than commands, usually to indicate areas needing clarification or elaboration; for example, Terry, the high school teacher, writes in the margin of Gerry's ethnography, "Can you give concrete examples?" Similarly, a teacher may use qualifiers to downplay his or her authority and to imply that the response is just one way of reacting to the student's writing; thus, Walt, the intermediate composition teacher, writes on Adam's essay, "I *think* developing these two terms would help to draw out the distinction you're making" (emphasis added).

The teachers sometimes couch their remarks in terms of reader response. That can take the form of their own response, as when Jill, the Canadian instructor, notes on Corrine's research paper, "You've lost me here." Or the teacher can indicate how a generic reader might react, as when Marie, a basic writing teacher, sums up her impression of Yvonne's narrative of a significant event in her literacy development: "[Yvonne], your paper presents some interesting ideas that still need development to help the reader understand why you were successful."

Despite their efforts to avoid being directive, these teachers will chide their students when they deem it necessary, usually when they detect a substandard performance. Walt warns Lisa that her research paper "draws too heavily on your source material"; he directs her to "come up with your own *original* thesis — your own perspective" and to do "a substantial revision/rewrite." Terry chastises Mark by writing on his argumentative essay, "You really needed to analyze the issues more directly, [Mark]. You can do better." Cassandra comments on one of Carrie's stories, "I do not sense completeness in this paper!"

Guy, who teaches basic writing, is the most directive of the six teachers. Because he structures his course around an analysis of the power dynamics in society, noting the inequities of race, class, gender, and sexuality, his comments tend to urge his students to adopt such a perspective in their writing. Even so, my examination of his responses to his students' writing shows that he makes an effort to lighten what the students could perceive as a directive tone by using some of the techniques described above.

A good illustration is his response to an early draft of Samantha's final paper. At the top of the paper and extending down the right margin, he offers the following comment:

Instead of concentrating on describing the mother's worth, you *might* use the image of the mother to show the need to critique current images of black women, particularly black mothers. Be careful not to put your values onto the figure of the mother. You *might* consider how the image of Lorde's mother compares with such popular images as Aunt Jemima, the mother on the TV show "Good Times" and the mother on "Fresh Prince of Bel Air" and even the mother from "The Cosby Show." The image of the black mother as beast of burden often differs little from such racist images as Aunt Jemima and Nell Carter in "Gimme a Break." (emphasis added)

Noteworthy in this lengthy passage is the way that Guy softens an apparent effort to direct the shape of Samantha's argument by using the word "might" twice. Thus, even though he offers his opinion rather forcefully, he still implies that the student has options.

Guy also downplays his authority later in the draft by raising questions: "What comments about education is Lorde making? Is this still an important issue today? Why?" In this case, he is suggesting a line of argument but not insisting on it. In general, then, I believe that the assertiveness of much of Guy's commentary can be attributed to inexperience (this is his first time teaching) and to a sincere desire to promote what he considers a beneficial perspective, rather than his intention to control a student's writing in the manner associated with a traditional, authoritative composition teacher.

I also note that the six teachers in this study are not fixated on errors, even though many of their students seem to be. They do minimal editing (Marie and Cassandra avoiding it altogether), and they focus more on content than mechanics and diction. They avoid overwhelming the students by noting errors in a restrained fashion, usually calling attention to only a few types of errors in a particular piece of writing. They also find ways to de-emphasize their positions as superior keepers of standards. Marie, for example, offers Kristin this advice: "Think about where you put commas. They do make the reader pause. Does the sentence require that hesitation at this place?" Here Marie is helping Kristin to understand the rationale for comma usage, rather than conveying the message that Kristin is committing a grammatical sin. Similarly, Jill apologizes to Corrine for stressing wordiness in one essay: "I got a bit carried away with the cut-and-slash routine, at first. Basically, I want you to consider every word you put down on the page. If it isn't *absolutely* necessary, cut it."

3.4. A case of (*perceived*) oppression

Given the fact that these teachers take pains to be nondirective in their commentary, it is ironic that their students are intent on translating every observation into a command that they must follow. And, in one instance, I find a student who feels oppressed by her teacher's comments, in spite of the teacher's efforts to couch her response in language generally conveying support and interest, rather than authority, and in spite of the fact that the teacher has withheld grades on individual assignments, a typical practice in portfolio assessment.

When I ask Yvonne, a basic writing student, in our first interview about her previous experiences with teacher commentary, her initial reaction is to gush, "I love it when teachers write all over my papers," but she quickly modifies that response: "Well, sometimes if it's constructive criticism, I can take it, but if they write something . . . I don't know. Sometimes I'll feel like they're just picking on me." That last remark foreshadows her reaction to her current teacher's comments by the end of the semester. In her exit interview she concedes that "... you do get to revise and recopy everything and see it all over," but she emphasizes

her distress with the response she has received on her writing: "Well, I keep getting back a bunch of negative comments, and nothing that I do seems to be good enough," she says tearfully. "And now all of a sudden, in the past week, I've realized I don't think I'm going to pass this class." These comments lead to the following exchange:

Yvonne: I feel that in a regular class if you're going to do bad on one paper, you know your grade on that paper, and you know you have to improve your next paper. In this class it's like you hand in a bunch of bad papers, not knowing. I mean, she does write comments on them, but never have I gotten anything good. So to me it's like I've never passed this class since the day I stepped in here.

Researcher: So even though you have the opportunity to revise and keep revising, you don't find that that's helped you at all?

Yvonne: Not really because I still don't know how good it is, if it is. I mean, you can still revise a good paper, I guess. So to me I guess I keep revising bad papers, and it's never becoming good. That's how I feel about it.

Researcher: So that's given you a negative attitude toward portfolio assessment?

Yvonne: Yeah. Before I liked it. I know at the midterm, or before [when] you interviewed [me], I said it was good because we're getting feedback and stuff, but now I realize that it's really brought my confidence down in my writing.

Researcher: Well, let me ask you this, [Yvonne]. Do you think that, you know, your negative attitude now, do you think that is a reflection on portfolio assessment or this class?

Yvonne: I think a little bit of both. I think that if . . . that . . . well, this class, the class, I think, has helped me. I think it's been pretty good. It's . . . the portfolio assessment, I guess, because it's the way, that's how she grades it. And that's the whole reason why I'm upset, because we don't get grades. You just hand it all in. If it wasn't for the portfolio method, then I probably would know. I could estimate what my grade would be in here right now.

Researcher: But I thought you said you did have a sense as to what grade you would get or how you were being evaluated.

Yvonne: Yeah, I guess. Well, I guess I'm saying more like, more like number values, like if I had an "A" on this paper, I'd know that's equivalent to, like, this percentage and this percentage, but now all's I have is comments. You can't really [put] percentages on comments.

Researcher: So even though you do get the chance to revise, you don't think it offsets the fact that you don't have an actual grade?

Yvonne: I think that even in a class where you do get grades, I think you do get a chance to revise . . . And in here you like, you just write a paper, hand it in, and then you revise it like two or

three times. I guess ... I don't know. I don't think it really offsets ... I just feel like I'm handing in a bunch of bad work, whereas like a graded class, I would know if I was handing in something good or not.

Researcher: You think that you're handing in a bunch of bad work. It sounds like you have some sense of either what *you* think of your work or what you think the teacher thinks of your work. So how is that any different than if she said "D" or "E" or whatever?

Yvonne: Yeah, I guess because I would know more, if she like gave me a "D" or an "E," I guess I would know more of what she expected. But on these, she just seems to ... every paper has comments. So I just think, well, it's routine.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Yvonne: Well, it's routine that she has to write comments on all the papers, like if it's what she thinks is bad or whatever. If it was in a regular class, then I would know, "Oh, I did bad on this paper," and then she would write the comments. But now she just writes comments. I don't know if it's good or bad or not.

Researcher: So the comments don't help you see what areas you need to work on, or what areas ...

Yvonne: Yeah, they do, they do. I mean, to anybody they would help, but I still don't have ... I seem to keep revising everything, and she still keeps writing comments, so it seems to me that I'm not doing what she wants. Or maybe I am, but I don't know. I guess I just like grades.

Researcher: So then it seems to me what you're saying — I want to make sure I'm not misunderstanding it — is that, to you, if you get comments on your writing, then it means the paper is bad?

Yvonne: No! It's just that ... negative comments all the time. On every one of my papers, she, you know ... At the beginning it was "Have you seen your tutor yet? Have you started tutoring yet?" ... And now she's written on all my papers that this paper would be graded unsatisfactory; it's equivalent to a "D" or an "E" in a 102 [freshman composition] class. That to me is not positive. She has written one positive thing on my paper when she said that one of my summaries was good. And that's it.

A number of contradictions emerge from this conversation. First, Yvonne mourns the absence of grades in the portfolio method and claims that grades would convey how well she is fulfilling the requirements: "... if she like gave me a 'D' or an 'E,' I guess I would know more of what she expected." In this sense, she seems to reinforce the teacher, Marie's, own view that low grades can be "eloquent." However, Yvonne would undoubtedly be devastated by this, as is evident in her reaction to Marie's warning about the poor quality of her writing

judged by the standards at the next level. "That to me is not positive," Yvonne decides, seemingly unaware of her inconsistency.

Her desire for "number values" or percentages may be due to the fact that she considers herself a "math person," but it also suggests that she wants a concrete evaluation and that she wishes to avoid the messiness of making writerly judgments ("I don't know if it's good or bad or not."). For Yvonne, like many students, revision is merely a means of improving the grade, not the quality of the writing. No matter how helpful the teacher intends her comments, a student like Yvonne finds them mystical because she is looking for an assessment, not a means of reworking the writing. Perhaps for that reason she dismisses Marie's comments as "routine," even though, when I probe further, she admits that the comments do direct her toward the problem areas in a paper. However, her impatience with having to revise a paper several times suggests that she regards the commentary as belittling, rather than helpful. In fact, she seems to regard any commentary as indicating a negative assessment, even though she denies that. "I seem to keep revising everything, and she still keeps writing comments, so it seems to me that I'm not doing what she wants," Yvonne says with frustration.

Nevertheless, Yvonne is hesitant to blame Marie for her distress, perhaps because she wants to believe in the supremacy of the teacher. Therefore, she thinks that portfolio assessment must be the culprit. "... [I]t's really brought my confidence down in my writing," she claims. "If it wasn't for the portfolio method, ... I could estimate what my grade would be in here right now." Yet her anger and resentment seem to be directed principally toward what she perceives to be Marie's totally negative comments: "... [N]ever have I gotten anything good."

I feel certain that Marie had no intention to wound Yvonne with her comments. When I ask Marie about her practice of asking questions on the student papers, rather than making statements, she tells me that this represents a departure for her:

I didn't use to grade papers that way; I used to be much more assertive than what I am. But I think that I get a better reaction if I ask a question of a student than if I tell them what to do. Maybe just the existence of that question mark is going to lead them to think of something.

She even notes that she finds this method more personally gratifying because "... it leaves some latitude. It's like feeding your kids. You know, 'Open your mouth' and shove the food in. Or 'Would you open your mouth? Would you like a bite of this?' I guess it leaves them an option, and I feel better about that."

Furthermore, my own observation of Marie's response to student papers reveals that she emphasizes opportunities for improvement or rethinking and that she tries to avoid dictatorial or harshly judgmental comments. For example, Marie offers this observation on Yvonne's second draft about a significant literacy experience:

[Yvonne], your paper presents some interesting ideas that still need development to help the reader understand why you were successful. Notice how brief the

paragraphs are. With added details, they would be much longer to give your reader a more complete idea of what you experienced.

Marie personalizes her comment by addressing Yvonne directly, and she tries to encourage Yvonne by referring to her "interesting ideas." And rather than merely issuing a directive to develop those ideas, Marie suggests a reason for doing so: "to give your reader a more complete idea of what you experienced." In other words, Marie couches her comment in terms of the benefit to the audience and hence, to Yvonne.

Still, I find examples that could have struck a sensitive student like Yvonne as wounding criticism. Even Marie's technique of asking questions is subject to misreading, as in the following comment: "The essay has a clear thesis. Now it needs paragraphs which each support and discuss aspects of that thesis. Can you create topic sentences? Can you support and develop your topic sentence ideas?" It is possible that Yvonne could have read this as questioning whether she has the *capability* of performing these actions and therefore interpreted the entire comment as demeaning.

As Smith (1997, p. 260) observes as a result of her study of the end comments on more than 300 student papers, some teachers adopt a convention of asking questions "in order to disguise a negative evaluation." Students, like Yvonne, may be able to decipher these questions to find the negative comment they obscure. Likewise Greenhalgh (1992, p. 405) argues that the teacher's voice is inherently endowed with authority by the academy; therefore, "... in theory, response to writing always plays out the social relations between the parties." What Yvonne may be hearing in Marie's comments, regardless of their phrasing, is the voice of authority passing judgment on her.

3.5. The omnipresence of grades

So what does Yvonne's case illustrate? Although she articulates her grievances more extensively than most of the students in the study, her reaction does not seem to be idiosyncratic. In fact, about half of the students in the study, representing all the grade levels observed, express their concern with grades, even though I do not directly raise the issue in my questions. For example, Randy, a Canadian student, worries at the beginning of the semester about how he will be judged on his revision efforts: "I don't know how good the essays are expected to be or how major the changes are expected to be, like between your first and last draft. Like how much work can I actually do to get myself the marks that I need?" His classmate, Corrine, shares his anxiety: "I hate being uncertain about my marks. They're kind of important to me." Eva, a basic writing student, sees the potential for receiving a higher grade as a major advantage of portfolios: "You can work to get an 'A,' not just on your first time, no 'D' period, you know, or 'F,' but you can work on the final thing. You probably will have an 'A' after three or four weeks, you know, instead of just a flat out 'F' or 'D.'" Adam, an intermediate composition student and a self-

confessed teacher pleaser, cynically describes his formula for success in a writing class: "You adapt to their [teachers'] style, you adapt to what they like. So through trial and error, your first couple of papers, you might get that 'B' or 'C.' But once you get past that, you read their comments and so forth, you know exactly what to give them." This anxiety about grades even in their absence with the portfolio method implies that students can still feel oppressed despite the presumably nurturing environment offered by portfolios. They therefore continue to function as underlings performing the work prescribed and judged by a superior.

It may be true, as Belanoff and Elbow (1991, p. 25) claim, that with the portfolio method, a teacher's commentary on a student's writing becomes more meaningful in the absence of grades: "... students often ignore comments when there is a grade; and teachers often write better comments when they're not having to justify a grade." However, when the comments become thus highlighted, they are more prone to close reading and even misreading as students seek to decipher what those comments mean. Students may interpret comments pinpointing problems in the writing as a sign that they are falling short of the teacher's expectations. Some, like Yvonne, will interpret *any* commentary as a signal of shortcomings, and they may therefore take it personally.

Furthermore, some people will feel lost in the face of any subversion of the familiar. In the case of portfolios, students may fear the new freedom they are given. Grades at least offer some definition, and without those signposts, more onus is placed on the individual to interpret and take corrective actions. As Weiser (1992, p. 299) observes, "... [P]ortfolio grading may increase students' anxiety about their grades instead of relieving it. ... [G]rades do give students familiar indicators of where they stand." Students still feel compelled to conform to some standard, but without the familiar assessment, represented by grades on final products, they are at a loss to understand what that standard is. Yvonne illustrates this belief when she describes Marie's authority style as "hidden": "She knew what she wanted — she was telling us in a way — but I guess I personally just didn't pick up on it." Rather than being liberated, students like Yvonne continue to feel coerced; the only difference is that now they are forced to function independently, but they can never forget that eventually, a higher authority will stipulate the value of their work.

Along the same lines, when I ask students if they agree with scholars like Yancey (1992b, p. 14) that portfolio assessment offers "shared authority," some are reluctant to believe that they have been granted any significant authority. Amanda, for example, concedes that portfolio assessment offers students "more responsibility" because there are "more decisions and more freedom," but she is unwilling to describe that as authority: "... [T]he final authority always ends with the grade, so in that case the authority is the instructor's." Similarly, Jeanne acknowledges that portfolio assessment offers a measure of shared authority in that "... the student has the input of putting what they want in [the portfolio], ... but, of course, I still believe the teacher

has the supreme control." In other words, students may appreciate being given the power to make decisions about the shape and content of their portfolios, but they regard such "authority" as merely a sham when compared to the "final authority" of the teacher, an authority dramatically symbolized by the power of the grade.

While I do not wish to argue that we revert to the practice of affixing grades to every paper, we must recognize that suspending grades may not relieve students from the burden of authority. The students in my study show that they are aware that the grade is always hovering ominously in the background. It is a constant reminder to them of the necessity to conform to the teacher's authority. For many, independent behavior may be too risky, even with a kinder, gentler approach like portfolio assessment.

4. Pedagogical implications

My study has implications for all composition classrooms, not just those using portfolio assessment. To begin with, compositionists need to acknowledge that the very act of evaluating anyone places power in the hands of the evaluator, period. As long as teachers must at some point arrive at a number to describe their students' performance, teachers will continue to occupy the superior position. In Foucauldian terms, evaluation emphasizes that teachers are the Subjects, in contrast to the student subjects. Efforts to deny or repress this reality will not alleviate student awareness of and anxiety over the fact that they are the ones being judged. As so many students in my study attest, the prospect of sharing authority is tempered by the specter of grades. In short, both teacher and students have been conditioned to expect that the teacher holds the position of power and that students must respect that.

My study shows that the teachers' intent to share authority with their students requires more than simply adopting portfolios. Teachers need to recognize signs that the students are resistant to assuming authority and prefer to function as underlings who do not have to accept responsibility for their own learning. Perhaps one course of action would be to begin a writing course by having students complete a questionnaire about their previous experiences with teacher response and their resultant attitudes. In this way, teacher response could become a subject of inquiry with the aim of demystifying it.

In addition, teachers need to engage in reflective practice. Proponents of portfolio assessment emphasize the value of reflection for students; now teachers should follow that same advice themselves. Elbow and Belanoff (1997, p. 31) claim to be moving in that direction already:

Our practice led to theoretical reflections and conclusions which in turn enriched practices at many levels and sites. These enriched practices have led and will continue to lead to greater exploration of theories to explain the success (and failure) of whatever the new practices are. All of this

supports our conviction that theory and practice when separated become stunted. All of us need to be both practitioners and theorists or philosophers of practice.

An excellent way for teachers to assess whether they are attaining their goals, with portfolio assessment or any other pedagogical strategy, is to engage in teacher research, a teacher's concerted effort to scrutinize a particular aspect of her own practice.

Finally, although, as I have argued, the teacher's authority is inescapable, that power need not be negative. The question, then, is how can we use authority productively? The very choice of portfolio assessment can be seen in this vein since the teachers who adopt it are asserting their authority to determine the evaluation method, but they are doing so because of their belief in its benefits for the students. Furthermore, even though the underlying philosophy of portfolio assessment is to promote student autonomy, that does not mean that teachers should abandon the judgment they have gained as experienced readers and writers. Teachers can use their experience to benefit students, to help them become more effective evaluators of their own writing. And I find many instances of the teachers in my study using their authority to promote their students' evaluative skills, for example, a teacher pressing a student to define the scope of her research project and sorting through her disjointed ramblings to suggest a direction.

As a result of this project, I have modified my own approach to conferences. Whereas previously I would staunchly avoid being directive, even when it was obvious that a student was struggling, I have become willing to suggest possible solutions to writing problems after listening to students' efforts to articulate their intentions. I also offer observations from a reader's perspective to highlight confusing passages.

What differentiates a portfolio classroom from a traditional one may be the allowance for student input. However, without the teacher's guidance, students may not know how to achieve the goals that they set for themselves, as well as those stipulated by the academy, not to mention the goals we teachers envision for them. If we assume that there is a need for our services, then we must not be afraid to use the authority we have been given in our efforts to empower our students as writers, thinkers, and citizens.

5. Conclusion

Let me hasten to add that this paper is not meant to be a condemnation of portfolio assessment. As a matter of fact, I myself am a portfolio proponent, and my study also reveals students who learn to become serious revisers in response to both teacher commentary and their own developing felt sense of effective writing. Rather, this paper is intended to serve as a cautionary tale, a hedge against overly enthusiastic claims about how portfolio assessment reconfigures

teacher commentary. Portfolio evaluation may, as Belanoff and Elbow maintain, affect how teachers respond to student writing but not necessarily how students react to that response. Although advocates may claim that portfolio assessment elevates students out of their traditional, subservient role — the themes of “community,” “collaboration,” and “partnership” echo throughout the literature — many students in my study show that they are too conditioned to meet the teacher’s expectations to assume an autonomous stature. Freire (1994, p. 45) would say, “They call themselves ignorant and say the ‘professor’ is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen.”

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