

Dr. Andrew Joseph Pegoda (“AJP”)

Professor: Dr. Patricia Webb

ENG 522: Composition Studies

15 March 2022

“The Pegoda Eye”: Journeys Being an Editor

Experiences and identities naturally impact a person’s positionality (or where they are situated within society’s power structures at any given time and place). In my case, I was born in 1986 with Neurofibromatosis (NF). In contrast to the oppressions of NF—frequent surgeries, numerous medications, various disabilities, and constant medical appointments—society has privileged my family: We are white, English-speaking, college-educated, citizens of the United States with reliable IRS-approved incomes. This backdrop of involuntary circumstances and socially constructed identities impacted and continues to impact my acquisition of literacies. Specifically, having NF forced me to effectively become an adult before starting kindergarten but also, in combination with my parent’s standing in society, afforded me unique choices, opportunities, and perspectives that have been the foundations for my experiences with the literacies of evaluation for over three decades now. Specifically, I will use a framework of rejection and acceptance to present a literacy narrative about my journeys as an editor and evaluator.

COMPOSITIONS REJECTED BY OTHERS

Rejected writing shapes life trajectories. My earliest experiences with rejection came in first and second grade. During these years, reading was a challenge, but I loved writing, even though dyslexia made (and makes) spelling very challenging. On one occasion, I was sitting at the reading table and facing the blackboard. Mrs. Boffone said, “If you had started a new paragraph *here* instead

of *here*, you would have earned an ‘A’ on this paper.”<sup>1</sup> I remember thinking how arbitrary that sounded. On another occasion, the blackboard was behind me this time, and Ms. Sharp was at my desk looking over my essay. Suddenly, she tore it up and stormed out of the room. The other twenty-something children in the classroom looked at me. Fear was in everyone’s eyes. She came back about ten minutes later. I never learned what I did wrong, or what I did to cause such a reaction. Having taught thousands of students and specifically talked with hundreds, I know such experiences are shared by too many, experiences where both parties lacked the ideal literacies for those situations.

My next significant memory with rejected writing occurred a decade later when I was a first-year college student in 2005. I submitted my first essay for Composition & Rhetoric I, and Dr. Lamb did not like it. She pointed out dozens of structural choices she disliked and said to start completely over. I was tempted to just drive home and forget college. The feedback took me back to those early years in elementary school. But, I decided to try her advice and see where it took me. I went home and went to bed early. The next morning, I sat in my home office and started the writing from scratch. It took over ten hours, but I had another essay written. I emailed it to her through WebCT (a now-defunct learning management system), as requested. And relief. She wrote back: “You’re a quick fix. This is absolutely perfect.” After this, and for almost every essay through both first-year writing classes, she always made me make major revisions, often asking that I completely rewrite essays. It was frustrating. But, when I reached her satisfaction, exhilarating. When I turned in the last paper for the last class, Dr. Lamb said, “I’ve thrown many challenges at you, and you’ve finished with flying colors. Well done.” And it was in her class one day in March 2005 that I first decided I wanted to be a professor and spend my days thinking, writing, and teaching. And it was Dr. Lamb who invited me to the Honors Program, where I went on to earn more honors credits than anyone in the history of the college, even as she rejected the first version of my first essay.

---

<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed, except where there is information readily and publicly available about our work together.

While Dr. Lamb was blunt and vague, she encouraged and demanded revision, sometimes revision after revision after revision. Unlike my literacy sponsors, to use Deborah Brandt's concept, in elementary school who simply rejected writing (and who inevitably made strong psychological links between writing and trauma for some), the pedagogy Dr. Lamb practiced encouraged me to internalize that writing is never finished, that any essay can be written in countless ways, and that conversations about writing can be part of a dialogue, all of which have in turn informed my skills as an editor (167-69). Sometimes, rejection is just the start of editorial negotiations. And there are numerous ways of rejecting.

Rosa is the next person who rejected my writing in significant, surprising, and new ways. When I first had sustained interests in public writing beyond what I had done for *Houston History Magazine* and for *Inside HigherEd*, I emailed the Public Relations Office at the University of Houston, as I had heard they helped faculty place essays in national publications, and attached an essay about Chick-fil-A's anti-queer funding practices. I was quickly put in touch with Rosa. She said we could get the article published in *The Houston Chronicle*, but I would have to make a few revisions first. But when I opened the returned attachment, parts of the essay had already been heavily edited and other parts had specific questions and comments. My initial reactions centered around feeling territorial: How dare this stranger change my essay and demand revision without my permission! I am a published author! I have a doctorate! After I gained some perspective and remembered lessons that I had now taught students about writing being an on-going process and learning how to reach different audiences, I accepted all of the changes and worked on the remaining questions and comments. I sent it back several hours later and the next day it was published in one of the nation's most circulated newspapers.

Rosa then offered to help with any of my essays, so I sent her another essay a few weeks later about why people forgo voting. I opened the document she returned, and again, every sentence had major changes. I ended up rewriting the entire essay. I sent it back several days later, and Rosa said it

was ready. It took several tries to find a publication interested—several said “we love this piece, but it doesn’t exactly fit what we need right now”—but *The Conversation* published it and dozens of other publications redistributed in the coming weeks. After this essay came out, Rosa said, “You get it.” She explained that I understood writing was a process, that writing for general audiences required a kind of super concise approach, and that I was one of the few who adjusted and just got the work done. We are still in touch, but before she retired during the COVID-19 global pandemic, Rosa had helped me revise and place at least a dozen articles. My public-facing publications have been significantly helped by her initial rejections, rejections only possible because of my employment, employment only possible because of my doctorate, a doctorate largely possible because of an entire array of identities handed to me at birth, and a doctorate only possible because of constant practice and experience with various literacies.

#### BECOMING THE REJECTOR OF COMPOSITIONS

My formal experience associated with evaluation and being the rejector started in 2007 with grading *my* college students’ assignments, but I have been evaluating—and sometimes rejecting—myself and others my entire life. I have frequently served as my own harshest critic, sometimes sitting on ideas for years until I deem them ready. I often delete sentences or paragraphs or even entire essays that I know will not work. Sometimes my body even does the rejection, such as when my dyslexia is acting up such that I just have to stop all attempts at reading and writing for the day. Oddly, some of my best writing comes when I suffer from a migraine.

One of my earliest such memories occurred while in kindergarten in Richwood, Texas, when we learned to draw a star with five points. Mrs. Epps demonstrated on the overhead, and we practiced on our own with her going around the room. This exercise fascinated me and frustrated me. At home, I went through almost an entire pack of paper drawing stars over and over until I was (more) satisfied. No one put this pressure on me but myself. The same constant practice and revision

that went into this visual composition exists today and even extends to my (probably too high, at times) expectations of others.

In my much younger years, I even *graded* waitstaff at restaurants. I developed an entire rubric that broke down the restaurant experience based on my analysis of the rhetoric of and literacy of the dining experience. I was a strange young person! How many children have such curiosities and interests shut down?

More seriously, my academic literacies of evaluation further developed in fourth and fifth grade when tutoring and reading with children in younger grades. In fifth grade, I graded most of the papers for my Mathematics teacher (including ninety tests twenty pages in length over the 1998-1999 winter holiday) and all the homework my Language Arts teacher assigned. In sixth grade, my Social Studies teacher let me grade all the work he assigned across his six classes—homework assignments, quizzes, and tests. Doing this grading was a thrilling experience and gave me early understandings that such authority is an important responsibility, one based in trust and sometimes even a kind of rejection—a failing grade.

Down the hall from Dr. Lamb's classroom, we had just finished taking a test in my Computer Science class one day in February 2005. I stayed in the classroom after the test to get ahead on the lab assignments. I looked over and saw Professor Woods grading. He looked like he was miserable. I said, "Would you like me to grade those for you?" Before he could finish saying "YES, PLEASE," he had handed the papers to me. From that moment and for the next year, I graded most of the tests and essays he assigned. (And he paid me for my labor!) It was during these experiences that I fully learned, I now see, that grading and evaluating—and doing the related comments and edits—uses very specific types of literacy that remain unnecessary and unfamiliar to most. At the risk of sounding grandiose, it was during these experiences in 2005 and 2006 that I saw firsthand how much more sophisticated my work was compared to most of the other students. I asked myself then and now: "Why don't they follow the instructions?!"

In 2008, I was a new transfer student majoring in History at the University of Houston—Clear Lake. About four weeks into the term, Dr. Zophy had exciting news to share at the beginning of class: “My textbook *Dances Over Fire and Water* has been approved for a fourth edition!” After he dismissed the class, I walked up to him and said, “Could I be your research and editorial assistant while you prepare the new edition?” He thought for a second and exclaimed, “SURE!” That summer we spent several days together every week going through every chapter. Using my memory and knowledge of writing, I marked sentences that could use clarification, places where there was a bit of unnecessary overlap between chapters, and places that could use additional detail. Dr. Zophy was very pleased with my work and regularly requested what he deemed “The Pegoda Eye.” During this time, fellow students would sometimes send me a paper to proofread, and I pointed out any patterns in mechanical errors and offered suggestions. Editing is indeed a specific genre of writing.

Working with student papers has been a different experience. Each student is in such a different place and wants something different. They each need something different from me as their sponsor. While grading papers sometimes requires rejecting or failing work, learning to compose feedback that is approachable is challenging. I do not intend to replicate Ms. Sharp’s or Dr. Lamb’s approach. Getting students to read and understand feedback sometimes seems almost impossible. Once when teaching First Year Writing I, I hid their grades until they looked over my detailed comments and wrote a short metacognition-based piece in response. These days semesters usually include 180 students across three or four different classes and no teaching assistant, so such time on writing is impossible. I have found it most effective to usually give each student a sentence or two of specific feedback, to give detailed and general feedback to the class, and to announce that any student wanting detailed feedback about their specific essay should let me know. Inspired by the “ungrading movement” and starting last summer, my students’ grades are largely based on their response to a series of submission questions: “what did you learn by completing this assignment,” “what are your strengths in this submission,” “where you can improve in the future,” “what grade

would you assign yourself and why?” To my surprise, often, the self-evaluation students provide is *spot on*, even to the point of rejecting themselves.

Since March 2021, I also have experience accepting and rejecting public writing for the scholarly, public-facing *Conceptions Review*, co-founded with my friend and colleague, Timothy Seiter. I found myself remembering Rosa and telling writers, “This is good, but needs major revisions. Do *this* to get started.” Academic colleagues are willing to read feedback but are stubborn too, especially those new to the OpEd/public-facing genre. Tim and I find ourselves doing some heavy editing and asking numerous questions. Thus far, we have only rejected one submission. The pitch was confusing and unclear and seemed like something that would require substantial work for us in the making-this-approachable-for-the-public stage. This writer resubmitted with a re-written pitch that soon resulted in a published piece.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND PHILOSOPHIES FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING

A person who thoughtfully sponsors and edits the work of others continually hones a variety of skills. They understand that any kind of composition is valid and has its specific conventions, editing perhaps among the most sacred. They have patience and perseverance. They understand the subjectiveness and relativity of writing. They are always learning and willing to improve. They are trusted. They remember. They see, as the cliché articulates, both the forest and the trees, as needed in any given moment. Further, they are flexible. They seek and give constant feedback and understand that mastery of any given literacy is at best temporal. They know their limits. And they understand that they too need editors, especially editors who will sometimes—conditionally—reject their work.

Sponsors and composers (including those of music!) must both be readers: ‘readers’ of articles, films, monographs, novels, and everyday life. We all have a variety of literacies, mostly those never specifically taught, as with my experiences grading, writing, and editing papers and receiving responses to such. What these literacies mean and the opportunities the literacies might or

might not afford is impacted by a variety of circumstances handed to us by life. And we all teach a range of literacies, too: How are *you* a sponsor of literacy?

I close with a final acknowledgment of how supportive my parents have always been. NF has always demanded hyper vigilance in any context and readiness to embrace or reject opportunities—from the medical to reading and writing. Rejection, however, has never existed at home. My parents bought anything I have ever wanted or needed for my education. I was always buying books as a younger person—remember I was basically born an adult—to further educate and evaluate myself. And my parents started an on-going ritual of us all reading together and talking about the specific narrative constructions and our resulting thoughts. When I was in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, my father and I read the then-released *Harry Potter* books. And before that in elementary school, my mother and I read together almost every single night. One of our favorite books is *Love You Forever*.

Work Cited

Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1998, pp. 165-185.

Work Consulted

Soliday, Mary. "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives." *College English*, vol. 56, no. 5, 1994, pp. 511-526.