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# A Comment on "Pedagogical "In Loco Parentis": Reflecting on Power and Parental Authority in the Writing Classroom"

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## COMMENT & RESPONSE: A Comment on “Pedagogical *In Loco Parentis*: Reflecting on Power and Parental Authority in the Writing Classroom”

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A COMMENT ON “PEDAGOGICAL  
*IN LOCO PARENTIS*: REFLECTING  
ON POWER AND PARENTAL  
AUTHORITY IN THE WRITING  
CLASSROOM”

I agree with many of the fine points raised in “Pedagogical *In Loco Parentis*: Reflecting on Power and Parental Authority in the Writing Classroom” by JoAnne and Leonard Podis (November 2007 *CE*) because *in loco parentis* is still a strong and relevant metaphor in our profession. However, I offer this response to extend the conversation and to make us perhaps think beyond the either/or binary of the disciplinarian and the nurturer as teacher, the strict father or the nurturing mother—both stereotypes that make me pause. Our roles as teachers of writing are diverse, which is a contention that the authors flesh out in their argument, but a contention that I want to extend.

Or, to put it more succinctly, I’m playing Quintilian’s advocate.

Although it’s clear that the idea of pedagogical *in loco parentis* can be traced

back to the eighteenth century and was influenced by the Oxford and Cambridge systems of education as the authors detail, the conception of instructors acting as parental forces in education goes further back than the eighteenth century. As I often find in studying the history of rhetoric, the Greeks and the Romans exemplified sound pedagogical practice that we seem to rediscover. When I saw the article’s full title, I first thought, “We’re going to get back to Quintilian,” the rhetorician who, as George Kennedy describes him, “regarded himself as *in loco parentis* (2.2.4), with a strong moral responsibility toward developing the values and discipline of students, but also with an obligation to make learning seem natural and even fun” (178). This description by Kennedy comes directly from Quintilian, when he recommends that a teacher of rhetoric should “adopt, then, above all things, the feelings of a parent toward his pupils, and consider that he succeeds to the place of those by whom the children were entrusted to him” (92). Obviously, in the context of Roman education, Quintilian offers relevant advice,

because the scholar of the rhetorical arts teaches young boys and men who are preparing for their work as citizens, legislators, and lawyers. What I find revealing in this discussion is that, although some might expect Quintilian's advice in *Institutio Oratoria* to tell educators to be strict disciplinarians, his perspective on pedagogy does not bear out that perception.

In contrast, he recommends a mindset that is probably quite similar to what many of us recommend to students in our teacher training workshops and graduate programs. Quintilian advises instructors to be careful about their *ethos*: "Let him not be of an angry temper, and yet not a conniver at what ought to be corrected. Let him be plain in his mode of teaching, and patient of labor, but rather diligent in exacting tasks than fond of giving them of excessive length" (92–3). He calls for rigor, patience, respect for students, a fair-minded view on error, and a need for plain words that are clear to students. The instructor, in sum, has to be a consummate rhetorician who considers how to persuade by character and credibility. I cannot think of much better advice that veteran and inexperienced writing teachers need to heed. In addition, one of the messages in "Pedagogical *In Loco Parentis*," the idea that "an essential step in negotiating improved authority relations would be for instructors to adopt a more respectful attitude not only toward students, but toward student *writing*" (136), compares favorably to Quintilian's point that "[i]n amending what requires correction, let him not be

harsh, and, least of all, not reproachful; for that very circumstance, that some tutors blame students as if they hated them, deters many young men from their proposed course of study" (93). So both the Podises and Quintilian argue that instructors should have respect for students and their writing, an idea that is not reinforced enough.

To move beyond Quintilian's advice and to use a line of argument similar to what Peter Elbow employs in his article about voice in writing, published in the same issue ("Voice"), I agree that we need to move beyond either/or thinking about our roles as writing instructors. The Podises argue that "pedagogical *in loco parentis* must be appreciated as a complex matter, with manifestations that range from the detrimental to the beneficial" (137). They're right. But I'd like to move us beyond what Elbow describes as a "both/and approach that embraces contraries" (184). Instead, I see being a writing teacher as not just "embracing contraries," as one of Elbow's more famous essays points out. Rather, I see the role of the writing instructor, especially working now in a digital world with a diverse student population, as embracing multiplicities. Embracing our multiple professorial roles as standard bearers, coaches, disciplinarians, guides, mentors, supporters, colleagues, nurturers, and strangers seems more apropos to me.

Many, such as I, who have had the pleasure and challenge of teaching non-traditional students will gladly relate that the typical parental ethos of the writing teacher just doesn't work that well in the

classroom. In addition, it can be a challenge, at times, to be “nurturing” when students don’t turn in their work or don’t take the writing process seriously or become disgruntled because they don’t receive the grades they want, because, unfortunately, some act as academic consumers (the mind-set of “I’ve paid for this course; therefore, I deserve this grade”). In addition, as Elbow relates in “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment,” the basic role of grade-giver/evaluator can be detrimental to the learning environment in which student-writers shouldn’t be “reluctant to take risks that are needed for good learning—to try out hunches and trust their own judgment” (197). Likewise, JoAnne and Leonard Podis offer the sound advice that being too much of a nurturer can create “negative consequences, such as encouraging overdependence on the teacher as source of support or setting the student up for future failure by being ‘permissive’” (135). I agree with both the Podises and Elbow that the roles of the teacher are multiple. But I’ve often wondered how “democratic” a classroom really can be; most of us have to assign grades; we still have to be “gatekeepers” of sorts; and we like students and really like reading their prose, which is ultimately complicated because “liking can also be hard-assed” (Elbow, “Ranking” 202). We have to evaluate, whether we like to or not. And, increasingly, I wonder whether, in our pursuit of preparing writers in academic discourse and/or workplace rhetoric, we may not show students enough that writ-

ing can be “fun” and that they need to “take risks,” as Elbow relates. I know I’m revisiting an old conversation here, but it’s certainly one that is still relevant, especially in regard to the conception of *in loco parentis*. Are we helping writers navigate the academy or find their voices or discover their thoughts or become critical citizens or prepare themselves for their professions? Perhaps the answer to that question is “all of the above.” We embrace multiplicities.

What the concept of *in loco parentis* brings up for me is the idea that our multiple roles and personas surface as the rhetorical situations dictate, which is quite similar to how one acts as a parent, in fact. The teacherly stance or persona depends on *kairos*—right timing. And how an instructor interacts with a student or offers comments on a paper depends on the time of the semester, the work that has preceded the paper, and the relationship that has been growing between the teacher and the learner. I’d argue that, for many of us, our instructor personas (our multiple versions of ethos) change slightly and naturally according to setting and rhetorical context—the conference in the office, email replies, mini-lectures in class, feedback during discussion, comments on student writing, etc. In teaching writing, we’re responding to students’ ideas while battling against their hang-ups and fears and loathing about writing. In many writing classrooms, I meet students who have been rhetorically beaten up from their past years of schooling. As an instructor I want to build confidence, but I also have

to contend with issues of work ethic, how students are still grappling with becoming adults and potential professionals, and ultimately how strong their writing is and how it can improve during the semester or semesters that I have them in my class.

In contrast, though, I find it interesting and somewhat revealing that, at times, writing instructors take on the guise of strangers in academia, or more often we use strangers in the writing classroom to benefit students and their writing and/or the writing process. We use the role of the stranger in professional writing classes when students work through a case method in which they have to take on the guise of a stranger in a certain rhetorical situation to navigate and problem-solve the rhetorical complexities of realistic professional writing scenarios. The student-writers inhabit a role that is foreign or perhaps distanced from them to offer practice in workplace rhetoric. Service-learning initiatives in composition studies have also used strangers, in the sense of having students write and reflect about their volunteer experiences with people they would have never met unless the course demanded it. In engaging with these strangers, they learn about communities and people, and they can grow immensely as both writers and citizens. Also, in the “writing for the community” (Deans) model of service-learning composition, students can write for an organization (the stranger) while they actively engage in trying to understand that discourse community and its values and habits of mind. In ad-

dition, some portfolio systems create the incentive of the stranger. Student-writers are forced to move beyond their writing guide/mentor in the classroom and have their work evaluated by strangers, and, many times, those evaluations can validate the instructor’s own evaluations and reinforce an instructor’s positional authority, his or her expertise. In those cases, the audience of the stranger can facilitate learning, growth, maturity, citizenship, and consciousness-raising while the instructor remains an authority figure and mentor and guide.

This remaining idea of positional authority leads me to another question that this article brought up for me and that might reflect an oppositional stance in this conversation. What’s wrong with being an authority figure? The simple task of giving grades creates positional authority that we cannot and should not escape. Sure, the classroom should not be a bully pulpit (I’m sure we’ve all had the displeasure of being a parishioner beneath some of those in our lives), but perhaps we should more realistically embrace the idea that grades can be used for motivation. I don’t think the authors discount that power. But the power of grades can be wielded appropriately and ethically, can’t it? And how does that fit into this parental role? Is it disciplined “tough love,” backdoor “nurturing,” mentoring, or guidance? Because, as the authors relate, classrooms can house sibling rivalries, what’s wrong with competition? For example, in my “Introduction to Professional Writing” courses last se-

mester, I had writers craft fliers and brochures about a similar subject, and I had two outside readers (strangers) evaluate the documents and award first, second, and third places. The documents were some of the best work that those students did all semester, because they found the competition “fun” and energizing. That is just one isolated anecdote, sure, but I would argue that competition can be used productively from time to time.

As the article by JoAnne and Leonard Podis relates, teaching and the idea of “pedagogical *in loco parentis* must be appreciated as a complex matter” (137). I heartily agree with that contention. But I would argue that, within *in loco parentis*, the role of the “stranger” and the “hard-assed” liker demand greater appreciation, too.

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#### JOANNE PODIS AND LEONARD PODIS RESPOND:

We were gratified to read Professor Taylor’s comments, not only because he fundamentally agrees with us, but because he raised important issues that we did not address. A prime example is the place of Quintilian’s views in the long history of *in loco parentis*. Although we did, in a note, discuss the ancient Greek roots of “pedagogy” in the practice of adults guiding young boys to school, we never considered the role of Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* in the development of pedagogical *in loco parentis*. We are grateful to Professor Taylor for making this point and for offering exactly the type of commentary that we hoped our article would stimulate. In the remainder of our response, we hope to reply in kind by continuing the ongoing conversation on *in loco parentis*. Three topics in particular that came to mind when we read this letter are grading, advocacy, and authority.

Undeniably, as Professor Taylor asserts, “We have to evaluate, whether we like to or not.” For most of us, evaluation means grading papers and turning in final grades. This aspect of our professorial identities is bound up with our function as “gatekeepers”—a role that is often thrust on us by colleagues and by society whether we wish to assume it or not. As Taylor notes, it behooves us to consider carefully *kairos*, as well as the specific context within which we teach, as we grapple with the issue of which identity to embrace or to perform. It is perhaps when we are evaluating that all