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Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Are You a Writing Bully? Considerations for Teachers and Students

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Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Are You a Writing Bully? Considerations for Teachers and Students

Abstract

The article focuses on discussing the implications of bullying in writing when teaching professional writing in English classrooms. It states some of the forms of bullying include through memorandums with threatening and aggressive languages, forwarded emails aiming to embarrass, and general directives. The authors relate their experiences of being bullied and as a bully to others. It presents examples to help students consider issues related the audience, format, and timing in writing.

Keywords

bullying, English writing, written communication, memorandum

Disciplines

Educational Methods | English Language and Literature | Rhetoric and Composition

Comments

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Jonathan Bush and Leah Zuidema, Editors

Professional Writing in the English Classroom

Are You a Writing Bully? Considerations for Teachers and Students

Show us a workplace where writing is an essential form of communication, and chances are we can show you instances of bullying. While most of us are aware that bullying can occur verbally, physically, or through social pressures, it is also important to realize that bullying can take place through written communications. If we teach professional writing in our English classrooms, then it is imperative that we consider the implications of bullying in writing, turning the attention first to our own actions and then using those experiences to teach our students.

Too often, we think that as professionals—as teachers, as caregivers—we are immune to the temptations of bullying. We take care of kids; we teach them how their actions affect others; we try to prevent bullying, and we stop it when we see it. That's who we are; that's our professional ethos. We forget how easy it can be for us to be bullies, too, especially in our writing. In both Jonathan's and Leah's teaching careers, we have witnessed examples of bullying in professional writing contexts, whether it has been through memos that use aggressive and threatening language, emails that are forwarded to embarrass and marginalize, or "general" directives that are obviously pointed toward individuals. And although we hate to admit it, both of us have to confess that we, too, have been guilty of bullying in our professional workplaces.

During her first weeks as a professor, Leah's emails to a copy-center assistant sounded (embarrassingly) like orders: "I need 36 copies of this handout, stapled and 3-hole punched, by 8 am tomorrow." No greeting, no *please,* no *thank you.* Do you hear the drill sergeant? ("Gimme 10 push-ups!") Leah's situation was a case of an English professor being overly zealous about writing clear, concise prose—to the detriment of her relationship with the assistant, who felt disrespected and treated more like a copy machine than a person, but didn't dare to say anything. Fortunately, Leah became aware of the problem, apologized, and changed her approach. However, it took a long time to change the first impressions she had made.

In Jonathan's current role as a department chair and administrator guiding a large faculty and staff, there are lots of opportunities for inadvertent bullying. In this role, his words have power in ways unlike in his previous role as colleague, and even the slightest hint of sarcasm or emotion can be threatening. As a result, Jonathan has learned to ensure that his email communications and other memos and notes are neutral and businesslike. However, in an email to a faculty member who continually violated departmental policy on copying, he lost his temper and emailed the individual with an inadvertent CC: to multiple other department members. The result was embarrassing to the individual and counterproductive for Jonathan. Realizing what he had done, he sent an apology email to the entire group.

In both cases, whether as a result of naiveté or frustration, we were acting as bullies. Not in the classic sense—that is to say, we weren't trying to pick on anyone or push others around for our own entertainment. Still, our 20/20 hindsight tells us that we could have done better.

We don't want to be bullies, and we're sure that you don't, either. But our daily interactions with teachers, parents, and students lead us to believe that the problem of teacher bullying via writing is all too common—and

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that in many cases, those doing the bullying are unaware of how their communications are being perceived. In this column, we call attention to writing decisions that may affect whether or not readers understand communications as bullying. Our goal is to raise awareness about the nuances of our writing choices. Furthermore, we show how calling attention to these writing choices can be an effective teaching strategy. When we think aloud about such writing decisions with our students, we open the door to conversations about how they, too, can avoid bullying in their writing—whether their messages are composed as emails, Facebook posts, text messages, or other communications.

Our daily interactions with teachers, parents, and students lead us to believe that the problem of teacher bullying via writing is all too common—and that in many cases, those doing the bullying are unaware of how their communications are being perceived.

Defining *Bullying*

Let us be clear. Avoiding bullying does not mean that we lose the ability to use language in direct or pointed ways in professional contexts. What it does mean is that we need to be more aware of our rhetorical positioning whenever we communicate. Like all communication, writing that can be considered bullying is dependent on the context. The environment, the purpose, and the relationship between author and audience are all important factors. As writers, we need to think deliberately about who is included in the conversation. What are the roles of the people involved? Assertive communication becomes bullying when it exploits power and status differentials, when it seeks to humiliate or threaten, or when it results in feelings of shame, powerlessness, or unwanted separation from the peer group.

As we have noted, these things can often occur without intent. To help students in our classes learn to avoid bullying in written contexts, we share scenarios and actual email exchanges (with the identifying information removed) for them to analyze. After we explain the different roles of the people involved, we ask students to explain the range of possible ways in which all the participants involved in the exchange might understand the situation.

For example, Leah's students analyzed a short email exchange between an incoming transfer student and a professor. The student asked to be enrolled in a full course; the professor denied the request. In his reply email, the transfer student stated that he planned to complain to administrators about the professor's decision because it contradicted a college recruiter's claims about the willingness of faculty to help transfer students. Some in Leah's class viewed the student's response to the professor as threatening or hostile; others read the tone of the message as disappointed but innocuous. However, both groups from Leah's class were able to point to key lines and phrases in the email that supported their reading.

We have found that this kind of analytical activity raises students' consciousness about the multiple perspectives that may be brought to any one communication. Often, students are taken aback by the different (and wide-ranging) interpretations of even a short email. We ask them to imagine the best and worst possible ways in which the audience might receive the message. In doing so, they point to the different roles of the people involved, to factors such as the timing and format of the messages, and to the possible nuances of various phrasings. As these discussions play out, our students reflect aloud about how important it is for them to write their messages carefully. We find this to be an excellent connecting point: by this juncture in such lessons, students are typically willing to share examples that stem from what they have observed or experienced in social and workplace settings. As a result, we are able to help them think about choices they make when they write their own communications.

The activity from Leah's class illustrates one short lesson that helps to address the issue of bullying. However, it isn't enough to have this conversation just once with our students. As with any important and complicated issue, we need to keep revisiting the concept, continually thinking aloud with students about everyday writing practices. For this reason, there are several other considerations that we discuss by analyzing both scenarios and real (but anonymous) examples that connect with students' experiences. In each case, there are opportunities to discuss both the writer's intent and the audience's possible interpretations. We find that these

real-life examples keep bringing our classes back to important conversations about ethics: about our values, our obligations, and the consequences of our actions. Additionally, we have come to appreciate how, by leading these conversations with our students, we as teachers also grow more conscientious about how to avoid bullying in our own writing.

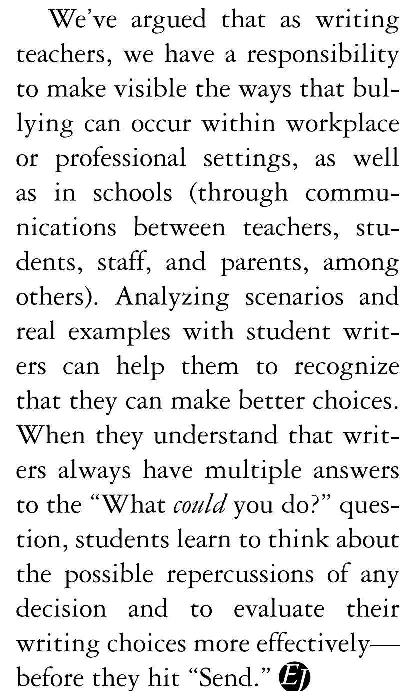
Choices: Who, How, When

Audience, format, and timing are three of the major considerations that we explore with students. It's important that writers think carefully about who should be included (and how and when) in a written conversation. What is each person's sense of power in relation to the other participants? We need to be careful not to "bring in the big guns" in such a way that it could be seen by our readers as threatening or as unfairly shutting down the conversation. To help our students consider these issues, we share a variety of examples and scenarios in which they are prompted to analyze factors including the following.

- Use of carbon copy, blind copy, and forwarding. What is the difference—for each person involved—between carbon copy, blind copy, and forwarding? For example, when is it OK for a teacher to include another teacher in an email to a parent about a student's performance in the classroom? How about an administrator? When should (or shouldn't) a teacher blind-copy a peer in an email to a colleague or administrator? When (and in what formats or venues) is it OK for students to share text messages or photos that peers have sent them?
- Name-dropping in emails, newsletters, and phone conversations (e.g., "The principal and I agree that . . ." or "My parents say that. . ." or "When I talk with my attorney . . ."). When do references to supervisors or other power players cross the line into territory that is threatening? When are such references helpful for everyone involved?
- Polite coercion. It's not unusual for teachers to receive notes from students (or their parents) to explain things such as absences and late homework. Some of these notes close with the line "Thanks for understanding." In what cases might this seemingly polite line be coercive? In what other situations can "good manners" or friendly remarks seem more like manipulation?
- Time-sensitive messages. Sometimes, the timing of a message causes scheduling problems and stress for recipients who are not in a position to argue about deadlines. Students can easily explain the problems that arise when teachers send out notices between classes about changing homework assignments. However, they also need to consider the timing of their own messages. When does repetition of a request to a parent or teacher become hounding? There are potential bullying problems with the common line, "I will assume you got this message and are agreeing to do this unless I hear otherwise from you." How do both timing and the roles of the participants factor into how such messages may be received?
- Permanence of online communication (relative to paper printouts and to speech). What are the possible repercussions of a text message, a Facebook photo tag, or an email that we later try to delete, retract, or follow with "just kidding"? Can these messages really be erased? When we think about permanence, in what kinds of situations may it be better for a conversation to be held in person rather than in writing, and vice versa?
- Invitations. Will the invited person truly feel free to decline? When is it OK for students or parents to "friend" teachers on social networks, or vice versa? Is it OK for a supervisor to put out a sign-up sheet where the employees can buy Girl Scout cookies from the employer's daughter?
- Complicated conversations. Conversations held in person, or at least by phone or Skype, provide more cues for helping all participants to read and understand each other's words and actions. What kinds of social and technical factors make a conversation so complicated that writing (or writing alone) is not the best choice? How do we know when it is time to move a conversation from writing into another format? When can the chance to craft and revise our words (through writing) be the best choice?
- Private vs. public messages. What kinds of messages and comments from teachers to students seem threatening or otherwise inappropriate when they are sent privately? Publicly? What about messages from students to teachers? To other students?

- The courage of distance. It's important that we call attention to the potential effects of saying things in writing that we might never say in person. Sometimes written courage can be a bad thing, especially when our writings include bullying behaviors such as name calling, belittling comments, or rude remarks. What kinds of things do teachers, students, and parents say in writing that they might never say face-to-face? In what instances might these be good choices? How do we decide? And what steps can we take to avoid foolish or harmful "bravery" in our own digital writing? What are the best ways to respond if we become the recipients of malicious writing? Who are the mentors and mediators that we could approach to help us?

This final question about mentors and mediators is especially important. While we wish we could say that lessons like these would completely eliminate written bullying, we know that's not the case. Students need to know whom they should approach for help when they feel threatened, humiliated, or powerless as the result of others' communications—including communications from the adults in their lives. Furthermore, they need to know who can help them when they suspect or realize that their own communications may have crossed the line.



We've argued that as writing teachers, we have a responsibility to make visible the ways that bullying can occur within workplace or professional settings, as well as in schools (through communications between teachers, students, staff, and parents, among others). Analyzing scenarios and real examples with student writers can help them to recognize that they can make better choices. When they understand that writers always have multiple answers to the "What *could* you do?" question, students learn to think about the possible repercussions of any decision and to evaluate their writing choices more effectively—before they hit "Send."

Leah Zuidema first taught professional writing to ninth through twelfth graders in her high school English classes. She is now associate professor of English at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa, where she teaches courses in English education and professional writing. Email her at lzuidema@dordt.edu. **Jonathan Bush** teaches English education and rhetoric/writing studies at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, where he also serves as department chair and director of the Third Coast Writing Project. His email is jonathan.bush@wmich.edu.