Perfect

Helen Collins Sitler

Makaylah was the student every writing instructor wants to teach. She was eager and enthusiastic. She rarely missed class. She always had assignments completed. She readily participated in class discussions. She took her academic work seriously, pushing herself to do well.

Yet during Research Writing, her third course with me, Makaylah, the good student whom I loved to teach, left me struggling to understand something that happened one day. Readers will likely recognize that experience, a moment when a student's behavior is so out of character that it leaves us mystified. I invite readers into that moment with me and then into some subsequent realizations.

What Happened Here? A Dissonant Moment with Makaylah

It was mid-October during a semester when my Research Writing students were conducting field work. I was collecting early drafts of their papers as class ended.

"Were we supposed to include our library research?" someone asked.

"Yes," I said and discovered that some students had misunderstood; they had worked only with their field notes. "Leave it with me anyway. By next class it's late."

My policy for daily assignments was to award points for doing the work, not for having done it all correctly. In return, I wanted assignments on the due date. Anything turned in late incurred deductions. The students who had misunderstood about including library research would still earn the points, but would have more work to do than their peers on the next draft. It wasn't a crisis, I thought. But I did not say this aloud.

In the end-of-class rush, I saw Makaylah. She had waited until nearly everyone else had left. She moved toward me, short ponytail bobbing as always, sweat pants and T-shirt marking the early morning hour. But her face, usually bright and cheerful, was contorted.

By the time she reached me, she was crying. When she started to speak, she was sobbing so hard her words barely came out. "I misunderstood," she gasped. She had not added the library research.

A thousand things flew through my mind: another class will start coming in any second. She can't be here sobbing when they arrive. Why is she so upset? She'll get the points anyway. This is too much overreaction, inconsistent with the few points for this draft. I told everyone to add the library information. She wasn't listening.

I flipped through the stack of papers, looking for hers. "Makaylah, it's all right. Add the research in the next draft. You'll still get the points for this."

The sobbing resolved to sniffles. She apologized, repeated that she had misunderstood, and made a quick, embarrassed exit. Mystified, I shuffled the papers for a moment, needing to collect myself as students from my next class began to arrive. There was no time to talk with Makaylah, no time to make better sense of this scene.

This memory from ten years ago is uncannily vivid. Perhaps because at that time I was trying to understand more about trauma and how it affected student performance in the writing classroom. My reading about trauma and my efforts toward changes in peda-

gogy, though, had been focused on the kinds of more antagonistic classroom moments readers might expect as related to trauma in students' lives. Like Patrick's profanity-laced outburst on the day I returned a portfolio with a grade lower than he had expected. Later, apologizing, he said that his father, unhappy with his grades, was threatening to force him to come home and attend a local community college. Or Akaysha's ability to disrupt any writing group she worked in. She later spoke about the beatings her mother suffered at the hands of a boyfriend. Surrounded by conflict at home, Akaysha had brought it with her into writing groups. Or Will's alternate personas, one radiating hostility, the other ennui, and my never knowing which Will would arrive in class. At the end of that semester, Will wrote about his mother's cancer treatments, the deteriorating mental capacities of his grandmother, who also lived with them, and his responsibilities as caretaker in his home while he was still in high school. (See Sitler 2009 for more about Will). I began to understand how trauma was exhibiting itself through Patrick's, Akaysha's, and Will's behaviors.

But I never anticipated Makaylah's breakdown, not from the prototypical cooperative, cheerful, good student. I did not recognize that moment as a more subtle manifestation of trauma—perfectionism. The very impetus that made Makaylah such a joy to teach exacted a terrific toll on her. This expression of trauma easily remains invisible, masking itself in the form of the dutiful student.

Perfectionism and Control

"Perfectionism has particular relevance to college students . . . . It is a common presenting issue at college counseling centers" (Ward & Ashby 51). Perfectionism is linked with a veritable litany of outcomes, all signals of trauma—low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, psychosomatic disorders, eating disorders, and even suicide (Miquelon et al. 914; Ward & Ashby 51-52). Studies done with college-age populations by Miquelon et al and Ward & Ashby, as well as other studies they cite, establish that perfectionism is multidimensional, i.e., that multiple factors play roles. In common, however, numerous studies point to two types of perfectionism: adaptive and maladaptive.

Adaptive perfectionists tend to be more intrinsically motivated (Miquelon et al. 921). Their behaviors are marked by "resourcefulness and constructive striving" (914). Tending to have higher self-esteem, adaptive perfectionists had "high standards yet experienced only moderate distress when mistakes were made and personal standards were not met" (Ward & Ashby 60). For this type of student, challenge can stimulate greater performance, and failure can be viewed as a learning experience.

In contract, maladaptive perfectionists are more extrinsically motivated (Miquelon et al. 921). These students "possessed high standards and were highly self-critical when mistakes were made and had excessive concerns about making future mistakes" (Ward & Ashby 60). Possibly because they feel significant outside pressure on them to perform, maladaptive perfectionists experience "chronic disruptions in self-esteem" (Miquelon et al. 921; Ward & Ashby 62), Unreasonable expectations of self can exact a severe cost. When outcomes do not match intentions, the maladaptive perfectionist can experience "feelings of insecurity and internal threat" (53). Such a student can "experience greater

levels of perceived inadequacies," despite possibly having an outward "facade of assurance" (55, 53). This student might find challenge in a course threatening or even overwhelming. Failure can feel disastrous.

While Miquelon et al. determine that motivation is a significant factor in perfectionism, more relevant to this writing is their commentary on locus of control. For a perfectionist, control emerges as a core issue. Adaptive perfectionists have "high levels of perceived personal control" (Miquelon et al. 914). Maladaptive perfectionists, however, are "characterized by a sense of helplessness about the inability to establish personal control over evaluative standards and by a great desire to please others and avoid punishment" (915). Control lies outside them, exacerbating the stresses of performance.

The same control issues noted in the literature on perfectionism emerge in the clinical literature on trauma where they are linked to beliefs about error and failure. Horsman, who researches the intersections between trauma and literacy, notes that for many who have experienced trauma there is no room for mistakes. A student may be trying to overcome years of negative input from authority figures. They [learners] "have continually been told they are stupid—in school, at home as children" (103). Trying always to "get it right," a hallmark of the perfectionist, can be a means of mitigating the impossible expectations of someone else. Such learners can have "huge issues around making mistakes" (142).

Judith Beck offers an example of such a learner through a case study detailing cognitive therapy with a patient named Sally. Sally is a first-year college student who sought therapy for "persistent sadness, anxiety, and loneliness" (19). Among her concerns was doing well in a research writing course, even though Sally was a student who had developed strong work habits and high standards. She was often "overprepared" and "hypervigilant for signs of inadequacy" (22). Trying to control situations and trying to be perfect—control under a different guise—were both compensation strategies for Sally's negative beliefs about herself, including doubts about her academic abilities (143-44). I came to discover that Makaylah was much like Sally.

Trauma Revisited—The Costs of Perfectionism

Six years passed before I understood what had happened with Makaylah in Research Writing that day, before I could fully realize the connection between her beliefs about herself, her perfectionism, and that moment at the end of class.

Makaylah's e-mail about moving into her new home pulled us back into electronic conversation. When I wrote back to congratulate her, her response included this: "I can't thank you enough for what you did for me and NEVER [emphasis hers] giving up hope. That is very important to me because so many gave up on students like me." When I asked her what she meant by this, a floodgate opened. Though she had hinted at this in the three courses she'd taken with me, the full extent of her struggle with school and family expectations had never surfaced.

Several years after completing a bachelor's degree, she told her story: "I was held back in first grade . . . . I would never be able to catch on to things or learn much of anything. They even told my dad I wouldn't amount to anything." As a high school student she spent study halls working as a teacher's aide in the elementary and middle schools. There

she heard teachers speak about children with learning difficulties. "Two out of the three teachers I worked for in the three years I worked there tell me 'don't worry about those kids, they will NEVER [emphasis hers] learn anything . . . just give up on them because I did.' That was the day when I realized I was that kid."

She closed with this: "There are very few teachers/professors who are willing to invest time and care in their students, and you did this." But it certainly didn't feel that way when I thought about the day she broke down in my class.

"That was the day when I realized I was that kid." For Makaylah, this moment in high school was a powerful moment of recognition. A confirmation; a judgment. Her e-mail clarified its connection to the incident in Research Writing. Makaylah writes:

> I remember the day I walked out of your class in tears. It wasn't all about you. It was a mixture of anger from my personal life, feeling that I was going to fail and live with things that my dad said, and a sense that I had upset you by having a disagreement that had nothing to do with you. You just happened to be the innocent bystander.

Warning signals about her perfectionism had been present, like excessive highlighting when she read, afraid she would miss something. Or her frequent questions about taking adequate field notes. Makaylah filled an entire notebook with field notes so detailed that later she was unable to discern what to focus on. Her email also explained how she had overcome some of her performance anxiety: "It wasn't until college when I came to the realization that I learn in a way that very few do. I have to use note cards [to distill important aspects of content area reading] because they make me feel safe, and I'm not nervous. I just have to hold them [when taking a test]."

For much of what was required of her for field work in my course, she could not depend on text already prepared and ready to be absorbed. She had to generate the text, her field notes, herself and draw her analysis from them. The solid learning techniques she was just beginning to develop for other courses, like her note-card system, were pulled out from under her in Research Writing.

No wonder she cried that day. Learning she had done only part of the assignment was confirmation of all those years of being "that kid" who wouldn't learn, a kid who should be given up on. Overachieving with a notebook full of field notes wasn't good enough. She was still falling short. She was still subject to control by external forces significantly more powerful than she and unhappy with her at that moment.

Judith Beck's work in cognitive therapy serves as a useful frame for thinking about Makaylah's overreaction to the incorrectly done assignment. She details a clear cause-effect sequence: A situation, often stressful, uncovers deeply-embedded personal beliefs that produce an emotion and/or a behavior (18, 140). Through that lens, Makaylah's breakdown follows an understandable pattern that can be described this way:

- The situation develops: Makaylah did the assignment incorrectly.
- This thought followed: All that my dad and teachers said about me is true. I'll never learn anything.
- Emotions of distress and possibly sadness flooded through her, and she began to sob.

Aaron Beck remarks about "the relationship between vulnerability and stress" (viii). Indeed, Makaylah had been vulnerable, more than any teacher might have suspected. As Judith Beck notes, "It is not a situation in and of itself that determines what people feel but rather the way in which they *construe* a situation" (14). Makaylah construed the situation as one more failure, and her long-held belief that she was inadequate simply overwhelmed her.

In her classic book *Trauma and Recovery*, clinical psychiatrist Judith Herman describes patterns like this, repeated, traumatizing experiences from which the victim can find no escape. One outcome of such experiences is that for "the chronically traumatized person, any action has potentially dire consequences. There is no room for mistakes" (91). Olson writes about how fragile a perfectionist can be in the school setting. Such a student can believe that "failure or making a mistake will lead to catastrophe" (53, *Wounded*). Olson also documents "how deeply personal, internalized, and often hidden school lacerations are" (47, "*Wounded Student*").

Makaylah had emerged from such an incubator. My classroom policies and structures added to it. The only choice she thought she had was to retrieve her draft, redo it, then turn it in later. I would punish her for this by taking away points.

Releasing Control

Control is a familiar concept to composition instructors. We call it ownership, and we have a long history of claiming that student writers need it. Makaylah had taken ownership of her research topic. Her field study site was the periodicals section of the university library where she worked. She had, in fact, parlayed her insider knowledge of the library into personal authority when she was able to escort her classmates into the periodicals area. There she explained the uses and locations of many of the materials they would later need. She used her research to build expertise that her employers would find valuable, making her continued employment in the library a sure thing. She expressed this in a final reflection: "I was excited to learn more about my workplace…. I will be able to take the information I learned with me and use it to further help others…. I now feel as though I am one step ahead of my fellow library workers. I have become more familiar with the place in which I work thus helping me in my future years."

In these senses, the work for Research Writing was authentic and meaningful; Makaylah could claim it for herself. In the daily routine of the course, however, I maintained strict control over students' time. It was not a problem I solved during the semester with Makaylah.

But triggered by the event with her, I asked myself why it was so important to get assignments and papers from everyone on the same day. Daily assignments were building blocks. As long as they were completed, a student who turned something in a day later than her peers was still building a foundation for more difficult or longer-term assignments. When students turned in drafts or papers, I could never respond to them all before the next class. So what was my fixation with all things coming in on the same day? I decided my due date policy was more about my control over students than about their learning. That was the impetus to release control over time to my students. For

perfectionists like Makaylah, as well as for students like Patrick, Akaysha, and Will, it has been a good decision.

To allow students control over their time, I instituted a system of vouchers. Students receive a limited number of them—two or three—for the semester. With a voucher attached, a student can turn any assignment in one class meeting day late (or two class meeting days late with two vouchers attached) and still receive full credit. As my classes do not meet every day, one voucher can mean two days' grace period (Monday to Wednesday, for instance) or as many as five days' (Thursday to the following Tuesday).

Vouchers, I discovered, allow for mistakes. More important, they create circumstances for better work. When major assignments converge on the same date, a student can choose to take some extra time with a writing portfolio. It is not uncommon now for students to schedule extra writing conferences with me and to visit the Writing Center more often. The cushion of extra time has helped students to turn in higher quality work.

Do students take advantage of these opportunities to turn things in late? Sometimes. But vouchers are limited, so students cannot take advantage too often. Under certain circumstances, a family hospitalization, for instance, most instructors would routinely accept late work. Whatever the circumstance, students do not have to ask me about it; they already know what to do. In addition, no explanations about special circumstances are necessary for other students who might legitimately question why a peer would receive an extension. Everyone has the option for the same extension.

On the day Makaylah burst into tears, I wish I could have said to her, "It's okay. Rework your draft and give it to me with a voucher next time." She may still have been overwhelmed at that moment over making a mistake. Even so, for her and possibly for other students whose stress never emerged as hers did, it would have taken only that small action to transfer control fully to their hands.

More recently I have adjusted the design of my writing courses in another way that also serves to release more control to students. At the same time the strategy keeps me aware of where students are getting bogged down and what I need to help with. I call it power conferencing. A power conference is a brief, three-to-five minute conference over a draft.

As I use the workshop model for teaching writing, I have always conferenced one-on-one with students, asking them to schedule office time when I could not get to everyone during class. Now, however, I insist that each student have at least one power conference with me during class as work proceeds on any new piece of writing. Students submit drafts during the class before they want to conference with me. I read the drafts and write minimal notes, often only two or three phrases on page one to jog my memory. The key factor is our conversation, not the teacher writing on the draft. During the next class meeting, I circulate to each of those students, often starting with the students who appear to be having the most trouble. We meet in their space—at their seats—not up front or removed from surrounding students who are at work on their own projects. I always begin by asking students what they need help with; students often point to exactly the same issues I had intended to bring up. Even if the student mentions something I have not identified as a concern, we can target one or two such items in our few minutes.

Conferencing is familiar to composition scholars. The brevity of power conferences may not be. And letting students choose when they are ready to submit a draft for conferencing may also feel unfamiliar. (See Kittle for more about short conferences and taking in drafts from students.) After several semesters of power conferencing, I have found that students who are more worried about their writing often submit drafts for conferencing earlier and more frequently. They also come to my office. Overall, students have been successful in responding to what we talk about in these brief exchanges. Perhaps the biggest success is that because of frequent, short talks, students feel supported to do more challenging work. I know, too, that when I talk with one student, those sitting nearby overhear what we say. They benefit from that indirect coaching as they work on their own revisions. One power conference becomes a mini-lesson for multiple students.

Had I power conferenced with Makaylah's class on their early drafts, she would have chosen when she turned that fateful draft in and what we talked about. That certainly would have been preferable to my confirming that she had done the assignment incorrectly and later returning it to her with notes that she may or may not have been able to act on.

Working With, Not Against, Our Students

Over ten years ago, Lunardini noted a shift in the college population:

> Students frequently come to college from single parent homes where the financial, and perhaps personal/emotional, support for their educational activity may be fragile. They may also come with a collection of problems requiring psychological interventions, or a history of alcohol or drug use that can easily interfere with their successful navigation of the collegiate experience . . . . The number of students who require our special attention continue to dramatically increase. (10)

Now, a decade later, the same trends have reached mainstream media. According to an Associated Press 2010 article, more college students than in the past "report anxiety and depression" ("Modern Times" A1). From a 2011 *New York Times* article, readers learn that "the emotional health of college freshmen . . . has declined to the lowest level since an annual survey of incoming students started collecting data 25 years ago" (Lewin).

A few years ago, when I mentioned to a colleague that writing instructors need to be attentive to possible manifestations of trauma, she replied that she does not have students like those I described. Clearly the evidence suggests otherwise. In fact, we—all of us—have a surprising number of such students in our classes.

Writing instructors often notice and take steps to work with those students who are obviously in some pain, like Patrick with his outburst, Akaysha, with her uncanny ability to bring any writing group to a halt, and Will, with his smoldering anger. They are noticeable, in-your-face.

The perfectionists hide. They are the easy students to teach, the eager ones who exert their need for control by always having everything done—perfectly. It is harder to notice that they need support.

In a semester more recent than my time with Makaylah, one military veteran is memorable. A student in Basic Writing, he spent most of the semester trying to follow to the letter my suggestions for his papers. It was if he were reading and trying to follow a training manual. He searched for the correct steps, the correct expressions. Years of training on an aircraft carrier had impressed on him the necessity of uniformity in procedures. Each man's life depended upon procedures unfolding in exactly the same way every time. Nothing could change; rote performance was the only performance possible. He struggled in Basic Writing, a site where "correct" was relative and where risk, i.e., devising one's own way, was encouraged. Permitting himself to take control rather than depending on preordained steps, took most of the semester. At times it was a rough ride for both of us. As an increasing number of veterans enter or return to college, composition instructors need to be aware of how military training may have inculcated tendencies toward perfectionism. It serves active duty personnel well; it hinders developing writers.

Certainly not every student who makes demands on her/himself is a perfectionist. And not every such student has experienced the kind of long-standing trauma that Makaylah lived with. Still, writing instructors need to plan and anticipate. "Writing is an intellectual activity carried on in an emotional environment" (Murray, qtd. in Romano 176). Writing is a site where judgment can occur and where a fragile student's negative beliefs about adequacy—accurate or not—can be confirmed. Research shows that learning proceeds best in an environment in which learners feel a teacher understands a student's challenges and struggles. There is "a robust positive correlation between high teacher empathy and student achievement" (McLeod 115). Battling over control, at least in my case, reduced my ability to empathize and to acknowledge the emotional environment in which my students tried to proceed with their work.

After the meltdown, Makaylah took control of her progress in Research Writing in another way. She frequented my office, asking for feedback on every draft. This was how we recovered from that awful October moment. Individual writing conferences were the way in which I could best support her learning. She finished the course successfully. At my request, she gave me her field notes, to show future students what detailed note-taking looks like.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Given the performative aspects of writing, writing instructors must, at the very least, be more aware that perfectionists in our classes might experience unexpected obstacles. And we must own our making of some of them. In studying writing assignments and students' responses to them, Scorczewski suggests instructor culpability in disappointing or unexpected results. She states that "difficult or unsettling interaction between students and teachers may have been generated by the teacher" (70). She views this dissonance as a strategic opportunity for instructor-student dialogue that can provide input for constructing a future assignment differently (70).

In writing about resilience, Benard does not lay dissonance at an instructor's feet, but does urge a similar strategic and even more pragmatic stance. She writes: "Healthy youth development must depend on deliberate policies, practices, and interventions

designed to provide young people with developmental supports and opportunities" (10). While Benard writes about students in K-12 classrooms, I argue that regardless of a student's age—adolescent, young adult, post-military adult, or even returning older student—writing instructors need to review the foundational ground from which our courses have been built. Part of that foundational ground deals with authority and control. A teacher does need to create an environment that encourages student growth, and for that a teacher needs to establish a presence. We can posit for ourselves, each in our own contexts and at various places in our teaching lives, how that presence interacts with releasing greater responsibility to students. I found that maintaining authority through control of never-can-change due dates was not helping students improve their writing. I am currently finding that short conferences that let students identify their own problematic writing areas are powerful supports for increased complexity in their writing. It has been better to release control of these things to them. Perfectionists like Makaylah have directly benefited, as have many other student writers.

Factors other than control are also at work in writing classrooms. Interestingly, Herman, in her work on trauma, describes them. After a trauma of any kind, regaining one's equilibrium to operate in the world "requires the restoration of a sense of efficacy and power" (Herman 41). This occurs, she indicates, through having control, connecting with others, and finding meaning in events. Composition scholars describe the ideal writing classroom in much the same way. We claim that ownership (control), community (connecting with others), and authenticity (finding meaning in one's work) foster the development of strong writing. While this essay focuses primarily on ownership and control when working with perfectionist students, I urge readers to consider, too, how community and authenticity play out. They were saving graces for Makaylah. As noted earlier, Makaylah did have agency through control of her topic. She was able to create meaning from her writing, as her research about her workplace would ensure her job in the library for future semesters. Connection also occurred for her. From among approximately thirty sections of Research Writing offered that semester, she chose one of mine. We knew each other; she felt welcome and comfortable in my classroom.

Course design, course policies, small individual assignments, and intentional student-teacher interactions set the tenor for learning in our classrooms. I urge that instructors of composition take Benard's call for deliberate practices to heart. If our day-to-day interactions with students offer control, connection, and meaning, or rather the composition terminology we are more familiar with—ownership, community, and authenticity—then students like Makaylah who are so threatened by mistakes can be supported in positive ways. Likewise, other students who find other obstacles in our courses can be supported to surmount them.

✦

Works Cited

Beck, Aaron T. "Forward." *Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond.* Judith S. Beck. New York: The Guildford Press, 1995. vii-ix. Print.

Beck, Judith S. *Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond*. New York: The Guildford Press, 1995. Print.

Benard, Bonnie. *Resiliency: What We Have Learned*. San Francisco: West Ed, 2004. Print.

Herman, Judith. *Trama and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Print.

Horsman, Jenny. *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence, and Education*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbam Associates, 2000. Print.

Kittle, Penny. *Write Beside Them*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008. Print.

Lewin, Tamar. "Record Level of Stress Found in College Freshmen." nytimes.com. 26 January 2011. Web.

Lunardini, Ronald. "Different Times, Different Challenges: Understanding and Responding to Today's College Students." *Journal of the Pennsylvania College Personnel Association* 8.1 (2000): 9-12. Print.

McLeod, Susan H. *Notes on the Heart*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997. Print.

Miquelon, Paule, et al. "Perfectionism, Academic Motivation, and Psychological Adjustment: An Integrative Model." *Personal and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31.7 (2005): 913-924. Print.

"Modern Times May Pile on Student Stress." *Tribune-Review* 12 January 2010: A1, A6. Print.

Olson, Kirsten. *Wounded by School*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009. Print

_____. "The Wounded Student." *Educational Leadership* 65.6 (2008): 46-49. Print.

Romano, Tom. *Writing With Passion*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1995. Print.

Scorczweski, Dawn. M. *Teaching One Moment at a Time: Disruption and Repair in the Classroom*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. Print.

Sitler, Helen Collins. "Teaching With Awareness: The Hidden Effects of Trauma on Learning." *The Clearing House* 82.3 (2009): 119-123. Print.

Ward, Andrew M. and Jeffrey S. Ashby. "Multidimensional Perfectionism and the Self." *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* 22.4 (*2008*): 51-64. Print.