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Abstract approved:

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What students need most from instructors' written response on their texts is commentary that evokes a sense of exchange. Teachers often believe that their job is to point out the deficits in a student's paper and help eliminate those deficits. While this is a part of the function of response, it should not be the primary goal of feedback; rather, students need comments that will help them gain a sense of themselves as writers who are accepted into the college writing community. Grounding the argument in the scholarship of response, this thesis develops an approach to teacher response that narrows the topic into three problem areas: the tension between responding to content issues versus responding to the distraction of surface error; the tension between promoting mastery of academic language versus encouraging development of student voice; and the tension between the reality of teacher authority and the teacher's desire to empower students to take charge of their own learning. The author's purpose is to clarify the goals of response as well as the act itself in order to help eliminate the confusion and frustration inexperienced instructors may feel when they respond to student writing. New teachers and experienced teachers who are new to writing intensive courses should find this thesis to be a useful guide to responding to student writing.

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A Circle of Response: Addressing the Tensions of
Teacher Response to Student Writing

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

April D. Carothers, Author

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Preface: The Challenge of Response

More than any other enterprise in the teaching of writing, responding to and commenting on student writing consumes the largest proportion of our time... With so much time and energy directed to a single activity, it is important for us to understand the nature of the enterprise. For it seems, paradoxically enough... although commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student writing, it is the least understood” (Nancy Sommers, “Responding to Student Writing 107).

My interest in response was born just shortly after I chose teaching as my career—more specifically, teaching of first-year college writing. After reading the quote above from Nancy Sommers in my undergraduate years, I decided that if I were to master only one aspect of teaching writing, it should be response.

Currently, I am finishing my first official year as a writing instructor at Chemeketa Community College, and I find that the art of response continues to fascinate and frighten me. My comments to my students can empower and inspire them or shut them down completely. At times, the students seem very fragile, very vulnerable to my words to them, and at other times they seem impervious, as if they are not hearing my message or caring. But at the end of each term, when I ask what part of the class they most valued, they tell me that it was my comments on their papers that meant the most. Not that my feedback was brilliant; what mattered to them was the simple fact that their teacher was reading and reacting to their work. My

comments showed them that I cared enough to read their papers and take the time to write back.

The subject of response evokes great passion in me for other reasons as well. During my year as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) at Oregon State University, I was alarmed at the panic I heard in many of the other GTAs' voices as they tried to decide how to respond to their students' work, and I was concerned at some of the responses they were giving their students. The most common reaction I heard among my colleagues was to the mistakes in the papers, which seemed to indicate that the students were far from ready for college writing and needed, as several TAs remarked, "to go back to grammar drills." I heard the phrase, "these students can't write" repeatedly. All of these TAs cared about their students' success, but many had no idea what to say to them other than pointing out what they were doing wrong.

My linguistics professors at Western Oregon University, where I earned my bachelor's degree, were adamant that freshman students are competent language users but need patience as they learn to translate what they know of language into writing for college, a new and unfamiliar task. This approach instilled in me not only a deep respect for struggling students and a desire to help them become more confident, but also a belief that the worst thing a writing teacher can do is make assumptions and act on them too quickly. Once that paper has been handed back, the words I write cannot be taken back; I can only try to undo any damage I inadvertently cause. In spite of my good intentions, however, I have done damage. I have discouraged some students without meaning to. But my feedback has to do more than soothe or flatter: it has to

push students to stretch their limits, explore what they mean to say, take risks, strive toward stronger writing.

Determined to learn what forms or methods of response would be most effective, I put my energy into research, trying to find answers to my questions and those of my colleagues. What surprised me was the enormous body of scholarly research on written response available. Even more surprising was that there existed a canon of sorts, a collection of literature on response that came out of the 1980's and early 1990's. In my years at WOU as well as in the GTA workshops at OSU, I had been assigned reading from this canon, so I was familiar with some of the work already, but I was surprised at how extensive this body of work was. According to Louise Wetherbee Phelps in her article "Composition" in the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*,

Composition studies as a contemporary discipline is conventionally dated to 1963 when calls for the revival of rhetoric (at the 1963 4Cs) and for research into composing... sparked new scholarship in writing. In the 1970's, published research and theory began to achieve a critical mass (spurred in part by Janet Emig's exemplary case study, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth-Graders*) and to produce structures of professionalization... (Wetherbee Phelps 124).

A composition revolution was taking place. Some of the most well known authors from this period, whose works are still included in many anthologies, are Mina Shaughnessy, David Bartholomae, Donald Murray, Linda Flower, Nancy Sommers, Mike Rose, Robert Connors, Andrea Lunsford, and Richard Straub, just to name a

very few. Many of these are still working hard in the field of composition, striving every year to know more, understand more, and become better instructors. As I began my research, I foolishly believed that if I read as much of this body of work as I could, I would become an expert at response. I did not yet understand the difference between knowing the theories and applying them.

My attitudes continue to evolve. Years ago, back in college after an 18 year hiatus, I entered the university believing that writers are born, not made, that one either has the ability or does not. I left believing that everyone has the potential to write with beauty, grace and power, but first they need to believe in themselves. As a teacher, I hope to help my students see their potential and believe that they can write. My goal for this thesis was originally just to learn more about the art of response so that I might provide feedback that would help my students toward being stronger, more confident writers... or maybe, simply so that I would do no harm, as Peter Elbow puts it (“Options” 197). Now, I hope that others might read this work and find a greater understanding of how important response is, and how complex, but also how amazing it can be to carry on a kind of “conversation on paper” (Lindemann 226) with our students and watch them grow from that frightened newcomer who confronted us on the first day of class and said, “I can’t write,” to a writer who says confidently, “show me what I need to know.”

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Introduction: Putting Teacher Response Into Context

I suppose the main caution is how easily teachers can forget that the end is students learning and that if productive response to their writing, despite all the shortcuts we can contrive, is still laborious, well, that is what we are paid to do.

(Richard Haswell, “The Complexity of Teacher Response” “Some Directions” par. 7).

Richard Haswell asks a painful question in the essay quoted above. He asks whether students get anything from teacher feedback, since research has failed to show that student writing improves as a result of teacher commentary on their papers. This is a concern for many instructors who may wonder whether students read their comments at all.

Haswell is also correct in saying that the time we spend in responding is part of the job of teaching writing. It is expected. However, the act of response can be less grueling when instructors feel some confidence in what their comments are meant to do and in the value of those comments for students. Haswell’s essay makes clear just how complex response is, but even a new teacher like myself can see that without being told. It is harder than it looks. This thesis explores what students need most from instructor response, as well as the problems that can result when teachers lose sight of what they meant to accomplish, or when they misunderstand the purpose of response.

This introduction will serve to orient the reader to how I conceive of the concept of teacher response and what assumptions drive my conclusions.

Haswell writes of his encounter with the poet William Stafford, who told him that he thought response to student texts was mainly a job of “leaving tracks” to show students that their work had been read and reacted to. Haswell says, “Maybe he was right, and the final worth of writing-teacher commentary is only a kind of passing the torch, keeping the students assured that they will always have words people will read (Haswell, “Complexities” “The Ever-Frustrating, Perpetually Fascinating Issue of Writing Response”). I like the idea of leaving tracks for students to follow, but is that what responding to student texts is really about: just leaving evidence that the teacher really did read the work?

Leaving tracks is a place to start, but there is much more that response can do and should do. Three questions have driven my research: How can I deal with all of the errors I see in my students’ papers yet still help them focus on the content of their papers? How can I encourage my students to make their own choices in language and style when they still have to meet academic standards? And finally, how can I encourage my students to have control over their own papers when I am the one who assigns a grade? From these questions, I identified three tensions which seem to powerfully influence the dynamics of the writing classroom and the way in which instructors respond to their students’ work. These tensions are the focus of the three chapters of this thesis.

Chapter One addresses the tension instructors feel between the pull of error correction and the need to respond to content first. Error is a powerful distraction as we respond, pulling attention away from the paper as a whole. Despite a desire to follow current theory, which promotes response as an exchange meant to provoke revision, many instructors tend to provide distant commentary that focuses on a paper as an isolated and finished product (Connors and Lunsford, “Teachers’ Rhetorical Comments” 151). Rather than simply pointing out problems, responders should offer their own reactions as readers, providing comments that evoke a sense of dialogue and exchange for students. But error need not be ignored: new teachers of composition often do not realize that errors can be a rich source of information about patterns in student thinking (Bartholomae, “The Study of Error” 263). These patterns can be addressed one or two at a time in response that focuses on the paper as a whole and evokes the give and take of a face-to-face conference.

Chapter Two explores the tension between the need to teach mastery of academic language and the need to help students develop a sense of their own voices. A strong voice is one of authority and composure (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 10), qualities students need help in achieving. In order to find this sense, they must first accept their role as novices (Sommers and Saltz 127). Teacher response that encourages and guides can give students a sense of safety and membership in the college writing community, providing feedback that focuses attention on audience and purpose and demonstrates how these affect word and phrasing choices.

Chapter Three discusses the tension between teacher authority and student empowerment. One of the most difficult aspects of response is to give students a sense of agency in their papers. Teacher response often wrests control from students with feedback that indicates how a student paper may not have measured up to an “ideal text” in the teacher’s mind (Knoblauch and Brannon 118). Revision should not mean merely correcting the flaws a teacher points out: powerful writing occurs when students can begin to envision an audience, can clarify their own purposes for a text, and can understand the impact certain changes may have on readers. A reader-response approach to commenting can draw student attention to the choices writers make and the effect of these on an informed reader, encouraging students to develop greater control over their own words.

In addition to the questions I began with, three fairly recent works influence my thinking: Nancy Sommers’ written accounts of the recent Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, which reveals the role feedback plays in student development; James Paul Gee’s *What Video Games have to Teach Us about Language and Learning*, which delves deeply into how learners become truly engaged; and Alice Horning and Jeanie Robertson’s chapter “Basic Writers and Revision” in *Reference Guide to Revision History, Theory, and Practice*, which discusses the differences between the habits of experienced versus inexperienced writers. Horning and Robertson’s discussion clarifies what students need to learn in order to write like experts. Gee’s work serves to demonstrate why students need more from feedback than simply to be shown what they are doing wrong. Sommers’ conclusions allow no

doubt as to what students need from response. These experts, taken together, reveal both that response is far more complicated than we may have previously suspected, and that providing effective response may not be as difficult as it seems.

The Harvard study followed four hundred students of the Harvard graduating class of 2001 through all four years of their college work. Researchers found that although writing skill is acquired very slowly, the freshman year experience with writing was pivotal (Sommers and Saltz, “Novice as Expert” 127). Response not only plays a vital role in a college writer’s development, it is key to their success: “...feedback plays a leading role in undergraduate writing development when, but only when, students and teachers create a partnership through feedback” (Sommers, “Across the Drafts” 250). Effective response is an exchange between student and teacher, a conversation that begins in the classroom and takes shape in the feedback our students receive from us on their papers, finally coming to fruition in the student’s reaction to our commentary.

The Harvard study reveals what happens as freshmen enter college. This look into the way students new to college face the challenges of writing for college coursework reveals the role teacher response can play in their success. Sommers and Saltz note, “...freshmen who see themselves as novices are most capable of learning new skills; and students who see writing as something more than an assignment, who write about something that matters to them, are best able to sustain an interest in academic writing throughout their undergraduate careers” (Sommers and Saltz, “Novice” 127). These first year students are aware that the demands of college writing

differ significantly from the demands of high school writing assignments, and they struggle to find a way to cope with being asked to write as if they are experts in a community they are new to. Those who could accept their role as novices and could see that there was more to be gained from each writing assignment than just a grade were most successful in adapting to college. “Being a novice allows students to be changed by what they learn, to have new ideas, and to understand that ‘what the teacher wants’ is an essay that reflects those ideas” (“Novice” 134).

What do those who accept themselves as novices do? They are aware that they have much to learn, and they accept the instructor’s role as their guide. They are open to the possibility that their previous assumptions may have been wrong, and that there may be ways of looking at the world that they have not yet discovered.

But college writing demands even more: these novices must also see themselves as members of the community they are new to. This is a paradox that can be resolved through instructor feedback that invites students into the “conversation” in academia and encourages them to explore their own thoughts alongside those of the current experts.

James Paul Gee, the Tashia Morgridge Professor of Reading at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, offers another perspective on the importance of the learner’s acceptance of the role of novice and their need for a sense of membership in the community they are new to. In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee explores the reasons behind the success of video games, which engage players by providing elements that educational environments sometimes

do not: a safe learning environment where students can take risks and stretch themselves, a sense of ownership in the work the learner is doing, and the opportunity to build an identity as a member of the community the learner is entering. Gee's theories on learner engagement align well with Sommers' conclusions: feedback must encourage students to feel safe and yet be willing to challenge themselves, it must enhance a student's sense of ownership in his/her work, and it must invite the student writer into the college writing community s/he has entered.

Alice Horning and Jeanie Robertson offer a more classroom-based explanation of what first-year students need in order to develop writing skill. They describe the differences between professional writers, those who make a living through published writing, and basic writers— for this thesis, inexperienced writers. Professional writers have three kinds of awareness that most inexperienced writers lack: metarhetorical awareness, or knowledge of the self as writer and of regular practices the self employs to produce strong writing; metastrategic awareness, or knowledge of the self as an individual who can solve problems using whatever strategies might be necessary; and metalinguistic awareness, or knowledge of the various features of language and how to use these features effectively (Horning and Robertson 53). These professionals are established members of the community in which they write. They have confidence in their own expertise, they are aware of various tools and strategies available to them for problem solving, and they are aware of the choices they and others make as writers, noting which choices result in effective writing.

According to Horning and Robertson, inexperienced students lack an awareness of themselves as writers; they have not yet projected themselves onto an identity within the community. This awareness takes time to develop: "...metarhetorical awareness comes in part from direct instruction in writing courses, but arises chiefly as a by-product of extensive writing experience" (Horning and Robertson 54). Inexperienced writers also lack metalinguistic awareness; they may lack knowledge of the conventions of academic language, or even of the difference between spoken and written language, which results in their writing containing many surface errors (57). These errors tend to become the focus for both student writers and their readers.

The findings on professional writers suggest that they use their metalinguistic awareness not to correct their writing but to address stylistic concerns and clarity of expression; [basic writers], too, need help to develop this kind of metalinguistic awareness in order to revise holistically, for substance, beyond being correct (58).

Inexperienced writers need guidance to help them become aware of the various ways language may be manipulated beyond simply eliminating error. Teacher comments can help draw student attention to the choices they are making as writers and offer suggestions for problem-solving strategies.

In order to provide effective feedback, instructors must be aware of the tensions inherent in providing feedback to students and how those tensions affect the way they react to student papers. They must also be aware of what outcomes

comments are meant to provoke: the experts in this chapter establish these outcomes as students' ability 1) to see themselves as members of the learning community in which they write, 2) to see themselves as novices open to the learning that can take place in the exchange of ideas provided by response, and 3) to discover and adapt the tools and habits of thought available to expert writers.

Through our written responses, we as instructors leave tracks behind us in our responses to our students, and our influence can be powerful. This feedback, when it provides a sense of exchange for students, can bridge the gap between entering college as an outsider and learning to see oneself as a member of this new learning community.

A Circle of Response: Addressing the Tensions of Teacher Response to Student Writing

Chapter One

Content vs. Correctness: Combating the Distraction of Error

One great issue in providing effective response to student writing may be an instructor's reaction to error: as readers who are also teachers, we cannot help but notice surface mistakes. These errors do matter, and I do not intend to argue that they should be ignored at all times. However, error elimination tends to become a priority for inexperienced teachers when they assume that these mistakes are a measure of a student's competence. For those who are not long familiar with the field of composition, the errors in a student's paper appear to be primary indicators of the student's writing abilities or knowledge. The solution seems obvious: if students are making too many mistakes, does it not make sense to work at eliminating those mistakes? Actually, it does not, if those surface features reveal an entirely different problem than a student's lack of understanding of rules of usage. Error is not only a poor indicator of student ability, but as many scholars observe, error marking as an end in itself is ineffective, not to mention time-consuming for the teacher and damaging to student confidence and learning.

Most experts advise that a teacher respond to the content of a paper before responding to surface errors. But even for more experienced teachers, there is tension between the need to respond to content and the distraction of not only surface errors

but more complex mistakes such as formatting problems, lack of proper citation, or a missing element such as a conclusion. Complicating this tension is another problem: teachers may believe they are responding to content, yet their responses may still treat a student's text as a product, not something in process. Their responses may fail to invite the student writer to become *part of that process*. Students need motivation to take a second look at their work, to re-evaluate their own purposes and how they have or have not achieved them, and to respond to teacher comments with effective revision that goes beyond simply correcting the mistakes pointed out to them. Students need to take more responsibility for their own texts, and response must invite them to do so.

This chapter examines the tension between content and correctness by first looking at research on what teachers actually respond to when marking papers, whether response even makes a difference in student writing, what the goals of response should be, and how complex a task responding to student writing can be. The chapter then turns to a more detailed analysis of the role of error in student writing and the research on responding to error. I conclude with a discussion of how to take theory into practice when we are responding to our own students' writing and seeking to embrace or at least live with the tension between correctness and content.

Teachers Respond

Robert J. Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford published the results of their study of teacher comments on student papers in their 1993 article "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers." In 1986, after sending out an invitation to 8,000

teachers, they received responses from 300, but these 300 contributed 21,000 teacher-marked, not necessarily graded, papers. Out of this sampling, Connors and Lunsford randomly selected 3,000. These 3,000 papers were first used in a study of how teachers mark error, but this same sampling was used again for the study of how teachers comment. For the second study, 26 volunteer readers, all experienced writing teachers, took careful note of teacher feedback. “What we wanted to try to get at were the ways in which teachers judge the rhetorical effectiveness of their students’ writing, and the sorts of teacher-student relationships reflected in the comments that teachers give” (Connors and Lunsford, “Teachers’ Rhetorical Comments” 141).

Connors and Lunsford’s research found that although theorists had made breakthroughs in determining what kinds of responses students seemed to need most, teachers, overburdened and overworked, were still tending to respond in ways that were prescriptive and even punitive. Teachers represented in the study seemed to want very much to respond in the ways theory instructs, with positive, encouraging feedback, but they still tended to interpret their roles in responding to be that of judge: “Most teachers, if our sample is representative, continue to feel that a major task is to ‘correct’ and edit papers” (151). The study revealed “a pervasive tendency to isolate problems and errors individually and ‘correct’ them without any corresponding attempt to analyze error patterns in a larger way” (151). Teachers’ commentary tended to sound distant and disinterested; instructors did not seem willing to engage with students in any personal way (151). The authors’ conclusion at the end of the research: “The bad news is that many teachers seem still to be facing classroom situations,

loads, and levels of training that keep them from communicating their rhetorical evaluations effectively” (153).

Connors and Lunsford make clear how harmful commentary can be when the focus is upon eliminating problems, whether local or global. Take the example of the instructor who responded to a paper that recounted the death of a sixteen-year-old girl: “Learn to use subordination” (“Teacher’s Rhetorical Comments” 145). The message sent is that what the student says matters far less than whether it was said correctly, but beyond that, as in the instance above, the student receives the message that WHAT s/he says does not matter at all. There may no more efficient way to motivate a student to *stop* writing or to resist it. Other commentary revealed by Connors and Lunsford’s research was less cruel but no less punitive: “Do over.” “This is just silly.” “Throw away!” (149). One instructor, frustrated by what s/he saw as a student’s intentional failure to follow instructions, stated that not only would the paper receive an F, but that s/he would be “lowering another grade 20 points” (150).

Connors and Lunsford’s team approved of lengthy, engaged, personal comments, grounded in the text of the student’s own paper, directed at charting student progress, and provided as part of a real exchange between student and teacher (149). Comments that most impressed the researchers came from teachers who seemed motivated to respond to the students as individuals, to connect with them one-on-one. One instructor’s comments gave the student direct suggestions for how to revise her paper, but did so in a way that was supportive and encouraging, keeping the student focused both on her own purposes in writing and on the purpose of that assignment.

Interestingly, these comments do not begin with praise, as most of the feedback in the study did: “Elly—this is not a good essay, but you’d have to be superhuman to write a good essay on this topic, given how important and immediate it is for you. I feel for your situation...” (qtd. in Connors and Lunsford “Teachers’ Rhetorical Comments” 150). This instructor goes on to help the student fine-tune what she was trying to say by telling her to narrow her focus.

Another instructor whose feedback the researchers admired offered marginal comments which were closely directed to the paper with questions like “When did she do this?” and “You didn’t know how to steer?” Note how very different such remarks are from “rubber-stamped” comments like “awkward” and “revise for clarity.” The instructor’s specific remarks were followed by a half-page typed letter to the student with suggestions for the next draft (151). This kind of feedback keeps its focus upon the student writer and his/her purpose, showing the student how well that purpose has been achieved, then giving suggestions or direction for where s/he might take the paper next. This is truly collaborative feedback, where teacher and student work together. The focus is on the paper, but the focus itself is shared between creator (student) and guide (teacher). This does not happen by accident: it is a deliberate move on the teacher’s part.

Fifteen years have passed since Connors and Lunsford’s study. Certainly, the field of composition has grown and changed since then, but how many teachers still remain overburdened and overworked? How many freshman writing classes are still

taught by teachers who are new to the field? And how many teachers are still writing comments like those in the study?

Richard Haswell, in his 2006 article “The Complexities of Responding to Student Writing; or, Looking for Shortcuts via the Road of Excess,” states that teachers still struggle with response to student papers for various reasons, the foremost perhaps being that response is a deceptively complex process in itself. Teacher response is complicated by the expectations, standards, and criteria by which teachers and institutions judge a student's work. The problem lies in the difficulty of defining these guidelines from one discipline to another, in regard to varying genres or modes, and from one style to another. For instance, Haswell clarifies that while all faculty in a university may agree on readability criteria, they will not agree on how to define these terms (Haswell, “Complexities” “Regulation” par. 2). His conclusion: there are no clear boundaries for responders to use as guidelines (Haswell, “Complexities” “Regulation” par. 2). Haswell states that, to make matters worse, “Little consistent association between writing improvement and volume or kind of response has been documented” (Haswell, “Complexities” “Consumption” par. 4). So teachers cannot be certain that their feedback is accomplishing anything.

Addressing the concern that some research has shown that teacher comments have no effect on student writing, Erika Lindemann argues that focused comments are beneficial, and that students need opportunities to learn criteria for good writing and apply it to their own work. The result is more effective revisions and stronger subsequent first drafts (234). This goes along with Horning and Robertson's

conclusions: students need to acquire the meta-awareness of language that experienced writers employ (Horning and Robertson 53).

Further, the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing (1997-2001) has shown that immediate improvement should not be the primary goal of response. The study, conducted by Nancy Sommers and fellow researchers, followed four hundred students from their freshman year through graduation. Researchers found that what students need is a sense of exchange, a sense of being involved in a dialog with their teachers, being a part of the “conversation” taking place in college writing. This is not always what they get. Part of the problem can be seen in Haswell’s remark above: expectations on the teachers’ parts as to what they believe feedback should accomplish. Sommers states,

Colleges have great expectations for students. But if we understand how slow writing development is... we become rather humble about the enterprise of commenting. If our comments move students forward as writers, they do so because such comments resonate with some aspect of their writing that our students are already thinking about. As we learned from the students we followed, most comments, unfortunately, do not move students forward as writers because they underwhelm or overwhelm them, going unread and unused. As one student suggested, “Too often comments are written to the paper, not the student” (Sommers, “Across the Drafts” 250).

This last observation strikes to the heart of the problem Connors and Lunsford’s research revealed so long ago. Students do not appear to be getting this sense of

exchange. Haswell argues that they misunderstand much of their teachers' feedback, and when required to revise, students tend to only correct surface mistakes or problems pointed out clearly by the teacher. He places part of the blame on teachers "who often think they are positively emphasizing central qualities such as reasoning, genre form, and reader awareness while in fact the bulk of their commentary dwells negatively on surface mistakes..." (Haswell, "Complexities" "Consumption" par. 2).

Teachers want to respond to content, believe they are responding to content, yet they still seem to be responding mainly to errors and problems. What is going wrong? What is needed to shift focus from product/correctness to process/content? What does response that provides a real sense of exchange look like? And perhaps most importantly, do our responses cause more harm than good?

According to the Harvard Study, effective feedback facilitates a student's ability to move from "private and idiosyncratic" writing to work that takes into account the needs of real audiences. Additionally, "When their instructors encourage them to confront opposing viewpoints and sources that don't support their claim, or ask them questions that enlarge their vision, students see that their writing is being taken seriously" ("Shaped by Writing"). Such response from teachers engages with the WHAT of a student's paper: what the student is saying, not just how s/he is saying it. It addresses the student, not the paper. And the role of response becomes critical later on: "After freshman year, feedback is often the primary form of writing instruction, and, as our study participants confirmed, probably the most significant contribution an instructor can make in the education of a writer" ("Shaped"). Freshman students need

exposure to response that they understand and use so that they can begin to see themselves as part of an exchange that takes place on paper. If they have a good experience with response early on, they will be better prepared to absorb feedback from future teachers.

So how can teachers produce response that students will consume? Before that question can be answered, it is necessary to understand how most advice on providing feedback can fall short of clarifying just how complex the act of response can be, as Connors and Lunsford's, Haswell's, and Sommers' findings revealed.

Any current handbook on the teaching of writing advocates focusing teacher response on addressing content issues first, such as purpose, focus, argument, anticipation of audience, organization, or how well the text meets assignment requirements. For example, in *The Elements of Teaching Writing*, Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj offer "A Basic Method for Responding to Student Writing" which begins with advising the instructor to relax and read the student's piece for comprehension, "letting it communicate whatever it has to say" (54), then to respond first to the purpose or argument of the essay, addressing how well it communicated that purpose, then offering only two or three suggestions for improving important areas (54-55). In *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, Erika Lindemann, offers similar advice: read the paper through first, looking for what meaning the student is trying to communicate, then respond in a way that will help the student see his/her own work positively yet as a "conscious critic" (Lindemann 239- 40). Richard Straub, in his article "Managing the Paper Load," advises that instructors "[r]ead through the

paper once quickly without stopping to make any comments” making small marks on the paper where problems seem to stand out, then focus on only two or three priorities, keeping commentary on early drafts limited to “content, focus, and purpose.” He advises minimally marking errors, but only those that occur repeatedly, and only one or two types of error at a time—such as comma splice or misspellings (Straub, “Managing” 258). Any web search on the keywords “responding to student writing” will turn up more advice such as this: respond to content first, then help students to address two or three problems within the body of the paper.

However, awareness that response should address content first is not enough. The problem still remains that surface errors do matter, and instructors need to know how to address these. With a better understanding of the sources of error—and why errors affect us so strongly—we as teachers can learn to respond to both errors and content quickly and effectively, getting at the heart of each individual’s learning needs and putting error into perspective for ourselves and students.

Also, many teachers believe that their job is to improve student papers, and Haswell’s remark that there is no research to show that response results in improvement in student writing shows that even the experts have difficulty letting go of the idea that immediate improvement is the primary goal. Yet Sommers’ research was clear: “The students in our study taught us that the rewards of college writing are incremental and cumulative; writing doesn’t shape a student’s education in the space of one course or one semester or even one year” (“Shaped”). Progress is slow: learning to write well is a process. Our goals as teachers, as we respond to student texts, must

be to acknowledge that our job is not to provide an immediate “fix,” but to create that sense of exchange promoted by the experts.

The next section explores the serious obstacle error presents to those goals.

Those Distracting Surface Mistakes

Error. The word alone brings up negative feelings and memories of the red pen. It is the single most visible problem with any text we read: a weak argument, lack of supporting detail, or even disjointed organization often does not catch a reader’s attention like a misspelled word or a misplaced comma. When we think of error, of “mistakes,” we tend to think only of surface features. Bill Bolin, writing on error in *Keywords in Composition Study*, provides this definition:

The written history of *error* leaves one with the sense that the phenomenon is first, negative, and second, distinguished by its divergence from standard dialect more so than by its relation to other issues of acceptable school writing such as tone... audience, ethos, and the like (Bolin 81).

It seems odd to have to so specify what error means, not just to a teacher of writing, but to anyone: but it also seems odd that the word sparks only thoughts of features that should be the least important when it comes to reading an effective text. After all, an error-free text may not say anything worth reading, while something riddled with small surface mistakes could contain real critical thought worth examining. Yet these small surface mistakes do matter.

After the pre-service workshops end for teaching assistants, all of us who are about to teach writing know that we are supposed to help students focus upon content or global concerns (audience, tone, support, thesis, etc., elements which affect a paper as a whole) ahead of local concerns (surface problems like run-ons, fragments, misspellings, etc., elements that affect only a small area of the paper). We are also usually taught that surface concerns can become global concerns when they occur repeatedly throughout a paper, for instance, the word “weather” consistently taking the place of “whether” or repeated comma splices—such repetition may show that the student needs help with this particular element. We have the examples of our writing professors’ comments to follow, and we have read an essay or two on response, so we have some theory to tuck into our belts.

Problems begin as soon as the classroom door opens: what we learned in workshops, and what sounded so clear on paper, is suddenly complicated by real students with individual needs, individual reasons for taking that required writing class, individual gazes looking up at us from the desks. Teaching suddenly becomes survival, and putting complicated theories into practice seems less important than just keeping clear what needs to get done today. Before long, we are faced with a stack of essays demanding response, and the weight of not being clear about how to put theory into practice can suddenly be crushing. In TA offices on every floor, I have heard my own fears voiced: “What am I supposed to say to this student?” “This paper is a disaster! Look at all these mistakes.” “I don’t have time to help this student with every problem I see here...”

When responding to a student whose writing is relatively error-free, it is fairly easy to focus instead on content issues such as audience awareness, organization, clarity, sufficient support, clear thesis. It is more difficult to respond to content in a paper that is riddled with surface mistakes. From the amount of research and writing done on the topic, I imagine that even experienced instructors find themselves challenged with certain students' papers. Complicating our own confusion is the conflict between the experts' questions as to the value of marking errors at all and our own instinct that errors are a serious problem. If new teachers of writing are to place global response before response to error, they need a better understanding of error and the teaching of writing, understanding that will help them move beyond that initial "This paper is a disaster!"

In the late eighties, in an attempt to determine what instructors—and wider society—consider problem errors and how these errors are marked, Connors and Lunsford conducted a study of the most common error patterns in student writing. They open their article, "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing," which reports their findings and conclusions, by stating the problem which provoked their research—and note how relevant this statement still is today:

Marking and judging formal and mechanical errors in student papers is one area in which composition studies seems to have a multiple-personality disorder. On the one hand, our mellow, student-centered, process-based selves tend to condemn marking formal errors at all. Doing it represents the Bad Old Days... Nevertheless, very few of us can deny that an outright comma splice,

“its/it’s” error, or misspelled common word distracts us... The world judges a writer by her mastery of conventions, and we all know it. Students, parents, university colleagues, and administrators expect us to deal somehow with those unmet rhetorical expectation, and, like it or not, pointing out errors seems to most of us part of what we do (Connors and Lunsford “Frequency” 334-5).

Writing instructors often feel torn trying to determine where their duty lies when it comes to error marking. Connors and Lunsford wanted to identify what happens when teachers mark papers and which errors might be labeled “most common.” As described earlier in this chapter, they collected a large number of teacher-marked student essays in order to determine “what the major patterns of formal and mechanical error in current student writing might be” (“Frequency” 335).

This brings up a second important point: the need to debunk the myth that what constitutes error is fixed. In their *epilogos*, or conclusion, Connors and Lunsford lament that their study actually provoked more questions than it solved, one of which was where our ideas of what constitutes an error come from (346). Trying to answer the question of why error patterns shift over time, they ask whether frequency of specific errors could be correlated contextually, or rather, put into context in terms of what society (in the form of consumers of written text) notices, or even in terms of what publishers or other business leaders consider significant patterns of error (346).

Andrea A. Lunsford and Karen Lunsford recently compiled a new “top 20 errors” list based on extensive research into error frequency in student papers. This list differs in significant ways from the previous “top 20” list which first appeared in the

St. Martin's Handbook, 1986 (Lunsford and Lunsford, "The Top Twenty"). For example, they note that while spelling errors have been greatly reduced by student use of computer spell-checkers, "wrong word" has moved to first position on the chart partly as a result of the inability of such spell-checkers to mark when a student has used the wrong version of a word (like "weather" versus "whether") (Lunsford and Lunsford, "The Top Twenty"). Another key difference today is the problem posed by students being required to incorporate outside sources into their work and the resulting mistakes. Lunsford and Lunsford note that perhaps the most important detail their research revealed was that despite the fact that students are required today to write much longer, more complex papers, the rate of error has not increased ("The Top Twenty").

To return to Connor and Lunsford's findings, error marking by teachers seemed unrelated to which errors occurred most frequently: the most common error (no comma after introductory element: 3299 found in 3000 papers) was the second to the least most frequently marked by teachers, and the 20th ranked error (its/it's: 292 found in 3000 papers) was the second most frequently marked (Table on 342). Connors and Lunsford suggest the following "intriguing, if tentative, generalizations" (341):

First, teachers' ideas about what constitutes a serious, markable error vary widely... Second, teachers do not seem to mark as many errors as we often think we do. On average, college English teachers mark only 43% of the most serious errors in the papers they evaluate... Third, the reasons teachers mark

any given error seem to result from a complex formula that takes into account at least two factors: how serious or annoying the error is perceived to be at a given time for both teacher and student, and how difficult it is to explain (341).

In other words, teachers tend to mark the errors that they as individuals believe are most serious and that take the least time to explain—and Connors and Lunsford are careful to be clear that this is not laziness but probably the result of having a heavy paper load and a lack of time (343).

It should be noted that students, not having a window into the teacher's head, in order to determine what matters in their writing, must rely upon what *appears* to matter most to the teacher, and this will vary from teacher to teacher and from one discipline to another; as Richard Haswell points out: “Nascent in writing standards is the concept of ‘acceptable level’ or ‘irritation score,’ also called ‘error gravity’ by ESL researches. It leads to some of the most complex of writing response interactions” (“Complexities” “Regulation” par. 9). In the example he offers, one group felt that the most serious errors were those that kept readers from understanding what the writer was trying to say, while another group felt that the most serious mistakes were those that the writer should have been able to catch and correct (sec. 3). This issue will be explored in greater depth in the following section which addresses the social implications of error.

Students learn to avoid each instructor's pet peeves, which is not necessarily bad—in the business world they will have to avoid their employer's pet peeves—but the message sent by intensive error marking is that avoidance of error is paramount.

This is complicated by the reality that, as Connors and Lunsford made clear, what constitutes error shifts over time and is determined at times by individual preference, yet instructors often address errors as if there were a single handbook with all the answers as to what *is* correct, and students are left believing that they may be able to eliminate all error if they can find this handbook and simply memorize certain rules.

Clearly, there is more to the question than “to mark or not to mark,” or even what to mark. What happens when students make mistakes? How do teachers respond to these mistakes? How do we as instructors direct our energy to modeling a hierarchy of response that leads to effective revision? Writing teachers need to discover how to put what they know into practice and resolve the persistent “multiple-personality disorder” Connors and Lunsford observed thirty years ago.

The Research

Scholarly articles addressing error fall fairly easily into two distinct categories: **one**, articles that address the impact of error upon readers and emphasize the interaction that occurs between the writer and the reader of a text (error *does* matter, but keep it in perspective); and **two**: articles that explore the needs of students to learn strategies for revision which include the importance of awareness of content and its effect on audience, and becoming aware of and addressing errors that occur in their own texts. The first set will aid new instructors in becoming more reflective responders, and the second set will provide greater understanding of what forms of response can help students become more reflective writers. Both approaches will help

writing teachers deal with the tension between global and sentence level issues in responding to student writing. The next section of this chapter explores the work of a number of experts whose views fall in each category.

For background, David Bartholomae addresses both issues of reader reaction and revision skills effectively in his much re-published article “The Study of Error.” He explains what happens when students commit errors and clarifies how teachers can react more thoughtfully and time-profitably to these mistakes. Mina Shaughnessy’s work provides background on reader response and why it is needed. Brooke Horvath, Ronald Lunsford, and Joseph Harris then discuss approaches that model involved teacher-reader response.

Nancy Sommers explains the revision habits of inexperienced writers, detailing why students themselves tend to focus on correctness instead of content. Nancy Sommers’ further work gives additional background to Connors and Lunsford’s 1993 findings, offering some insights into why teachers tend to see student texts as isolated products. Sommers examines the mistakes teachers tend to make when they respond to error and demonstrates how to motivate students to prioritize content above correctness.

The chapter closes with concrete examples from Erika Lindemann of how to respond to content in a way modeled on face-to-face conferencing. Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj, as well as Richard Straub, give teachers an idea of how to respond in their own voices in this “conference on paper.”

Developing a Meta-Awareness of Error

David Bartholomae, in his “The Study of Error,” notes what happens to most instructors when they read a student’s paper that is rife with mistakes:

When a basic writer violates our expectations... there is a tendency to dismiss the text as non-writing, as meaningless or imperfect writing. We have not read as we have been trained to read, with a particular interest in the way an individual style confronts and violates convention. We have read, rather, as policemen, examiners, gatekeepers (259).

Note that while he is discussing the needs of basic, or struggling, writers, those of us who teach freshman composition today may recognize the kind of paper he describes, as well as our own reaction to that paper.

Inexperienced instructors, when Bartholomae was writing *and* today, are especially vulnerable to jumping to the conclusion that a paper full of errors is indicative of a student’s lack of knowledge of grammar, lack of ability to define what a sentence is, lack of interest in creating coherence, or all of the above. In fact, many early basic writing courses were designed with the goal of eliminating error. As Bartholomae states in his famous 1985 essay “Inventing the University”:

... [O]ne of the problems with curricula designed to aid basic writers is that they too often begin with the assumption that the key distinguishing feature of a basic writer is the presence of sentence level error. Students are placed in courses because their placement essays show a high frequency of such errors and those courses are designed with the goal of making those errors go away.

This approach to the problems of the basic writer ignores the degree to which error is not a constant feature but a marker in the development of a writer. Students who can write reasonably correct narratives may fall to pieces when faced with more unfamiliar assignments (Bartholomae, “Inventing” 158-9).

In other words, within a “more unfamiliar assignment,” error may indicate that the writer is struggling, not with grammar rules but with finding the right words to express his/her ideas. Bartholomae’s work reveals that the presence of error may indicate that the student has reached a more advanced stage as a writer. He provides this example of student writing: “In the past time I thought that an incident was creative was when I had to make a clay model of the earth... I thought of these things in a dimension of which it would be unique, but easy to comprehend” (“Inventing” 159). Bartholomae states, “... [S]uch sentences fall apart not because the writer lacks the necessary syntax to glue the pieces together but because he lacks the full statement within which those key words are already operating” (“Inventing” 160). This student is using certain academic sounding phrases, but s/he does not have sufficient familiarity with such phrases to be able to put them together. This problem could be compared to a student new to Spanish being able to say “how are you” and “glad to meet you,” but not being able to connect the two phrases fluently.

The point is this: rather than make quick (and inaccurate) assumptions about what an individual student needs based on glaring errors, Bartholomae urges that we stop and take a moment to determine exactly what errors are occurring and where.

Error analysis can provide great advantages when it comes to deciding how to respond to a particular student.

In “The Study of Error,” he suggests that response to error be very student-specific. He notes that error can be a sign of learning, or a way of seeing into a student’s thought processes, viewing “failed sentences... as a sign of growth” (259). He mentions the Kroll and Schafer article, “Error Analysis and the Teaching of Composition,” and their theory that error can provide “clues” as to what is happening in the student mind (Bartholomae, “Error” 263). Errors, Bartholomae states, when analyzed with some care, can help teachers understand the problems a student is having, or even the progress s/he is making. By looking at error patterns in individual papers, instruction can be directed more efficiently at the exact problem instead of a general one. For instance, instead of drilling a student on spelling rules, error analysis might show that s/he is really only struggling with words that contain vowel clusters (263). Bartholomae goes a step further: when students are asked to analyze their own error patterns, they begin to develop a greater awareness of their own processes: “Studying their own writing puts students in a position to see themselves as language users, rather than as victims of a language that uses them” (263).

Bartholomae suggests that there are three types of error: one, accidental errors (errors of performance), which students can correct themselves once they learn to proofread; two, idiosyncratic errors (errors of competence) which occur because of some lack of understanding on the student’s part; and three, errors that occur when a student’s home language interferes with his/her attempts to use Standard English

(Bartholomae, “Error” 262). These last errors, he states, occur with far less frequency. He provides an excellent demonstration of this by providing an excerpt from “John’s” essay, which is littered with mistakes. Bartholomae investigates these errors one at a time, coming to the conclusion, through working with John one-on-one, that John can correct most without help (264-66). John does need help with avoidance of the miscue, which occurs when a writer reads the words he has written the way he meant to write them instead of how they actually appear to another reader. John needs help and practice with proofreading. “The most dramatic change in John’s performance over the term was the number of errors he was able to eliminate from his first drafts” (272). Editing procedures were more useful to John than grammar drills would have been... drills based on a false assumption that the errors appearing in his paper were ones he could not correct.

Bartholomae’s description of error analysis can be intimidating, but putting it into practice does not have to be complicated. Instructors can improve their response to error by watching for patterns of error (repeated mistakes). Bartholomae notes that students can learn to analyze their own errors, thus lifting some of the burden from the teacher, and this important skill improves with practice (272). In order to help bring mistakes to students’ attention so that they can begin to chart patterns that they observe, Richard Haswell suggests a short cut approach: placing a small mark in the margin, like an “x” or a check, by each line where an error occurs. He notes that most students could correct over 60% of these errors on their own (Haswell “Minimal” 601). Erika Lindemann takes it a step further and argues that instructors should look

for error patterns, choose one or two, and note only these errors with a mark in the margin (Lindemann 241). This helps avoid overwhelming a student who may have a lot of errors. Minimal marking, whether one marks all mistakes or only selected ones, reinforces the idea that most errors *are* accidental, which the writer, if s/he saw them, could correct easily. And Haswell's minimal-marking suggests correction without implying ignorance.

Even with practice in editing, however, the problem of errors of competence and errors of dialect interference remain—the best way to approach these is student centered, with mini-lessons (a five- to ten-minute discussion between student or students and teacher on a particular issue) that address specific problems. Haswell, in his more recent work, argues that this final step is vitally important: teachers must follow up, after minimally marking. Students should be required to correct the mistakes they can, then teachers should check to see what the student still needs help with. In this way, instructors only confront those errors the student cannot correct alone (“Complexities” “Some Directions to Short Cuts” par. 6). For example, Bartholomae found that John was having problems not with all verb endings, but with regular verb endings, so he might benefit from a brief, face-to-face discussion of this specific topic (265).

The point, for now, is that response to error should be primarily directed at helping students learn to proofread their own work (see Bartholomae 272). Not only will this save hours of the instructor's time in correcting—and prevent damaging the confidence of writers by marking up their papers— but it is a skill that carries forward

to other tasks and one that gives students more control and responsibility over their own words.

Reader Response: the Reader/Writer Interaction

Many teachers in the 1970's were overwhelmed by open admissions, when universities opened their doors to all high school graduates. For writing teachers, uncertain how to help the hundreds of students whose written work seemed hopeless, Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* offered an approach that seemed a perfect place to begin: a way to deal with error without rejecting students or making them feel incompetent. Bill Bolin, in *Keywords in Composition Studies*, sees Shaughnessy's book as a catalyst for change:

Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* seems to be at the fulcrum of contested contemporary perceptions of *error*... Before her book, *error* was used primarily, if not exclusively, in a pejorative sense. Errors were to be avoided, and the teaching of writing was shaped by the intent to eradicate such errors. Shaughnessy, however, advocated exploring student errors... While she defines errors as anomalies... [she] delves into a course of action centered around the reasons for those errors (Bolin 82).

Errors and Expectations was published in 1977 and had immediate, massive impact upon the composition community. In the first six months of publication, it sold 12,000 hardcover copies. When the softcover came out, it sold more than 40,000 copies. The usual number of copies of a scholarly book in a specific field: 1000

(Maher 199). “Mina asked Marilyn Maiz to start a file to hold the letters she was receiving in praise of *Errors and Expectations*; within a month, Marilyn had to begin another file, and then another” (197). Shaughnessy was suddenly famous, and in demand. David Bartholomae remarked that she had put herself in the role of “disseminator rather than expert” (Maher 190), and the source of this success was perhaps this invitation to other teachers to join the conversation Shaughnessy had begun. As Bartholomae puts it, “Shaughnessy helps us create an interpretive community” (Maher 190).

Shaughnessy, on remembering reading the first papers turned in by her Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) students: “... the writing was so stunningly unskilled that I could not begin to define the task nor even sort out the difficulties” (vii). I have felt this way myself, and I have heard numerous teaching assistants voice the same concern. Decades after Shaughnessy wrote her book, some of us are still reacting to student errors as though they were the sum of that student’s performance, but like the teachers who bought her book in droves, those of us new to teaching are looking for answers. Shaughnessy helps clarify why error matters: “It has to do with the writer’s relationship to his audience, with what might be called the economics of energy in the writing situation... the speaker or writer wants to say what he has to say with as little energy as possible and the listener or reader wants to understand with as little energy as possible” (11). Error trips up a reader, “demand[ing] energy without giving any return in meaning” (12). The writer cannot afford to be casual about error: the cost is too high.

Instructors can learn to balance their own reactions to error and keep the focus upon student progress, but how do we help students decide when to pay attention to error in their work: as they work, or only when polishing a final draft? If we ask that they ignore error as they work, how can we demand correctness in the end product? The answer may lie in effective response.

Putting theory into practice: Reader Response

Many instructors who comment reflectively on student papers focus, as Shaughnessy does, on the impact that error has upon a reader. Brooke Horvath, in his 1984 overview of then-current views on written response, promotes feedback that addresses *the paper as a whole*. He states that comments must take into account the rhetorical context of the paper being responded to. In other words, the assignment, the writer, the situation in which the paper is being written, the purpose of the paper, and who the audience is. Horvath explains, quoting Richard Larson, that if instructors “respond to whole pieces as they are read... [this] might lead students to think that they should take composing seriously... as a *transaction between human beings* to whom writing matters, as the performing of an act that seeks to accomplish work in the world” (qtd. in Horvath 246, emphasis mine). Response must provoke thought about how a reader understands what has been written. Seeing the piece as a whole, and as a transaction, as Horvath puts it, may help put error in context, as opposed to drawing a student’s focus solely to mistakes.

Ronald F. Lunsford's 1997 "When Less is More" also emphasizes the value of responding in context. This article reports the findings of a study conducted by Lunsford and Richard Straub in which twelve highly respected, well known composition instructors were chosen to respond to the essays of students they had never met... but as though these were their own students. Lunsford and Straub provided as much information as the responders would need in order to respond with some context. Then they gave feedback just as they would in their own teaching practices. These responses were then analyzed carefully.

Lunsford makes clear that all of the readers in the study responded *as readers*, not as judges: "the twelve teachers in our study can be characterized as nonauthoritarian in their approach to student texts" (Lunsford, "When Less is More" 96). He warns, however, that this term is complex: some responders used language that avoided giving orders of any kind while others used commands. Nevertheless, all of the teachers in the study respected students' authority over ultimately deciding what to say and how. They read as readers, offering feedback from an experienced point of view, as insiders in the academy, and they read for meaning, respecting students' purposes and staying focused upon what students were trying to say. This approach models priorities for students, demonstrating that reader understanding matters most.

Reader understanding is also an effective way to communicate to students why error matters as well, and Joseph Harris brings this issue into focus by addressing the question of which reader the student must anticipate: Harris recommends examining the importance of correctness to outsiders, but he also points out that the

teacher/reader reaction must be closely examined. He advocates reflective practice in order to avoid making the mistake of overemphasizing error—or implying to students that error is not important. By reflective practice, Harris means that instructors need to be aware at all times of their own reactions to error or other problems in student work, as well as aware of their own pedagogies, and how they are putting those pedagogies into practice.

Teachers need then to respond to what students are trying to say, to the effectiveness of their writing as a whole, and not simply to the presence or absence of local errors in spelling, syntax, or usage. Correctness thus becomes not the single and defining issue in learning how to write but simply one aspect of developing a more general communicative competence (Harris 428).

Harris says that what students need “is a sense of what others find most exciting and useful about books, writing, and ideas” (429). They need reader response to their ideas. But they also need to know how to catch and hold the attention of educated readers other than their own teacher. Referring to composition instructors who try to focus students on global concerns, Harris states, “...[O]ne can see how this downplaying of error might seem to outsiders simply a way of slipping past the difficulty and drudgery of actually teaching writing” (430). Most people outside of composition studies, when asked, would say that the purpose of an early college writing course is to teach students to write competently and clearly without error. But most composition teacher/researchers believe that focusing on error impedes inexperienced writers from learning to express their thoughts and thus write anything

of value: a piece of text must be more than simply error free. Do we mark errors at all? Do we mark all errors? Some errors, and if only some, which ones? Harris proposes to resolve this conflict by recognizing the importance of correctness without allowing issues of error to control how composition is taught: "...we need to argue for a view of literacy that clearly recognizes and includes such concerns but is not wholly defined by them" (431).

Harris is arguing that teachers must be reflective about how important error is to us and how we will find a balance between error and content issues—there is more at stake than simply pleasing an unknown, imaginary audience: the teacher as audience cannot be forgotten. To illustrate this point, Harris refers to Joseph Williams' essay from 1981, "The Phenomenology of Error," in which Williams tucks away quite a few mistakes that the reader, accepting his article as professionally written, completely overlooks. Williams believes that so many mistakes are discovered in student papers because the reader is looking for them (Harris 432). It is a waste of time, Harris asserts, for instructors to correct mistakes just for the sake of form: "we should focus our attention and energies on those mistakes which really count, on those that seriously impugn a writer's authority" (Harris 433). By reading as a *reader*, as opposed to reading as an instructor, we will be better able to respond to students in a way that models the importance of error in terms of reader understanding without putting too much emphasis on error itself.

Each of the experts reviewed in this chapter agree that a meta-view of language is needed, both for students and teachers. We must be more aware of the choices we

make as readers and writers, and we must be more aware of what influences those choices. It makes sense that if we as teachers demand that students think about the choices they make as writers, we must think about the choices we make as instructors as we read the work of our students and respond.

Teaching Revision Skills: Revision habits of inexperienced writers

Nancy Sommers' study, documented in her 1980 "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," uncovered similar problems. "It is a sense of writing as discovery—a repeated process of beginning over again, starting out new—that the students failed to have" (Sommers, "Revision Strategies" 53). She noted that students were so focused upon correctness that they were strangling their ability to explore their own ideas. Students were too close to their work. Sommers argues that they need to take a step back; she points out that the word "seeing" is part of the word "revision," and that students need to be able to see their work again and again through fresh eyes. And she uses an unusual term as she describes effective revision: "Good writing disturbs: it creates dissonance. Students need to seek the dissonance of discovery, utilizing in their writing, as the experienced writers do, the very difference between writing and speech—the possibility of revision" (53).

Sommers is promoting a meta-view of language. The error analysis approach motivates students to become more aware of their own practices.

Student centered error correction

In terms of motivating revision, Nancy Sommers believes in giving students power over their words. In her 1982 “Responding to and Evaluating Student Writing,” she promotes feedback that encourages students to take control of their words through revision. First, she points out that response itself is motivated by the instructor’s belief that students can benefit from feedback as they work toward a final draft, that feedback will help students revise effectively (Sommers, “Responding” 385). She makes an important point in regard to response on student texts: “As a means for helping students, [written feedback has] limitations; they are, in fact, disembodied remarks... Written comments need to be an extension of the teacher’s voice—an extension of the teacher as reader” (391). In other words, response must be personal, from a known reader to a known writer, from individual to individual. In the study, many of the responses she saw from teacher to student could have been “rubber stamped” onto any paper: “wordy,” “awkward,” “be precise,” “avoid,” “elaborate.” These responses, she noted, were useless because they were vague and unclear—truly disembodied remarks without context. This is exactly the kind of commentary Connors and Lunsford’s research revealed earlier in the chapter when they noted teacher tendency to “*not* engage with student writing in personal or polemic ways” directly in opposition to the conclusions of critical theorists (Connors and Lunsford, “Teachers’ Rhetorical Comments” 149).

Sommers also promotes a hierarchy of response, in which the instructor first draws a student’s attention to the ideas and content of their paper, their purposes, their

audience. Response should be appropriate to the draft the student is working on (how much revision is needed? Is it a first or last draft?). Also, response must give students a reason to revise, “to show them through our comments why new choices would positively change their texts, and thus to show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing” (391-2). Sommers argues that error should most appropriately be responded to in later drafts when it is less likely that those sentences that we mark will be edited out anyway (“Responding” 390-91). She suggests that error be ignored in all but a final draft, but this may not be realistic if the instructor receives only one draft to give response to.

Sommers’ more recent work reveals an even deeper understanding of how important it is that comments not be disembodied remarks. In the article, “Across the Drafts,” she reflects back on her “Responding to Student Writing,” taking a second look at her conclusions. Sommers found that her earlier work lacked students’ input. She had studied teacher response, but she now regrets not including students’ reactions to those responses: “I feel the absence of any ‘real’ students who, through voice, expertise, and years of being responded to, could offer their teachers valuable lessons” (“Across” 248). The Harvard study was an attempt to include student voices in the research on response, and the results were surprising:

[F]eedback plays a leading role in undergraduate writing development when, but only when, students and teachers create a partnership through feedback—a transaction in which teachers engage with their students by treating them as

apprentice scholars, offering honest critique paired with instruction (“Across” 250).

The missing element in effective response was *exchange*, a give and take between student and teacher. This exchange was most valuable when the student saw teacher comments as “instructive and portable words to take with them” (250). Unfortunately, most comments “underwhelm” or “overwhelm” students, Sommers states. Underwhelming comments are small cryptic marks or phrases, vague remarks that students cannot decode. Overwhelming comments are those that ask too much of a student, as though instructors believe they must help the student correct every problem at once, “as if pointing out such errors will prevent students from ever making them again” (250). In this case, note that “error” refers to problems in the student’s paper, not specifically surface mistakes.

Sommers stresses that students must be willing to accept criticism of their work (“Across” 252). The best way to do this, as she advises in “Responding,” is to keep comments in context, relating them to class work and discussions, but also to complete the final step and hear the student’s voice. Sometimes this is difficult, as when students shut down as a result of feedback that was too much or too little, or they are not accustomed to criticism and do not know what to do with it. Sommers makes clear that even in such cases, students will not benefit from empty praise (251). She advocates “tough and honest assessment” that shows the instructor’s engagement with the writer and his/her ideas, promoting an exchange in which the student feels

like a colleague, “someone capable of great things, even if not yet achieved” (“Across” 252).

Theory into Practice: Responding to Content by Conferencing on Paper

The opening pages of this chapter clarified how important a sense of exchange is for students. Comments must be text-specific, anchored in the student’s own writing, and should give the student a sense of having a real reader engaging with his/her ideas. The following experts give advice on response that promotes a sense of reader-writer interaction and focuses feedback on global issues first.

A Conversation

Erika Lindemann describes writing comments to students as “a conference on paper” (226). If we as teachers view commentary in this way, we must ask ourselves what we would tell a student were we face to face. What would we want to focus the student upon? Lindemann states that formative comments (comments that assume revision) support learning when they “praise what has worked well, demonstrate how or why something else didn’t, and encourage students to try new strategies” (233). She refers to six assumptions from Mary Beaven, rephrased in Lindemann’s own words, that we can use as a basis from which to form our responses: 1) growth occurs slowly; 2) teacher comments create a safe environment for students; 3) teachers support risk taking, realizing that students will commit more surface errors as they stretch themselves to learn new skills; 4) students need concrete, appropriate goals (keeping in mind that writing skill improves slowly); 5) writing improvement takes place when

students practice speaking, listening, reading, and other forms of communication (an interchange of ideas with others); 6) students need practice writing in various modes, practice in investigation of language use, and practice exchanging ideas with other students as well as the teacher (Lindemann 233-4).

Lindemann's assumptions line up well with James Paul Gee's ideas in regard to what students need in order to learn: the need for a safe environment where the learner can take risks (Gee 62), the need to be able to imagine oneself as a competent member of the new community (Gee 66), and the need for practice (Gee 68). Her ideas also align nicely with Horning and Robertson's argument that freshmen need to develop a meta-view of language (Horning and Robertson 54).

It is also clear that a focus upon error can work against some of these assumptions: if growth occurs slowly, there is no point in correcting every mistake. Also, error correction must not inhibit students from feeling safe to take risks. A focus on content instead will help students develop goals for their writing as well as encouraging them to try new approaches when one proves to be unclear to a reader.

Lindemann's suggestions in "Teaching through Comments" are lengthy, so the following summarizes key points in regard to responding to content:

After reading a paper through once, and after identifying one to two problems to address, evaluate the student's purpose, audience, thesis, and organization, noting any recurring error patterns. Assuming that there is a logic to what appears on the page, try to decide what may be going wrong. This goes back to Shaughnessy's and Bartholomae's ideas about error analysis. As an example, I had noticed something odd

about one student's work: in spite of having a strong thesis, her papers would often be hard to understand. At first, I tried working with her to develop better sentence fluency, but the problem persisted. Late in the term, I realized that all of her error patterns— awkward phrasing, fragments, and confused logic— pointed to the same thing: an absence of agency in her sentences. In *Errors and Expectations*, explaining how errors at the sentence level can have a source other than lack of knowledge, Shaughnessy says, "Unwittingly... the inexperienced writer draws upon the same passive constructions, the same circumlocutions and evasions as the bureaucrat" (*Errors* 86). My student was trying to establish authority but did not know where it should come from. I could have assumed she did not understand how to construct a sentence and drilled her on rules for fragments or dangling modifiers; instead I discussed agency and sources of authority with her, and her work improved immediately.

Lindemann goes on to advise praising what the student has done effectively— but avoid token praise, making comments very specific. "Silence tells students nothing" (Lindemann 241). It is tempting to not write comments for A papers, but students need to hear what they did well so that they may repeat these successes in the future.

Lindemann advises phrasing questions about the student's text with "why," "how," or "what" so that students will rethink his/her own choices. For example: "How often have you used this kind of sentence in this paragraph?" (240). When marking errors, avoid correcting for the student. Marks in the margin (such as a check

or an X) or circles around errors call attention to what a student may have missed. Again, the teacher is looking for patterns, not simply marking every mistake. Lindemann suggests that students keep a log of their own errors in order to see these patterns for themselves. Finally, write an endnote to summarize: one full sentence for specific praise, one to identify 1-2 problems with an explanation for why they cause problems in the piece, and one to set a goal for work on the next draft along with suggestions for strategies to help meet this goal (Lindemann 241).

Lindemann suggests keeping a teacher's log to chart student progress. This can simply be a note of a few key problems the instructor observes in the beginning, noting as the term progresses whether the student seems to be overcoming these problems (242). A brief note in the grade book next to the grade for each essay can be a reminder of what the student was struggling with at that time ("lack of focus," "organization," "comma use"). For those who prefer more detailed records, a teaching journal is a good place to record notes about student progress.

The Teacher's Voice

Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj promote response that echoes, for the student, the teacher's own voice as a reader—not the distant, unaffected voice Connors and Lunsford's research exposed ("Teachers' Rhetorical Comments" 149). They also advise addressing general issues first, then specific. Comments can begin by summarizing the essay's argument, purpose, how effectively it conveys its point, then close by offering possible ways to improve two or three important areas. They suggest

that a reply to a student's paper could take the form of a brief letter or note addressed to the student (this was the form of response Connors and Lunsford's readers favored ["Teachers' Rhetorical Comments" 151]). Finally, teachers should take a moment to study their own end comments and determine what the student will learn from them (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 54-55).

Richard Straub also advocates reflective response. His advice on responding to content is simple: he suggests responding only to content during the first half of a course, then adding sentence level work, if necessary, during the second half ("Managing" 255). These comments should be limited in scope, focusing on two or three things for students to work on each time. Straub goes on to suggest that we as teachers get feedback from our students as to how they are making use (or not) of our responses, then working to improve them. "The best responding styles will create us on the page in ways that fit in with our classroom purposes, allow us to take advantage of our strengths as teachers, and enable us to interact as productively as we can with our students. Ultimately, they will allow us to make comments that are ways of teaching" ("Concept of Control" 150). They will become the effective conference on the page.

Conclusion

Inexperienced responders need not become instant experts. The problem is primarily one of misunderstood goals. There are a great many handbooks on response as well as online articles, but none of these can help the teacher who does not

understand what his/her feedback is meant to do. The goal of this chapter is primarily to make clear those goals more clear: to notice mistakes in terms of what they might reveal about student progress; to respond to student writers and their purposes; to get students thinking about what they meant to say instead of what they did wrong.

First, as teachers we must become more aware of how we react to surface mistakes, and we must accept the truth that marking every error we see takes time and provides little benefit in return. Second, we must become more aware of whether we are responding to a student text as an isolated product or as a work in progress. Even if a final draft has been submitted for the last grade of the term, we can still provide feedback that takes into account how far the student has come. It is not enough to merely focus on responding to content first, error last: feedback must address each student where s/he is at, at the moment s/he is writing that draft of that paper.

The experts argue for response that enhances students' sense of selves as members of the academic community with something to say. They promote student/text/assignment specific feedback that provides a strong sense of exchange by "speaking" to the student, not to the paper, and doing so in a way that lets the teacher connect with that student on a personal level. Yet research reveals that teachers tend to focus too much on "fixing" a product and not enough on the student writer who produced it. A shift in focus is needed: let response address student progress and what a particular text might reveal about that progress, and let response focus upon patterns that might give insight into a student's thought processes.

Our comments can provide students with the sense that someone is reading their work, valuing what they have to say, and working with them to improve their strengths and eliminate weaknesses, including surface errors. Goals can be humble: perhaps John can learn to eliminate comma splices this term, or Anne can begin varying her sentence structure to create better fluency. When time is not spent marking every error or criticizing every awkward sentence, a teacher's energy can go toward addressing students' ideas, helping them learn to anticipate audience and to clarify their purposes... and begin to see themselves as college writers.

Chapter Two

Academic Language vs. Student Voice: Helping students write with authority and composure in the academic world

The discussion moves naturally now from the question of how to respond authentically to content and student intention to how to provide response that helps encourage the development of student voice while guiding students toward mastery of academic language. The problem is more complex than it sounds: instructors want to encourage the development of voice *and* academic writing, but our feedback can sometimes stifle student voice if comments focus too closely on how well the student is meeting academic standards in terms of language use and word choice. On the other hand, these are necessary skills. There is no question that students need mastery of academic language not only for success in college, but for advancement in the workplace as well. The key is in finding a balance.

One difficulty is the use the labels “academic language” and “voice.” “Academic language” does not refer to a single writing style but refers to the way in which language is used by various disciplines in the academic community. The term “voice” is more difficult to explain. Richard Straub, as he defines methods of response, defines “voice” and describes the term, which is usually included as part of context, as including “the tone, persona, point of view, authority, and credibility of the writing” (Straub, *The Practice of Response* 78). Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj describe voice in this way: “...as readers we sense the presence of a writer writing, addressing us, taking responsibility for our understanding and, in effect,

ushering us through the text. This sense of voice does not rely on first- and second-person address (*I...you*), but the writers often use cues and transitions to maintain and direct attention” (10). Gottschalk and Hjortshoj also describe the result: “dispassionate voices of reason... relaxed and engaged with the subject,” writing that addresses the needs of the audience with authority and composure (10). To have a voice as a writer means to produce prose that both focuses a reader upon the message of the text (instead of distracting him/her from it) and assures that reader of the author’s expertise.

Yet students are rarely experts—and they know it. They may feel like outsiders or pretenders as they attempt to write with “authority and composure.” However, this state is not, in itself, negative. Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz explain that the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing revealed that students who were willing to see themselves as novices and were able to trust their teachers for guidance were better able to adapt to the different demands of college writing (“Novice” 127). But before students can view their roles in this way, they must feel accepted as members of the academic community. If response can provide this sense of membership, and if it can enhance the teacher’s role as trusted guide, students may feel safe both to accept that they are novices and inexperienced and to accept that they have authority to speak in their papers.

If a strong “voice” in writing is characterized as authoritative and composed (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 10), then response must promote students’ sense of authority, helping them feel confident enough to write with composure. The opposite

of composure and authority is nervousness and uncertainty, which can result from feedback that is too critical, too corrective. Yet response must also aid in mastery of standards. This chapter will examine how methods of feedback can encourage the development of voice, promote competence in academic language, and increase awareness of the choices that academic writers must make.

Attitudes of the Institution

David Bartholomae explains one reason students lose control of voice. In his essay “Inventing the University,” he describes the problem that occurs when teachers at the college level demand that students speak as if they were experts speaking to an audience of peers (their teachers) before having achieved any expertise. He writes at the opening of his essay,

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion...The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community (“Inventing” 134).

Just as this situation can lead to odd patterns of error and trouble with syntax, it can create problems for students in terms of language and phrasing. Students are aware of the necessity of sounding academic, but they are not familiar with the language of the academy. Bartholomae explains that the problem may be created when students aren’t clear on what it is they are supposed to be saying, on how they should be saying it, or

who they should be saying it to (143). I see this in my students' papers again and again, and it comes through as a stilted effort to sound like a college textbook. For example, they may use vague, meaningless phrases that they believe mimic the language of academe instead of specific details to describe the situation they want the reader to understand.

College writing requirements, which are markedly different from those of high school, are unfamiliar to college freshmen, so writing for this audience is an unfamiliar task. Sommers and Saltz argue the importance of building trust between student and teacher in order to help students accept the role of novice. One might assume that freshmen understand this implicitly, but to become a novice means to admit uncertainty, to feel out of place and unsure. Not all students are willing to accept such a position. However, being a novice allows students to be open minded, open to feedback and instruction, open to risk-taking and experimentation. "By contrast, those freshmen who cling to their old habits and formulas and who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice have a more difficult time adjusting to the demands of college writing" (Sommers and Saltz, "Novice as Expert" 134). These students, who cannot accept the role of novice, feel alienated by academic discourse. They feel that "college itself is a kind of game whose rules... are kept secret to them, only glimpsed through the cryptic comments they receive on their papers" (134). Feedback from instructors can either perpetuate this belief or create a bridge to help students cross over into the unexplored (for them) territory of academia. Sommers and Saltz state,

Students are asked as freshmen to leave something behind and to locate themselves in the realms of uncertainty and ambiguity. It doesn't take long for most first-year students to become aware of the different expectations between high school and college writing, that something more is being offered to them and, at the same time, asked of them. The defining academic moment of the first semester is often the recognition, as one freshman put it, that "what worked in high school isn't working anymore" (Sommers and Saltz, "Novice as Expert" 125).

Students who successfully cross the threshold into college writing are those who learn that beyond audience and purpose lies a more important goal: "writing is not an end in itself but a means for discovering what matters" ("Novice" 146). College writing demands that students see further than the conclusions of others, that they put these conclusions together and develop their own. Finding their voices in this new environment is a complex task. Response can help students develop their voices when it invites them into the "conversation" of academia instead of addressing them as outsiders.

Instructor Attitudes, Student Attitudes

Before instructors can provide response that helps students feel that they are part of the academic "conversation," they must be aware of the pitfalls of reading student texts simply as judges. Gregory Shafer, referring to his work in Mott Community College's writing center, describes teacher response from a struggling

student's point of view. He feels that there has been too much focus on teaching students the conventions of academic writing and not enough on helping students develop autonomy and voice. Shafer sees instructor response that overlooks *what* students are struggling to say in favor of *how* they are saying it. The result can be unintentionally damaging for students.

In his essay "Negotiating Audience and Voice in the Writing Center," he describes the role of the college writing center as he feels it should be, but is not: "...[C]omposition is too often about imposed power, about learning to write for one's teacher, about learning a prefabricated, immutable form" (Shafer 429). He illustrates this by describing the situations of two different students who walk into the writing center frustrated and confused; they have powerful ideas to express, ideas that do not fit into the standard academic essay format and whose instructors seem so focused upon correctness that they cannot seem to appreciate what Shafer sees as unique and talented voices.

The first example is Marcus, whose paper is "both a parody on the romanticism some youths have toward a violent world and a dramatic statement on the limitations placed on African Americans" (433). Shafer describes Marcus' writing style as poetic and song-like, very different from the writing of college professors, "... and this is perhaps one of the reasons his prose is so dramatic and riveting" (433). Shafer appreciates Marcus' approach to a sensitive subject and how he carefully balances humor and pathos in order to help his audience see the very real problems created by racism. Shafer is offended by the instructor's responses, not detailed in his

article: “They way she is blunting and effacing the voice of a talented young writer seems unethical, unconscionable, but I can’t sacrifice his grade so I can make a statement” (430). Shafer promises the student that he will talk to the instructor and try to help her see the value of preserving Marcus’ voice in this particular piece.

The second example is Polly, whose paper on her personal experience with spousal abuse evokes a powerful reader response, yet her teacher’s criticism is distant, concerned only with correctness. Shafer calls this teacher’s response “surgical”: “Again, as with Marcus’s work earlier, I see what seems to be a stripping away of the meat and blood of a paper. Each instructor seems unsure or unwilling to deal with topics that transcend the ‘academic community’” (432). Having exposed themselves, having seen their ideas overlooked in favor of the mistakes they have made, the writers understandably feel “empty and alienated” (432). “We cry for voice and power. We preach liberation. And then we require the fabricated prescriptions that embody nothing of the person behind the words,” Shafer laments (433). The question here, in my opinion, is not whether the instructors should have to compromise their standards or agree to suspend their concerns for academic language: the question is whether these instructors can shift their attitudes toward their students’ unique voices in order to provide more encouraging response.

Connors and Lunsford observed the same situation in their research: teachers focused on problems in student writing may simply not notice the weight of the topic the student is addressing. One example Connors and Lunsford offer is of a student writing about having been called to the scene of a fatal accident. The teacher’s

response: “You are still making comma splices! You must learn to eliminate this error once and for all” (Connors and Lunsford, “Teachers’ Rhetorical Comments” 145). Teachers focus on doing their job the way they believe it must be done, and they may not realize how their feedback might be perceived as indifferent or even insensitive (Connors and Lunsford 149) from a student’s point of view. In fact, the teacher here, as well as the ones Shafer refers to, may have reacted strongly to the content of the student paper... and then forgotten to note this in their comments. The student’s only impression of the teacher’s reaction is the words on the page.

This is not to say that comments must *only* address student ideas or encourage individual voices and cannot address problems. Shafer tempers the idea of students having freedom to use their own voices by pointing out that as writers, we are not writing for ourselves; we are writing to be read. “The content and style, then, must reflect a cooperative effort to express our views without alienating readers” (436). If we want to be understood when we are read, we must take into account the needs of readers. It is an exchange. “Writing is about more than either a monolithic model of the university essay or a personal vision of what the author has planned” (437). Writing is about being part of a conversation, contributing in a way that others can learn from. The following section offers practical ways to find a balanced approach to feedback, one that includes students in the feedback loop.

Effective practices: Building authority and composure

The key to response that helps to balance the development of student voice and mastery of academic language lies in feedback from instructors which encourages students to take risks and explore their ideas. Peter Elbow, Erika Lindemann, and Paul Diederich offer approaches meant to encourage students in this exploration and risk taking.

Learning through exposure

Peter Elbow argues that the development of a meta-awareness of academic language comes from exposure to and exploration of various ways of writing: he suggests that instructors go beyond talking about how language is used in published works and break down stereotypes in terms of what is acceptable in print. He offers an appendix of examples of works published in AAL or Black English, Caribbean Creole English, Hawai'ian Creole English, Hispanic/Latino/a English, and Scots (Elbow, "Why Deny" "Appendix"). Instructors could add their own titles to his list. Again, allowing students to see how real authors use language helps develop meta-awareness of language. In terms of response, comments can call student attention to discussions of such topics. For example, if a student's word choices or language is inappropriate to an assignment, feedback that recalls how varied language use can be and points out when academic language is called for can facilitate a student's sense of identity as a writer making choices.

Elbow also offers another viewpoint in terms of voice. He believes that when academic language is emphasized over student voice, students learn only how to sound

academic: they don't develop critical thinking or learn the moves behind that academic discourse. If *voice* in writing is to speak with authority, then students must find a way to discover this authority. Elbow believes that freedom to explore ideas is vital to development of voice— freedom to do so in whatever language or dialect the student feels most comfortable with:

Consider the primary criteria by which most teachers judge most essays: sticking to the topic or question or assignment; getting the information or concepts right; having good ideas; reasoning carefully; giving enough supporting evidence and examples; organizing effectively; and getting the meaning clear at the sentence level. It's crucial to realize that students can meet *all* those criteria and still write entirely in AAL and use lots of other language that violates the conventions of standardized written English. We need to help students meet all these criteria before asking them to try to get their grammar, syntax, spelling, and register right for correct written English (Elbow, "Why Deny African American Speaking Students" 8).

Elbow is referring to his students who speak African American or Black English, students who struggle with academic language in serious ways. However, his approach can be adapted (see below) to students who have fewer problems using academic language yet still struggle to both write with mastery of academic English *and* explore their own ideas and those of others critically. If our main teaching challenge is helping students write thoughtfully on topic, Elbow argues that a student can explore his/her topic more freely when s/he writes in his/her own home language, which may be

something other than English, or it may not differ much from Standard English. The text can be converted into academic language in later drafts (Elbow, “Why Deny” 8). Elbow points out that this technique can be used to varying degrees, stating that for his Hawaiian students, he asked that they do an extra final draft, in which they adapted their own language into standard written English. Importantly, he also notes that not all students will prefer such an approach—many who are new to academic language prefer to use it throughout their writing process, and this should be respected (“Why Deny” 9).

Elbow also notes that while our goal as instructors is to create a safe place in the writing classroom for experimentation with language use, we must also help students feel safe outside the classroom: “...students cannot have that crucial experience of safety for writing *inside* our classrooms unless we show them how to be safe *outside*—that is, unless we can also help them produce final drafts that conform to Standard Written English” (Elbow, “Inviting the Mother Tongue”). In other words, students are aware of the need for mastery of Standard English for success both in college and outside of it, so while we encourage our students to take risks and explore language, we must not lose sight of the fact that one of our key goals is mastery of academic language.

Elbow's safe classroom

In order to for students to see the writing classroom as a place for risk-taking, they need to know first that the instructor respects his/her dialect “as a full, complete,

sophisticated language—in no way inferior or defective compared to Standard Written English” (Elbow, “Inviting”). This applies both to home dialects or languages that differ greatly from Standard English and those that may differ only slightly—many students believe the way they speak at home, with family, is “incorrect.” It is the teacher’s responsibility to make clear that it is less a matter of what is correct than of what is appropriate for a given situation. Students also need to know that the instructor believes each student is intelligent and linguistically competent; according to Elbow, those students who use more than one language or dialect are more linguistically sophisticated than those who use only one (“Inviting”). Students need to know that use of their home language is welcome in the classroom, but also that the student need not use his/her home language at all if s/he does not feel it is appropriate or helpful to do so. Finally, students need to know that the instructor will encourage other students to have a respectful attitude toward each other’s language use.

Translating this to written response: comments must not sound punitive when they address language that is not academic English. They must emphasize audience and purpose, helping a student become more aware of his/her choices and their effect upon a reader. If respect for home dialects and languages is established in the classroom, responses that help direct students toward appropriate language use can be directive without offense. Response to early drafts can ignore language use and focus on ideas, content, focus, and other global issues, just as response to early drafts also strives to ignore surface mistakes.

A voice for various purposes

Erika Lindemann's advice aligns well with Elbow's approach of exposure to various forms of published works: she advocates offering students the opportunity to write in many different modes, which increases awareness of audience and purpose, and she promotes feedback that is specific to each student and encourages risk taking (by not punishing every error) (233-234). Feedback must also help students judge their prose for themselves rather than simply correcting the text, which takes responsibility away from the student and takes up more time from the teacher (235). Lindemann encourages teachers to help students think about the choices they are making and how these choices affect audience. When instructors respond based on how a student's choices affect audience and purpose, the focus turns away from any shortcomings of the student text to ways it might be made stronger (237).

Remarking on the need for students to address a variety of audiences, Lindemann points out the difficulties they have in producing an appropriate voice and rhetorical stance: "Unfortunately, most students are not really writing for a 'you.' They have learned to address most of their academic writing to an 'it,' an abstraction of an authority figure they presume to be The English Teacher" (99). If response from their instructors is limited to what "The English Teacher" in general would say, students lose the opportunity to hear what a real reader might say.

Students need practice writing for a variety of audiences—when they may have only their teacher—and teachers need to provide response that might reflect the needs of those audiences. Lindemann offers the following suggestions: Make sure

students have opportunities to write in as many modes as possible, and frame teacher feedback in terms of how appropriate the student's language choices are for each particular mode. In terms of error or awkwardness, address language problems specific to each individual student (look for patterns of errors). Offer feedback that encourages students to take risks. Notice how each individual student has grown throughout the course "without expecting 'mastery' of some uniform class standard" (Lindemann 234). Make sure comments teach students to judge their prose for themselves: constant correction takes responsibility away from the student (235). Offer instead comments that encourage students to think about the choices they are making in terms of language and how those choices affect or are affected by audience and purpose.

Lindemann also advocates feedback that begins—or continues—a conversation with a student about his/her paper. "Conversational commentary" provides a student with the sense of a written dialog, a shared conversation taking place on his/her paper. "Conversational commentary would avoid spelling out specific revision strategies [which would take responsibility for the work out of student hands] but instead would draw [the student] back into his essay to examine his decisions and the possibilities for exploring his topic further" (Lindemann 239). When an instructor merely marks errors or problem spots, the student learns only to correct what has been pointed out. When feedback encourages a student to think about his/her choices as a writer, students can begin to develop the skills they need to judge their own prose for themselves.

The value of praise: promoting confidence and composure

Paul B. Diederich promotes praising student papers, and his approach may prove to be a time saver. “I believe that a student knows when he has handed in something above his usual standard and that he waits hungrily for a brief comment in the margin to show him that the teacher is aware of it, too. To my mind, these are the only comments that ever do any student any good” (Diederich 222). His point is that criticism and correction can overwhelm a student, especially if that student never hears what s/he is doing right. He suggests responding in this way: “Find in each paper at least one thing, and preferably two or three things, that the student has done well, or better than before. Then, if you must, find one thing, and preferably not more than one thing, that he should try to improve in his next paper. Whenever possible, make this a suggestion, not a prescription” (223). This form of feedback embraces the theory that progress is slow, that the teacher’s job is not to “fix” problems but to help build student confidence so that they can find that authority and composure they so need. Diederich’s approach is a legitimate one that may fit well with certain teachers’ styles, or with the needs of certain students as individuals.

What experts do

Before students can write like experts, they must develop an understanding of what experts do when they write. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein offer an approach that gives students hands-on practice and raises their awareness of the moves experts make in academic “conversation.” The goal of their book, *They Say/I Say*, is to

identify what is required in order to produce academic language, and then show students how to provide it. The authors demonstrate how to summarize the views of others (“they say”), then how to create one’s own argument (“I say”). They provide templates that allow students to simply fill in their own information. By pointing out the “moves” experts in the academic world make, Graff and Birkenstein demystify academic language and how it is used, and the templates give students a chance to practice using expert technique. The book helps enhance a meta-awareness of how language is used in the academy, it helps students begin to feel like members of the academic community, and it provides opportunities for practice.

In Chapter One of *They Say/I Say*, students are shown how to begin a formal paper by addressing what others are saying about the topic the student has chosen. Students learn to summarize and quote. In Chapter Two, students are shown how to respond to what others say, how to distinguish for readers between what the student is claiming and what others are claiming, and how to address the “naysayer,” or an argument against the student’s thesis. The authors also explain how writers answer the “so what” question, or why the reader needs the information in the text being produced. They also demonstrate how to use transitions.

Finally, Graff and Birkenstein show students how to use academic language without losing their own voices. They address the problem of adapting to college writing:

Have you ever gotten the impression that writing well in college means setting aside the kind of language you use in everyday conversation? That to impress

your instructors you need to use big words, long sentences, and complex sentence structures? If so, then we're here to tell you that it ain't necessarily so. On the contrary, academic writing can—and in our view should—be relaxed, easy to follow, and even a little bit fun (115).

Their point is not to encourage students to ignore the conventions of academic language, or to discourage them from using sophisticated vocabulary and syntax, but they do want to clarify for students that the primary goal of writing academic papers is not simply to sound intelligent. Academic papers need to make sense, and students need not twist themselves into knots trying to sound like someone other than themselves.

The authors use excerpts from published works (much as Elbow suggested) in order to demonstrate how academic language can blend with colloquial style. They make clear that choices as to when to use a colloquial term and when to remain more formal depend upon audience and purpose.

An index of templates provides the vocabulary and phrasing students may be unfamiliar with. For instance, in the section on introducing quotations, Graff and Birkenstein offer several choices: X states, “....” According to X, “...” In her book _____, X writes, “...” Under the section “Signaling Who is Saying What”: X argues _____. But X is wrong that _____ (43).

The value of using this book in the classroom is that teachers can frame their commentary in terms of what students have learned or might learn from its pages. For example, “I see you're having trouble framing this quotation. Look at page 41 and 42.

How might you introduce what X is saying, and then explain it in your own words?” If students are persisting with inappropriate word choices, the book is also a rich resource for vocabulary that teachers might suggest in their feedback. Graff and Birkenstein model the conversational, relaxed tone a teacher might use in responding to how well students are adapting to the academic moves they need in order to write with authority and composure.

Conclusion

Students writing at the college level, particularly freshmen, struggle to find their voices in an environment in which they must adapt to new roles and new demands. They must project the identity of an expert before they know what it means to be one. Teacher feedback can help invite students into the college writing community. It can show them that they are members of our writing community who have something worth saying, and it can encourage them to explore this new community as insiders. Comments must be specific, anchored in the text, yet at the same time personal, directed at the student, not at the paper as an isolated product. What response must do is address students’ purposes first, respecting those purposes, then showing them how adapt those purposes to the outcomes required for the class.

What it comes down to is whether we as teachers can resist the tendency to simply correct. Can we believe, no matter how heavy our class load, that our job is *not* to provide objective correction? Can we keep our attention instead on student writers as individuals moving toward expertise and use feedback to chart their progress? Can

we have faith that this form of response takes no more time than the other and might perhaps take less? Response may be a complex act, but it can be simplified by keeping in mind that the goal is to show that we are listening, we are hearing, and we are responding, taking part in a conversation meant to guide students toward exploring their own ideas and the ideas of others with authority and composure.

Chapter Three

Teacher Authority vs. Student Agency: Empowering Students through Conversational Response

The third tension in teacher response to student writing that must be addressed is the tension between teacher authority and student empowerment. Instructors struggle with the question of control and power in the classroom, especially when it comes to assigning essays and deciding how much control over those essays students will be allowed.

“Empowerment” is defined by Lisa T. Hill, looking at the work of several experts who have discussed the subject in their work, as an act of agency. She quotes Kathryn T. Flannery: “[e]mpowerment... has built into it a presumption of human beings as agents” and Madeleine Picciotto, who pairs the word with “powerlessness” (Hill 71). Hill refers to Ira Shor’s claim that “[e]mpowering education.. is a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change,” and Hill concludes that “empowerment becomes a function of education in which the individual and the social intercreate each other” (Hill 71). Perhaps Nancy Sommers puts this more plainly: “[g]iven the opportunity to speak their own authority... students can... be empowered not to serve the academy..., but rather to write essays that will change the academy” (qtd. in Hill 72). Empowerment seems to occur when a student has the opportunity to add his/her own voice to the “conversation” of the academy, to be a producer of knowledge instead of merely a consumer (Sommers, “Shaped by Writing”).

Yet the term “empowerment” is controversial in writing pedagogy. Hill remarks that for Victor Vitanza, the term is one of deceit: “‘empowering students’... is the biggest hoax ever perpetuated on the ‘student body’” (qtd. in Hill 73). Hill states that David Bartholomae defines “empowerment” as “a ‘utopian’ unethical ‘lie’ that ‘reproduce[s] the ideology of sentimental realism” (qtd. in Hill 73). For many instructors, to promote the idea of students having any real power in the academy is to promote illusion: the teacher assigns the grade; the academy decides who has achieved mastery in a given subject. Students must conform to the rules of the institution in order to succeed in that environment.

According to Hill, the definition of “empowerment” depends entirely upon the context: “What the term empowerment *is* becomes a function of the literal and figurative, local and global scenes of writing and composition pedagogy in which it finds itself” (Hill 73). So this term should be handled with care. For the purposes of this chapter, the term empowerment will focus upon agency: what agent or agents are at work in the formation of a student text? Who is in control of the text, and who decides what shape it will take? Instructor response has a profound effect upon the answers to the question, simply because students are aware of the fact that it is the teacher who will give the grade.

Response that dominates; response that directs

Nancy Sommers’s 1982 “Responding to Student Writing” details research on teacher commentary and its specific effect on a student’s development. After studying

the commenting styles of 35 teachers at two different universities and after conducting multiple interviews, she found two primary tendencies. The first was that teacher commentary could take student attention away from their own purposes in order to satisfy the teacher's purposes ("Responding" 108). Sommers noticed that the worst culprit for misdirecting student attention was feedback that identified errors in a first draft, which gave students the impression that errors matter more than content in a first draft (109). Other problems occurred when teachers sent contradictory messages such as asking that an error be corrected then asking that the whole sentence be revised or expanded. "When the teacher appropriates the text for the student in this way, students are encouraged to see their writing as a series of parts... and not as a whole discourse" (110). The resulting revisions can actually result in a worse draft when students try to follow the letter of the teacher comments, placing their attention on fulfilling orders rather than on their own purposes in writing. In this case, there was no interaction between reader and writer; the student simply responded to teacher authority. Just as teachers may believe their job is to "fix" student papers (Connors and Lunsford, "Teachers Rhetorical Comments" 151), students may believe that their job, during revision, is to merely fix the problems pointed out. Ideally, comments should motivate students to think for themselves, but feedback that takes control of a paper fails to do this. As Sommers puts it, "revising becomes a guessing game" as students struggle to decode what they see as vague directives (112). As we saw in the introduction, Richard Haswell's 2006 work still found students floundering to understand teacher

commentary (Haswell, “Complexities” sec 3), so Sommers’ findings are still quite relevant.

This struggle is evident as well in students’ efforts to decode vague, “rubber-stamped” remarks (111). Phrases such as “awkward,” “needs thesis,” or “be specific” are too general and do not tell the student anything about a particular paper. Even longer phrases like “think more about your reader,” or “begin by telling your reader what you will write about” are not specific enough to be understood by most students who are struggling to decode the feedback they have received. Without a face-to-face opportunity to question what the teacher has written, students are on their own trying to discern what was meant. Students may feel like outsiders, and the opportunity for feedback to provide a sense of dialogue is lost. “Rubber-stamped” comments do not help students develop any sense of being part of an exchange of ideas: such comments could come from any teacher and be directed at any student. Only commentary that speaks to the individual student and what s/he is trying to accomplish will provide a vital sense of being part of a written conversation between teacher and student, reader and writer.

Summer Smith, in her much-republished “Genre of the End Comment: Conventions in Teacher Responses to Student Writing,” further clarifies how even the best intentions can produce non-specific feedback. She argues that teachers tend to follow predictable patterns when writing end comments as response to student papers, and that the effects of these comments can become entirely negative if students pick up on how generic these responses are.

Smith found that teacher comments tended to fall under the category of “judging,” “reader response,” and “coaching.” She also found that teachers followed similar patterns when writing entire end comments, first giving praise as a brief fragment, giving negative evaluation, then finishing with praise again, then coaching. “This convention follows a logical movement from problem to solution and is probably intended by most teachers to help the student” (Smith 263). Smith notes that because more time and detail is given to negative evaluation, students may disregard the brief praise and place more value on the aspects of the paper which were evaluated negatively. She argues that praise must be specific and detailed in order to help students see their strengths (Smith 262). She also notes that the coaching that teachers frequently end with “may seem like punishment for the ‘mistakes’ mentioned in the previous negative evaluations” (Smith 263). This can occur when coaching is paired with negative evaluation, whether related or not. For example, the negative evaluation may address content, then may be followed by a coaching suggestion which asks the student to practice avoiding comma splices. The student can be left feeling that s/he has done little that was right, even if the teacher closes with a positive comment.

Perhaps the most serious problem Smith notes is this: “the sample end comments offer little evidence that the teachers respond to individualized understandings of each student; rather, they seem to identify with a generic student apprehension” (Smith 261). So responses seem to be aimed at reducing such apprehension, but without addressing the difficulties of each student writer as an individual—just the sort of disembodied remarks Sommers warns of. This problem

occurs when teachers use fragments and follow generic conventions (Smith 265). She provides this comment from one teacher to a student whose paper addressed child abuse:

Nicely done. The basic five-paragraph format works well for you and the paper is well organized as a result. But the second paragraph needs some attention to transitional elements and certainly you need to catch the mechanical errors throughout. Focus attention on these two elements in your next paper in order to get over the hump of competent writing. As always, if you have any questions, don't hesitate to see me (Smith 264).

This comment, Smith remarks, removed from the paper it was written upon, contains very little to connect it back to the paper and student it was written to. It could be rubber-stamped on many student essays which share the same generic problems. Smith warns that students see through such feedback: "Students who have noticed the similarities between end comments they have received may tend to dismiss the advice they are given as formulaic and conventional" (Smith 266) and "if students recognize the convention, it loses its effectiveness" (264).

Probably in order to save time, responses seemed to be shaped to fit the need of a generic, apprehensive student. However, even praise can be harmful if it is generic: students will see through the attempt to boost their confidence and demonstrate that the teacher wasn't merely looking for problems.

For a solution, Smith suggests that instructors be as specific and clear as possible and make sure that their end comments begin with praise that is written in one

or more complete sentences and addresses specifically what strengths the student has shown. She also advises using “you” to direct praise to the individual writer. Most importantly, teachers can personalize feedback by referring to specific content in that student’s paper (Smith 265). One example Smith offers, which for the most part follows the patterns her study identified, differed in one significant way by connecting personally to the student’s essay: “You’ve done an excellent job with this evaluation you found so difficult to write” refers to a shared conversation, Smith surmises, between student and teacher (266). This brief remark shifts this teacher’s feedback from general remarks to a dialogue with the student.

Additionally, Smith advocates including a comment addressed personally to the writer which may or may not have anything to do with the paper itself. The example she offers is to congratulate a student on his acceptance on the baseball team (Smith 257). The purpose is to “break through the impersonality of the end comment and establish a connection with a student” (257). This surprised me because this type of commentary seems irrelevant to the paper, but the purpose is to enhance the sense for the student that the instructor is speaking to him/her as an individual, connecting with the student on a personal level.

C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon argue that instructors might begin by demonstrating their willingness to read respectfully. They begin their 1982 article “On Students’ Rights to Their Own Texts” with this quote: “I. A. Richards has said that we begin reading any text with an implicit faith in its coherence, an assumption that its author intended to convey some meaning and made the choices most likely to convey

the meaning effectively” (Knoblauch and Brannon 117). As readers, we put up with a great deal if we believe that we are reading the work of a professional. When we read a student text, we do not give the work the same kind of respect: “The teacher-reader assumes, often correctly, that student writers have not yet earned the authority that ordinarily compels readers to listen seriously to what writers have to say” (118). Knoblauch and Brannon argue that this stance is harmful to students and creates an artificial reading environment in which the reader takes control of the text and imposes his/her meaning upon the author. An argument can be made that all readers take control of the text being read, but that is not the point being made here:

Oddly... in classroom writing situations, the reader assumes primary control of the choices that the writer will make... Hence, the teacher more often than the student determines what the writing will be about, the form it will take, and the criteria that will determine its success (Knoblauch and Brannon 118).

The teacher attempts to shape the student’s text to resemble what the authors refer to as an “ideal text” that exists only in the teacher’s mind (118).

It is an unavoidable truth that there appears to be some kind of ideal that every student paper is measured against as it is graded; teachers must have criteria for grading. However, Knoblauch and Brannon point out the danger of the “ideal text,” or a vague idea teachers may hold in their heads of what an A paper must look like. Response that addresses a student text as a product falling short of this ideal may teach students that revision involves only repairing those problems the instructor notes. Students learn how to please that teacher for that course; they gain no skills that can be

carried forward to other classes or tasks that will demand an understanding of the needs of an average reader. Knoblauch and Brannon also remark that this attention to the ideal prevents teachers from offering “the best kind of assistance,” or guiding student writers toward achieving their own purposes (120). The question we must ask, they argue, is whether the text fulfills the writer’s purpose, clearly communicates the writer’s meaning (121). To be able to ask such a question, they state, we must acknowledge that student writers operate with the same “sense of logic and purpose” as professional writers, whether that logic is apparent on the page or not (122).

Another point Knoblauch and Brannon make is that when instructors provide multiple opportunities for drafting, students get practice in learning to adapt to reader needs—if the teacher models an average reader, not simply his/her own responses as a teacher, although reader response from an instructor must also reflect that instructor’s expertise so that students can get an idea of what professors or other experienced readers are looking for. Response as evaluation can provide valuable insights for students:

By responding, a teacher creates incentive in the writer to make meaningful changes. By negotiating those changes rather than dictating them, the teacher returns control of the writing to the student. And by evaluating, the teacher gives the student writer an estimate of how well the teacher thinks the student’s revisions have brought actual effects into line with stated intentions. By looking first to those intentions, both in responding and in evaluating, we show students that we take their writing seriously... (Knoblauch and Brannon 127).

Knoblauch and Brannon argue convincingly for an approach to student texts that makes the writer the priority, not the product. Students need the kind of dialogue that effective response produces with comments that are anchored in the text.

What happens, however, when students do not meet the requirements of the assignment? Knoblauch and Brannon, in their article “Responding to Texts,” write, “We are not recommending a suspension of the critical faculty in responding to student writing, but only an essentially receptive rather than evaluative reading posture” (301). When teachers read student texts with the “calculated (as opposed to naïve)” awareness that the writer has a purpose s/he is trying to communicate, teacher feedback begins to change from corrective to communicative as the instructor uses comments to ask questions of the writer or indicate where the text or purpose is unclear (301). Knoblauch and Brannon ask that teachers “suspend their own preconceptions, to a degree, in order to understand the writer’s position” (300). Response becomes directed toward the writer instead of toward the paper as product.

One further point to keep in mind is that when students avoid assignment instructions, it is usually a danger sign. Failure to comply with instructions may indicate that a student has plagiarized. Teachers cannot afford to relinquish their authority in terms of asking for specific assignments; the more specific the requirements, the more difficult it is for students to be tempted to cheat. Students may also resist instructor guidelines when they feel they lack the skill to complete the assignment as required. However, if we allow students to stay with what they feel comfortable doing, their growth as writers will be compromised. When I receive a

paper that does not meet the assignment requirements, I simply write back to the student, “I know this assignment was difficult. I can see how hard it might be to _____, but this is an important skill to practice. Although I’m very pleased with _____ (aspect of the paper which is working well), I cannot give you a grade above a _____ unless you meet the guidelines.” Then I offer suggestions for how the student might approach this task more successfully.

Knoblauch and Brannon’s approach is not a license to let students do whatever they like: it is a method of looking at students’ work with respect and supplying feedback that attempts to engage with the student as a writer worth reading.

Empowering response

Student empowerment begins with instructor willingness to encourage student agency in their own papers, and this in turn will place more of the burden of work on the students. Some students may want or need to know exactly how revision might take place, but instructors can encourage students to reflect on their own purposes, following guidelines offered by feedback. It is vital that this feedback be specific to the student, the paper, and the context of the assignment so that teacher comments can provide students with that sense of exchange that Sommers makes clear is so important. Students must be able to see themselves as participating members of the community in which they write, and teacher comments can enhance this sense by demonstrating the informed responses of a reader who respects the student writer’s goals.

Yet there is more to this question of relaxing authority than just encouraging students to be the agents who control their words. Richard Straub notes that teachers often struggle with the reality of power dynamics in academia: “Given the power relations that adhere in the classroom, all teacher comments in some way are evaluative and directive” (Straub, “Concept of Control” 148). It is the instructor’s job to supply evaluation and direction to students. What Connors and Lunsford note is that instructors often translate this duty into detached, objective commentary that leaves students on the outside.

According to Straub, the problem lies in the belief that certain comments, in themselves, control student writing, while others do not, and in the idea that there is one ideal way to respond, one ideal level of control (“Concept of Control” 130-31). He asks us to consider just how we might define “controlling” comments. He is looking for a more productive way to describe feedback (132). First, he gives an example of highly directive commentary that is clearly controlling, in which the teacher has taken over not just marking every error or awkward phrasing but has also changed the wording in ways that she prefers: in the example she has changed the phrase “could you imagine” to “can you imagine,” for no discernable reason. She has attacked the student’s use of the word “I” without explaining why her wording, which eliminates the first person, is preferable. She has also eliminated a semi-colon in favor of a comma and the word “because,” also without explaining why her choice is superior. After heavily marking the entire paper, she offers this praise: “Good material—needs to be tightened up” (Straub, “Concept” 132). Straub states that her goal as a teacher,

and her goal for this paper is simply to motivate the student to produce clear, correct prose. She has made clear that surface features are what matter most, and she has paid little attention to the student's purposes (133).

In contrast, Straub examines the feedback of Edward White, which at first glance appears very authoritarian and controlling. All of White's responses are in the imperative: "Now that you are clear on what you have to say... revise the opening to begin your argument" and "As you revise, be sure you focus each [paragraph] on its central idea" (Straub, "Concept" 133). Straub notes that despite the phrasing, White's feedback ignores surface features and focuses closely on helping the student achieve his/her own purposes by clarifying or developing his/her ideas (Straub 138). His goal is to motivate the student to revise in ways that will improve the paper as a whole and help it achieve its purposes (Straub 138). What I appreciate about White's method is that he is clear on what the paper needs; he isn't afraid to take control when necessary to make sure the student is clear on what work needs done. His feedback is specific and focused, avoiding forcing the student into a guessing game. It is important to note as well that his students know him: they can construct him on the page as they read his feedback, even "hear" his voice, and so they can translate these disembodied comments, which superficially sound like orders, into helpful guidance.

In contrast to White's authoritative response, Peter Elbow's response is highly facilitative. He offers his feedback in a separate letter to the student, avoiding writing directly on the student's paper. "Elbow offers some instruction, advice, and praise at the beginning and end of his response, but for the most part he acts as a sounding

board for the writer” (Straub, “Concept” 144). He describes his reactions to as a reader to what he has read, and he leaves it up to the student author to make what changes s/he decides are necessary. His responses take two forms, Straub observes: one in which he restates what he believes the text is communicating while giving his own reactions and judgments as a reader from moment to moment (Straub 144). Straub provides this example from Elbow: “I don’t disagree with your position, but somehow I find myself fighting you as I read. I’m trying to figure out why” (qtd. in Straub 144). Elbow is not giving orders or even providing an evaluation; he is giving his reaction as an informed reader.

Clearly, White and Elbow have two very different responding styles. In comparing White’s feedback to Elbow’s, it seems that what matters most is not wording or format but intention and the instructor’s goals for the student and the text. Careful response, regardless of the way it is phrased, directs the student’s attention and helps him/her fix his/her purpose. Straub is careful to be clear that no single method is appropriate for all instructors since each has his/her own weaknesses and strengths and mannerisms. No single response style will be appropriate for every teacher. The only way to be certain, as a teacher, that my own feedback helps my students fulfill their purposes (and meet assignment requirements) is to be very reflective about each response I write.

Straub suggests that the most effective way to analyze our own comments is to look at focuses and modes. Focus of comments usually falls into these five categories: correctness, style, organization, content, or context (Straub, “Practice of Response”

76). Modes usually fall into the areas of corrections, criticism, praise, commands, advice, closed or open questions, and reflection (76). He urges teachers to take the time to note the way they comment on student papers, keeping in mind our own strengths as individuals, our goals for the classroom, and the needs of each student (“Concept of Control” 150). As he puts it, “It is how we receive and respond to the words students put on the page that speaks loudest in our teaching” (147-48). We should take the time to be sure that our written responses say what we intended them to. In fact, what we are seeing in all of the expert testimony we have examined in this chapter and the previous ones, is a demand for more reflection on the part of both teachers and students.

To return to the idea of empowering students, The Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing found that writing-intensive courses themselves had the potential to give students a feeling of ownership in the work they were doing in college: “Writing, more than any other feature of academic life, gives students something that is their own—an opportunity to explore the issues that matter most to them and to figure out why they matter” (Sommers, “Shaped by Writing”). Sommers argues that response from instructors can facilitate this sense of agency for students. Research from this study indicates that an instructor’s most important contribution to a writer’s education is feedback (“Shaped”). She clarifies that this commentary from teachers did not necessarily need to be praise: “While a handful of students expressed pleasure at receiving praise... many more described experiences in which an instructor challenged their ideas” (“Shaped”). This kind of intense, context and individual

directed response does not focus on correction but on directing students toward meeting their own goals in a way that fulfills assignment requirements. The following section provides examples of how to put this theory into practice.

Response as conversation: provoking exploration of the text

Richard Straub believes the answer to resolving the tension between teacher authority and student agency lies in response that does more than just “speak” to a student. He states in his essay “Teacher Response as Conversation” that the current attitude in the field of composition tends to favor a view of response as a dialogue between the student and the teacher meant to provoke effective revision (going on the theory that the writing of students who revise improves at a greater pace than the writing of those who do not). He pushes the idea even further, asking just what it is that makes a particular response part of a dialogue, and what it is about such a response that helps promote effective revision.

First, he defines “conversational” comments as those that sound as though the teacher is talking directly to the student, but he discriminates between comments that sound like a conversation and comments that actually promote a sense of exchanged dialogue (“Teacher Response” 340). One key feature of conversational feedback is that it is rooted in the student’s text, referring specifically to words, phrases, passages that the student used in his/her writing. This practice not only demonstrates that the teacher did read what the student wrote but that his/her commentary does relate directly to the student’s words, not simply to a general idea. For example, instead of

saying “be more specific,” an instructor might write “when you talk about how important this house was to you, offer the reader more detail about why.” Straub points out that this move keeps the focus on the student’s purposes as well as on the paper itself, rather than the “ideal text” a teacher might have in mind (342).

Straub defines three strategies that keep commentary conversational: an informal voice which “sounds” like speech; text-specific comments that keep the focus on the student’s writing; and a “playback” of the student’s own ideas/meanings from the reader’s point of view (342). This provides that vital sense of exchange, helping the student have a sense of sharing his/her ideas with a reader who responds. Straub further explains that such feedback need not turn all authority over to the student writer:

The idea of response as a *conversation* has become a catch-all for any teacher response that is informal, positive, and nurturing, or even for any response that is nonprescriptive. The term has come to refer to any response that puts the teacher in the role of reader or coach rather than the role of critic or judge... When we think of response that is “conversational,” we think of comments that are easy, gentle, and friendly, comments that, from another perspective, may be too readily dismissed as “soft” (343).

On the contrary, Straub argues, the term “conversational” does not limit itself to facilitative or praising comments. He notes that although our feedback could be more friendly, there is a place for productive criticism in this dialogue of response (343).

He offers three further strategies for producing this productive criticism: critical comments are framed to offer guidance or aid; other comments provide direction for student revision without taking control of the paper or restricting choices to only those offered by the instructor; and key statements in comments are elaborated upon or explained (344). Such feedback expands the role of the responder to more than reader or coach but includes that of “teacher, demanding reader, and co-investigator” (344). This second set of strategies takes response from exchange to shared exploration.

Such response first places the teacher in a role that encourages an attitude toward student writing as something worth reading and the student as someone who has something worthwhile to say (Straub 350). We as teachers need to remember this as much as our students need to hear it. The greatest motivation for writing is the idea that one has something important to pass on; most students arrive in the freshman writing class strongly doubting that they have anything to say. As instructors, we need to reinforce the idea that each student writer has something important to share, and that each paper has great potential.

Examples of the kind of conversational commentary that is most effective are offered by Straub from Anne Ruggles Gere. The assignment was an expository piece, and the student’s purpose was to explain the merits of bass fishing:

Your choice of topic is excellent because you clearly know a great deal about bass fishing. You include so many concrete examples and details, but these accounts also raise some problems. When you begin to recount specific

experiences, they tend to take over. As you revise this essay, try to concentrate on explaining bass fishing rather than telling the story of one fishing trip (qtd. in Straub, “Teacher Response” 346).

Gere then goes on to elaborate upon these general comments, making them more specific, pointing out trouble spots and offering suggestions for certain places in the student text. She creates both a conversation and an inquiry (Straub 346).

Another example provided by Straub is from Peter Elbow, responding to the same student essay and reporting his thoughts “out loud.” As he considers what changes a student writer might make, he does not list specific changes to make but offers some ideas, a place to start. He is exploring the ways the student above might keep his personal anecdotes about fishing without losing the purpose of the essay:

Not sure how to do it. Break it up into bits to be scattered here and there? Or leave it a longer story but have material before and after to make it a means of *explaining your subject*? Not sure; tricky problem. But worth trying to pull off. Good writers often get lots of narrative and descriptive bits into expository writing (qtd. in Straub 347).

Both responses anchor themselves in specifics of the student’s text and try to help the student focus his piece. Reading these comments, I get the impression that I am “listening in” on a conversation between instructor and student.

Before Teachers Respond

This chapter is about empowering students to have more agency in their work through teacher response. One method that gives students more voice in the response process is that of having them provide some guidance for the instructor before s/he responds. The student writes to the instructor, letting him/her know what the student was trying to accomplish with a particular paper and what kind of commentary the student is looking for.

Cover letters are one way to open a dialogue with students. The Harvard Writing Project suggests that cover letters raise student awareness of the choices they are making as writers. “Self-awareness in writing—knowing what works in a paper and what doesn’t—is one of the keys to improvement. Students who are required to submit their papers with a cover letter attached become more self-conscious writers through the experience of reflecting on a paper’s strengths and weaknesses” (“Strategies” *HWP Bulletin*). Instructors read the letter before reading the student’s paper and then are better prepared to provide useful, individualized comments directed at answering the writer’s specific concerns or questions (“Strategies”).

Another practice is sometimes called the process memo, or the student-teacher memo, as Jeffrey Sommers refers to it. Like the cover letter, the process memo gives students an opportunity to explore the processes that they went through as they wrote the paper, to think about problems they encountered and how they did or did not solve them, and to consider what worked best for them and what did not. Sommers notes that this approach also gets students involved in the response process before the

teacher begins to comment. He promotes asking the following questions before students turn in drafts for comment: “Who is your audience in this piece of writing?” “How did that audience affect what you have written?” “What do you want the audience to get out of this piece of writing?” “Which parts of the essay seem to be the least successful? Why?” “Which parts were most successful? Why?” “What do you want me to comment on in particular in the paper?” (Jeffrey Sommers 329). These questions allow the instructor to read with a better idea in mind of what the student was trying to do—but they also help students become more aware of their own writing processes.

Kathleen Blake Yancey uses a method she calls a “talk to” to involve students in the response process. She says that she borrows from Elbow’s *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* and asks students, in their “talk to’s” to “*believe* that this is the best paper you’ve ever written and then to *doubt* that this text is any good at all” (Yancey, *Reflection* 32). She then asks them to predict how she will react to the paper, and finally to agree or disagree with her projected reaction to the paper (32). Her purpose is to promote self reflection, which can enhance a student’s sense of self as writer (33). When she responds to student papers, she reads the “talk to” first, writing very brief comments directly on this text, then she moves on to read and respond to the main text.

These approaches—the cover letter, process memo, or “talk to”—can fail if students do not truly reflect on what they have done. Yancey describes four steps students must go through in order to accurately judge their own work: step one, they

must become familiar with their work; step two, they must like something they have done; step three, they must critique the piece; and four, they must begin to revise based on what they have observed (Yancey, “Reflection and Self-Assessment” 8). When teachers respond to that paper in terms of whether the student has judged it accurately, the student can see exactly how a real reader’s responses compare to the his/her own perceptions of the piece.

Students Respond

The last step in involving students in the response process is to have them respond to teacher comments. The benefit to this is that instructors can get a better sense of whether their feedback is being read and understood. Instructors may not feel confident that their efforts will be put to good use. Connors and Lunsford believe that part of the problem with ineffective response may be that teachers do not expect their comments to be read (“Teachers’ Rhetorical Comments” 151): how can a teacher invest emotion and energy into feedback if they do not believe students will read it? Peter Elbow offers a simple solution: take five minutes when handing back essays and ask students to read the comments on their papers. Students then write the instructor a brief note in response telling him/her what is understood and what is not and giving their reactions to the instructor’s feedback (Elbow, “Options for Responding” 199). Richard Straub also promotes taking the time to get student responses to teacher feedback: “If you spend so much time making comments on a set of papers, why would you want to hand them back in a hurry...?” He suggests setting aside class time

for reading comments and discussing them as a group (Straub, “Managing” “Making the Most”).

Yancey uses a “talk back” to complete the circle. Students “talk back” to the comments they receive, giving the teacher insights into how their feedback is being consumed. One way to read this phrase is to be reminded of a child “talking back” to an adult, or rather, rejecting the authority of the adult. Yancey’s purpose, however, is not to foster rebellion but to encourage students to see themselves as having a voice in the writing process. There is an element of resistance here, or there should be. Yancey notes that the reflection process can fail when students merely write what they believe the teacher expects, failing to become engaged with the feedback they received. The more specific students can be in both their “talk to’s” and “talk backs,” the more engaged they will be.

If students are not engaged, they will not feel empowered by being included in the response process. Self-reflection is meant to help them develop the skills to assess their own work, a practice that Yancey feels has been neglected. In her article “Reflection, Self-Assessment, and Learning,” she argues that student self-assessment of their work is a vital and neglected part of curricula. While acknowledging that students usually resist it, she notes that research on composing has shown that self-assessment is part of how experienced writers write:

Experienced authors tend to evaluate their work not only in terms of their own intentions, but also in terms of their audience’s expectations, with the result that this self-assessment dimension of composing helps writers create new

ideas. Through such self-assessment, writers see what's missing, what might be deleted, and what word or phrase will resonate with their intended audiences (Yancey, "Reflection" 4).

This action of self-evaluation goes back to Horning and Robertson's point that writing and revising by professional writers requires a meta-awareness of the writer regarding the choices that writer is making and how those choices affect audience and purpose, a sophisticated level of self-awareness that inexperienced writers lack (Horning and Robertson 53). Yancey argues that through self-assessment, student writers can begin to develop such awareness. When students are brought into the response process with the "talk to" and "talk back," a teacher's feedback helps enhance self-awareness by providing a true back-and-forth between teacher and student.

Lynne Ticke of Bronx Community College/CUNY argues that encouraging such dialogue between teacher and students keeps students engaged actively in the writing process and places more responsibility on them for revision. Such dialogue also helps increase students' awareness of audience, helping them see their writing in context as response provides feedback from a real reader (Ticke 20). Finally, when students stop to think and reflect on their writing in terms of teacher feedback, they become more aware of their own processes (21). Ticke states that this encourages students to slow down and consider their own thinking. But perhaps equally important is the effect that student response to teacher feedback can have on teacher awareness of how their comments affect students (21). As instructors, we may be unaware of gaps between what we think students are understanding and what they are actually

understanding in terms of our feedback. Ticke points out that at times, commentary intended kindly may have a negative effect on sensitive students. Dialogue helps makes us more aware of how our feedback has been perceived, and just as practice with response from readers helps students begin to anticipate a reader's concerns, practice with response from students helps teachers anticipate students' concerns.

In her essay, "Opening Dialogue: Students Respond to Teacher Comments in a Psychology Classroom," Ticke studied her own response processes, but she included student reflection on her feedback, introducing an extra element into the study. She found that when students were encouraged to provide reflection on the comments they had received from her on their papers, the result was greater awareness on the students' parts of their own processes (Ticke 27). They spent more time reflecting on their writing. Ticke was also gratified to note that students felt comfortable telling her when her comments were confusing or unhelpful (29).

Students used a Student Response-to-Teacher Feedback Log with three columns. In the first column, they wrote the teacher's comments word for word. In the second column, they described how the comment made them feel. In the third column, they stated whether they understood what to do in the next draft(s). Response logs were handed in along with their first and second drafts for the final assessment (Ticke 24). Ticke's method was motivated by a desire to formally research student response, so instructors might want to adjust her method to fit their own goals for the classroom.

Ticke notes that one serious obstacle to creating real dialogue in the classroom is students' perceptions of their role, which is at the heart of this chapter's topic:

teacher authority versus student empowerment. Students often consume response with the belief that it is the teacher's job to "fix" their paper: therefore revision is often limited to repairing the surface problems the teacher points out. As long as teachers are viewed by students solely as judges of their work, they will not engage in true dialogue since they believe that they must accept their teacher's criticisms (Ticke 32).

This is where Yancey's method of introducing self-assessment into the grading process can help students see that there is more to their role in the writing process than simply producing a text: the "talk to" forces them to reflect on what went into that text and to communicate their purposes to the instructor, who then will provide response based on those reflections. For both student and teacher, this dialogue makes clear that there is more to consider in regard to the text being evaluated than simply a grade. Yancey directly addresses the tension between teacher authority and the desire to create more agency for students:

Reflective classrooms, where we teach writing "reflectively"—by which I mean using reflection as a means *and* an end—are places where we teach much differently than is typically the case. One way to think about it is to say that while many of us advocate student-centered pedagogy, we are still struggling to see how to get the student into that center (Yancey, *Reflection* 20).

Part of the process of empowerment is to place greater responsibility upon student writers, and one step toward this is to get them more involved in the writing process. This means that "process" must include more than just the production of a text. The actual writing process for completing any given assignment begins with the

student writer, so response to the completed work should begin with asking the student about his/her perception of that work. In this way, a teacher would not have to guess at what was in the writer's head as s/he wrote. This is not to imply that there are no instructions or guidelines students must follow in producing each assignment—the idea of self-assessment is in addition to this, providing a way for students to consider how they have fulfilled both the instructor's guidelines as well as their own writerly purposes.

Conclusion

Writing comments on student papers is a complex act which becomes even more complex when new writing teachers feel unsure of what to write or why. Error is a powerful distraction, one that demands attention to the point that all other details can fade into the background as an instructor struggles to decide how to deal with surface mistakes, yet experts on responding advise attention to content first. New teachers also struggle with the question of whether to put mastery of academic language first or to encourage students to take risks and find their own voices as writers. Finally, teachers are told to “empower” students through our comments, yet the reality of grading makes such empowerment seem a temporary pretense.

These tensions are actually the way in which theory comes face-to-face with practice. Embracing these tensions is a signal that a teacher, as s/he becomes aware of the complexities of response, is on the brink of discovering how to enact the practices the experts recommend. There is no need to choose between error and content, voice

and academic language, or teacher authority and student empowerment. Even more, there is no need to imagine that feedback will “fix” a student paper and provide a miracle for a student who still has a long journey ahead before reaching mastery of writing for college. What students really need is feedback that addresses the tensions explored in this thesis in a way that encourages a back-and-forth dialogue between teachers and students, involving students fully in the writing process by including them in the circle of response.

Future research in the area of response might address questions such as, how does feedback differ from instructors in one discipline to the next, or how does a new teacher’s early training in feedback affect response? Do graduate student teachers, like teaching assistants or teaching fellows, who have been trained in peer feedback, use different commenting styles from those who have had no training? Can more be done to prepare new teachers for responding? The question I would most like to see answered would be whether more training has a positive effect on teacher practices in responding, or how other factors may inhibit effective commenting—such as class size and teacher workload.

For me, just understanding my purpose in response has relieved a great deal of stress. I do not have to repair every problem I see, I need only provide a sense of dialogue for students, to draw their attention to their work, get them thinking, get them involved. I know my students. I have taken the time in class to get to know who they are, and to let them know who I am. I have heard their concerns about the class, about me, about each essay they must write. An early, ungraded assignment, such as a letter

to me about themselves as writers, allows me to give them feedback that is only praise and encouragement. With a positive start to our dialogue about writing, I hope my students will be able to focus on their writing assignments instead of their fear of what I will say in response to their papers. As the class progresses, I watch for patterns of error, so that I know what they are struggling with as individuals. I offer feedback on early drafts, and I can spare this time because only a few students will take advantage of this opportunity. When I comment on papers, I always project revision possibilities, even for the last papers of the term, and even for A papers (where might a student imagine publishing their work?). My feedback is written directly on the paper with very brief comments, noting where the text is powerful, what I liked most, places where I felt confused, and one or two patterns of error. Then I type a half-page letter addressed to the student, in which I go into more detail and explanation. I try to set up a dialogue by asking questions and offering suggestions about what the student might do next with this paper. The following is an example of one of these letters (student name removed) responding to a rhetorical analysis paper on advertising:

Hi [student's first name],

This is a great start. Your comparison between old McDonald's ads and modern ones is powerful—I hadn't thought about how innocent they used to be! I think you could add a little more detail here to drive that point home. What I have in mind is maybe some reflection on how the audience seems to have changed. They used to be aimed at kids; now they are aimed at... men?

Who does Paris Hilton in a bikini appeal to? Are they trying to say that she can eat this huge burger without gaining weight, so we should too?

Your comparison between the tone of the ads and the tone of TV shows today is especially well done. This is a great point that I hadn't thought about before.

Finally, in the closing, you bring up the idea that parents have to monitor what ads kids are watching. Be careful: this is an entire other essay waiting to be written. Stick closely to your concern that ads are no longer innocent. You could add a few words to your conclusion that get your reader thinking about how ads today have changed and how we might need to be paying more attention to what they're showing.

April

The circle of response is not easy to build, but it improves with practice. Earlier in the chapter, I described the dialogue process that any instructor could set up with students, beginning with a process memo or "talk to" and ending with a response like a "talk back" or similar note from students in answer to the teacher feedback they receive. I have found this approach very helpful in terms of motivating students to participate in the response process. Each time I have my students write to me in a "talk to" when they turn in an essay, they give me a little more detail about their processes, and they show a little more enthusiasm for my comments to come as they begin to trust me. Each time I get them to write a "talk back" to me after I return the essays,

they take a little more time to be honest with me about which of my comments were most clear or useful, and which were not. This process also gives me a clearer idea of which students are holding back, which are not consuming my feedback in the way I had hoped and need extra encouragement or attention to draw them out. Some students fail to turn in assignments, never engage with me in dialogue, and do not succeed in the class... but most do. When they leave my class, they have a sense of teacher feedback as something useful, something to look forward to in their next writing class.

What I hope for is that this thesis will help struggling teachers to see just how vital the response process is, how important those comments are to students, and how to write comments that students will make use of and appreciate. It helps to keep in mind that feedback need not be extensive: even very brief comments can show students that their work has been read and appreciated in some way. A single note can point out a student's strengths and what progress s/he is making toward conquering a weakness. Response is a very complex act, but it is at its very base an act of exchange. The student writes to us, their teachers, shares their thoughts, and we write back. Just as students are freed to write when they do not fear our reaction, we are freed to write back to them when we do not fear what to say. By becoming aware of the tensions of response, we have taken the most important step toward making the most of this significant opportunity to engage with our students: responding to their written work.

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