RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

This article was delivered as a paper at the CCCC Convention in March, 1981 and as such was written for oral delivery rather than silent reading. The two examples below were handouts at that presentation.

—Editor

EXAMPLE #1

---Both examples are first drafts of introductory paragraphs.

Handout

Every year on one Sunday in the middle of January, tens of millions of people cancel all events, plans or work to watch the Super Bowl. This audience includes little boys and girls, and people, housewives and men. Many reasons have been given to explain why the Super Bowl has become so popular. Commercial spots cost up to $100,000.00. One explanation is that people like to take sides and root for a team. Another is that some people like the pageantry and excitement of the event. These reasons alone, however, do not explain a happening as big as the Super Bowl.

EXAMPLE #2

---Both examples are first drafts of introductory paragraphs.

Begin by telling your reader what you are going to write.

In the sixties it was drugs, in the seventies it was rock and roll. Now in the eighties, one of the most controversial subjects is nuclear power. The United States is in great need of its own source of power. Because of environmentalists, coal is not an acceptable source of energy. (They say it creates too much pollution). Solar and wind power have not yet received the technology necessary to use them. It seems that nuclear power is the only feasible means right now for obtaining self-sufficient power. However, too large a percentage of the population are against nuclear power claiming it is unsafe. With as many problems as the United States is having concerning energy, it seems a shame that the public is so quick to "can" a very feasible means of power. Nuclear energy should not be given up on, but rather, more nuclear plants should be built.

More than any other enterprise in the teaching of writing, commenting and responding to student writing consumes the largest proportion of our time. Most teachers estimate that it takes them at least twenty to forty minutes to comment on an individual student paper, and those twenty to forty minutes times twenty students per class, times eight papers during the course of a semester adds up to an enormous amount of time. With so much time and energy directed to a single activity, it is important for us to understand the nature of the enterprise. It seems, paradoxically enough, that although commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student writing, it is the least understood. We do not know what constitutes thoughtful commentary and whether our comments help students to become more effective writers.

We know, theoretically, at least, that we (Continued on Page 8)
RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING
(Continued from Page 7)

comment on our students’ writing for the same reasons professional editors comment on the work of professional writers or for the same reasons we ask our colleagues to read and respond to our own writing. As writers we need and want thoughtful commentary to tell us when we have communicated our ideas and when not, to raise questions from a reader’s point of view that may not have occurred to us as writers. We want to know if our writing has communicated our intended meaning and if not, what questions or discrepancies our reader sees that we, as writers, are blind to.

In commenting on our students’ writing, however, we have an additional pedagogical purpose. As teachers, we know that most students find it difficult to imagine a reader’s response in advance and to use that predicted response as a guide in composing. Thus we comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students become that questioning reader themselves because we believe this ability will help them evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing.

More specifically, we comment on student writing because we believe it is necessary to offer assistance to student writers when they are in the process of composing a text rather than after the text has been completed. Comments create the motive for doing something different in the next draft; thoughtful comments create the motive for revising. Without comments from their teachers, student writers will revise in a consistently narrow and predictable way. Without comments, students assume that their writing has communicated their intended meaning and will perceive no need for revising the substance of their message. Instead, students will concentrate on rewording their texts, assuming that once they have written a first draft that the meaning to be communicated is already there—finished—and that revision is merely a process of patching up and cleaning up the words and phrases of a fixed text.

In commenting on our students’ writing, we are trying to sabotage their sense of completeness and coherence in the drafts they have written. Our comments offer us a means to show students the dissonances we, as readers, sense in their writing. Such dissonances—the discrepancies between intention and execution, between what a writer intended to do and what was actually accomplished—offer any writer a motive for revising. Our comments call attention to these dissonances, and our hope, of course, is that students will learn to perceive these dissonances on their own.

And so the theory of commenting goes... but as much as we believe in the soundness of this approach to responding to student writing, we also realize we don’t know how our theory squares with actual teacher practice and whether teachers comment and students revise as the theory predicts they should. For the last year I have been researching this problem, attempting to find out what messages teachers give their students through their comments, and what determines which of these comments the students use when they revise and which they ignore.

My research has been entirely focussed on comments teachers write to motivate revisions. I have studied the commenting style of thirty-five teachers, studying the comments these teachers wrote on first and second drafts and interviewing a representative number of these teachers and their students. All thirty-five teachers also commented on the same three student essays. For an additional reference point, I typed one of the student essays into the computer, using a package of twenty-three computer programs developed by Bell Labs to help computers and writers work together to improve a text rapidly. Within a few minutes, the computer delivered editorial comments on the student’s text, identifying all spelling and punctuation errors, isolating problems with wordy or misused phrases and suggesting alternatives, offering a stylistic analysis of sentence types, sentence beginnings, and sentence lengths, and finally, giving our freshman text a Kincaid readability score of 8th grade which, as the computer program informed me, “is a low score for this type of document.”

The sharp contrast between the teachers’ comments and those of the computer program highlighted how arbitrary and idiosyncratic most of the teachers’ comments are. In addition, the calm, reasonable language of the computer provided quite a contrast to the hostility of many of the teachers’ comments.

The first major conclusion of this study on commenting styles is that comments can take students’ attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers’ purposes in commenting. The teacher appropriates the text from the student by confusing the student’s purpose in writing the text with her own purpose in commenting. The teachers’ concerns become paramount and create the reasons for the subsequent changes the students make. The specific type of change a student would make could be predicted from the specific concerns the teacher imposed on the text.

We have all heard our perplexed students say to us when confused by our comments, “I don’t understand how YOU want me to change this” or “Tell me what YOU want me to do.” In the beginning of the process there was the writer, her words, and her desire to communicate her ideas.
After the comments of the teacher are imposed on the first or second draft, the student’s attention dramatically shifts from “This is what I want to say” to “This is what YOU the teacher are asking me to do.”

This appropriation of the text by the teacher happens when teachers identify errors in usage, diction, and style in a first draft and ask students to correct these errors when they revise; such comments give the student an impression of their importance that is all out of proportion at this point in the process. They create the concern that these “accidents of discourse” need to be attended to before the meaning of the text is attended to.

It would not be so bad if students were only commanded to correct errors, but more often than not, students are given contradictory messages; they are commanded to edit a sentence to avoid an error or to achieve greater brevity of style and then told in the margins that the particular paragraph needs to be more specific or to be developed more. An example of this problem can be seen in Example No. 1 above. The teacher has shown the student how to edit the sentences and then commands the student to expand the paragraph in order to make it more interesting to a reader. A similar problem occurs when the end comments and marginal comments sometimes represent two separate tasks for students; the marginal comments encourage students to see the text as a fixed place, frozen in time, that just needs some editing, while the end comments will suggest that the student develop the text by doing some more research. Students are commanded to edit and develop at the same time; the remarkable contradiction of developing a paragraph after editing the sentences in it represents the confusion I encountered in our teachers’ commenting styles.

Moreover, the comments are worded in such a way that it is difficult for students to know what is the most important problem in the text and what problems are of lesser importance. No scale of concern is offered to a student so that a comment about spelling or an awkward sentence is given equal weight to a comment about organization or logic. The comment that seemed to best represent this problem was one teacher’s command to his student: “Check your commas and semi-colons and think more about what you are thinking about.” Example No. 1 also illustrates this problem. The language of the comments makes it difficult for a student to sort out and decide what is most important and what is least important.

When the teacher appropriates the text from the student in this way, students are encouraged to see their writing as a series of parts—words, sentences, paragraphs—and not as a whole discourse. The comments encourage them in believing their first drafts are finished drafts, not invention drafts, and all that they need to do is fix them up. The teachers’ comments do not provide their students with a inherent reason for revising, for making any larger changes. The processes of revising, editing, and proofreading are collapsed and reduced to a single trivial activity, and the students’ misunderstanding of the revision process as a rewording activity is reinforced.

The second conclusion from this study is that most teachers’ comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text. This is to say that the comments are not anchored in the specifics of the student’s text, but rather a series of vague directives. Students are commanded to “Think more about your audience, avoid colloquial language, avoid the passive, avoid prepositions at the end of sentences or conjunctions at the beginning of sentences, to be clear, be specific, be precise,” but above all, to “think more about what you are thinking about.”

The comments on Example No. 2 illustrate this problem. One could easily remove all the comments from this text, rubber-stamp them on another student text, and they would make as much or as little sense on the second text as they do here.

I have observed an overwhelming similarity of generalities and abstract commands given to students. There seems to be an accepted, albeit unwritten, cannon for commenting on student texts. This uniform code of commands, requests, and pleadings demonstrates that the teacher holds the license for vagueness while the student is commanded to be specific.

The students I interviewed admitted to having great difficulty with these vague directives. The students stated that when a teacher writes in the margins or as an end comment, “choose precise language” or “think more about your audience,” revising becomes a guessing game. In effect, the teacher is saying to the students, “somewhere in this paper is imprecise language and lack of awareness of an audience and you must find it.” The problem of these vague commands is compounded for the students when they are not offered any strategies for implementing these commands. Students are told they have done something wrong and that there is something in their text that needs to be fixed before the text will be acceptable. But to tell students that they have done something wrong is not to tell them what to do about it. In order to offer a useful revision strategy to a student, the teacher must anchor the strategy in the specifics of the student’s text. For instance, to tell our student, the author of the

(Continued on Page 10)
second paragraph in the example, as the teacher has, to “be specific” or to “elaborate,” does not show our student what questions the reader has about the meaning of the text, or what breaks in logic exist that could be resolved by supplying specific information, nor is the student shown how to achieve the desired specificity.

Instead of offering strategies, the teachers offer what is interpreted by students as rules for composing. The comments suggest to students that writing is just a matter of following the rules. The teachers seem to impose a series of abstract rules about written products even when some of them are not appropriate for the specific text the student is creating. For instance, our student author of the second paragraph is commanded to follow the conventional rules for writing a five paragraph essay—to begin the introductory paragraph by telling his reader what he is going to say and to end the paragraph with a thesis sentence. Somehow these abstract rules about what the five paragraph product should look like do not seem applicable to the problems this student must confront when revising, nor are the rules specific strategies he could use when revising. There are many inchoate ideas ready to be exploited in this paragraph, but the rules do not help the student to develop the necessary opportunistic stance he needs in revising his writing.

The problem here is a confusion of process and product; what one has to say about the process is different from what one has to say about the product. The teachers who use this method of commenting are formulating their comments as if these drafts were finished drafts and were not going to be revised. Their commenting vocabularies have not been adapted to revision and they comment on first drafts as if they were justifying a grade or as if it were the final draft.

My conclusion, therefore, from this research project is that the news from the classroom is not good. For the most part, teachers do not respond to student writing with the kind of thoughtful commentary which will engage students with the issues they are writing about or which will help them question their purposes and goals in writing a specific text.

However, these findings do not allow me to conclude that teachers should abandon the practice of commenting in general, or that they should abandon the practice of offering comments to students as they are in the process of composing and revising. What I would like to urge is a reorientation of perspectives and habits. There is nothing exotic or mysterious about responding to student writing; indeed, responding to student writing is an eminently learnable behavior. Unfortunately, it has been a behavior that has rarely been stressed in teacher training or in writing workshops. Composition teachers are trained in various prewriting techniques, in constructing assignments, and in evaluating papers for grades, but rarely ever in the process of reading a student text for meaning or in offering thoughtful commentary to motivate revision. We have been trained to read and interpret literary texts for meaning, but unfortunately, we do not hold the same set of assumptions for student texts as we do for literary texts. Thus, we read students texts through our preconceptions and preoccupations, expecting to find errors, and the result is that we find errors and misread our students’ texts.

As a result of this research project on teacher commenting styles, we have developed a series of workshops at NYU for our teachers. We are showing our teachers how to offer students revision tasks of a different order of complexity and sophistication by forcing students back into the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning. We are showing our teachers that if the content of a student text is inadequate, if the order of the parts must be rearranged significantly in the next draft, if paragraphs must be redeveloped for logic and clarity, then many sentences are going to be changed or deleted anyway, and there seems to be no point in having a student correct usage errors or edit sentences that are likely to disappear before the next draft. (W.U. McDonald, “The Revising Process and the Marking of Student Papers,” CCC, May 1978)

In our workshops we are stressing four basic ideas for responding to student writing:

1. We encourage our teachers to see their role as readers of their students’ writing rather than as correctors. As readers, they respond as any reader would by registering questions and reflecting befuddlement about the meaning of the text.

2. We encourage our teachers to develop different scales of concerns for responding to first draft as opposed to second or third drafts, and to learn how to tolerate certain lower level dissonances such as spelling, punctuation, or usage errors in a first draft because their goal in commenting on a first draft is not to raise questions about these errors.

3. We encourage our teachers to write text-specific comments on their students’ texts; comments which have no meaning if isolated from the specific text they were written for.

4. Finally, we encourage teachers to see comments not as end in themselves, but rather as means for helping students become more effective writers. As a means, they have their limitations, but the key to successful commenting is a reinforcement and mutual enrichment between what is said
in the comments and what is done in the classroom. Exercises such as revising a whole text or individual paragraphs together in class, learning how the sense of the whole dictates the smaller changes, looking at options, evaluating actual choices, and then discussing the effect of these changes on revised drafts are designed to take students through the cycles of revising and to help them overcome the anxiety of revising, that anxiety we all feel at reducing a finished draft into fragments and chaos.

Why does anyone revise a draft? We revise from the perception of incompleteness or of dissonance or of inexactitude—one has to be able to see the need for changing. In order for us as teachers not to appropriate our students' texts, we must show them how to be readers of their own writing, to be able to see the dissonances for themselves.

It is our challenge as teachers to develop comments which will provide an inherent reason for students to revise, because it is a sense of revision as discovery—a repeated process of beginning over, starting out new—that our students have not learned. We need to show our students how to seek the dissonances that lead to discovery, show them through our comments why new choices would positively change their texts, show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing—the possibility of revision.

Quite often students follow every comment, fix their texts appropriately as requested, and their texts are not improved substantially, or even worse, their revised drafts are inferior to their previous drafts. Sometimes students do not understand the purpose behind their teachers' comments and take these comments very literally. Other times students understand the comments, but the teacher has misread the text, and the comments, unfortunately, are not applicable. For instance, I repeatedly saw examples of comments in which teachers commanded students to reduce and condense what was written, when in fact what the text really needed at that stage was to be expanded in conception and scope.

Too often revision becomes a balancing act for students in which they make the changes that were requested, but do not take a risk to change anything that was not commented on even if the students' sense tells them the change is needed. The process of revising, however, must involve a risk; a more effective text does not always evolve, and the student does not want to take the chance of changing a finished, albeit inadequate, paragraph to fragments, to the original insights with which the student began, if such changes have not been requested by the teacher.

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