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AUTHOR Grant-Davie, Keith; Shapiro, Nancy
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ABSTRACT

Responding to student writing is challenging for teachers, because it is difficult to write helpful, perceptive comments on student papers. Recent theory and research suggest that teachers can learn much about response, and that there are options available to writing teachers searching for better ways to respond to student papers. An important reason why written response is difficult is that teachers must decide what role or roles to play in their comments, such as coach, judge, or doctor. Research has shown, however, that teacher comment has little effect on the quality of student writing other than negative attitudes fostered by negative criticism. Also, longer comments are less effective than shorter ones, marginal notes and interlineal comments often give conflicting signals, and paternalistic attitudes that measure writing against some Ideal Text cause students to lose interest. Improved responses may be possible when teachers view comments as rhetorical acts, think about their purpose for writing them, and teach students to become their own best readers. To achieve this goal, teachers should respond to student drafts in the way they respond to their colleagues' drafts--few judgments and directives, more questions and suggestions. They should also comment during the writing process, before final grades are assigned, on what is said not how it is said. Another successful technique is the workshop method, utilizing peer editing and revision. (An annotated bibliography of works on responding to student writing is appended.) (SKC)

Conference on College
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Keith Grant-Davie & Nancy Shapiro
English Department
University of Maryland
College Park 20742

Curing the Nervous Tick: Reader-based Response to Student Writing

"Meeting the deadline" is one of the common rituals of a writing course. We are probably all familiar with the student who arrives at our office at two minutes to four, trying hard to talk calmly while his chest heaves from the cross-campus dash from the dorm or library. There is a sense of drama in the scene, as if the student has rushed through the lobby of Washington National Airport to thrust the paper into my hand as I leave for Atlanta. I preserve the myth of urgency, of course, but the deadline is invariably artificial, simply a necessary device to keep us moving through the syllabus. The truth is that the papers will likely sit in a corner of my living room, untouched, for several days. They remain in my peripheral vision and in my peripheral consciousness, but I find other things to keep me busy until the day (or even the night) before I have promised I will return them. Reading papers means writing, and, like the students who arrive panting in my office, I tend to postpone writing.

Responding to student writing is probably the most challenging part of our teaching duties. It takes the most time and demands the most intellectual activity, and I think we need to keep reexamining the way we do it. In our joint presentation this morning we will discuss the difficulty of writing helpful, perceptive comments on student papers, what we can learn about

the response process from recent theory and research, and the options available to the writing teacher searching for more efficient, effective ways to respond to student papers. We will be considering a number of different metaphors for the writing teacher's reading process.

Perhaps the main reason why responding to student writing is so hard is that it puts us in a complicated rhetorical situation, or rather it presents us with a number of possible rhetorical situations. We have to decide the purpose of our comments and the role, or roles, we will play in these comments. We need to decide the levels of abstraction on which we will respond to the paper, and we need to consider how to modify our comments to address the particular student who will read them. On one of the handouts is a table listing some of the options available to us when we mark student papers. These options are listed under five headings: source of response (who gives it), responder's role (how she gives the response), stage in composing process (when she responds), location of response (where on the paper the comments are made), and abstraction level (the subject of the comments).

Two of the roles on this table come from Peter Elbow (1983), who has observed that writing teachers feel obliged both to nurture their students and to enforce standards--to play coach and judge to them. Elbow argues we must embrace both these conflicting roles, playing coach during the course and judge at the end. I would add that I think much of the anger and

frustration that make our comments caustic results when we continue to play the role of coach on the final versions of papers. Watch any athletic coach or manager pacing the sidelines while his team flounders in a crucial game and you will see the same painful combination of responsibility and helplessness that causes English teachers to pace the margins of their students' papers nervously, either cheering the writers or chastizing them. When we find ourselves doing this, perhaps it is because we are trying to write our students' papers vicariously, in the same way that coaches and fans play on their teams vicariously.

Aggressive coaching that tries to control play from the sidelines may be effective on the sports field, but research indicates it is less so on student papers. As we will suggest later in our presentation, we might help our students more by playing the role of the opposing team, demonstrating in our marginal comments the effects and reactions that might result from the moves our students make.

Maxine Hairston has observed that teachers often refer to student writing in clinical terms, with talk of impairments, handicaps, and remediation. This remedial attitude towards student writing represents another role on our diagram--the role of doctor. In this role, we cultivate the myth of the writing teacher as healer extraordinaire, whose high and lonely calling is to heal infirmities and drive all manner of evil spirits from student writing. I find it very easy to slip from Ph.D. to M.D., and I expect many others do too. We are drawn to this role, I

think, by three things: first, by a concern to help our students improve their writing; second, by a belief that we are ultimately responsible for the health of their papers; and third, by the intellectual challenge of diagnosis and prescription.

When we respond to a student paper, we give ourselves a tacit writing assignment that reflects to the role we have chosen to play. Playing the role of doctor, for instance, we all too often give ourselves an assignment like this:

> Examine the paper thoroughly and write a detailed analysis of its rhetorical, structural, stylistic, grammatical, and mechanical strengths and weaknesses. Interpret the writer's aims, diagnose the underlying problems of the paper where necessary, prescribe effective remedies, decide a grade, and explain the grade in up to a page of your best bedside prose. Time allowed: 20 minutes.

When I respond to this assignment, I can easily find myself half an hour into a paper and still searching for the main rhetorical problem--the "heart of darkness"--which I feel sure is the root of the paper's other problems. This situation presents a dilemma: should I abandon the search and try to catch up with my marking schedule, or should I invest the extra ten or fifteen minutes it may take to find the underlying problem and explain it in terms the writer can understand? Usually my schedule, not the student's paper, is tossed aside, and I opt for the consolation of feeling I have finally put my finger on the "original sin."

But when I look at all my pencilled comments--the invention notes I made in the search for my final conclusions on the paper --I wonder if I have been wasting my time. Will the writer really pore over my marginalia, nod remorsefully at every corrected error, and study my end comments diligently? In rare cases, yes, but I suspect the weaker students--the ones who need most help and whose papers invite the most criticism--will just feel discouraged when they see their essays covered with comments. What I meant as a careful, helpful diagnosis, they will see as a messy autopsy, another essay torn apart, confirming the stereotype of the English teacher as choleric coroner. I think we need to be keenly aware of this stereotype when we mark our students' work. We should try to see what we write through their eyes.

As I said earlier, research has challenged the effectiveness of extensive, aggressive sideline coaching on student papers. George Hillocks (1986) has reviewed some studies which indicate that teacher comment has little effect on the quality of student writing, although negative criticism, not surprisingly, seems to foster negative attitudes in students towards writing. Hillocks suggests that comments focused on a few elements of a paper may more likely lead to better writing than comments ranging over all the abstraction levels we have listed on our table. In a study of his own, Hillocks found that longer comments on papers were, if anything, less effective than shorter ones. He concludes that "a teacher who spends ten hours a week making focused comments on

matters of specificity and focus on the compositions of seventh- and eighth-graders might expect to achieve comparable if not better results with only five hours of work."

Nancy Sommers (1982) has looked at the relationship between teachers' comments on student papers and the revisions which followed. She found that teachers were often giving conflicting signals in their comments. For instance, interlineal comments implied that the text needed only local editing, while marginal notes by the same passage suggested that much deeper revisions in the content and meaning of the text were needed. Sommers also found that while it took teachers twenty to forty minutes to read and respond to student papers, their comments were so vague and general that one set could easily by transferred to another student's paper without anyone noticing.

C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon (1982, 1983), who were research associates of Sommers on the same study, saw a paternalistic attitude in teachers' comments. Most response, they argue, is addressed to finished papers and measures them against the teacher's sense of what the Ideal Text should look like. Knoblauch and Brannon suggest that students rapidly lose interest in their texts if teachers appropriate them and deny students their own purpose. (This is what I referred to earlier as the teacher writing the student's paper vicariously.)

Perhaps the clearest message from these studies is that what we write on student papers matters far more than how much we write. But if students have little use for large amounts of

critical, judgmental comments, what kind of response to their papers might have a better chance of helping them become stronger writers? How can we ensure that our comments are more than automatic reflexes? How can we cure the nervous ticks in the margin and the "rubber stamp" endcomments? I think we can begin to answer these questions by recognizing our comments as rhetorical acts and thinking about our purpose for writing them.

What are our goals in responding to student writing? Obviously, we want to improve their writing, but how do we do this? When we limit our response to the traditional role of experts who merely prescribe and judge, we are, in effect, widening an invisible, but very real gap between ourselves and our students. We are excluding them from the community of proficient writers by constantly reminding them of their inferiority. We belong to this elite community because we have developed a special kind of control over language, and one source of that control is our ability to anticipate our readers' response--to hear how our writing might sound to our intended audience.

If our goal is to improve student writing, perhaps a better way to do this would be to teach students to become their own best readers. Proficient writers learn to anticipate their

readers' reactions. They construct hypotheticals: "Will my audience understand this?" "Do I need more examples?" "I'd better break up this sentence." "No, they know that already." Perhaps our goal, as readers of student writing, should be to provide students with that model "reader," by sharing all the process comments that we can.

Rather than preserving the mystery behind our judgments and prescriptions, our intent should be to demystify that process of response and evaluation and make it accessible to our students so that they can take over where we leave off. We do not want them to be cringing, fearful of negative evaluation, waiting for the Damoclean sword to evicerate their papers. Ultimately, we want them to be secure and pleased with their written product, just the way we are when we prepare our final draft of a paper for a conference or journal. If this is a more accurate formulation of our goal, how should we go about it?

To begin with, this perspective calls for a different kind of comment in the margin. It involves responding to our students' drafts the way we respond to our colleagues' drafts--fewer judgments and directives, more questions and suggestions. But teaching students to be their own best readers requires more than this subtle shift in the way we phrase our comments. It involves modeling the reading process--showing students how their papers might sound to their intended readers, and why some places in the papers might give readers trouble. These comments offer specific suggestions: e.g. "I'm having difficulty following you

here." "Now I see what you were leading up to; perhaps you could forecast this better." "I've lost the point of these examples."

These comments also reflect our reaction as real people, responding not only to the writer's technique, or her command of spelling rules, but also to her message and intention. Michael Robertson, in a recent contribution to CCC (Feb. '86), suggests that perhaps our first response to student writing should be that of one human being to another--a comment on what is being said, not how it is said.

I recently had a student submit a paper evaluating the new anti-baldness drug, Minoxodil. When the student described how sweat, dripping down a volunteer's face caused hair to grow in odd places, my marginal comment was "Oh, great!"

Responding to student writing as the intended reader requires that we enter the reading-writing transaction as participants, not merely as observers. We must ask the questions and make comments that will help direct students to our problems and responses as readers, not merely as judges or evaluators.

A number of theorists have suggested ways of achieving this kind of shift in role. Our annotated bibliography refers you to some of these.

The kind of response we have been describing might be most effective if we make most of our comments before the end of the student's composing process, and before we have to give a grade. We want to identify two teaching techniques which address this problem. Peter Elbow (1983) and Christopher Burnham (1986) have

independently described "portfolio" systems in which no grades are given on individual papers. Students submit a portfolio of their revised papers for evalution at the end of the course. The portfolio method allows for the growth and maturity that we anticipate in a writing course, and acknowledges the inappropriateness of "averaging" early grades with later grades. If we expect our students' writing skills to mature during the course, then their final papers, not their early ones, will indicate their growth.

This idealized presentation of the portfolio system has several drawbacks in the reality of the classroom. I found that my students tend to feel either vaguely uncomfortable or overly complacent throughout the semester. The insecure students kept asking "how am I doing?" while the overly confident students set themselves up to be shellshocked at the end of the term. In addition to the students' problems associated with the atypical practice of withholding judgment until the end of the semester, teachers encounter another set of difficulties. When the end of the semester arrives and you face a thick stack of portfolios, it's easy to feel overwhelmed, especially when so much is riding on these final evaluations. Experience has led me to compromise. I now give grades on individual papers, but the grades are in parentheses, offered with the understanding that they are tentative, recognizing that the students' work is continuously in progress. Yet, in the end, in this system, the teacher is still responsible for all the comments on the papers.

A second technique brings the focus back to generating real reader responses to the student writing, and involves the familiar workshop method, where students offer comments on their peers' papers. If our goal is to teach students about the reading process, workshops are a useful technique not only because they provide students with peer comments, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because they give students practice in playing the role of reader for each others' papers.

Below is a sample of one student's written response to a fellow student's proposal paper dealing with the question "Should a wife and mother work?"

> The paper begins with a strong introduction. I like how you related the past to the present; I could actually picture women picketing in front of the factories. Your introduction really brought me into the paper and set a strong tone for the rest of the paper.
>
> However, the second paragraph weakens the paper a bit. I like the first few sentences but I think you get off the track when you begin writing about nonworking mothers and the "libbers' eye" (this could be a paper in itself). It's a good point but it doesn't flow with the rest of the paper. I also think you need a sentence that sums up what your paper is going to talk about, such as "Women have faced many problems because of the ERA movement but the advantages of to a working

mother are far greater than these problems." This would provide your reader with a connection between your proposal and the arguments you make later in the paper (your arguments would be much stronger). It's obvious that you're talking about ERA and the problems of working mothers, but I was not sure what you were proposing until the end of the paper.

This student is responding as a reader, not an evaluator. She really wants to help her fellow student write better. The tone of her comments is supportive yet her suggestions are quite specific. These are not the kind of comments Nancy Sommers characterized as "interchangeable" from one paper to another. This student-reader addresses coherence, organization, emphasis, and later, credibility and focus in this paper.

If our workshops and seminars help our students to become this kind of reader, then we are coming closer to the goals of teaching them to become their own best reader.

As our chart suggests, when we mark papers, we are faced with a multitude of choices. Perhaps the most important of these is to decide which role we will assume. Our role is influenced by where in the composing process we make our comments, and by the content and focus of those comments. Some of us play the same role all the time. For instance, we might play judge whenever we have a piece of student writing in our hands; on the other hand, some of us slip in and out of roles at different stages in the process, perhaps without being aware that we are

doing so. If we become aware of the role we are playing, we can ask ourselves: do we really want to play this role for this student at this stage in the composing process?

Our presentation has emphasized the drawbacks of the exclusive use of judge, coach, and doctor roles, and the advantages of the intended reader role. However, we do not want to suggest that this is the only role that we should take. What we do want to stress is that when we make our choices, we should be conscious of the options and their implications. Some roles--judge and doctor, for example--used exclusively, can enslave us. However, there are others which free us from the narrowest view of justifying final grades.

When we are aware of the array of choices, we may find that the stack of papers waiting for our attention becomes less of a chore and more of an opportunity to sit back, read, and enter into a productive, intelligent dialogue with our students.

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Curing the Nervous Tick: Reader-based Response to Student Writing

An annotated bibliography of selected books and articles on responding to student writing

College Composition and Communication 32 (May, 1982)

Includes several pertinent articles, especially Nancy Sommers' study of teachers' responses to student writing, and an article by Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch's arguing that teachers should not usurp students' responsibility for their own texts.

College Composition and Communication 33 (October, 1982)

Continues the discussion begun in the May issue. Griffin presents overview of recent theory and research on response to student writing. This issue also includes five shorter articles presenting individual teachers' models and methods of response.

Bridges, Charles W., ed. Training the New Teacher of College Composition. Urbana: NCTE, 1986.

Includes three articles addressing problems associated with response to student writing. Larson offers advice on the kind of comments to make on papers. Hairston warns against "becoming a slave" to the marking process, noting that more response is not necessarily better response. Burnham describes in detail his model of portfolio evaluation.

Cooper, Charles R., and Lee Odell. Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging. Urbana: NCTE, 1977.

Presents a comprehensive summary of various measures of writing achievement, including holistic scoring, primary trait scoring, syntactic maturity, and peer evaluation. See especially Odell's article addressing ways to identify intellectual processes reflected in student writing.

Elbow, Peter. "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process." College English 45 (1983): 327-339.

A pilot article for his recent book, Embracing Contraries (OUP, 1986). Elbow argues that writing teachers need compromise neither their commitment to nurture student writers not their commitment to uphold high standards.

Hillocks, George, Jr. Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching. Urbana: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1986.

An extensive review of research into the composing process and methods of teaching writing. Includes 9-page summary of studies on effects of teachers' comments on student writing.

Knoblauch, C.H., and Lil Brannon. Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing. Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook, 1983. 118-150.

Chap. 6 develops ideas advanced in May '82 issue of CCC. Argues that teachers' comments should be facilitative, not directive, in order to motivate substantive revision while maintaining students' responsibility for their work.

Mallonee, Barbara, and John R. Breihan. "Responding to Students' Drafts: Interdisciplinary Consensus." CCC 36 (1985). 213-231.

Addresses the problem of standardizing evaluation in a WAC program. Recommends that faculty agree on a policy towards error, on a limited common terminology for responses to student writing, on a sensible response process, and on the value of responding to papers. Offers suggestions for reaching such agreement, but acknowledges that disciplines remain distinct interpretive communities.

Murray, Donald M. "What Can You Say Besides Awk?" Learning by Teaching. Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook, 1982. 151-156. (This article first appeared in California English Journal, December, 1973.)

Contrasts some roles the teacher can play when responding to student writing, arguing that a receptive form of response based on listening to students in conferences is better than prescriptive or punitive responses to student writing.

Robertson, Michael. "Is Anybody Listening?: Responding to Student Writing." CCC 37 (1986). 87-91.

Argues that we should respond to what students write as well as how they write. Describes the dilemma as he sees it: we must be both personal and impersonal; and he suggests that one way past this dilemma is to respond in terms of various hypothetical audiences.