

The Art of Response

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Responding to students' writing can be a tricky business. As teachers of writing, we are told that we should encourage, motivate, inspire, liberate, and challenge our students with both our written and verbal responses. We should also instruct, guide, correct, and—above all—be honest in our reactions. At the same time, however, we are cautioned that anything we do or say can have long-term psychological or practical effects on students' desire to write and/or on their feelings about literature, reading, language, or even school, in general. Take, for example, the student writer I interviewed for a case study in one of my

graduate classes. Writing, for Brooke, had always been merely fulfillment of school requirements. However, a writing teacher's comment on one of Brooke's ninth-grade original poems—"You have poetry in your soul"—inspired Brooke to strive to be a better writer and develop her own style and voice. This incident had such a profound effect on Brooke that she said, "[My teacher's] insight changed me, and I have valued writing ever since" (Crone-Blevins 2).

As Tom Romano says, "We speak a word of praise or a word of criticism, and someone we've known only weeks may be permanently changed in some way" (103). Having such influence in students' lives can bring much joy to a teacher, but it can also be a heavy responsibility. So, how do we respond to students' writing appropriately, effectively, and honestly? How do we give them the support, positive feedback, and suggestions they need so they want to continue writing, and, at the same time, both draw attention to the areas of their writing that need improvement and empower them to know how to make those improvements, all of this without adversely affecting their writing futures?

To address the above questions adequately, we must look at the broader environment in which

most teachers are teaching writing. In the public school setting in the United States, there are several internal and external pressures brought to bear upon teachers, students, and the learning environment that contribute to making teacher response difficult and stressful. Some of the most influential pressure comes from parents, school officials, and society in general, all of which—consciously or not—perpetuate the notion that grades are an appropriate and accurate indicator of a student's individual value and worth. In fact, as Zemelman and Daniels write, "[I]f we teachers are going to insist on our rightful professional latitude to try new forms of evaluation, we must educate not only our students but their parents as well" (217). For while most parents sincerely want their children to expand their knowledge base, they are often more concerned that their son or daughter is making the grades needed to progress to the next stage in life, whether that is middle school, high school, college, or a chosen career. While most local public school administrators truly want to see students delve into learning, they are often also concerned—and justifiably so—that their students' test scores are high enough to identify their school systems as "successful." While state education officials are usually educators first and foremost, they

are also well aware that students and schools nationwide are compared to each other, and they want their students to measure up favorably. Whether we like it or not, all of these outside forces play an influential role in the atmosphere and environment in which our teachers must teach.

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A second kind of pressure in the classroom is the internal tension in teachers themselves, who often feel torn between a conviction that students learn best in an educational environment that encourages creativity and personal discovery (i.e., one in which they are not judged on every piece of work they produce), and a recognition that the outside world demands visible and tangible results, with the teacher often held accountable for student success or failure. The conflicting expectations of teachers to both provide a stimulating and affirming learning environment and to judge and evaluate their students in a way that shows the world their successes, may seem impossible to reconcile. Some teachers—even some very good teachers—can be frustrated or overwhelmed by such demands.

A third pressure that negatively affects the broader teaching and learning environment is, in a sense, exerted by the students themselves. While most students accept that they must achieve certain standards to ensure the stability of their futures, for whatever reasons—among them lack of interest, lack of ability, and/or lack of self-confidence—some make no attempt to learn for their own enrichment, but instead settle for performing for grades. Their minimal involvement in the classroom speaks loudly of disinterest, boredom, and lack of personal investment in their education.

Each of us has had experience with such students, in whom we see sparks of creativity and po-

tential, but who are satisfied with simply getting something down on paper to meet the requirements. One of my first-semester college freshmen turned in a draft of a critical essay in which the first three or four paragraphs were stimulating, creative, and well-developed. As the essay progressed, however, the cohesiveness weakened considerably, and the final couple of paragraphs were so poorly written that I wondered whether the same person who had so competently set out his analysis in the first several paragraphs had actually authored those final disorganized and empty ones. When I conferenced with the student and enthusiastically pointed out the strengths of the first half of his essay, I realized that he clearly had thought in depth about the subject and had good ideas, which could have been incorporated into his concluding paragraphs. But when I encouraged him to rework his final paragraphs to make them as effective as the early ones, his only question was whether the first part was good enough to earn a “C.” If so, he said, he did not want to put more time and effort into the assignment. In spite of my attempts to motivate him to revise in order to produce the interesting and well-written essay of which we both knew he was capable, the student was unconcerned about learning anything from the writing experience and cared only about earning a passing grade. I was disappointed and frustrated with his reaction.

Teachers, in their individuality, react differently to such attitudes. Some acquiesce to the students’ apathy and plod through each school year giving and grading assignments without responding to or challenging their students in any meaningful way. Others may try to find projects that follow the traditional methods with which students are familiar and which produce the requisite grading opportunities—projects that generate enough student interest to motivate them to participation. Still others, however, rise to the challenge and are able to foster learning environments that empower students to discover, create, and think in ways they have never done before.

The above-mentioned pressures can be found in all of our public school classrooms including, but not limited to, our English classes. However, there are additional pressures present in the writing classroom that are perhaps not as prevalent in the broader school context. For example, Romano says that because of the deeply personal nature of writing, “Distinguishing between the student and

the writing is a fool's distinction. Writing is the writer. It embodies her voice, her passion, her thinking, her intellect, her labor, and, on some occasions, her very soul" (125). Being aware that all writers find it difficult to separate themselves from their writing, the writing teacher knows that any response that he or she might intend as constructive criticism to help a student improve writing can be interpreted by that student as personal criticism rather than comment on the work presented, can contribute to the student's frustration with writing, or can reinforce the student's poor self-image and feelings of failure. As Moher states, "So many students feel powerless about their own thinking and even more so about their writing" (79). Obviously, conscientious teachers do not want to exacerbate an already tenuous situation. Such tensions and possible repercussions weigh heavily on many writing teachers' minds, since their purpose is to help students become better writers, make them want to write again, and teach them how to use writing as a learning and thinking tool. But Lad Tobin says that tension is not necessarily a bad thing:

Unfortunately, many teachers seem to fear tension and often try hard to reduce or eliminate it. These teachers have good intentions: they know that many students have been traumatized by writing and writing teachers and they also know that too much tension is debilitating, even paralyzing for a writer. But while we can decrease tension in certain areas of the process, we cannot (and should not try to) make writing or teaching writing entirely painless. We should not strive to make everyone in the writing class "as comfortable as possible," a goal appropriate for terminally ill patients, but not for teachers and writers. Rather than wasting time trying to dissipate tension, we need to expend more energy finding ways to use that tension productively. (100)

So, given the general climate of public school teaching today and the specific pressures and tensions felt by teachers and students alike in the English classroom, how *does* a writing teacher both make the tension productive and give supportive and encouraging responses that motivate and nurture, yet are honest and instructional?

Teachers themselves provide us with a wide variety of strategies and philosophies. In fact, Sarah Warshauer Freedman's extensive 1984 study of 560 teachers and 715 middle and high school students showed that among the teachers, there was not "a consistent sense of the most and least productive

types of responses during the writing process" (56). That same inconsistency is still prevalent today. Some teachers prefer using only positive language, concentrating on the students' strengths, while others believe that total honesty is always the best policy, even when that means less than favorable comments. Some insist that verbal response is far better than written, while others think just the opposite. Some prefer to use a combination of peer response with teacher response, while others' experiences indicate that peer response is ineffective and frustrating for the writer. Regardless of the method(s) favored, however, there seems to be general agreement that commenting on students' writing is only useful if it influences the way the students read their own writing. Johnston summarizes the writing teachers' common concern in this way:

Most English teachers feel a responsibility to comment in a way that will prompt improvement in future pieces. Consequently, the task of reading students' work is a highly stressful one, not because it is difficult to read, but because it is difficult to work out the comment one should make. It should simultaneously encourage, recognise, correct and instruct. Faced with that pressure, marking is very hard work that can be fiercely resented, especially when the teacher has a nagging suspicion that the time is largely wasted; that the comments won't be useful. (54)

Taking a look at several teachers' methods and styles of responding to student writing will help us understand the wide range of strategies used by effective teachers who feel the pressure and tensions present in the English classroom. Dr. June Hobbs, a teacher of English at Gardner-Webb University, states that her most productive approach is twofold: She makes a conscious effort to be "a concerned reader who is trying to understand and help the writer find out what he or she is trying to say," and she is careful to question rather than direct. For example, she asks, "How are you going to make this bridge?" rather than saying, "You need to put 'however' here for these two sentences to flow."

Additional keys to Hobbs's successful responses are her attempts to provide many opportunities for students to write without a grade at stake and her efforts to respond honestly to her students, to ask questions that clarify for both reader and writer where the writing is unclear or lacks focus, and to communicate her interest in both the writing and the writer. While aware of the fragility of her

students' writing confidence, Hobbs believes in a straightforward approach that at times leads her to be blunt with her comments and questions such as, "What does it matter?", "What is the significance of this?", or "You missed the point here." Hobbs prefers written response to oral, but more important than whether the response is oral or written is that the student, as a result of Hobbs's response, begins to "re-see" the piece in a clearer, more focused, and objective way. Johnston summarizes this idea when he says, "Our principal role is to show [student writers] how we and others read their work, and to teach them different ways of reading it themselves, so that they can develop as writers" (66–67). Hobbs believes that helping her students hear the reader's voice as well as the writer's (what Donald Murray refers to as "the other self") is critical for students in every piece of writing (Murray 114).

Brian Johnston makes a convincing argument that teacher response that is tied to assigning grades is often ineffective, as is teacher response that does not involve the writer. While Johnston acknowledges that in most schools there is a requirement that the quality of students' work be judged, he believes that such "judgement . . . discourages reflection and experimentation, in fact learning itself" (127). In his research study done in 1978, titled "Motivational Effects of Different Schemes for Assessing Students' Writing," Johnston concludes that "when English teachers avoid grades and marks, and involve students in assessing their own work, then the students are more motivated to improve their writing" (1). This finding directly addresses the effects that grade expectations have, both in the broad context of education and in the narrower field of teaching writing.

Supported by significant research and data, Johnston looked carefully at the grade-oriented pressures exerted in the classroom, as discussed in the early portion of this article, and concluded that, while a teacher is accountable to the outside world for helping students achieve certain standards, a writing teacher's main concern must be to help students improve their writing. In order to do this, Johnston says:

[Teachers] can be quite direct in [their] response. [They] can indicate that [they] read it differently, or [they] can offer suggestions. [They] can respond freely and quite naturally. It is important not to be too cautious and non-directive . . . Writing teachers sometimes feel that they must treat a student's

work with kid gloves, so as to show respect for the student. They talk of students being damaged by challenging comments. But students' motivation to work is also damaged by [indirect response by a teacher]: a lack of integrity in the teacher's response stimulates a similar lack of integrity in a student who agrees to revise work, but in fact has little interest in doing so. (52–53)

While Johnston acknowledges that in many classrooms students make improvements to their writing in response to comments from peers or teachers only in order to get a better grade, he still encourages honest and direct response to a student's writing. To avoid grade-oriented revision, Johnston suggests separating grading from the process of writing whenever possible, and establishing an "apprenticeship-like situation" (82), much like Nancie Atwell's workshop approach (*In the Middle* 89–117).

Without outlining here all of Atwell's guidelines for a writing workshop, we can look at the philosophy that undergirds her approach and the crucial role that response plays: "A writing workshop [is] a place where writers have what writers need . . . time, ownership, and response" ("Making Time" 195). By listing it as one of the three main ingredients for a successful writing workshop, Atwell stresses the importance of response. Believing that her own responding has changed over the years, she says, "My knowledge base has broadened and deepened. I've gone from acting as a mirror, someone who reflects back what I hear in the writing and gives a neutral response, to trying to act as a mentor to young writers" (*In the Middle* 230). Now Atwell at times finds it necessary and even desirable to take a more directive approach in her response:

I ask leading questions, suggest options a writer might pursue, intervene when a writer moves off-track, point a new direction, demonstrate solutions to writing problems, show how to achieve an effect, even make brief assignments that invite students to engage as writers in ways they otherwise might not. My role as responder is more diverse these days, and more satisfying. (*In the Middle* 230)

Additionally, Atwell addresses the previously mentioned tension that concerns many teachers, that of doing long-term damage to a budding writer's self-confidence and/or self-image. While she clearly encourages teachers to support, motivate, and nurture student writers, Atwell also cautions against empty praise, which can both call into question a

teacher's integrity and prevent a writer from seeing his or her writing as a work in progress:

Writers are vulnerable. That's the writer there on the page. Our essential selves are laid bare for the world to see. Writers want response that gives help without threatening our dignity. . . . But writers are also inquisitive and ambitious. We want to know how we can improve our essential selves. Writers want response that takes us seriously and moves us forward without condescension. Everyone can recall a time when something we did elicited a compliment that felt contrived. It didn't help, because our standards told us we could have done better, but we still didn't understand *how*. (*In the Middle* 217)

Both Atwell and Johnston would no doubt concur with Donald Murray's assertion: "In practice, the effective conference teacher does not deal in praise or criticism. All texts can be improved, and the instructor discusses with the student what is working and can be made to work better, and what isn't working, and how it might be made to work" (119). Although Murray's assertion specifically deals with response through conferencing, it can obviously be applied to other kinds of teacher response, as well.

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Some adolescents have fragile egos, and one of their difficulties with writing stems from their belief that they cannot offer anything worth writing or reading about. Many teachers are thus afraid to respond forthrightly to these students' writing, for fear of doing long-term damage to their psyches. Beach and Marshall suggest that "teachers can bolster stu-

dents' self-confidence by providing a lot of praise. Furthermore, they can react to students' responses in a manner that implies that they take the students' ideas seriously. If students hear teachers responding to their ideas, they may then believe that what they say can actually affect another's thinking" (214). I remember the pleasure radiating from my nine-year-old son's face when he showed me a story he had written on which his fourth-grade teacher responded, "I had never thought of this! Thanks for helping me see things in a new way!" My son told me that he had worried that he would get a bad grade on the story because he had disagreed with what the other children in the class had said during the prewriting discussion of the subject. He was amazed that he could offer new insights to an experienced and beloved teacher, and his confidence in his ability to write something worth reading was clearly boosted. Through our seemingly insignificant responses, we can motivate and encourage our students to use writing to connect their personal thoughts and experiences to what they are learning both in school and in life.

The key to successful responding for each of the teachers/researchers we have discussed seems to be not the actual words they utter, but rather their underlying attitude and philosophy, succinctly summarized by Moher: "I try to approach each student writer with a sense of wonder and genuine interest in who she is and what she is trying to say. Not judge or edit or correct. Just listen for what is going on behind the text" (75–76). Styles of response seem to matter less than this underlying message, which imbues writers with a sense of worth and takes them seriously, regardless of the quality of the work.

In summary, we have seen that a major difficulty with teacher response is that "it is often coupled with grades, and functions to justify the grade rather than to teach the student" (Freedman 2). This unfortunate reality pervades many of our classrooms and is especially problematic in our writing classrooms. What a teacher might believe is good classroom practice—many opportunities for practice writing without evaluation—can often seem to be at odds with the need for public accountability, i.e., grades. Unfortunately, the pressure from parents, school officials, and society for assessment through grading will most likely not lessen in the near future. However, as we have seen, there is some helpful advice available from teachers who have found ways to deal with some of this pressure.

Because “the affective usually controls the cognitive, and affective responses have to be dealt with first” (Murray 118), it is imperative that teachers establish a nonjudgmental and positive atmosphere in their writing classrooms. Students must feel free to take risks with language, and they must feel supported by their teachers when taking those risks. As we have seen through the testimonies of several educators, however, we should not give only glowing responses to student writers. There is room for gentle instruction and kind teaching, as Romano notes:

Our responses and grades should nurture. This does not mean we deceive students about their writing skills, offering overexuberance and undeserved praise. On the contrary, we owe them honesty. We must humanely discuss their writing problems and help them work to master them. But let us not forget that honesty also means we must continually strive to see what our students are doing well, and then acknowledge and reward it. What really matters is that our students keep writing, learning, and growing as much as they can. (125–26)

Not everything a teacher does works perfectly all the time, and certainly some students gain more than others from their experiences in a writing class. But the point is that almost all students can gain something if their teachers are cognizant of their writing struggles, and if they are willing to offer a safe and supportive writing environment. As teachers, we will not always be confident that we are making the correct responses, but just as with writers and their writing, the more we practice responding, the better we will get at knowing “the difference between [responses] that are helpful, and those that are hurtful, at recognizing the emotional burden that most [responses] carry” (Wassermann 8). Teachers can make a difference in their students’ desire to continue writing, and writing can make a difference in people’s understanding of themselves and their world. If teachers respond honestly to their students’ writing as serious and interested readers,

they will establish an atmosphere of trust and acceptance in which their students can develop their own individual voices, and can grow and change through the very act of writing.

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