

Beyond the Red Pen: Clarifying Our Role in the Response Process

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Setting: *A high school English classroom. Mrs. Thomas has just returned the class's papers as the bell rings. Students file out of the classroom with their essays. As the last of them leaves, Mr. Bell, another English teacher, enters.*

Mr. Bell: Sue, how are things going?

Mrs. Thomas: Okay, I guess. I'm just getting frustrated with these kids. I'm making the same comments on their writing with every paper—we've been working on thesis statements and supporting details all semester, and they just aren't getting it. That's all I seem to respond to. I don't know what else to do.

Setting: *Hallway, outside of Mrs. Thomas's class. Two students head toward the cafeteria, having just gotten their papers back from Mrs. Thomas.*

Tom: Hey, how'd you do?

Trish: A "C" like always. She says the same thing on every paper. "Unclear thesis." What the heck is a thesis anyway?

Tom: Yeah, I know what you mean. She's been writing "support" next to my paragraphs most of the year, but look how long this paragraph is—it has lots of support. She's never really gone over any of this stuff with us. And what does "awk" mean anyway?

The scene above is all too common in many high schools. After returning papers teachers are left with the feeling that they are still not reaching some students, and students still feel powerless in the writing classroom. Grading and responding to student papers can be one of the greatest sources of tension we face as writing teachers. To learn more about this dilemma, Bryan conducted two research studies with teachers and students in a public and private high school. Both studies dealt with various aspects of response to writing—both from the students' and teachers' perspectives.

What Research Tells Us: Bryan's Motivation

What do teachers need to consider when they respond to their students' writing? Nancy Sommers believes that as we respond we must not bring our own purposes and beliefs into the comments we give our students. If we do this, we will be appropriating the students' drafts and taking control of their writing. We would be, through our responses, taking our "students' attention away from their own purposes

in writing a particular text and focus[ing] that attention on the teachers' purpose in commenting" (149). It is very easy to do this, so as responders we must be very careful to remain focused on the students' ideas and not on our goals.

The kinds of comments we write are also important. Several researchers found that students prefer specific comments rather than general observations. For instance, Gary Dohrer's research suggests that responses based on classroom instruc-

tion are more helpful than those that are not. Catherine Lynch and Patricia Klemans found that students believe comments are more useful when they explain why something is either good or bad. Telling students that a part of their essay is effective isn't enough; students want to know why it's effective. Richard Straub learned in his research that students generally don't like to make macrostructural changes to their writing. That is, they don't want to "go back to the drawing board." They prefer to make smaller sentence or paragraph level alterations. He also found that students did not respond well to comments that they felt were expressed in a highly judgmental way. Further, Straub learned that students preferred praise on their writing only when the praise had an explanation as to why it was praiseworthy. Finally, C. W. Griffin determined that students respond better to a positive tone in the comments on their papers than to a sarcastic tone. He also found that, overall, students don't find marks on grammar and spelling very helpful.

While written commentary is certainly an important type of response, the research also talks extensively about conferencing. The writing conference is an excellent way for teachers and students to dialogue about writing and begin the writing or revision process. Donald Murray discusses several aspects of the writing conference in "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Process." First, he lists some good questions to begin a writers' conference: "What did you learn from this piece of writing?" or "What do you intend to do in the next draft?" (234). He reiterates the importance of questioning when he comments that, rather than using questions to praise or criticize, the questions in the conference should always look toward the next draft. He discusses how he at one time marked everything on students' papers but gradually learned that within the conference teachers need to listen first and respond to the students' comments and concerns. In short, let the students direct the dialogue.

This research was important to the development of these studies for several reasons. First, I have had a longstanding interest in responding to students' writing more effectively, and these writers and researchers helped to inform my own research for both of these studies. Further, as Molly and Liz began to use more conferencing in their classrooms as our study progressed, I more closely examined the work of these researchers to better inform myself. In doing so, I found that assessing student writ-

ing goes beyond merely grading papers. Teachers need to first understand their role as responder and make it an integral part of writing instruction.

Teachers' Responses Defined: Background for Molly's Study

The purpose of this study was threefold. First, I was looking to see how much attention students paid to the written comments on their papers. Second, I wanted to learn if students knew why teachers responded to their writing. Third, I was interested in determining if students understood the comments written on their papers.

At the time of the study, Molly was teaching in a medium-sized private high school in the Midwest. She taught sophomore English, which at this school is an American literature course. During the second year, the students read authors such as Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Twain, Fitzgerald, and Salinger and wrote at least four papers each quarter, including exposition, literary analysis, response essays, and personal narratives. They also kept a journal and a portfolio of their writing.

For this study Molly marked and graded a set of papers as she normally would. Once she graded the class set, I took the papers and randomly numbered 6–12 comments on each student's essay. The original essays were passed back to the students along with two copies of a questionnaire—one for the author of the essay and the other for a peer reader. The questionnaire had a pair of questions for each numbered comment on the students' papers: "What does the comment mean?" and "How will this comment be helpful for future drafts?" Next, Molly allowed the students some time to look at the numbered responses on their papers and answer the two questions for each response. The purpose here was for me to determine if the students understood the comments and if they felt they were helpful for revision or future writing assignments.

After the students returned the completed questionnaires, I began to look for patterns in their responses. I also tried to determine how well the students understood Molly's responses to their writing. Further, I noticed that the comments could be broken into several categories on two levels—their appearance and their function. As to appearance, the comments could be described as either a word or words, symbol(s), or a combination of the two. (See Table 1.)

TABLE 1.
APPEARANCE COMMENTS

Word Comments	These comments are simply written words with no symbols connecting them to students' writing. Some examples are "fragment," or "good."
Symbol Comments	These comments are marks or symbols that teachers use to show students an error or call their attention to a particular part of the essay. An example might be circling a piece of text. It is important to remember that there are no words to explain what the symbols mean.
Combination Comments	These comments contain symbols as well as words. Typically, the symbols point out something for the students, and the words give some explanation, correction, or answer for them. An example might be a teacher circling a word and in the margin writing "misspelled."

Comments could also be examined based on their function. The more I looked at the responses, the clearer the categories became. In the end five types of responses became apparent: question responses, instructional responses, praise responses, answer responses, and attention responses. (See Table 2.)

As I was analyzing the comments Molly wrote and her students' understanding of them, I began to interview several students in her class to learn more about their attitudes toward Molly's response style. This proved to be very interesting. One point that the students made very clear through their interviews was that they believed the main reason teachers respond to students' writing is to tell them what they are doing wrong. A similar attitude has surfaced in other research as well. Daiker, Dragga, and Harris have all found that teachers at both the high school and college levels overwhelmingly respond to their students' writing negatively. In each case, at least 89 percent of the responses teachers wrote on student papers noticed error or found problems with the writing.

A second point that the interviews brought out was that the students saw the written comments as a way to get a better grade, not necessarily to im-

TABLE 2.
FUNCTION COMMENTS

Praise Comments	Typically, these comments let students know that they did a good job—for example, "nice transition," or "good paragraph development."
Question Comments	These comments simply ask the writers a question about their paper—for instance, "Are you sure?" or "Can you elaborate on this a bit more?"
Instructional Comments	These comments tell the students what they are doing wrong or attempt to inform them how to improve on something without giving them the answer—for instance, "Please explain this in more detail." or "Try to be more specific here."
Answer Comments	These comments are pointed out by the teacher using symbols and then writing in a correction near the symbol as an explanation. For instance, the teacher may see a misspelled word and circle it, writing the correct spelling above it.
Attention Comments	Most often these comments are just symbols whose main purpose is to call the students' attention to a mistake, problem, or improvement in their writing—for example, a teacher circles a word but gives no indication or direction as to what the symbol means. The assumption is that the student will know what the symbol means.

prove as writers. Nowhere in the interviews did the students equate one with the other. Third, the students noted that it was important for them to read the comments on their papers, but in almost all cases they may spend only a moment or two doing so. These perceptions from the students made an impact on Molly as well.

Molly's Response to the Study

From this action research study, I learned how my philosophy toward writing and the teaching of writing is not necessarily reflected in my commenting style. It was interesting for me to learn what my stu-

dents perceived in relation to my comments. Unfortunately, students' perceptions did not always match my intent. Many times they had difficulty understanding my comments, even though I believed instruction in class had made them clear. For example, if I asked a student for a "clearer thesis," I found that some students were still not sure what a thesis statement was. Another important insight was that students saw my comments as ways to help them receive a better grade on their next draft. I do not think they saw comments as a teaching tool, as I would have expected.

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Specificity also seemed to be a problem. My perception of a specific instructional comment was still not the same for my students. I realized that my teaching practice needed to change somehow. The fundamental concern for me was realizing my philosophy of teaching writing was not matching my response style. To my dismay, this study seems to indicate that students really see the grade as the final assessment of themselves and their ideas. The greatest insight I found was the need to create better communication with my students about the responses I had toward their papers. This goal caused me to create more opportunities to dialogue with them about their writing. As a result, I hoped my comments would empower my students to find their voice in writing and validate what they have to say.

One way to increase dialogue with my students is the post-commenting conference, conducted after the first paper is assigned, evaluated, and returned. It becomes a nice way to get to know my new students and establishes a greater sense of trust between my class and me. While I conference

with a student, others are at their seats reading and responding to literature. During the conference I also take the time to continue teaching and pointing out various problems with the paper. Knowing the conference is going to occur, I sometimes hold back on a comment on the paper, making a mental note for myself, and address it during the conference. More importantly, the conference is also an opportunity for students to receive genuine praise. I can always find something redeeming about a paper—the general subject, a developed example, or a well-constructed sentence.

The conference itself is open-ended. I come with two or three questions. I first ask students what they liked about their paper and what they could have improved upon. After we discuss the paper in general terms, I then ask them to review my responses and see if they have any questions. It is interesting to me that, nine times out of ten, students admit to not really reading or thinking about the comments. What an eye opener! It is also interesting to see them question an unreadable comment or ask for clarification. For example, my sophomores often find stylistic questions and comments the most difficult to understand; therefore, the conference becomes a nice avenue for individualized grammar instruction. I can point out a subject/verb agreement, verb tense, or punctuation error and really discuss it with the student. It is also an important time to clarify what I consider key concepts for their writing: understanding the structure of the essay; the complete, well-developed thesis statement; developed examples; and unified organization.

The post-commenting conference seems to match my writing instruction philosophy with my teaching practice. Writing is an ongoing process, and students are always learning through their writing. Hopefully, it allows us to build an important relationship so they see me more as a coach in the classroom rather than someone who just reads and grades their papers. Reflection has also become an integral part of my writing classroom with the use of portfolios. Students are introduced to the reflective aspect of the portfolio process from the very beginning, when they are asked to respond to their paper as well.

One problem that I soon ran into, however, with the post-commenting conference was the time constraint and not being able to do this with every writing assignment. Realizing that I would not be able to hold conferences after every paper,

I found the answer at the NCTE Conference in Nashville in November 1998, where Kathleen Blake Yancey shared the use of a “talk back” to her comments by the students. Students respond to her comments on their papers, using three guiding questions: What did the teacher like about your paper? What did the teacher not like? and What questions do you have regarding the comments? This strategy has been a valuable tool for me to use after the second or third paper. It continues the dialogue between us in a different way and, I hope, affirms student perceptions of my comments as being valuable to me as their teacher.

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The second insight from the study was the emphasis students put on the grade. While in many ways this does not come as a complete surprise, I was still disheartened by the students’ focus on improvement only for a better grade. It seems to feed into the game of “find out what the teacher wants and give it to her.” I wanted students to move away from their emphasis on the grade and points. I realized that I needed to give comments throughout the process. It was frustrating at first for some students to receive only an outline or brainstorm sheet with comments and no grade (5/5, 10/10, etc.), but I believe that it moved them away from focusing only on the points. Creating opportunities for dialogue has changed the role my responses play in writing instruction.

Matching Instruction with Response Practice: Background for Liz’s Study

After working with Molly and using the information that I learned from that experience in further research, I was eager to conduct a slightly different study, this time trying to examine how well teachers put their own theory about writing instruction

into practice with their response style. I wanted to see how closely teachers, as they teach writing, are supporting their instruction with the responses they write on student essays. In essence, I was hoping to determine not only if Liz is “practicing what she is preaching,” but also if her students recognize whether her instruction matches her response style. To do this I knew that I would be using several data-gathering techniques that I utilized in the study with Molly.

First, before the study began, Liz and I sat down for an interview. My primary goal was to get as much information as I could about Liz the teacher, the responder, and the writer. Second, I decided to sit in on several classes during the semester to take notes and see for myself how Liz taught writing. I would try to be in class when they were discussing literature, preparing to write a paper, and discussing writing strategies for essays they were working on. During the semester I attended class approximately six times—each time observing not only Liz’s instructional method and focus in her teaching, but also the students’ attitude toward the instruction. Next, as with Molly’s study, I interviewed several students, asking questions that dealt with their beliefs about how and why teachers respond the way they do to their writing, what the students do when they get their papers back, what they consider to be helpful and unhelpful comments, what comments they see on their own papers, and what comments the individual students would like to see more of on their papers. Of course, several questions dealt specifically with the way that Liz responded to their writing. The student interviews were important because they gave me a sense of how the students perceived themselves as writers, Liz as a responder, writing as a way to communicate, and comments as a means to help improve writing.

After the individual interviews, I looked at a set of essays that Liz marked. It is important to note that, unlike Molly’s study, in this instance I numbered every written comment on the students’ essays. I felt this would give me much more detailed and descriptive information from which to draw. Another difference between the two studies was that, since Molly’s study had concluded, another function category had emerged—directional comments. This type of response is similar to the instructional comments mentioned above, but the primary difference between the two types is in their tone. Whereas an instructional comment may use words like “please,”

“try,” or “you might want to” as an introduction to the response, a directional comment is more of an order to do something. For instance, a teacher might write “revise this paragraph,” or “change the verb tense here.” Clearly, the tone is more of a command than an instructional response. As research has shown, students do not like to be told or ordered to make changes in their writing. Many times they feel that by doing this a teacher is taking too much control over their ideas.

When the students’ essays were returned to them, Liz also passed out the same questionnaire that we used in Molly’s study. As I hoped, numbering all of Liz’s responses provided much more data than in the first study, and it was well worth it. It allowed me to take a closer look at how Liz responded to her students—I could determine which types of responses she tended to use more often, and it gave me a better idea about her commenting tendencies. Also, because the students were filling out the questionnaires for all of the comments on their essays, I was able to get a clearer picture of just how well they understood the responses on their papers. In the last part of Liz’s study, I conducted focus group interviews with four students from the class. Students became more animated and were much more expressive during the focus group than in the individual interviews. In addition to the student responses, it was also interesting to get Liz’s point of view.

Liz’s Response to the Study

This study with Bryan allowed me to focus on how I taught writing and whether my students found my methods effective. I felt frustrated trying to teach my ninth graders how to analyze literature, including such things as writing thesis statements, using quotes from the text, and tying their explanations to the thesis. The study made me examine what I wanted to do with my processes of teaching, editing, and having the students revise their papers using my comments. I was interested to see if the students could tell what focus skills they should be working on for that essay. The study also allowed me to see if the comments that I made on the students’ drafts were being read, understood, and used in their rewrites.

During the study, students told us that they knew what was expected of them in their writing based on what we had discussed in class. Even though students could recognize what my objectives were for teaching certain skills, they were not always

able to achieve those goals successfully in their essays or during revision. In looking at their reactions, I realized that I made several assumptions about the way that I responded to my students’ writing. First, I assumed that they understood the symbols that I used in the comments I wrote on their papers. For example, I mistakenly thought they understood such things as circling words and above them writing “w.c.” for word choice, “sp” for spelling, “awk” for awkward, or even using squiggly lines under sentences that need to be revised. I thought that the students would also understand comments like “develop this further” or “clarify.” Another assumption that I had made was that my students would be intrinsically motivated to revise their papers to improve their writing, not just to improve their grades by a few percentage points. I realized soon enough how naïve I was in ignoring their very basic needs in not only being able to develop a thesis statement on their own, but also knowing the difference between what I considered to be an awkward sentence and one that was clearly stated. In addition, I had been ignoring the basic principle that giving them one chance to revise their papers was sending them the message that they had one shot to improve their grades, thereby taking away the motivation to improve as writers. This became even more obvious to me when I realized that many of them did not understand how to improve their papers because they had a difficult time interpreting my comments.

Having Bryan analyze their interpretations of my comments helped me realize that I do not take enough time in class to explain to my students my response style and the symbols I use when marking essays. I learned that many of my comments were too vague. Terms such as “explain further,” “more details needed,” “too vague,” or “develop idea” were foreign to many students. I learned that they need to be shown not only what needs to be improved in an essay, but also how to do it. Even though they understood the concept that they needed to add more details to their essays, I had not shown them examples of how they could successfully do that. A targeted comment such as, “Can you also include Romeo’s view here?” usually will work better for a student than simply writing “develop” in the margin. One student told me later, “I don’t know what you mean by clarify!” Another responded that he knew I wanted more of an explanation, but he did not see how he could say anything more about the topic.

I also learned that the tone of my comments was just as important as the outcome I wanted for the response. In other words, students wanted to be praised and know that they were doing something right. If they don't receive this message, or if it sounds like I am ordering them to do something differently, then I might not get a motivated response. I found that one of my students reacted negatively to my directional comment, "Give more of an explanation here." because it sounded too "bossy" to her. However, she responded very positively to comments like "Could you tell me more about Romeo's revenge here?" I came to realize that both positive and negative comments can work, depending on the student, if they [the comments] are specific.

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I've learned that to teach writing well there must be open communication between the teacher and the students. One way I think this is best achieved is by asking students to do a portfolio reflection of their own writing skills. By the end of the year I had implemented the portfolio reflection with my students, which gave them the opportunity to review their own growth and achievements in their writing, as well as set up their own writing goals for the following year. I knew I was on to something when one of the students who participated in the study approached me early this year and told me that when his new English teacher had asked the class to write their first essay with a thesis statement, he felt very proud that he knew what she was asking and that he could do it on his own.

This year I have been trying to improve my writing instruction by inviting students to talk with me about their papers. Because of the new portfolio system at our school, students set up writing goals for themselves at the beginning of the year, reviewing them from the previous year and looking at their previous papers. I sat down with each of my students

to review their goals and talk about which specific skills they should concentrate on during the semester. For the first paper our general class goal was to work on creating thesis statements, implementing quotes, and organizing ideas. After the essay was marked and graded, I sat down with each of the students, and we talked about which skills they should work on for the next paper. At the midpoint of the school year we sat down again to review their goals and their essays from the first semester, and, if necessary, to set some new goals for the rest of the year.

One way to really stress to students the importance of good writing is by using conferencing. Conferencing can help move students away from focusing too much on grades to begin feeling really good about improving as writers. Conferences can serve to alter the role of the teacher from the strict evaluator to a more supportive coach or guide. Sometimes I will use what I call a quick "check-in," where students have the opportunity to ask me a few brief questions about the responses on their essays before beginning the revision process. This has proved very beneficial for my students.

Dialogue between teachers and students can also be achieved through writing. For instance, I sometimes ask my students to respond to or interpret the comments written on their papers in a homework assignment. In this way I get a good idea about the kinds of responses the students understand and those that they have difficulty with. I've found that it is just as important to focus on the paper after it is graded and returned to the students as it is to initially teach the skills. Additionally, I came to the conclusion that if I allow only one revision to improve their grade, I should not even bother writing comments on the revision; students will only read and use the comments if they can use them in future drafts. Hands-on revising, with the individual dialogue—either in writing or in conferencing—seems to be the key in my classroom to having students transfer writing skills from essay to essay throughout the year and improve as writers.

Implications for our Teaching

Working with Molly and Liz has allowed me to learn a great deal about what a good writing classroom looks like. It has also given me a wonderful opportunity to learn more about students' perceptions of themselves as learners and Molly and Liz as responders to student writing. After completing these

two studies, I've seen some implications that may help teachers more effectively respond to their students' writing:

- We need to understand our own motivations and commenting style as we respond to our writers. Do we emphasize content or form in our responses? Are we emphasizing in class what we are responding to on students' papers?
- Research tells us that students will rarely look at comments if they don't have the chance to revise their writing, so it's important that we give them this opportunity whenever possible. Allow students to examine their old papers so they can become familiar with the kinds of problems and successes they typically have. Knowing this information can help them not only during revision, but also early in the writing process.
- If at all possible, allow students plenty of time to write in class. This will enable them, if they wish, to ask us questions about their writing, and, by being more available to them, we can become less intimidating and more of a guide for them as writers.
- In both studies, when students were interviewed they said they want specifics and clarity in the comments we write on their papers. We need to keep this in mind when we respond.
- We must continually emphasize, both in word and in action, how our comments can be helpful for our students in successive drafts as well as future papers. We need to stress that using the responses written on their essays will do more than improve their grades—it can help improve their writing.
- It is crucial that we praise our students' writing, not gratuitously, but when it is warranted. It is easy for students to feel frustrated or overburdened because they don't see many good things in their writing. Making sure that we give positive feedback on every paper is important, not only for their writing development, but also for their self-esteem.
- Mini-lessons and conferences are excellent ways to focus on specific areas of concern for teachers as well as students. Used in conjunction with written comments, they

can be a powerful tool in helping students improve their writing.

Conclusion

By recognizing and affirming student perception of our commenting style, we become learners in the classroom along with our students. Opening the door for more effective dialogue with our students and making response part of our instructional goals seems to be one of the first steps in bringing research into the classroom. We can continue taking these steps by constantly being aware of how and why we respond to our students' writing the way we do. In doing so, we create a better, safer environment, not only for our students to learn, but also for us to teach.

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