

Techniques for Responding to Student Writing

Lucy Calkins is an influential educator and one of the founders of the writing workshop model. In an interview for this project, she talked about useful ways in which teachers can tailor their comments to help young writers grow in their craft.

Transcript

"I think students need response to their writing. They need to feel that their content has gotten through, and somebody's hearing them. And that response can come from a teacher, but it can also come from the student's peers.

"And then students need to know what they're doing that's new, that's really working. I think we need to be very careful that our compliments are much more powerful and that we compliment what we see as the new frontier of a student's writing and describe it in ways that . . . where a student can continue to do that work again and again. So instead of saying, "this is a good paragraph" to say, "the way in which you wrote with sensory detail here is totally different than you used to do couple months ago. And you are changing as a writer. You're the kind of writer now who writes with such sensory detail and it really makes, it makes your pieces alive." And if you say a compliment like that, students remember it, and it becomes part of their identity.

"The other thing that I think we need to do is we need to teach and we need to be really clear that we can . . . around any one piece of writing we can teach, not just the piece of writing, but we can teach the writer. We need to be able to give the writer a lesson, teach a technique which the writer can use, not just with this piece, but with future pieces. My high school son writes lots of papers for his AP history course and, one day I sat down with a lot of the papers and I looked through them and I saw sprinkled in the margin of one paper and then the next and then the next was the question, 'when?' When? When? And I realized that that question, "when" may have reoccurred fifteen, twenty times in the responses to my Myles' history papers. But Myles never extrapolated the fact that he tends to write and to not pin down the particular date and I think that we need to be more willing to teach explicitly. I think Myles' history teacher would have been wise to say, 'Myles, in paper after paper, you write about events, but

you don't say when they occur. And even if you just put it in parenthesis, you need to stick the date in because that's what's expected on the AP exam and that's what historian's do.' So I think we need try to not just fix what the writer did. We need to be really explicit about what is it that we're trying to teach that writers can do, not just in this piece, but in future pieces.

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"The most important time to respond to student writing is when it's just begun. You want to work with writers at the front end, not the rear end of their writing because at the front end you can help them to develop a focus, to decide what it is they're really trying to say; to think again about their point of view or their language. All of that's really hard to learn from if somebody just comes and just gives you an autopsy of finished work. So absolutely the time for response is when you have half of a page written, or when you've got a plan for what you might write or when you've got the, just the beginning of a first draft.

"It's very easy to get a student's piece of writing and to hold it in our hands and to, our fingers start to itch, we know exactly what we would do if this was our piece of writing. We can jump in and tell the student, you know, 'this is what you need to do in this paragraph and this is what you need to do in this paragraph.' And it's tremendously important for teachers to remember that this is not our piece of writing. And that we need to coach students to use techniques in this writing that they can use again and again in future pieces, but that ultimately the student's the author. The fact that we would do the piece differently is somewhat irrelevant."