A Curious Case of Our Responding Habits: What Do We Respond to and Why?

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For a two-week summer seminar on the teaching of writing, I conducted a class exercise that yielded surprising results and made me reconsider how I respond to student writing. When planning the exercise, I remembered Gary Sloan's "The Wacky World of Theme-Marking" and his claims that writing teachers' marking habits are contradictory, biased, and often useless and incorrect, as well as "wacky." I prepared the exercise to see how the teachers enrolled in the seminar would respond to a given text and to prove that they were not as wacky as Sloan and others suggest.

I divided the class into two groups of seven, separated the groups so that they could not hear each other, and gave one group a typed and the other a handwritten version of the same paragraph. Both versions were clear and legible, but the handwritten version was deliberately uneven, the penmanship resembling that of a young writer: circles for the dots above i's, slightly exaggerated curls on the tails of y's, and two minor cross-outs. I instructed both groups to respond to the writing as if it had been sub-mitted in response to an assignment asking for a paragraph describing a relationship between two people. I didn't tell either group anything about the writer, and they didn't ask about the student's age or grade level, or whether the draft was finished or in progress. Each person was allowed approximately ten minutes to read and respond to the paragraph. I instructed them not to discuss the paragraph until they were finished and I had collected the responses. Before collecting the responses, I asked them to put a grade below their written comments. I instructed them to grade the piece after they had written comments in order to ensure that they would not write comments to justify a grade. I then collected their responses and we discussed the paragraph.

Teacher Responses

The behavior of the teachers as they responded and later as they discussed the paragraph was interesting. Those given the handwritten version were at first disturbed, noticeably perplexed by the task of responding, and hesitant to begin. After they turned in the papers, their behavior indicated that responding to the paragraph was especially difficult; they seemed pleased to find consensus about its quality, and they
talked mostly about lines and words they thought were poorly written and unclear. In contrast, those reading the typed version were at first noticeably interested and dedicated to reading the text and writing comments. Later, they remained intent and serious, noting details they liked in the paragraph. I was naturally curious about the reasons for the difference in the behavior of the groups and began to anticipate that the grades and written responses might differ, but not significantly.

Everyone then returned to the main group to discuss the exercise. A spokesperson from the group responding to the handwritten version explained that the student had not addressed the assignment well. This group suggested that the paragraph, while "somewhat" interesting, needed work, especially on style. The spokesperson for the other group explained that the group found the paragraph mature and "intense," and believed the writer had accomplished the task exceptionally well, except for some minor punctuation problems. As soon as a teacher mentioned that one of those minor problems was vague pronoun reference, a participant from the other group recognized the scam and asked if both groups had read the same paragraph. I admitted that they had and explained the difference between the two versions: one had been typed and the other handwritten. I read to them the grades assigned by each group as well as selected responses to the paragraph. The differences were startling and obviously surprised the members of both groups.

The differences in the comments on the paragraphs clearly reflected differences in the attitudes of the two groups. While the participants in both groups attempted to praise the student, the praise in response to the typed version was much more sincere and confidently phrased:

- Excellent mood created here; soft words—emotion. I feel frightened for her—the fright comes after the calm I sensed at the beginning.
- Effective mood is created. This has some tender emotion. I like this softness [arrows are drawn to the first two lines].
- Very good thoughts. You seem to be in touch with them. This paragraph is excellent. I feel I can see those eyes!
- Emotional intensity good! Mystical quality heightened by not naming the person in question.
- I like the way you allow me to "feel" her fright. Your thoughts are very good, but we could do some work together on word choice (you use "look" six times).
- The feeling and visual images are fantastic. I can picture this! I have been through the same emotion.
- Great technique—showing me in a unique way much more about this person than meets the eye.

In contrast, the comments on the handwritten version, particularly attempts at praise, were much more reserved:
• I think you really have some insight into this other person. I do not see your side of the relationship. I like the idea about seeing her through her own eyes.
• A good subject. You surely feel something for this subject. Good effort—description is good.
• The third sentence intrigues me with the character. But most of the sentences are run together. Too gushy.
• Interesting piece of writing—very distinct style—a lot of thought.
• You appear to really care about this person and want to know her better. You must be very observant about human behaviors.
• I can tell you've given a lot of thought to the way she looks at things. Your idea is a good one.
• Your idea comes through.

Members of both groups wrote recommendations for revision. Recommendations for the typed version were polite, suggesting that the writer, if he or she wished, make the changes:

• Perhaps more physical environment would help. "Eyes" description is almost too abstract.
• Some problems with punctuation that cause some reader difficulty.
• First line, after her—second sentence could be made easier to envision.
• Describing your surroundings is a possibility.
• Maybe write more like this [an arrow is drawn to a line].

Note the qualifiers "perhaps," "some," "is a possibility," "could," and "maybe" and the general courteous and respectful tone. Participants responding to the handwritten version, however, were more resolute, identifying definite problems and stating their observations firmly. Note the definite evaluative tone and imperative constructions in the following:

• "They would look on" (use comma to avoid confusion).
• No sense for punctuation in correct places. Too many thoughts within one sentence.
• Try to find substitutes for look. Revise the second sentence. Try using subordinate phrases or clauses.
• Shorter, more concise sentence.
• All of your sentences are basically the same.
• You need to work on sentence structure.

The marks and responses given by both groups to individual sentences in the sample were surprisingly different and idiosyncratic. Of the fourteen samples, very few marks or notations directed to individual
sentences addressed similar concerns. Most of the notations occurred only once, indicating general inconsistency among teachers in their observations about stylistic features. The teachers inserted commas, crossed out or changed conjunctions, and noted problems with clarity and pronoun reference. But very few of these notations were consistent. In fact, at times the notations were noticeably contradictory.

While the tone was clearly different in the responses given the two versions, the responses from both groups were similar in that they addressed the text from the perspective of an "authority," and they followed the traditional response formula—identifying strengths and weaknesses and making recommendations for changes ("This . . . is good, but . . . , so I'd recommend that you . . . "). The responses were essentially product centered and expressed different audience roles: friend, advisor, teacher, authority, and judge (see Cowan for a discussion of the effects of mixing these roles). The inconsistencies, the "praise . . . but" format, and the unusual reader expectations revealed a mode of response that these teachers were accustomed to. Admittedly, some of the inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies resulted from the exercise itself, which presented unusual time limitations and instructions as well as an artificial context. The teachers had to play a hypothetical game—they didn't know the student, they hadn't created the assignment, and they didn't know that the paragraph had been excerpted from a large prose selection. Thus, the idiosyncrasies expressed in the commentary may have partially resulted from the exercise itself.

Judging from the differences in the remarks, one might anticipate differences in the grades assigned by the two groups. The typed version received these grades: A-/B+, A, B, B+, B+, A, A (averaging an A-); the handwritten version received these: C+, C, C-, C-, C, C-, D (averaging C-). Clearly, the differences in attitude between the two groups' written remarks are emphasized by the significant difference in grades.

I asked the seminar participants what these differences in grades and responses suggest about the way we handle a student text. A few teachers remarked, and the others seemed to agree, that we need to look beyond the surface to acknowledge a student's intent. Many of them were astonished by the differences in the grades and the obvious conclusion that a typed paper will receive a much higher mark than a handwritten one. One teacher remarked that what could happen to a student with poor penmanship is sad; the student may be interested and concerned about writing something of importance but receive responses and grades that fail to acknowledge his or her message.

This exercise reveals idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies in how we read and respond to student papers; it also suggests that writing teachers grade compositions, as Paul Schumann observes, "on a host of unconscious and/or superficial factors which often have little to do with what students actually write" (1164). The only consistency I was able to observe is that the various reactions often expressed an authoritarian stance. It is
safe to assume that during students' years of education they receive many authoritarian responses and directives. It is no wonder that they come to class asking, "Now what does this guy want?" Certainly, the mixed and disparate messages we send students do irreparable damage to their attitudes and, most strikingly, to their ability. But how can we solve this problem when most of us are faced with piles of papers and feel obligated to respond to content, style, tone, and format? My experiment seems to suggest that we need to develop the ability to read and respond as real readers to student writing and not to poke and pick and draw arrows to surface problems divorced from what the writer is doing—that is, unless the aim is editing later drafts. What I would like to recommend is that we change our traditional "marking" habits—a change which requires that we also change the way we perceive ourselves, our roles, our students, our expectations of their writing, and the ways we read their writing.

**Teacher Role**

Many of the responses to this sample writing, I suggest, are partially a result of the "teacherly" role—a role that can distort the reading process and make responses peculiarly condescending and critical. Most of the people in my class, all of whom had studied and discussed essays on contemporary writing theory, resorted to the safety of an authoritarian role when they responded to the writing. But that traditional role is not a very satisfying or effective role to assume. As Carol Berkenkotter insists, it promotes an "unreal" sense of writing, in that it does not permit students to experience the variety of rhetorical situations but instead requires them to "write for a single authority, the teacher" (396). Peter Elbow recommends that we 'think about what it means to 'be an audience' rather than just be a teacher, critic, assessor, or editor" (65), and Robert Brooke suggests that we think carefully about our "identities" because neither "writing teacher nor student is content to rely on the expected roles of teacher and student" (151). Brooke believes that we should accept our "underlife," an identity that lies under our many public roles. Doing this requires not that we dramatize "the presence of the reader," which Nancy Sommers argues is the aim of response; it requires, instead, that we become real readers, thus allowing students to "internalize" gradually the concept of a reader (Knoblauch and Brannon 285). To accomplish this aim, a responder needs to offer consistent and actual "reader" responses.

Insisting that we drop the masks that inhibit learning, Thomas Newkirk argues that we must "act as the fallible, sometimes confused, sometimes puzzled readers that we are" (765). Elbow recommends that we "respond by 'replying' (as in a letter) rather than always 'giving feedback'" (65). In so doing, we would show students that we are readers, not critics of classroom performances or observers disguised as readers. We can dispel the destructive notion that they need to decipher our commentary to determine how to play the game for us. "If our response is to tell students
what's strong, what's weak, and how to improve it (diagnosis, assessment, and advice)," Elbow maintains, "we actually 'undermine' their sense of writing as a social act" (65). Instead, we might emphasize that we are actual readers and prove it to them in our responses. What we need for response—to replace the pedagogy of exhortation, which Ann Berthoff claims is no "substitute for instruction" (754)—is a pedagogy of collaborative learning, which as Kenneth Bruffee argues, "naturally challenges the traditional basis of the authority of those who teach" (649).

Several responses to the sample paragraph show that some teachers do engage in a pedagogy of collaborative learning; their responses show their engagement in reading the paragraph: "I feel frightened for her—the fright comes after the calm I sensed at the beginning" and "I feel I can see those eyes!" But comments such as "This paragraph is excellent" or "You should develop either the introduction or the last three sentences" reveal a critic, an authority who hunts for strengths and weaknesses in the text. These responses do not come from a participant in a writer-reader dialogue; they come from an observer peculiarly detached from the rhetorical situation. Such responses are similar to that of a person who has just finished listening to someone describe fear experienced in a car accident and who then responds that the speaker has good ideas but should improve the introduction.

Teacher Reading Processes

The "traditional" teacher role and the habit of dealing with large numbers of papers at once distort our reading of student texts. And we expect to read well and even write effective comments on batches of the papers we assign. But in these situations, we are not participating readers; instead, we are good lookers and examiners, doing the kind of work accomplished on an assembly line.

I understand why many writing instructors look at the reading of student texts as a service and not as a particularly interesting task—many do not look at student texts as writing worth reading. We expect student writing to be "student" writing and not writing we read for pleasure, reading which Wolfgang Iser says is "only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (51). Louise Wetherbee Phelps makes a distinction between an "ordinary" reading and an "unnatural" reading. The "ordinary" reading to which she refers is clearly different from the reading of the writing instructor who assumes a "teacherly" role when responding to a student text. Joseph M. Williams also notes a difference between an "ordinary" reading and one that is "consciously directed" at specified features of the text. He explains it this way: "When we read for typos, letters constitute the field of attention; content becomes virtually inaccessible. When we read for content, semantic structures constitute the field of attention; letters—for the most part—recede from our consciousness" (154). A reason for this difference in reading habits, according to Phelps, is that we are not capable of observing critically all the elements of discourse with
"equal attention and emphasis" (23). Perhaps we look for what we want to see and when we read in the traditional role, what we want to see is determined by the standard response formula (strength + weakness + advice) and its emphasis on predetermined product features. As a result, we often do not see other rich features of students' language.

To help myself see those rich features of language, I schedule collection of papers so that I do not burden myself with an excessive number to read at any one time. And, realizing that the value of written teacher commentary is easily overestimated, I conduct regular individual conferences and frequent peer-group readings. Further, I try to make my reading of student writing "active and creative," as Charles Schuster suggests, so that I can "more fully participate in the rich discourse of others" (607). Schuster argues that "once we realize the extent to which all language is saturated with other styles, idioms, and modes of speaking and writing, we become better readers and, by extension, better teachers of reading and writing" (607). If we confront student writing eagerly and engage ourselves in the "textual" conversation, "bringing to bear on the text broader experiences and expectations" (Warnock 74), then we will not be guided by unusual "teacherly" expectations for the student text. We could become better readers and, consequently, better responders.

Teacher Expectations

"Unnatural" reading is caused in part by the preconception that a piece of writing is inferior—inferior, that is, to sophisticated "real" writing that one reads as an ordinary reader. The handwritten paragraph in my workshop caused the participants to assume that the text was inferior. But even the typed version, which was greeted more favorably, received commentary that revealed teachers' preconceptions that the text was a student's in need of revision. If I had announced at the beginning of the session that the paragraph was Hemingway's (it was, in fact), I suspect that the responses would have been much different, that the teachers would have actively read the paragraph, participating as readers engaged in "ordinary" reading. Sommers says that this teacher-response phenomenon is created because teachers are trained to read and analyze literature but not to do the same with student writing. She explains that "we read student texts with biases about what the writer should have said or about what he or she should have written, and our biases determine how we will comprehend the text. We read with our preconceptions and preoccupations, expecting to find errors, and the result is that we find errors and misread our students' texts" (154).

To avoid such misreadings of texts, we need to try to approach a student text with no preconceptions about quality. We need to attempt what Stanley Fish recommends: to make no distinction between ordinary language and literary language and to recognize that both are a "product of reading" (97). As a product of reading, a student text has the potential, if read with sensitivity by a real reader, to do to us what we assume literary
texts do: engage us in "textual conversation" and rich discourse. Our reader responses can help engage students in that conversation as well.

I am convinced that we should look at student texts from a new perspective: reading each text with the same engagement that we experience when we read "literary" texts. From such a perspective we can, I believe, enjoy the job of reading and responding much more, and, subsequently, our responses can be more meaningful and motivating to students. If we keep in mind Fish's observation that "ordinary language is extraordinary because at its heart is precisely that realm of values, intentions, and purposes which is often assumed to be the exclusive property of literature" (108), we will not be tempted to hold pen in hand and pick at language, as if we were bone cleaners. We will be more likely to read, appreciate, and become involved in a writer's language, recognizing the person and the expression within and behind the words. Responding from such an orientation, we may indeed discover the "extraordinariness" of ordinary writing; in fact, we may even be able to recognize the extraordinariness of anonymous literary language, such as a handwritten copy of a Hemingway paragraph.

As teachers of writing, we hold considerable power when we respond to student writings. We can damage a student's willingness and interest in writing, or we can encourage and motivate the student to do a lot of writing, and, perhaps, to become a professional writer or even a novelist like Hemingway. I wonder what Hemingway would have thought about receiving a C- on that paragraph had he turned it in to a teacher handwritten because he did not have a typewriter. Maybe he would have become discouraged, or perhaps he would have laughed at some of the corrections and recommendations. Perhaps he would have gone back to the paragraph and attempted to revise it as instructed. Or, perhaps, he would have deleted it from The Sun Also Rises. If he had been a student writer submitting the paragraph in response to an assignment, he conceivably would have confronted all of these options. Hemingway could probably have negotiated such a situation, but I wonder how a young, inexperienced writer, experimenting with language and expressing something of much concern to him or her, would have handled it.

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Works Cited


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