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Recovering the Conversation: A Response to "Responding to Student Writing" via "Across the Drafts"

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Nancy Sommers and I agree on her assessment of her 1982 essay, "Responding to Student Writing"—that it reflects "the absence of any 'real' students." Even though Sommers and her colleagues conducted interviews of student writers in connection with their research, the thrust of the 1982 essay is textual criticism, using both the student text and teacher comments as the sites for analysis and critique. As Sommers points out, the "language established in the classroom" is missing—and, with it, the context for the relationship between student and teacher in a given classroom. Without that context, both the atmospherics of the classroom and the local meanings established in that climate vanish, leaving textual artifacts that reveal only part of the communicative story.

Sommers is not alone in paying insufficient attention to the classroom context in her early research on student writing. Other thoughtful studies by prestigious scholars have produced impressive analyses of teacher comments

without benefit of the assignment presented to the student—much less the understandings, overt and subtle, in operation among students and teacher in a writing class. Two examples will serve.

First, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford ("Teachers' Rhetorical Comments") used a sophisticated classification scheme to analyze teacher comments recorded on three thousand samples of student writing. Trained readers sorted out the teachers' notations and classified them according to the rhetorical features of the commentary. The sample was originally collected from a larger inventory of 21,000 college-level papers to provide evidence for the top twenty errors committed by college students ("Frequency"). Because the earlier study did not require assignments or any input from students other than the text submitted to teachers, no contextual information was available beyond the general level of the course and the kind of institution where the course was taught. Therefore, the sample lacked context, but the three thousand papers chosen for the response study provided a wealth of student writing ornamented with marginalia, end comments, and grades from dozens of faculty members.

Connors and Lunsford's study provides wonderful information about patterns of response, including the affective dimension of teacher commenting. Among the valuable contributions made by their study is the poignant reminder that a great deal of teacher commentary is produced under conditions of fatigue—not to mention frustration, impatience, and perhaps despair. Empathy with colleagues, however distant and anonymous, can inform advice for faculty development, teaching-assistant training, and writing center pedagogy. However, concomitant empathy for the student writer is more difficult to engender from textual evidence alone. One can assume that a student writer is making a good faith effort, but in the absence of the task assigned and the student's testimony about her understanding of the assignment, abstract reader generosity proves nothing. Instead, the reader is left with the teacher's traces on the student text but no sense of the rest of the story. What does a student make of her teacher's advice? What writing behaviors change—or persist—in the face of teacher critique? What classroom situation gave rise to the student's decisions about the text and the teacher's words written in response? How can their dialogue be captured? Textual analysis goes only so far in addressing such questions.

Another example: Richard Straub and Ronald Lunsford conducted an ambitious study published in 1995 (*Twelve Readers Reading*) that examined teacher response in a more controlled research situation. Twelve well-known

composition scholar-teachers were recruited to respond to the same set of sample student essays. The students were anonymous, but the readers were given a brief description of the assignment for each paper, which was more information than was available in the Connors and Lunsford study. (Yes, there are two composition scholars named Lunsford doing excellent work on teacher response.) The object of Straub and Lunsford's study was to develop responder profiles for each scholar who participated, using a classification system and trained readers—similar to the methodology in the Connors and Lunsford study.

The study did indeed yield descriptive profiles of several response styles, which were developed and analyzed at length. However, once again, the student voices were missing. Furthermore, even with a specific set of student papers as a common factor among all twelve readers, the study imposed some unusual audience considerations on the reader-responders themselves. First, the twelve readers were aware of the artificial reading situation that contrasted with the response situation in their own teaching. As experienced researchers themselves, they had to be concerned about the evaluation of their responses by the study authors, who would be drawing conclusions from the comments readers produced. Second, all readers would have assumed that the study results would be published; consequently, their comments and the accompanying analysis of them would be made available to a much larger audience of professional peers. That second audience would be an extension of a third audience, the twelve readers themselves, who would be tempted to compare their individual responses with those of their colleagues. When we pause to remember that the typical audience for comments on a student text is the student writer, we can appreciate how this study tended to dislodge that writer from the center of the reader's concerns to the periphery. This study, like the Connors and Lunsford study, collected comments that were offered outside of a classroom relationship, where the student writer seldom shows teacher comments to anyone other than a roommate or writing center tutor. In contrast, the twelve readers could not ignore the prospect of public scrutiny of their comments that was built into the study itself.

Despite all of these potential audience distractions, readers tried to frame their responses as if they were addressing students they knew. Some even supplied a back story to construct a relationship with the student, positing the paper under review as one in a series of submissions during a term. That instinct toward creating a narrative context for the paper speaks to the awareness on the part of the twelve readers—like all who read and respond to student

writing—that real people write student papers, and real people read and comment on them. That insight speaks to Sommers' findings from her longitudinal study at Harvard.

Having done a modest study myself[1]—one that involved classroom observations, interviews of students and teachers, plus the kind of textual analysis performed in the Connors and Lunsford and Straub and Lunsford studies—I admire the Harvard study's methodology and sheer scale. My small study followed students and teachers in four first-year writing courses at the University of Minnesota. I was allowed to observe their class sessions and collect drafts with written teacher comments from the students in each class who chose to participate. As in the two studies cited above, the teacher comments were counted and classified by a team of independent raters, and general tendencies for each teacher were noted, based on the comments alone. Unlike the other two studies, my study included interviews with teachers about their philosophy of response to student writing and what they intended to convey with specific comments. Using the same papers, I also conducted separate interviews with the student writers as a means of uncovering what the students understood they were to do in response to comments on their drafts.

The four instructors differed widely in their response habits, which was borne out by the textual analysis of their comments. For example, one instructor used coded references to a writing handbook for recurrent surface errors. Another instructor ignored surface error and provided a full page of single-spaced typed commentary for each student; perhaps half of the typed comments were based on macros that the teacher had composed in advance and customized for the student and topic at issue. A third instructor line-edited every draft, correcting surface error, requesting examples and clarification, and posing questions for the writer to consider. The fourth teacher wrote almost nothing on the student text, but she required each student to meet with her individually on every draft. Within the sample, each instructor was consistent in her or his approach to student drafts.

The interviews were also consistent, but they told a different story, one not captured through textual analsyis. The teacher who coded surface errors explained that he was trying to help students learn how to use the handbook as a reliable reference. This tactic was understood by his students, one of whom sighed at the number of comma splices in her draft, but reasoned that it was better for her to look them up, consider examples, and make her own decisions rather than have the teacher correct her sentences. My observations of that classroom supported the interviews; the teacher who appeared to be a

comma cop on paper was a thoughtful, dedicated, and subtle writing coach for students who were rather insecure about their writing ability.

The other interviews provided equally illuminating insights into the dialogue between student and teacher that marginal comments only begin to reveal. I learned from my study that clear messages between teachers and students about *how drafts will be read* promote meaningful communication. The understanding about assignments and revision established in class—whatever that understanding was and however it was articulated—played out in the interviews. Even a student who was frustrated by repeated criticism and low grades acknowledged that the teacher's expectations were never in doubt. That student admitted to scheduling work and other activities to avoid having to meet with the teacher outside of class, despite repeated invitations. The student's knowing avoidance was undetectable from the draft itself, as was the teacher's attempt to reach the student. This particular draft did not include the "See me" note often appended to a paper, and given the student's reluctance to engage, a personal approach made sense—even if the conversation was thwarted.

My work on response to student writing, though far less exhaustive than the Harvard study, reveals a disconnect between the understanding operating in a classroom and the thoughtful assessment of teacher responses by trained readers. I am not surprised that the Harvard study speaks to the critical importance of including the classroom relationship between those who teach and assign writing and those who submit writing to their teachers, and I look forward to detailed analysis of the material collected by Sommers and her colleagues.

The real contribution of the 1982 essay and the reason for its pride of place in faculty development programs is Sommers's direct call for integration of response and instruction: multiple drafts with dialogic, respectful exchanges between writer and reader. Her advice to writing teachers requires no apology on Sommers's part. That she now bases her advice on testimony from students and teachers as well as the marks made on student texts affirms a stance that was prescient as well as sensible and humane.

Sommers's new essay draws poignantly on the voices of Harvard students to argue for the classroom relationship as the vehicle for writing instruction. The bridge metaphor works perfectly with the dialogic assumption from 1982 to encourage teachers to retire their comma-cop badges and, instead, become reader-colleagues for their students in courses at all levels. Honest, focused critique addresses thinking and composition—just as we who write for schol-

arly venues value substantive writing advice from reviewers as well as editorial polishing prior to publication.

Note

1. Some of the findings are discussed in my chapter, "Marvelous Cartographers," in Ed Nagelhout and Carol Rutz, *Classroom Spaces and Writing Instruction.*

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From "Self-Righteous Researcher" to "Fellow Teacher"

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In rereading her Braddock Award-winning essay, "Responding to Student Writing," I couldn't help but feel enormous gratitude to Nancy Sommers. In collaboration with colleagues Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, Sommers put response to student writing on our emerging discipline's research agenda (as she had done for revision a few years earlier). She sent the clear and unequivocal message that attention to the writing process ought to include the rhetoric of our own response. By so doing, Sommers created a sub-specialty to which scholars such as Knoblauch, Brannon, Richard Straub, and Ronald Lunsford have contributed mightily. For her part, Sommers' research offered two startling conclusions: first, that teachers' comments, rather than helping students to clarify their meaning, shifted the focus from students' intention to our sense of an ideal text; second, that those comments amounted to rubber stamping, giving little evidence of direct engagement with students' ideas and intentions.