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Re-seeing Research on Response

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Because we are also working on research about teacher response, it was with anticipation—and a little trepidation—that we read Richard Straub's recent article on "The Concept of Control in Teacher Response." While we found the article suggestive in the subtle distinctions offered among different commenting styles, it was also disappointing in its inability to unpack the assumptions underlying the very concept of control and the resulting limitations these assumptions have had for research on teacher commentary. Straub leaves unquestioned the assumption that the teacher's response to a student's draft is the most important facet of the response situation. Many blindspots in Straub's article (and in the literature about response in general) follow from this assumption of primacy for the teacher's written comments: The research focuses on such comments as the only significant area for analysis, avoiding classroom context and the complexities of interpretation it suggests.

Straub attempts to complicate existing studies of teacher commentary by conducting a much subtler analysis of commentary than he finds in the general labels of "directive" and "facilitative" comments that guide much of the previous research on response. His project is one of fine-grained textual analysis which can make some important contributions to our understanding of response styles. However, because Straub continues in the tradition of most prior studies of commentary—using only textual analysis—his study replicates the assumptions of the earlier work instead of significantly re-envisioning our approach to research on response. Straub, like the earlier researchers he refers to, suggests implications for the classroom context strictly from his analysis of written comments, assuming a standard interpretation of the classroom and the response situation instead of studying these complex contexts as well as the texts they give rise to. Straub explains his approach:

I will study comments as they appear on the page, independent of the larger classroom setting but seen amid the conventions that typically go along with

such teacher-student interactions. I will try to determine how the comments themselves create an image of the teacher on the page, implicitly establish some relationship with the student, and exert varying degrees of control over the student's writing choices. (233)

If Straub's focus were contextual as well as textual, examining how teacher control is established across the whole classroom situation, including teacher's written comments, then the much-needed revision of the concept of control in commentary he outlines could be much more substantial, with implications for the ways we involve response and evaluation in our teaching other than just in our written response to student papers. Straub acknowledges in a footnote that his textual study is only preliminary to other, contextual modes of research into teacher response. At points, though, his description of his approach undermines the more modest assessment of it in the footnote: "The most effective way to take up an examination of teacher response is to study individual comments, in detail, and describe the *focuses* and *modes* of these comments" (233). While this tight focus on text may be the most efficient way to conduct research on teacher response, we doubt that it is the most effective. Our extensive criticism on this point is not meant to single out Straub. We focus on these limitations in his study because they continue a trend in almost all research on teacher response in composition studies in which written comments are viewed as the only significant part of the entire response situation.

Such a focus suggests that teachers should try to improve their response practices by rethinking their commenting styles instead of examining the entire response situation in their classrooms. In recent descriptions of teachers' response practices we have noted important changes in how the response exchange is configured: These teachers see response to writing as beginning with the student's written assessment of the text and the processes and decisions involved in producing it. (See, for example, Jeffrey Sommers on "The Writer's Memo" [*Writing and Response*, Chris Anson, ed., Urbana: NCTE, 1989] and Norm Katz on "Reading Intention" [*Encountering Student Texts*, Lawson, Ryan, and Winterowd, eds., Urbana: NCTE, 1989]). This conception of the response situation cannot be addressed adequately by research on teacher response that looks only at teacher written comments apart from their context, including reflections by the students.

This broadened conception of the response situation has significant implications for the discussion of teacher control over student writing. Straub discusses the issue of control only in terms of how controlling a given commenting style is instead of noting how control in the writing classroom might be altered according to who is authorized to speak about student texts, when, and in what ways. When students are invited to offer the first

response to their writing, for instance, through some form of reflective letter or self-assessment, it can change the dynamics of control in the typical response situation envisioned by the research on teacher written commentary. When students are authorized to speak first, there is a greater possibility that they might see themselves as real participants with the teacher in the discussion about the direction of revision, a discussion which reflects attempts at control by both student and teacher.

Straub fails to envision how this altered response situation might give students a kind of authority in the conversation about their writing that they do not have when they are only recipients of teacher commentary—no matter how facilitative that commentary may be. This continued focus on teacher comments as the crux of response means that research and theory on response lags behind many actual classroom strategies for student self-assessment rather than being informed by them. The widespread use of portfolios in writing classrooms is a prime example of how teachers' theory and practice about assessment has changed the dynamics of the response situation in ways that response research has yet to catch up with. A defining characteristic of the classroom portfolio is the reflective cover letter which often includes self-assessment, thus authorizing students to initiate evaluative comments on their own writing. The 1996 NCTE conference "Learning and Literacies: Reflecting on Reflection, Self-Assessment, and External Assessment" offers a further example of the importance of reflection and self-assessment in many teachers' writing pedagogies; audience participants as well as conference presenters spoke about their use of reflection as a common part of their response practices. The traditional centrality we give to teacher comments cannot account for the many new issues and challenges raised by this widespread inclusion of student reflection in the classroom evaluation of writing.

While we certainly agree with Straub's observation that all comments, however indirect, suggest that "something needs to be attended to" in a student text, we do not agree with his tacit assumption that all comments, and thus all such interventions, are or should be initiated by the teacher. While Straub and the tradition of research that his study follows have made significant contributions to our understanding of control as it is related to teacher commentary, research now must extend this tradition in order to explore additional important questions about control and the teaching of writing. Researchers, including teacher-researchers, should also ask how the very structure of the response situation influences how control is exercised over student writing and who exercises it. These explorations can, of course, include how teachers' written comments influence both a teacher's and a student's control over student texts. However, we also need to study how the response structure authorizes various people to

participate in the conversation about student writing. When and how do teachers offer comments? Do students interpret teacher comments differently than researchers and teachers interpret these comments? When and how do students comment on their own and other students' writing? What value do the participants in the exchange place on these different comments and, by extension, the students' and teacher's authority as evaluators? We must move beyond an exclusive focus on teacher's written comments to initiate this promising phase of response research.