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The (re)invention of feedback

Jason Wayne Loan

THE (RE)INVENTION OF FEEDBACK

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A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

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San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition

———————————————

by

Jason Wayne Loan

September 2010

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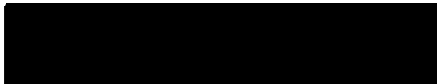A Thesis

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

While scholars acknowledge that learning is a complex, even unpredictable endeavor, educators continue to utilize response practices that promote stabilization and measurement. This thesis argues that, far from being obstacles to teacher response, the new media and avant-grade practices of appropriation, the readymade, and nonlinearity can actually work to orient feedback toward textual practices that both conceptually and technologically embrace networks.

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CHAPTER ONE

TOWARD NEW MEDIA AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Cynthia Selfe's "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing" (2009) opens with an image of students living in a web of sound and armed with technologies for composing and navigating this sound. It is a moment of technology and exigency. It is a moment of a writing teacher observing students gathered at the student union or on the campus green:

> Anyone who has spent time on a college or university campus over the past few decades knows how fundamentally important students consider their sonic environments -- the songs and music they produce and listen to; the cell phone conversations in which they immerse themselves; the headphones and Nanos that accompany them wherever they go; the thumper cars they use to turn streets into concert stages; the audio blogs, video soundtracks, and mixes they compose and exchange with each other and share with anyone else who will listen. (617)

Such an image actually pulses with a dual exigency. Depending on one's pedagogical orientation, this scene, on one hand, demands that we as teachers urgently need to take advantage of the power and possibilities of these tools and pleasure seeking devices in our pedagogies. On the other, the scene could prompt an urgent desire to shore up curricular walls and find ways to reassert the value of more traditional pleasures of reading and writing. Or, on a more pragmatic level the scene might prompt the pedagogue to ask how she might more effectively word a "no cell phone" policy in her syllabus.

The avant-garde poet David Antin's talk piece "tuning" (1984) also opens with a scene of technology and exigency:

> if you see me fiddling with this
> tape recorder   its mainly because i have no
> very precise image of what im going to say
> though i have a considerable notion of the
> terrain   into which i tend to move and the
> only way im going to find out whether it was
> worth doing or not   is when i hear what ive
> got   which has been my way of entrapping
> myself   and the reason ive chosen to entrap
> myself rather than to prepare in advance a

precise set of utterances   has been that i

felt myself ive written things   before this

    in the natural vacuum that is the artificial

hermetic closet that literature has been in for

some time   and the problem   for me is in the

closet confronting a typewriter and no person

    so that for me literature defined as literature

        has no urgency   it has no need of address

    there are too many things   no there are not

too many things there are only a few things you

may want   to talk about but there are too many

ways you could talk about them   and no urgency

in which way you choose to talk about them

        there are too many ways to proceed   too many

    possibilities for making well crafted objects

        none of which seem particularly necessary

                                                                i

dont think im unique in feeling the absence of

urgency (105-106)

Here, as writing teachers, we are not looking on the

student union or the campus green, bursting with devices.

Antin's hermetic closet resonates with one of English

studies' persistent visions of the student writer: the

scene of a dorm room, perhaps late at night, with a
freshman sitting in front of a typewriter (or word
processor) mere hours before their paper is due. What, I
wonder, is playing on the stereo? This hermetic closet
might also conjure the image of a teacher sitting at their
desk reading through a stack of papers, perhaps late at
night, pen in hand (glass of red wine within reach),
pushing the acceptable limit for the turn around time to
handing back student work. What, I wonder, is playing on
the stereo?

Typically, the scholarship on teacher response (or
feedback) does not directly take up the question of what's
playing on the stereo (or iPod). Lil Brannon and Cy
Knoblauch categorize the moves in teacher response
scholarship as calling for "what teachers *should* do,"
describing "what teachers actually do" and testing "whether
response of one kind or another makes any difference in
student performance" ("Emperor" 5-6). They conclude:

> We find nothing in our experiences as teachers,
> and nothing in the accumulated research, to alter
> the fundamental impressions we formed twenty-five
> years ago in our own contributions to the
> literature. First, there is scant evidence that

students routinely use comments on one draft to make rhetorically important, and in the end qualitatively superior.changes in a subsequent draft, although student will make limited, usually superficial corrections in order to comply with overt or tacit instructions. Second, there is still less evidence to show that they change their practices from one assignment to the next in ways that measurably represent or affect their development as writers. Third, the very possibility of acquiring such evidence is compromised by the imperfect assessment instruments available for the task. ("Emperor" 1)

Knoblauch and Brannon acknowledge that, generally "most writing teachers [and researchers] would...reject" such assertions ("Emperor" 1). They attribute this rejection to teachers' tacit acceptance of what they call the "myth of improvement" or the "belief that particular teaching activities cause identifiable advances in learning in a smoothly upward trajectory over specific increments of time" ("Emperor" 3). There exists, then, ambivalence in the thinking about pedagogical practices encompassed by teacher response. On the one hand, scholars acknowledge that

learning is a complex, often unpredictable endeavor. Yet, simultaneously, particularly as equally complex issues of public perception and funding exert pressure on institutions, educators turn to practices that promote stabilization and measurement (Brannon and Knoblauch, "Emperor," 4-5). As sections of courses involving some form of composing fill up every fall in colleges and universities across country, it remains, however, that interacting with students in response to acts of textual production — marginal or otherwise — are central to the work of Composition as a discipline.

This project, then, works in the space that scholars such as Chris Anson have opened that move "away from traditional understandings of pedagogy that valorize 'what works' and toward...the representation of teaching as a cultural project" (Brannon and Knoblauch, "Emperor," 12). Put another way, the aim is to construct pedagogy (generally) and teacher response (specifically) as creative acts composed in response to the creative act that is student work.

Using avant-grade poet David Antin's poetics of talking and the compositional capacities of new media, no claims will be made that feedback performed in this

(multi)mode result in improved student products. Instead,
my argument is threefold. First, new media and avant-grade
poetics invite a rethinking of issues that teacher response
literature often positions as obstacles to feedback, namely
-- appropriation, readymade material, and nonlinearity.
Next, embracing new media and avant-garde poetics positions
feedback to be practiced as multimodal performance,
productively complicating the notion that responding to
student work involves enacting a presence. Finally,
practicing feedback as multimodal performance constructs a
network, creating opportunities for invention -- involving
the work of making new connections and arrangements -- as
the work of feedback becomes unbound from the margins of
the page.

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Teacher Response, Digital Culture, and the
Avant-garde

</div>

In "Responding to Student Writing" (1982), Nancy
Sommers writes:

> ...it seems, paradoxically enough, that although
>
> commenting on student writing is the most widely
>
> used method for responding to student writing, it
>
> is the least understood. We do not know in any
>
> definitive way what constitutes thoughtful

> commentary or what effect, if any, our comments
> have on helping our students become more
> effective writers. (148)

That teacher response starts from a position of not-understanding offers writing pedagogy its first turn to David Antin. For Antin "the problem of systems is — that they don't have enough holes," not that they have too many (qtd. in Smith and Dean). In teacher response, the holes in the system are concepts like *appropriation, cliché* and *nonlinearity.* These concepts have been viewed as obstacles to feedback; however, in the context of digital culture and avant-garde art practices, they could be (re)deployed as generative practices.

Appropriation

As much of the work in writing instruction gears toward (at least the appearance) of purposeful writing tasks, towards improvement, the literature on teachers' response to this work often revolves around the question, framed in an evaluative sense: "What is the teacher to do with this paper which his student has given him" (LaBrant 204). Nancy Sommers, Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblach all concluded that what the teacher does is "appropriate[] the

text from the student" (Sommers 149). This appropriation comes about as the teacher ignores the students' purposes in writing and consequently frames their response to the writing in ways that assert teacher expertise and use the work of the student to forward in -- the name of instruction or improvement or development -- the institutional or disciplinary visions of what writing is, could be and should do. The appropriation -- again, the shift in pedagogical focus away from a student's intention as a writer towards the *use* of the text by the teacher for other purposes -- works at the both the surface level of the text (making corrections in such areas as grammar and mechanics) and at the level of content. Appropriation, then, becomes problematic because it facilitates the reading of any student text against an "Ideal text" that ultimately "fixes" students' texts within the limits of that ideal (Brannon and Knoblauch, "Students' Rights," 158). Generally, positioning student texts as fixed actually works counter to commonplaces that social-epistemic writing pedagogy adheres to in both the writing process and the motives of teacher response: that at least one role of the teacher is to move a student writer toward "tak[ing] the chance of reducing a finished, albeit

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inadequate, paragraph to chaos -- to fragments -- in order

to rebuild it..." (Sommers 152).

Within digital and art logics, appropriation is a

valued practice. Such logics value appropriation as the

generative or inventive taking of an "object" or "element"

out of its original context and putting it to use for new

purposes. In terms of the digital:

> [appropriation] is best exemplified in practices
>
> ranging from web-site construction (appropriating
>
> images and HTML code from other sites to create
>
> new sites) to Weblogs (cutting and pasting links)
>
> to hip-hop and DJ culture (appropriating sounds
>
> and music, remixing them, and generating new
>
> compositions). (Rice 63)

Guy Debord and the Situationists methodologized

appropriation with the practice of "détournement."

Détournement involves, in some sense, going beyond the

ideal text that Brannon and Knoblauch find so problematic.

Détournement works to think through:

> not whether we like them [texts] or not. We have
>
> to go beyond them.
>
> Any elements, no matter where they are taken
>
> from, can be used to make new combinations....

Restricting oneself to a personal arrangement of

words is mere convention. The mutual interference

of two words of feeling, or the juxtaposition of

two independent expressions, supersedes the

original elements and produces a synthetic

organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be

used. (Debord 15)

While there are shades and degrees of détournement

(minor/deceptive/extensive), for Debord, the generative or

inventive power of appropriation resides, at least in part,

in contextual distance -- "It is the most distant...element

which contributes most sharply to the overall impression"

(16).

In the digital and the avant-garde, then, to

appropriate students' texts, might update the question of

evaluation. Instead of asking "what I'm to make of this

paper (good? bad?)," the move would be to ask, in the

spirit of production, of "making matters" (Sherman), "what

can I *make with* this?"

Cliché

Sommers's "Responding to Student Writing" (1982),

asserts "there seems to be among teachers an accepted,

albeit unwritten canon for commenting on student texts. [A] universal code of commands, requests and pleadings demonstrat[ing] that the teacher holds a license for vagueness" (153). This canonicity results in a *"rubber-stamped"* effect in which the comments from one student text *"could be interchanged"* with any number of other student texts (Sommers 152 emphasis original). As example of teacher-response cliché, Summer Smith offers this end-comment:

> This is a very good essay. You used quotes well to support your argument and the discussion of the Cousteau museum was interesting and effective in developing your point. Your paper is well-organized and your argument is well-accommodated to your audience. Your equation of the slaughter of whales to the capture of dolphins for massive parks seems a bit extreme, though. Try not to stretch too much for startling examples. There are a few awkward sentence structures and your conclusion is a bit forced, but otherwise, this is well-done. (249)

This feedback prompts Smith to wonder: "The teacher could have written anything, but she chose to script a statement

that closely resembles not only her previous end comments, but also the end comments of other composition teachers. Why?" (249) One answer for Smith resides in the concept of genre. Smith, via Susan Miller, views the act of sitting down to read and comment on student work as "a recurrent rhetorical situation" (Miller qtd. in Smith 250) that shapes, over time, the conventions of the practice.

The oft-cited work by Robert J. Connors and Andrea Lunsford, "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers" (1993), also identifies genre as a controlling factor of the limits and possibilities of teacher-response. Conner and Lunsford, having analyzed the commentary of teachers on 3,000 essays, conclude that "Teachers...tend to return to well-understood topoi as well as to familiar terms, phrases, and locutions as they make their judgments on student writing" (209).

Like appropriation, cliché becomes viewed as problematic in teacher response primarily because it contributes to generating an inert or fixed student text. Cliché works against clear directives and developing strategies for further textual work, first by transforming revision into a "a guessing game," then framing the act of writing as "just a matter of following the rules" (Sommers

153). In addition, the inertia potentially stemming from teacher-response can be framed as an issue of narrowing the audience for a student text to simply the teacher, as "the impression left by reading most teachers comments [is] that the audience for the writing was clearly the teacher, only the teacher, and nothing but the teacher" (Conners and Lunsford 212). Rippling out from a teacher-centric audience is, of course, the specter of assessment and grading, itself the most traditional means to fix a student's in a "place" on the grading scale. Conner and Lunsford identified that the majority of teacher-responses "were grade justifications," what they labeled as "full stop" moments in the life of student textual work (213).

Again, turning to digital and avant-garde logics, the cliché can be valued material. In the context of art:

> pop art provide[s]...a clue — Warhol's and
> Lichtenstein's blowups, news photos,
> advertisements, publicity pics, comic strip
> frames...they were clichés...[what was
> interesting were] the techniques for isolating
> them, magnifying them, repeating and reframing
> them, and letting them speak for themselves....A
> cliché or commonplace is like a broken pencil. It

once had a point but got worn down by too much

use or too much pressure on it. [Why not]

interrogate these clichés to see, if they had a

point, what...might [it] have been [?] (Antin,

Converstaion, 33-34)

The means to interrogating and redeploying cliché, to

giving it generative power can be linked to appropriation,

and extends, generally, from movements in art (particularly

situated within the avant-garde) to enact -- what itself

has become a cliché in an art context -- the move to blur

art and life:

Modernist composition meant limits; but if people

didn't want limits in their life, why would they

want them in their art? With the two (art and

life) indistinct, an expansiveness resulted.

...And so, as potential material for composition,

in terms of their ability to blur and art life,

the Duchampian readymade became useful. (Sirc

128-29)

Duchamp places a manufactured, everyday object in the

white cube and labels it. Later, the DJ:

Drop[s] the needle on the record and see[s]

what happens when this sound is applied to this

> context, or when that sound crashes into that
>
> recording. (Miller 45)

In digital culture, the cliché has affinity with the concept commutation or "the exchange of signifiers without concern for referentiality" (Rice 93). Paul D. Miller writes:

> [Creativity in the digital] builds on the early successes of file-sharing to create a milieu where people can exchange culture and information at will and create new forms, new styles, new way of thinking. (65)

According to Miller, digital culture produces what he terms a "multiplex consciousness" (61). The multiplex, in part, contains a vast array of choices, a huge field of signifiers with which to work; however, the multiplex also offers only cliché — a complex with 50 movie screens, each featuring a redundancy of narratives and archetypes, each freely exchangeable with the other. But as Duchamp's readymades, Warhol's silk-screens, and DJing illustrate, the vast exchangeability facilitated by cliché "involves more than just the swapping of signifiers...[it] also positions rhetoric [and textual production] as a manipulative practice" (Rice 99). In digital culture, no

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longer does a multiplex audience necessarily passively consume. Instead, they capture, upload, manipulate, and share.

Nonlinearity

Nonlinearity can also be traced through teacher response. Assertions that "Our comments need to offer students revision tasks of a different order of complexity...by forcing students back into chaos" seem to hint at it (Sommers 154). As does a revisiting of such work by Carol Rutz:

> I agree [with Sommers] on her assessment of her 1982 essay, "Responding to Student Writing" — that it reflects "the absence of any "real" students."...As [she] point 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 meaning in that climate vanish, leaving textual artifacts that reveal only part of the communicative story. (257)

For Rutz, the artifacts of students' essays and the
accompanying marginalia composed by their teachers present
a too singular (if not literally linear) story, and neglect
the more multi(com)plex narratives present in the
atmospherics of the classroom. If nonlinearity

> involves choosing among various discursive
>
> strands that exist within one or more
>
> spaces...[and] asks...that writers identify
>
> complex sets of data and form multiple texts out
>
> of that data (Rice 115)

Then Rutz and Sommers would likely assent to a claim for
responding to student work being a nonlinear endeavor. Even
in more traditional forms, the task laid out by teachers'
feedback is multiple:

> The interlinear comments and the marginal
>
> comments represent two separate tasks for the
>
> student; the interlinear comments encourage the
>
> student to see the text as a fixed piece, frozen
>
> in time, that just needs some editing. The
>
> marginal comments, however, suggest that the
>
> meaning of the text is not fixed, but rather that
>
> the student still needs to develop the meaning by
>
> doing some more research. (Sommers 151)

Despite, however, the language of complexity, chaos, and atmospherics and despite, perhaps, the actual experience of these terms in the attempt to write in any context — academic or otherwise — teacher response and feedback has generally been practiced as a fundamentally linear textual act, or again, practiced with "a belief that particular teaching activities cause identifiable advances in learning in a smoothly upward trajectory of specific periods of time" (Brannon and Knoblauch, "Emperor," 3). So, while acknowledging that writing is a complex, nonlinear affair, the teacher response literature has persistently defined successful literacy as writing that can and should be defined within the parameters of a linear process, from idea to a subsequent series of drafts, each one working — with the help of teacher feedback — to better communicate some specified content. Notions of linear progress, however, generate the problem of framing teacher-response as simply "tinkering" within the narrow confines of constantly evaluating efficacy of methods and products, rather than initiating conceptions of literacy as complex and able "to challenge mechanistic curricular and assessment schemes" (Brannon and Knoblauch, "Emperor," 5) that compose learning as a straight line.

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Yet, nonlinearity abounds. The most everyday example in digital culture is, of course, the Web, "a chain of networked, and often associative pages, whose multithreaded discussions and ideas take place on Web boards, in email, on Weblogs and within websites" (Rice 122). Web 2.0 in particular, by enabling user-generated content, amplifies the Internet beyond simple, one-way consumption. A cursory browsing of Facebook provides a good example of the multi-layering of identity that, if not strictly made possible by the digital, is at least made more present by it.

The artist Joseph Cornell, whose work remains important to the theorizing of writing and writing pedagogy in digital culture (Janangelo; Sirc, *Happening*), offers us another example:

> ...Cornell's work [box-situated collages], on a
> first encounter resembles that of a glorified
> junk-monger -- someone who is indiscriminate in
> his collections, recondite in his references, and
> arbitrary in his juxtapositions....Yet Cornell is
> no accidental artist, His collages give evidence
> of close reading, purposeful selection, and
> strategic presentation (Janangelo 32)

And there is Antin, the poet, who once participated in an academic conference on postmodernism, not by "invoking the spiritual presence of [an] absent but terribly potent critical" lineage (Derrida, Lyotard et al) but by performing "a talk about the difficulty of buying a mattress" (Antin, *Conversation*, 58).

Byron Hawk asserts that rhetoric and its affiliated pedagogy have traditionally sought "the imposition of simplicity, linearity and system onto the world or the chaotic power of language"; however, logic or meaning within new media contexts are just as likely to "emerge[] from networks of relations, complexity, and noise" (839). Additionally, avant-garde poetics have allowed for what Jerome Rothenberg identifies as a generative removal of the "barrier...between music and noise...[a blurring of] the distinction between doer and viewer" ("How We"). Rethinking the possibilities for teacher response in the work rhetoric and composition, then, begins with practicing feedback within new logics, informed by new media, multimodal performance and networks.

In the next chapter, I turn to the poetics of talk, both in teacher response and the work of David Antin. The use of talk in teacher response tends to remain tied to a

linear logic, but talk, informed by Antinian poetics, has

the potential to bring feedback into contact with network

logic.

CHAPTER TWO

TOWARD NETWORKS

The turn to talk seems a simple one. My impulse to
turn toward David Antin's poetics in order to reinvigorate
my own thinking towards feedback and teacher response rests
in the seemingly simple, common sense-ness of talk. When
asked "Why do you really need to [create your work]
verbally in public? Why can't you do the thinking at the
computer?" Antin points to a desire for "engagement...the
sense of occasion, of art being rooted in an occasion"
(Smith and Dean). Engagement and occasion also circulate
through teacher response. Chris Anson writes:

> This role and purpose [of evaluator] often yields
> a formal, authoritative, and judgmental style of
> response. Early in my own teaching, I felt uneasy
> using this style in my written comments when my
> classroom demeanor was more casual and personal.
> When I commented on students' writing, it was as
> if I distance myself from them...(105).

Anson suggests that engagement comes about via the occasion
of the classroom and his presence within it. This moment
also points to the anxiety of response, of feeling limited

by working with end notes or comments in the margins. This anxiety has much to do with a commonplace assumption that as teachers of writing one of our central functions is "to dramatize the presence of a reader" (Sommers 148), fueling teachers' faith in the proverbial "writing conference" as a productive form of talk:

> No method of response -- written marginal
>
> annotations, taped comments, even a one-way
>
> computerized conference in multimedia -- will
>
> ever surpass the centuries old method of sitting
>
> down with a writer to discussion of his or her
>
> work. Nor should it. (Anson, "Our Own Voices"
>
> 113)

But who has the time? The logistics of working conditions -- reliance on adjunct instructors, enrollments of 20 or more students per class -- often mandate the marginal comment, endnote, or rubric as the most efficient, if not only way to respond to student work. So, the teacher writes in the margins and "attempts...to squeeze their reactions into a few pithy phrases, to roll all their strength and all their sweetness up to one ball for student delectation" (Connors and Lunsford 200). They witness (or feel or maybe both) that much of this marginal scribbling is not taken up

in the work of students. They lament that if there was just more time to sit down with students -- to talk through their paper moment by moment, point by point -- that the insights they offer as a reader/writer (academic or otherwise) could be put to better use.

Presence, Multimodality, and Teacher Response

Teacher response -- from informal marginal notes to final evaluations -- hinges on the idea of presence. Thinking about what drives teacher response to student work, Anson writes:

> Writers improve by *being read.* Hearing other
> people's response to their work helps writers to
> develop a kind of internal monitor, a "reading
> self," that informs their decisions as they enter
> new and more sophisticated worlds of writing.
> ("Reflective Reading" 361, emphasis in original)

This presence is internal, involving the writer's sense of self. It is also external, the writer's sense of someone as reader. Presence is also mediated:

> The student, opening her paper on her own
> computer screen later on, can click on the
> marginal icons and hear her teacher's voice

> commenting on her text. Such programs were once
> thought futuristic, but now they being
> supplemented by video boxes that appear in the
> corner of the screen...such systems and more will
> characterize the response environment...(Anson,
> "Reflective Reading," 377)

Far from futuristic, emerging network culture fueled by
multimodal digital texts continues to complicate the notion
of presence in the context of rhetoric and composition's
pedagogical desires and practices. Selfe highlights the
complexity of presence by extending the need to engage
analog-and-beyond technologies to the inclusion of aural
texts in what she calls the "bandwidth" of textual
possibilities in composition classrooms (618). When the
vast majority of rhetorical acts involve aural, visual and
print elements, and are digitally networked, presence — in
the classroom and beyond -- is far from a singular affair.
Rather, as "cultures and communities have managed to
maintain a value on multiple modalities of expression,
multiple and hybrid ways of knowing" and as new technology
facilitates new possibilities for these ways knowing, the
situations of public life, of which schooling is one, have
become even more overtly complex (Selfe 617-618).

An early experimenter with aurality and technology in the context of teacher response, Anson also understood presence, mediated by technology, as anything but singular. His article "In Our Own Voices: Using Recorded Commentary to Respond to Writing" (1997) reflects on his own use of tape-recorded responses to student writing.

> Tape-recording my comments on students' papers didn't remove the responsibility of making judgments. I was still using my expertise to weigh the students' successes and shortcomings and, on final papers, reach a verdict about their quality. But the tone and style of my comments seemed different. Because I was literally *talking* to each student, I felt a social dimension in my commentary that had been less present in my short, often corrective written remarks. My comments had a narrative quality, and were framed with personal remarks. (106)

Turning to talk, Anson felt better able to balance the multiplicity of his roles: "[t]he tapes were revealing something about me as a teacher that my students weren't getting from my written comments" ("Our Own Voices" 106-7).

Straight Talk

That "no method of response will ever surpass sitting
down with a writer" (Anson, "Our Own Voices," 113)
presumes, and not necessarily unjustifiably so, that
talking it over somehow assures a much clearer channel of
communication between teacher and student, writer and
reader. Certainly, this presumption may be valid. In the
context of a face-to-face conversation the teacher/reader
is able to more fully explain or elaborate upon their
thinking in response to a paper than the spaces of 1-inch
margins allow. In turn, students can also initiate these
elaborations by asking questions and, in turn, further
elaborate their intentions as a writer subsequently helping
the teacher to further offer context specific responses to
the student's work.

Beyond the conference, the commonsense faith in
actually talking with the writer carries over into
developing textual methodologies for teacher response.
Richard Straub's "Teacher Response as Conversation: More
Than Casual Talk, an Exploration" (1996), citing Erika
Lindemann, Chris Anson, Nina Ziv, Peter Elbow, M. Francine
Danis as examples -- opens with the assessment that:

It has become commonplace in scholarship on

teacher response: [to] view[] comments as a

dialogue between teacher and student, an ongoing

discussion between the teacher reader and the

student writer, a conversation. (336)

The purpose of Straub's piece is not simply to foreground

the commonplace of conversation, but to argue that

conversation is not, in itself, enough. Writing teachers

need to "develop a more rigorous definition as response as

conversation" (Straub 337). For Straub, such rigor occurs

when teachers make use of six strategies:

1. They create an informal, spoken voice, using everyday

   language...

2. They tie their comments back to students' own language

   on the page in text, in text specific comments...

3. They focus on the writer's evolving meaning and play

   back their way of understanding the text...

4. They make critical comments but cast them in the

   larger context of help or guidance...

5. They provide directions for the student's revision,

   but they do not take control over the writing or

   establish a strict agenda for that revision...

6. They elaborate on the key statements of their

   response. (342-344)

The initial three strategies rearticulate a few of the

fundamental critiques of teacher response in attempt to

counter the problems these critiques expose: the apparent

canon of commentary typically conveyed in disciplinary

language, the appropriation of the student's text, and

rendering the student text as fixed or static. Strategies

three through six move teacher response into the realm of

collaboration. Straub sites responses to a student essay

titled "Attention Bass Fishermen" by both Peter Elbow and

Chris Anson as examples of how to employ these strategies:

> [Elbow:] I felt something interesting going on
>
> here. Seemed as though you had the assignment in
>
> mind (don't just tell a story of your experiences
>
> but explain a subject) -- for a while -- but then
>
> you gradually forgot about it as you got sucked
>
> into telling your particular day of fishing.
>
> (You'll see my wiggly lines of slight bafflement
>
> as this story begins to creep in.) The trouble is
>
> I like your stories/moments. My preference would
>
> be not to drop them ("Shame on you-telling
>
> stories for an expository essay") but to search

around for some way to save it/them as part of a piece that does what the assignment calls for. Not sure how to do it. Break it up into bits to be scattered here and there? Or leave it a longer story but have material before and after to make it a means of *explaining your subject*? Not sure; tricky problem. But worth trying to pull off. Good writers often get lots of narrative and descriptive bits into expository writing. (Elbow qtd. in Straub 339, emphasis in original)

[Anson:] Well, let's take at look ay your second draft of the...[ ]piece here....Ok, let's see. Let me give you some impressions I had of the draft first and try to raise some questions for you to think about, ok? Um, first of all, one thing...is this question of how much "you" you want here and how much you want to, uh, well essentially how much of yourself and your impressions and experiences you want to be in this piece...And I think that's a judgment call...Um, what you could do is go thorough your paper and strip out everything about yourself and there wouldn't be much left but it would be purely informational —

for example, "all these were formed by sink-holes thousands of years ago." That's purely informational and not really...you're doing a kind of encyclopedic writing here. And then at the other extreme, when you say, "During my early childhood the first fun thing that I was taught to do by my grandfather was fish for bluegill," which is purely personal, narrative style of writing. And the two of them are really mixed together, which happens a lot in this kind of writing. So I would encourage you to think about how much you want of yourself and your experiences, and…how much straight information you want to provide. (Anson qtd in Straub 338-39)

Ultimately, there is perhaps little reason to doubt Straub's claims that the above responses represent strong models of conversational response. What is potentially problematic, or at least limiting, however, in these responses is that they risk enacting conversation and talk as a simply linear process of communicating information and as a result tend to actually sidestep a major motive for feedback: getting students to *do* something *new* with their texts.

To illustrate this point, I find it helpful to turn to Bump Halbritter's description of the difference between physical and psychological interactivity. Citing Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Halbritter writes:

> It is true that the automobile carried Kuruac and the Beat generation to places they had not gone before, but they where still tied to an infrastructure of roadways: They could go only where somebody else allowed them to go by, literally, paving the way. (332)

In contrast to a roadway and its predetermined limitations, psychological interactivity, as facilitated by aural texts like music and film soundtracks, operates primarily through metaphor and "allows audience[s]...to travel their own roads as well as those suggested by the author" (Halbritter 332).

Ultimately, then, as much as the conversational responses of Elbow and Anson "provide directions for the student's revision...[without] tak[ing] control over the writing or establish[ing] a strict agenda for that revision" (Straub 344), the responses also don't offer much thinking beyond the literal confines -- the infrastructural conventions -- of the page. They ask that the writer work

within the predetermined limitations of the essay instead of pushing the writer toward "a different order of complexity" (Sommers 154). They more resemble what Bruno Latour called an intermediary, or "what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs," rather than as a mediator, which in the Latourian sense is not simply a go-between in the relationship between two entities, but anything -- person, object, system -- that

> cannot be counted as just one; [mediators] might count for one, for nothing, for several, or for infinity....Mediators transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry.(39)

In short, as currently conceived, conversational models of teacher response do not prompt the writer to *do* much beyond revisit the expectations of the assignment and genre, despite hints of complexity, "[t]he tapes were revealing something about me as a teacher that my students weren't getting from my written comments (Anson, "Our Own Voices," 106-7).

Network Talk

In 1973, Antin, who at the time had published relatively extensively as a poet, was invited to read his poetry at the San Francisco Poetry Center and decided:

> ...I wasn't going to bring any of my books with me to read from. The place was filled with poets....Then I went up there without any poems to read and asked the question "what am i doing here" and proposed to answer my own question by talking.(*Conversation* 44)

Generically, from this point forward, Antin's work, what came to be known as talk pieces, can be described as improvised, spoken public performances. The performance is tape-recorded and at some point published as a print text (typically in book form) or distributed as sound recordings (via the Web). While the audio recordings of the performance are distributed essentially "as is," merely uploaded and available for download from sites like Penn Sound, the print versions of the pieces are revised. Antin offers a glimpse into this process in the talk piece "real estate" (1984):

> now the book itself   can be considered
>
> a package a kind of care package so to speak

> right   i mean i do my talking here and i take
>
> my imperfect recording and i transcribe it in the
>
> hope of finding what in it was the real thing
>
> the real action   and i try to get it into the
>
> book in such a way that its still intelligible
>
> when it goes into this rectangular object with
>
> covers that you open   like this   and which is
>
> partitioned arbitrarily by those things they call
>
> pages
>
> there are
>
> no pages when i talk (55-56)

While Antin labels the move from the recorded talk to the

print versions as transcription, he acknowledges that "I

felt free to add to the original [taped] material and

expand it [in print] -- with phrases or whole passages that

were not in the original but belonged in the talk" (Antin,

Conversation, 63). Instead of using the conventions of

either prose or verse notation, the print versions of

Antin's talk pieces are void of commas, periods, and

capital letters and instead "separate words from each other

and represent phrasal groupings[]...to follow the pulse of

talking...hesitation markers or other junctural markers

that seem[] meaningful" (Antin, *Conversation*, 63).

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Consequently, the talk doesn't just become a recording, the recording a transcript, the transcript a book and on down the line. Inputs don't simply define outputs.

In contrast to conversational teacher response which desires a coherent playback from reader to writer, the critic Marjorie Perloff has suggested that "the key to Antin's...method" -- the accumulation of translations, via *adding to* in multiple mediums (improvised talk, tape, print) -- is that "[t]he story cannot, it seems, be 'told' in any straightforward manner, the questions, which is to say the noise in the information channel, soon overwhelm[s] all linear communication" (iv-v). Perloff's thinking suggests that, if Antin's work offers noise and non-linearity in the face of more traditional expectations of straightforward manners often held by audiences, then we can also read his work as having the potential to do what Bruno Latour identified as *"trac[ing] a network"* (128 emphasis in original).

Defining network as "a string of actions where each participant is treated as a full-blown mediator," Latour describes texts capable of tracing such networks, of educing multiplicity, as works "where all the actors *do something* and don't just sit there...[where] each of the

points in the text may become a bifurcation, an event, or the origin of a new translation" (128 emphasis in original).

Antin's talk piece "i never knew what time it was" (1998/2004) can, in general, like many texts, be read multiple ways. Literally, a reader could generate this sort of bulleted list of the text's contents:

- A description of how New York was changing and continued to change since Antin lived there in 1957 (80);

- An assertion about Antin's wife's, Eleanor, "peculiar relationship to time" (81-82);

- A memory and description of conceiving and executing two separate, but linked, performance pieces he in 1998 and 1971 (82-88);

- A brief comparison/comment on narrative vs. storytelling that references the poet Apollinaire (88-89);

- Posing the question -- "now how do you remember a date like 1971   how do you remember any date like the millennium" (89);

- An exploration of this question jumping off from but linking to "the jewish museum show" of 1971 -- "look a

radical young rabbi gets killed by the romans   he

dies and his followers who admire him try to remember

this" and moves to "i begin to think that finding the

year two thousand is like painting a wave white in the

middle of the sea and saying   lets go there

and celebrate" (89—91);

- A loop back to Eleanor's sense of time (91);

- A loop back to try to "find" 1971, date of the

  previous performance mentioned earlier -- but also a

  possible link to his wife, Eleanor -- via " a

  photograph   my sister in law and her husband" and

  an anecdote of Antin playing with catch with his son

  (92);

- A loop back to the 1971 performance piece from playing

  catch with his son via the weather -- "it looked like

  it might have been a cold day in central park

  blaise [Antin's son] was wearing the kind of corduroy

  lumberjacket with fur that kids wear in late fall when

  its already cold   and if that was the case

  then it couldntve been the year of the jewish museum

  show   which happened during a very hot indian

  summer" (92)

As with multiple meanings or interpretations, one can
take nearly any text and construct a bulleted list of
what's collected in it. Antin's pieces, however, actually
prompt the work of making a list or an index. This
prompting emerges, according to Antin, as part of a
conscious strategy of transforming the print versions of
his improvised talks to something outside the forms of both
verse and prose:

> A reader might try to find a possible speaking
> pulse...but would probably remain uncertain
> about their intonations and pacing. The
> result...[is] a tendency...to acquire
> conceptually a kind of list-structured
> intonation. (*Conversation* 63)

In listing out Antin's "i never knew what time it
was," also noticeable is how in such "list-structured
intonation[s]" the reader is enabled, by Antin's text, to
employ a language generally associated with networks -- the
language of loops and links and associations. In Antin's
own thinking about his work, the Latourian concept of
networks also emerges:

> I am always conducting a kind of dialogue with
> myself, as well as a dialogue with the audience,

and the audience is always conducting a kind of

dialogue with me, but also spinning off. I feel

that's good. One of the reasons I use a less

tight presentation mode is that I want the

audience to have room to pursue its own interest

and loop away *and* loop back, which I think they

do. (qtd. in Smith and Dean)

What happens here, I contend, is that being the

extension or product of improvisory talk (a spinning off),

and translated through multiple mediums (aural and print),

Antin's talk pieces trace networks in that they make good

on constructing writer, reader, text, and technology to

become mediators in the Latourian sense "of count[ing] for

one, for nothing, for several, or for infinity" (39).

Beyond any move to simply interpret Antin's text, the

talk pieces incite psychological interactivity, allowing

the reader space to go their own way, or follow Antin, or

simply wander:

I think people associate off into things that are

like my experience but different, and that they

might have said in a different way. So they

pursue their agreements and disagreements with me

through parallels of support, this allows them a

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full-scale dialogue. And to the extent to which
they are involved in it...they have this kind of
intense but intermittent attention. (Antin qtd in
Smith and Dean)

A network is measured, at least part, by "the ability of
each actor to *make* other actors *do* unexcpected things"
(Latour 129 emphasis in original). Antin's sense of what he
provokes his audiences to do recalls a hope found in the
teacher response literature, that "Comments create the
motive for doing something different in the next draft"
(Sommers 149), that teacher response to student texts offer
a chance to share one's own thinking about something while
still letting the student say something in their own way.
Unlike Antin's talk pieces, however, the paradox (or myth)
of improvement, that learning is complex but must also be
reliably standardized and measured (Brannon and Knoblauch,
"Emperor"), causes the textual work of teacher response to
place less value on associative logics.

Talk, Connections, Networks

Embracing talk and conversation (either literally or
metaphorically) has helped teacher response as a means to
move beyond the "the traditional use of comments simply to

42

label errors and mark problems" (Straub 336). In the context of contemporary digital culture, the use of talk and conversation could be extended even further as "The predominant form of human interaction...is networking" (Shaviro qtd. in Edbauer, "Unframing Models," 9).

As a starting point for defining this form of interaction, Mark C. Taylor contrasts walls and webs:

> [Walls are] designed to maintain stability by simplifying complex relations and situations in terms of a grid with clear and precise oppositions…walls divide and seclude in an effort to impose order and control...webs [on the other hand] link and relate, entangling everyone in multiple, mutating, and mutually defining connections in which nobody is really in control.
> (23)

What are rubrics if not grids with clear and precise oppositions?

Echoing Taylor's image of webs and countering the notion of rhetoric as being fortified by walls, Jenny Edbauer defines rhetorical work as "a circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" (9). Stemming from the

work of, among others, Margaret Syverson, who in *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition* wrote:

> [T]he knowledge involved in "writing" ... depends
> on activities and communications shared in
> interactions not only among people but also
> interactions between people and various
> structures in the environment, from physical
> landmarks to technological instruments to
> graphical representations…Our theories of
> composition have been somewhat atomistic,
> focusing on individual writers, individual texts,
> isolated acts, processes, or artifacts. (qtd. in
> Edbauer, "Unframing Models," 12)

Edbauer argues that "Rather than imaging the rhetorical
situation in a relatively closed system...[a] distributed
or ecological focus might begin to imagine the situation
within an open network" ("Unframing Models" 13).
Specifically, then, models of teacher response that seek to
adopt conversation as desirable literal or conceptual
methods might rethink talk -- like Antin -- by tracing
networks, by calling forth mediators, as if:

> The contact between two people [or a teacher and
> a student and an essay] on a busy street [or in

an office or a classroom] is never simply a

matter of two bodies; rather, the two bodies

carry with them traces of effects from whole

fields of culture and social histories. This is

what it means to say that the social field is

networked, connected... (Edbauer, "Unframing

Models," 10)

Traditional, even effective, conversational teacher

response texts do not trace networks. Instead, they operate

in the service of a singular connection, what Latour might

phrase as the transmission of a *mono-translation*. In other

words, while conversational methods of teacher response

strive to "engage students in learning how writers and

readers work intersubjectively through texts through texts

to achieve understanding" (Straub 337), they largely

regulate the texts of the reader and writer as Latourian

intermediaries oriented to a singular contexts, singular

modes -- singular inputs and outputs.

Um, what you could do is go thorough your paper

and strip out everything about yourself and there

wouldn't be much left but it would be purely

informational -- for example, "all these were

formed by sink-holes thousands of years ago."

> That's purely informational and not
> really...you're doing a kind of encyclopedic
> writing here. And then at the other extreme, when
> you say, "During my early childhood the first fun
> thing that I was taught to do by my grandfather
> was fish for bluegill," which is purely personal,
> narrative style of writing. And the two of them
> are really mixed together, which happens a lot in
> this kind of writing. (Anson qtd in Straub 338-
> 39)

Or:

> The trouble is I like your stories/moments. My
> preference would be not to drop them ("Shame on
> you-telling stories for an expository essay") but
> to search around for some way to save it/them as
> part of a piece that does what the assignment
> calls for. Not sure how to do it. (Elbow qtd in
> Straub 339)

The input and output is simply "re: what works." There has
been no translation of the "traces of effects from whole
fields of culture and social histories" (Edbauer,
"unframing Models," 10), of what perhaps — when reading or
writing this text — was playing on the stereo.

In the final chapter, I will explore in more detail the significance of multimodal performance informed by improvisation as a move toward networks and work through (one) possibility of what teacher-response-as-network might look like. Specifically, the technology of screencasting will be explored as a means to extend the conversational model of teacher response towards an improvised network performance.

CHAPTER THREE

TRACING NETWORKS

If presence, as an element of teacher response, can be understood as networked and if textual performances informed by association, accumulation and noise are able to approach the tracing of such networks, then it is worth exploring ways to capture these tracings in the context of feedback practices.

As Latour argues, and Antin demonstrates, "Network is a concept not a thing" (Latour 131) and as such, access to or knowledge of sophisticated technology is by no means a prerequisite for networked performance. W. Michele Simmons and Jeffrey T. Grabill have pointed out, however, that

> Most public places where deliberation takes place
>
> are either institutionally complex (i.e.,
>
> procedurally dense) or technically and
>
> scientifically complex -- or both. This
>
> complexity places an extraordinary burden on
>
> nonexperts ("citizens") to develop knowledge that
>
> might be persuasive in these settings. (423)

As classrooms are public spaces and as teacher response is a site where deliberations about the quality and potential

of student texts happen, there seems little reason to assume the writing classroom or rhetoric curricula are removed from the challenges of complexity. While in the classroom, the teacher is the institutionally sanctioned expert and the student, typically, the nonexpert; however, as citizens in a complex society (in which school is only one public space), the distinction of expert and nonexpert is less certain. For example, as citizens, it is entirely possible that, in terms of evolving technological complexity, neither students nor their teachers are (depending on the situation) any more "expert" than the other. As citizens, then, both teachers and students are faced with having to develop skills and knowledge enabling participation within spaces shaped by network technology. With this in mind, I argue that teacher response, practiced in affinity with new media and networks, has the potential to be one site for experimenting with both the logics (i.e., nonlinearity) and the equipment (i.e., MP3 recorders) of digital culture. The *screencast* is a starting point.

Multi-application Multimodality

Screencasting is a compositional process that utilizes software capable of advancing the screen-capturing features common on most computers into the realm of moving images and sound. It allows nearly any "real-time" activity visible on a computer's desktop to be captured to video, edited, and distributed. Perhaps most commonly associated with "how-to" or instructional videos on using software, screencasting has also made its way into Web-based journalism and performance art, as well as conference presentations at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Schaffner; Anderson).

This image, taken from Spencer Schaffner's "Desktop MCing, Part I" (2009) offers a static glimpse of the screencasting form:

Desktop MCing, Part I

metaspencer · 20 videos ☑ | Subscribe |

metaspencer — March 14, 2009 — Part I of my CCCC presentation on multi-application webcasts. ☑ **242** ☑
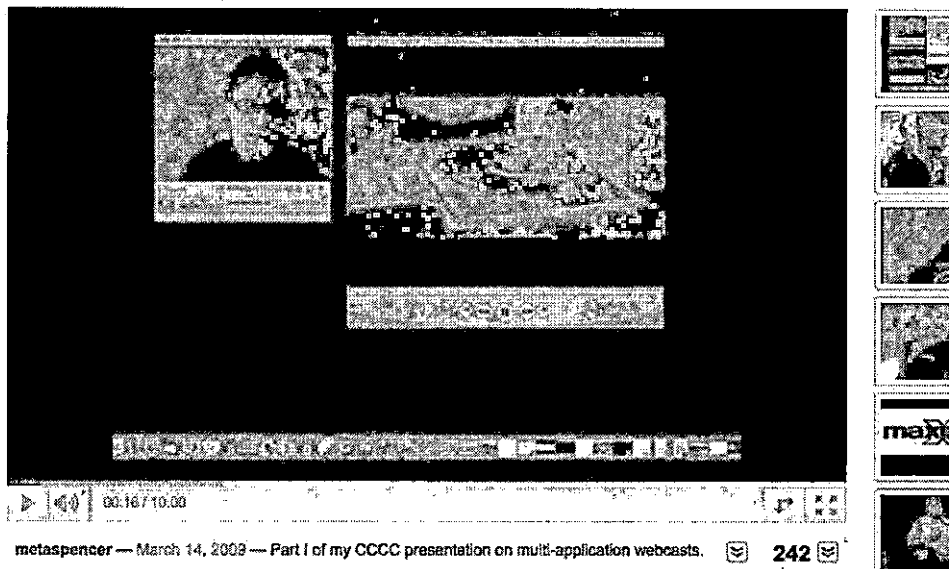
Fig. 1 Screen capture, "Desktop MCing,

Part I," Spencer Schaffner, *Metaspencer.com* (Mar.

2009)

Visible in Schaffner's piece, and familiar to Mac users, is

his desktop's dock, which makes applications (and their

active windows) available for use, and, in the context of

the screencast -- visible to both Schaffner and his

audience -- in one click. In Schaffner's screencast

recording, a window playing a video of a DJ's performance

is open, as well as a window making Schaffner both seen and

heard via his computer's internal mic and camera. Not

clearly visible here in the context of this print document

is that, as the audience, we would be able to both listen and watch as Schaffner manipulates the cursor for his operating system and quite literally performs the screencast by cuing-up and bringing multiple applications and their content -- images, sounds, alphabetic texts, videos, webpages -- into play. As texts like "Desktop MCing, Part I" illustrate, screencasting offers the composer the ability to enact an Antin-esque multimodality simultaneously and within a single space. For Antin this multimodality was talk, tape, and print. With the screencast, composers are not limited to these three modes, but are able to work in a potentially limitless combination of sights, sounds, and words.

In terms of teacher-response, the screencast pushes conversational methods like Anson's taped commentary and Elbow's "movies-of-the-reader's-mind" into new territory: networking aural, visual, and textual content.

Networks of the Reader's Mind (Part I)

Anson's exploration with taped comments represent an early intersection of conversational response techniques, like Elbow's "movies of the reader's mind" and recording technology (see also Jeff Sommers's "Spoken Response:

Space, Time, and Movies of the Mind"). Specifically,

Elbow's movies method "ask[s] readers to tell you honestly

and in detail what is going on in their minds as they read

your words" (Elbow and Belanoff 9) while Anson describes

his tape method as an improvisory:

> Talking out loud about a student paper [that]
>
> seems to spark many spontaneous discoveries that
>
> lead to more explanation and more talk....Tape-
>
> recorded commentary...offers you chance to *show*
>
> student's what happens in readers' minds as they
>
> construct meaning from a piece of writing. In
>
> this process, you can read a small part of the
>
> paper, usually a paragraph or a section, then
>
> comment on what it has done to advance a line of
>
> thought or move a paper forward. ("Our Own Voice"
>
> 108)

If Elbow evokes the possibility of essay as storyboard and

Anson's method conjures the more literary adage of show

don't tell, then screencasting converts the computer

desktop into a Web 2.0 multiplex. This allows the teacher

to not only respond to a given piece of student writing,

but to pay attention to the situation's ambience -- its

mise en scene. Defined as "surroundings, or background of

any event or action" (OED), *mise en scene* is not entirely foreign to thinking about teacher response. Brannon and Knoblauch, for example, have shown concern for the limits and possibilities of feedback in light of "the whole environment of oral and written communication between teacher and student" ("Teacher Commentary" 71). Screencasts offer feedback a chance to better materialize and capture this environment, to expand the view of its oral and written communication as "link[ing] and relat[ing], entangling everyone [and everything] in multiple, mutating, and mutually defining connections" (Taylor 23).

Describing a method for composing a text — analog or digital — capable of tracing a network, Latour writes "the best way to proceed...is to simply keep track of all our moves, even those that deal with the very production of the account[]...because from now on *everything is data*" (133 emphasis in original). What follows is an attempt to sketch out such a text in response to a passage of student work that appears in Richard Straub's "Teacher Response as Conversation: More Than Casual Talk, An Exploration" (1996). Excerpted from a student essay titled "Attention: Bass Fisherman," this student's text served as the basis for the feedback solicited by Straub for his analysis of

conversational methods of teacher response. Straub selected

this particular passage as representative of what had

emerged in the teachers' response as a key struggle for the

writer, that the "draft frequently shifts from an

expository account to a narrative of personal experience"

(337).

Ultimately, it is not my purpose to specifically

counter Straub or any of his teacher-responders' assessment

of this student's draft. Indeed, these assessments may in

fact be correct, and as Straub's project asserts, the

conversational means though which the feedback was

originally delivered may hold an incredible potential for

efficacy in working with writers in general, and this

writer in particular. Although, it should be noted,

however, that Straub's article does not actually concern

itself with whether or not the writer of "Attention: Bass

Fisherman" ever used any such feedback for the

"improvement" of his text.

My purpose, instead, is to appropriate and update, for

my own use, Straub's claim that:

> the metaphor [of conversation] may be used more
>
> productively to help teachers make responses that
>
> turn students back into the chaos of revision,

foster independent, substantive thought in their

writing, and engage students in learning how

writers and readers work intersubjectively

through texts to achieve meaning. (337)

Networks of the Reader's Mind (Part II)

"Attention: Bass Fisherman" was written in for "an

assignment that asked students to explain an idea or

activity they are knowledgeable about to readers who are

not as knowledgeable" (Straub 337):

Lake Ivanho is unique because the only thing

between you and the fish are the occasional

patches of lillypads [sic]. The best solution to

this problem is to work a top-water buzz bait in

the early morning or late afternoon. I have

hooked some big bass using this technique, but if

the bass is big enough to give a good long fight

it can be very difficult to get it through the

lillypads. After fishing the lillypads that

morning my next move was to work a plastic worm

under the giant oak trees that hang out over much

of Lake Ivenho. Bass like to hang out in these

shady areas during the heat of the day so they

can better spot unsuspecting prey swimming by.
This didn't produce the monster bass I was
looking or so my next move was to work a spinner-
bait along the southeast bank of the lake. (qtd
in Straub 337-338)

Appropriate the Student's Text

Use the built in camera and microphone on my laptop to
record an improvised response to reading "Attention: Bass
Fisherman," what Anson has termed "reading live" ("Our Own
Voice" 108):

> [my improvised talk:] The idea that 'the only
> thing between you and the fish are the occasional
> patches of lillypads" is interesting...I know you
> mean this in terms of literally when you're on
> the water, but I lived in central Florida for a
> while, not far from Orlando and I'm brought back
> to the sprawl of the place, of not being from
> there so constantly hearing stories of how 'it
> used to be' before all the growth and
> development...and when you talk about Orlando,
> the other thinking that comes to mind is Disney
> World...and that place just seems to sprawl
> outward...[Note: while the passage makes no

refernece to Orlando, the full draft locates Lake

Ivanho in the Orlando area]

Some Rationale. Knowing that a screencast will

ultimately facilitate being able to incorporate a near

limitless number of elements into the response, I would

work to make this initial piece of spoken commentary

concerned less with "text specific comments" (Straub 342)

that seek to speak to the efficacy of, say, the draft

meeting the expectations of the assignment as Elbow does

when he replies "Seemed as though you had the assignment in

mind (don't just tell a story of your experiences but

explain a subject) — for awhile — but then you gradually

forgot about it as you got sucked into telling your

particular day of fishing" (Straub 339). Instead, I want to

work to make these spoken comments more *associative*, more

along the lines of what Antin describes as a "spinning off"

(qtd. in Smith and Dean), to work as Latour's "mediator"

(39), and what Taylor calls "multiple, [and] mutating"

(23). In doing this I will have to appropriate the student

text rather freely. If my response were going to be a

singular note in the margins of a page or even an extended

(albeit singular) instance of comments written at the foot

of the draft, then I might not be willing to be freely

associative in my response, but, again, being aware that in the context of the screencast I am able to potentially capture more fully "the environment of oral and written communication" (Knoblach and Brannon, "Teacher Commentary," 71), I want to mine that environment for as many links, connections, entanglements and *translations* as possible. In opening the possibility for these links, connections, entanglements and translations my commentary operates, at least initially, unhinged from the student's original purpose -- to inform me about bass fishing on Lake Ivanho -- and treats the moment in the text of *seeing nothing beyond the lillypads* as a bifurcation, a point at which further invention could happen.

Screencasting offers multiple ways to ways to proceed with spoken commentary. On the one hand, the option exists to compose a one-take screencast in which you actually capture spoken commentary live while you are using your computer to bring other elements into play. For example, using screencasting software, the composer can simultaneously read the student essay, talk out loud about it, and even navigate the web to reference items like "Lake Ivanho" or "bass fishing." Another option is to pre-record spoken commentary -- improvised or not -- and simply

include it as a piece of the screencasted feedback's *mise en scene*. One of the most appealing capabilities of screencasting is that it allows a composer to capture the performance of putting together the composition itself in addition to allowing for the screencast to be composed using a more traditional video editing process. Again, as Latour instructs, from now on everything is data.

For Antin, composing is a matter of exigent situation, and the most direct route to such a situation is not reading from a previously composed text as in a typical poetry reading, but in composing live, in the moment, in front of an audience. Again, the opening moments of the talk-piece "tuning" (1984) speaks to this:

> if you see me fiddling with this tape
> recorder   its mainly because i have no very
> precise image of what im going to say   though i
> have a considerable notion of the terrain   into
> which i tend to move and the only way im going to
> find out whether it was worth doing or not   is
> when i hear what ive got   which has been my way
> of entrapping myself   and the reason ive chosen
> to entrap myself rather than to prepare in

advance   a precise set of utterances   has

been that i felt myself   ive written things

    before this   in the natural vacuum that is

the   artificial hermetic closet that literature

has been in for some time   and the problem

    for me   is in the closet confronting a

typewriter and no person   so that for me

literature defined as literature   has no

urgency   it has no need of address (105)

As George Leonard describes it:

He begins to talk, and, as you watch, he watches

you too, "tuning," in on you...[s]peaking,

watching you, improvising the poem while he

studies you, he is trying, through his speech, to

"tune" your instruments together with his, all

your minds, together…as he works to create a kind

of rhythmic communion that the whole room joins

in...(107)

In another move of appropriation, I could also

manipulate the words of the student's draft. This could be

done in a number of ways with a multiple applications. For

example, a word processing program could be used to perform

the highlighting and extracting of words, phrases and

61

passages from the student's original document. Such programs could also be used to manipulate the design of the original draft, including spacing, capitalization, and look of fonts.

> Under what conditions would you accept a paper handwritten in crayon on colored construction paper?
>
> If you can imagine no conditions whatsoever, then for you color of paper and technologies of print typography are like water or stones: things whose natural properties (seem to) necessarily constrain how we can use them. We do not attempt to make soup from stones nor do we imagine early hominids attacking mammoths by throwing water at them. If paper and typography are similar in having such inherent constraints, then it is the neat rows of typographically clean letters on letter-size white paper that are necessary for serious thought. (Wysocki 55)

Use Cliché

Some Rationale. If my initial recorded, spoken commentary would be of the associative sort, I would then have the option of creating an element for the screencast

that utilizes the cliché material of more traditional

academic expectations for expository writing. For example,

if the student had received feedback from others,

particularly via institutional processes such as a writing

center, I could compose a PowerPoint slide show of these

responses to the work that could be used as yet another

element of the screencast. Mix in, for example, Elbow's

feedback for "Attention Bass Fishermen":

> The trouble is I like your stories/moments. My
>
> preference would be not to drop them ("Shame on
>
> you-telling stories for an expository essay") but
>
> to search around for some way to save it/them as
>
> part of a piece that does what the assignment
>
> calls for. Not sure how to do it. Break it up
>
> into bits to be scattered here and there? Or
>
> leave it a longer story but have material before
>
> and after to make it a means of explaining your
>
> subject? (qtd. in Straub 339)

Sound advice from Elbow. Why should it represent the scope

of the feedback offered?

Another option for cliché would be to deploy passages

lifted from popular (even required) writing textbooks into

the screencast. Mix in a passage from *The Writer's Presence* (2009):

> Another way a writer makes his or her presence felt is through creating a distinctive and identifiable *voice*. All words are composed of sounds, and language itself is something nearly all of us learned through *hearing*. Any piece of writing can be read aloud, although readers have developed such ingrained habits of silent reading that they no longer *hear* the writing. (McQuade and Atwan 3 emphasis original)

Again, sound advice. But what do bass fisherman sound like? Mix in the voice of Les Claypool, bassist and lead vocalist for the band Primus:

> I was just a little pup and it was derby day/ Was dad and me and Darrell out in San Pablo Bay/ Taco flavored Doritos and my orange life vest/ Dad caught a hundred pound sturgeon on twenty-pound test/ Now he fought that fish for 'bout an hour and a half/ Darrell'd say 'Jump ya sons a bitch!" and he grabbed for the gaff/ When we got him in the boat he measured six feet long/ I was so danged impressed I had to write this song called

'Fish On' (Fish On [Fisherman Chronicles, Chapter
II])

Some rationale. In terms of equating writing with
sound, and by association -- music, appropriation and
cliché both lend themselves to the practice of
improvisation. In jazz, for example, there exists a:

> tension between creating something new and
> staying with the tradition of the genre...If the
> performance is too new the audience won't get it;
> respect for the audience requires that musicians
> maintain a certain continuity with tradition.
> (Sawyer 181)

In writing pedagogy there might not be a more clichéd
notion than that of voice. To call it cliché, however, in
no way demeans its value. Rather, the juxtaposition of such
a standard trope with the song "Fish On (Fisherman
Chronicles, Chapter II)" by Primus has the chance to
replicate the improvisory tension of jazz. To simply offer
an explanation of a writer's voice or point out that a text
lacks voice isn't incredibly provocative. Remember, while a
goal of feedback is to "provide ...students with an
inherent reason for revising" (Sommers 156), feedback must
also incite the student to action — to *do something new.*

65

Reasons alone are often not enough. On the other hand, if

the feedback *only* offered the Primus tune (Claypool's voice

and all) — i.e., what your draft needs is more Primus, man

— the writer's disorientation risks provoking a static

state of being disabled instead of a more provocative one.

Taken together in juxtaposition, however, the generic bit

about a writer's voice and the Primus song have the

possibility, as in jazz, to become "contributions [that]

only make sense in terms of the way they are heard,

absorbed, and elaborated on" in the ensemble of players

(Sawyer 182) — in this case, the writer, the reader, the

text, and as much of everything else that can be captured.

The screencast makes possible, then, via cliché and

appropriation, the tension from which a creative

performance by both teacher and student might emerge.

Go Nonlinear

If my initial improvised spoken commentary,

associating off from the writer's line "the only thing

between you and the fish are the occasional patches of

lillypads" and to urban sprawl in central Florida is

extended further, it would brings me, perhaps, to when I

was living in central Florida — 1990 to 1994. It would

bring me back to my soundtrack for that time. I was in high

school, so, generally, this soundtrack was a typical lineup
of the alternative rock that dominated MTV and the airwaves
in that moment. Among these groups was Primus, who across
three albums released between 1989 and 1993, composed three
songs -- "John the Fisherman" (1989), "Fish On (Fisherman
Chronicles, Chapter II)" (1991), and "Ol' Diamondback
Sturgeon (Fisherman's Chronicles, Pt. 3)" (1993) -- that
comprise, as indicated by the titling, a saga of the
fisherman.

> When he was young you'd not find him doing well
>
> in school. / His mind would turn unto the
>
> waters./ Always the focus of adolescent
>
> ridicule,/ He has no time for farmer's
>
> daughters./ Alienated from the clique society,/ A
>
> lonely boy finds peace in fishing.
>
> His mother says "John this is not the way life's
>
> supposed to be."/ "Don't you see the life that
>
> you are missing?" ("John the Fisherman")

Some Rationale. Nonlinearity also lends it self to
improvisation. David Borgo links nonlinearity -- output not
proportional to input -- to the emergent properties of
improvised ensemble performance (62-65). While I'm not a
musician, screencasting makes it possible for me to utilize

preexisting -- readymade -- musical material in order to
construct feedback as act of listening. I can "play"
Primus:

> In a panic the old diamondback sped to the north/
>
> He sped to the east, west and south/ But the
>
> harder he swam, he still could not break free/
>
> From the "tugging" that pulled at his mouth ("The
>
> Old Diamondback Sturgeon")

Play Primus off Elbow's feedback:

> I felt something interesting going on here.
>
> Seemed as though you had the assignment in mind
>
> (don't just tell a story of your experiences but
>
> explain a subject) -- for awhile -- but them you
>
> gradually forgot about it as you got sucked into
>
> telling your particular day of fishing. (qtd. in
>
> Straub 339)

Play both elements off the textbook *The Writer's Prescence*
(2009):

> One of the most straightforward ways for the to
>
> make his or her presence felt in an essay is to
>
> include appropriate personal experiences.
>
> ...Writers...find ways to build their personal
>
> experiences into essays that are informative or

argumentative, essays on topics other than themselves. They do this to show their close connection with a subject, to offer testimony, or to establish their personal authority on a subject. (McQuade and Atwan 2)

Some Rationale. The writer's original assignment was "to explain an idea or activity they are knowledgeable about to readers who are not as knowledgeable" (Straub 337). I know little about fishing either as hobby or sport. I could, having family in rural Ohio, maybe, cite some of familial memories of fishing. Like Elbow, however, I also *feel* something interesting going here and its not any perceived gap in genre expectations or any literal association with fishing per se. Instead, I feel Primus's "Fish On (Fisherman Chronicles, Chapter II)" (1991) pulsing through my speakers. After my initial read of the draft, I pulled it up on my iTunes application and played it on a loop as I go looped back and reread the student's text. Not only, then, if Primus's musical text(s) are deployed in the screencast response, will the writer have to come to terms with the lyrical (and most literally) textual component of this material -- "[c]artoonish celebrations of the mundane"

(Azerrad). They will also have to hear it, listen to it and come to terms with *feeling*:

> [a] guitar sing[ing] at high velocity,
>
> squall[ing]uncontrollably or peal[ing]out
>
> perplexing dissonances; ...crisp, tricky drumming
>
> -- full of mighty double-bass-drum bursts and
>
> startling syncopations from all corners of his
>
> mammoth kit -- recall[ing] art-rock maestro Bill
>
> Bruford...But the band's focal point is the
>
> charismatic [avid fisherman] Claypool, a
>
> prodigious bassist whose playing can suggest
>
> both drum and rhythm-guitar parts, enabling [the
>
> guitars and drums]...to freak freely while he
>
> talk-sings in a variety of cartoonish voices that
>
> would make Mel Blanc proud. (Azerrad)

For all its strengths and weakness -- whatever these may be and by whatever category of evaluation one could apply -- that I read "Attention: Bass Fishermen" on the proximity of another, aural text, the reading of this draft becomes for me a "distributed processes of *hearing*-and in my...[living space] with...[Primus] turned up, even *feeling*..." (Edbauer "Unframing Models" 23). So, maybe, Primus and their "Fisherman Chronicles" are the heart of what I have to

offer the writer of "Attention: Bass Fishermen." The screencast makes it possible to redistribute this feeling, circulate it amongst more traditional teacher response insights, for whatever ends are desired.

What screencasting offers, however, is the chance for the teacher not to simply respond by using a diverse array of materials, of saying in effect -- here are some things you might check out in thinking about your paper. It allows the teacher-responder the chance to design a multiplex, networked response that one the hand, works to accomplish "dramatizing the presence of a reader" (Sommers 148), and on the other, for the writing teacher themselves to experiment with composing multimodal, digital texts, "to expand our own engagements with the modes of invention and means of circulation" that have come to define rhetorical work of both teachers and students in digital culture (Rice "Mechanics" 368).

Even so, isn't all of this stuff just noise? How is Primus supposed to help a writer move from rough draft to improved final product in the context of an expository writing assignment? In other words, if even the most well-crafted and best intentioned teacher response produces only "scant evidence that students routinely use comments on one

draft to make rhetorically important, and in the end

qualitatively superior changes in a subsequent drafts"

(Brannon and Knoblauch, "Emperor," 1), then why seemingly

exacerbate the problem by further abstracting feedback?

"When information is understood as a process rather

than a product, the line separating it from noise is

difficult to determine...noise is the static that prevents

the systems it haunts from becoming static" (Taylor 122-

123). Process versus product is a familiar trope in writing

pedagogy, and developments in teacher response, like using

the metaphor of conversation, have been pushed along by the

embrace of process-oriented thinking; however, response

practices have largely clung to an understanding of

feedback as simply a consumable product.

Again, I make no claims that teacher response

practiced in the ways I've sketched out will result in

improved student products. Instead, if anything, what I

have strived to take seriously is not end products, but

rather the strands within teacher response that desire to

play a part in invention, in getting students to see their

texts, and language in general, in new ways and as capable

of being put to new, as yet undetermined uses. Sommers

describes such desire for invention as needing to "sabotage

our students' conviction that the drafts they have written are complete and coherent" (154); however, why is it that the disintegration of a paper, particularly at the point of invention, simply results in a new paper? If a paper where to really disintegrate — why wouldn't it disintegrate into a mix tape, a podcast, a YouStream video, or a conversation over dinner and a craft beer with friends? Each of these instances veer toward what Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye call "writing performances" or "students' live enactment of their own writing" (226). In this way, then, feedback as screencast performance, as network, reframes the desire in teacher response to facilitate invention, shifting it from the disintegration of text within the confines of a single genre toward a process of distribution across multiple genres. Put another way, feedback as network has the potential to move beyond pushing students to tear down a paper only to construct another one, although it could still be useful for that. Feedback as network, instead, invites in other channels and mediums for thinking through the possibilities of a given text.

As Selfe points out, making space for multimodality in the classroom has much at stake for both teacher and

student. While classical rhetoric's notion of *"all available means"* has long been implicit in Composition's acknowledgment of and desire for a hefty lineage, when it is ignored in practice, teachers not only offer students an incomplete "sense of rhetorical agency" they "also, limit, unnecessarily, [their] own scholarly understanding of semiotic systems" (Selfe 618 emphasis in original). It is in the latter sense, that multimodality has consequences for scholarship, that teacher response as network becomes most valuable. This value comes about, in part, because as Jenny Rice reminds us, the work of understanding semiotic systems in digital culture cannot be removed from "the *mechanical knowledge* of technology" (368 emphasis in original). One has to get in there and start making things, using the tools. So, in as much as software (screencasting) or hardware (an MP3 recorder) facilitates this sort of *doing*, teacher response as network can benefit Composition scholarship and pedagogy by opening up a space through which to lay hands on new tools. Of course, making in itself is only a starting point. Equally important is putting tools -- old (talking) and new (screencasting) -- to work within new logics (networks). In addition to *making things*, then, feedback as network offers the chance to

deploy these things in the service of thinking about the
expanding webs of technology, textual production, and
pedagogy.

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