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Reararticulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning

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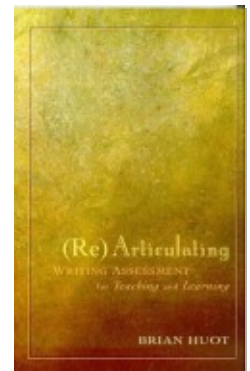
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5

READING LIKE A TEACHER

Toward a Theory of Response

Like chapter three, this chapter focuses on activities in the writing classroom and is concerned with the way our evaluation of and response to students' writing affects their ability to learn. As I have in all the chapters in this volume, I start here with what we currently know or perceive about a specific component of assessing student writing and attempt to re-articulate it in ways that can further promote teaching and learning. My study of and ideas about response have been evolving over the last decade or so. For example, I regularly teach a doctoral seminar on writing assessment called "Assessing and Responding to Student Writing," and I include a responding-to-student-writing section in both of my teaching writing courses, one for high school teachers and one for those teaching at the college level. The evolution of activities and readings I have used in courses like these to prepare teachers to respond to student writing has been an important experience for my own evolving thought about response practices. This chapter reflects my continuing struggle to understand and improve my own response practices, along with those of the teachers I work with, and to say something important about the act of responding to student writing. All of these experiences and activities have led me to the conclusion that we currently lack a sufficient theory for responding to student writing. Although no single chapter could possibly articulate a coherent theory of response, I explore the theoretical soundness of the ways we respond to student writers and teach new instructors to respond. My goal is to unearth the beliefs and assumptions that guide

current response practices and hold a critical eye toward them and the act of responding to student writing. This practical, grounded notion of theory rooted in the ideas of James Zebroski (1994) and Louise Phelps (1989; 1998; 2000) attempts throughout the volume to blur distinctions between theory and practice in writing assessment, creating a more conscious awareness of where our practices come from and how we can use them to promote teaching and learning.

More than twenty years ago, Nancy Sommers (1982) told us what we already knew but were afraid to acknowledge—that teachers' written comments were more concerned with students' ability to write correctly than to make any kind of meaning. Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford's (1993) study of almost three thousand student papers revealed much the same. Anthologies published about ten years ago (Anson 1989; Lawson, Sterr, Ryan, and Winterowd 1989) provided alternative ways of responding to student writing, and attempted to foreground discussions of teacher response in how we read, interpret and make meaning of written communication. The focus of most response literature is on different ways we can respond to student writing, on practice rather than theory. More recently, Richard Straub (1996; 1997; 2000) has conducted a series of studies on response, most of which document the different ways in which certain teachers can read the same students' writing. In one essay on response, Straub (2000) examines his own responding practices in light of seven principles he extrapolates from the research on response: 1) "Turn your comments into a conversation" (28); 2) "Do not take control over a student's text" (31); 3) "Give priority to global concerns of content, organization and purpose before getting (overly) involved with style and correctness" (34); 4) "Limit the scope of your comments and the number of comments you present" (40); 5) "Select your focus of comments according to the stage of drafting and relative maturity of the text" (40); 6) "Gear your comments to the individual student" (42). 7) "Make frequent use of praise" (46). While I find little to disagree with in the principles Straub advocates, I see little advancement in such principles for an overall understanding of

teacher response. Instead, the focus is once again only on practice, with little attempt to see response within a theoretical, pedagogical, or communicative context. (For a more thorough treatment of Straub's work, see Murphy 2000 and Phelps 2000.) What's also important to note is that all of Straub's principles focus exclusively on the writing of comments without any attention to the teacher's reading of student writing.

One of the reasons the literature on responding to student writing has focused on methods for response is that many of us are unhappy with more traditional methods for responding to student writing. As well, it is difficult not to hold negative views about the way teachers read student writing, considering studies like those conducted by Nancy Sommers (1982) and Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford (1993). In her book chapter, "Reading Like a Teacher and Teaching Like a Reader," Virginia Chappell (1991) defines what I take to be some rather widely held notions about what reading like a teacher means to many of us: "That mythology includes what I call reading like a teacher: the fault-finding summative evaluation of student writing that makes grades, their bestowal and their receipt, so distasteful" (55). Chappell goes on to illustrate why teachers' readings are held in suspicion and distaste: "But as we know, teachers tend to read students' texts to evaluate them, and, as William Irmischer has pointed out, teachers tend to evaluate by finding fault (148)" (59). Edward White (1995) and Peter Elbow (1991) both have written about how we cannot trust teachers' evaluations, with White advocating the use of holistic scoring as a way to control teacher's inconsistencies.

In her chapter on responding to student writing, Louise Phelps (1989) includes this negative notion of reading in her first category of teacher response, "Evaluative Attitude, Closed Text" (49) in which a teacher grades a stack or set of student papers. Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch (1982) describe response of this type by noting that instructors often compare student writing to an ideal text. Phelps is accurate in describing the status of scholarship on response: "Yet today's study of response remains a minor subspecialization pursued by a relatively small group of scholars, rather than the central theoretical

concern for the discipline.”(2000, 92). Richard Miller’s point mentioned in chapter three bears repeating here: “learning how to solicit, read, and respond to the reading and writing done by the student populace—those people who stand inside and outside the academy simultaneously—has been and continues to be the most pressing challenge confronting those who work in English Studies” (1994, 179). Unfortunately, there has, for the most part, been little attention to the theory and practice of responding to student writers. Instead, we have focused on various ways to respond—or have attempted to isolate and study the ways different teachers might respond—to the same student. Jane Mathison Fife and Peggy O’Neill (2001) tell us that whether the scholarship looks at the response practices of a range of teachers or focuses on individuals, these studies for the most part are conducted outside of any pedagogical context.

My attempt to rearticulate what it means to read like a teacher hopes to create, in Phelps’s (1989) terms, a dialectic between the way we think about language and teaching and the way we read and respond to student writing. This dialectic questions a continued focus on methods for response and on studies of teacher response outside of the context of teaching writing, just as it questions a continuing suspicion of teachers’ response. A dialectic between theory and practice shifts the focus from *how* we respond to *why* we respond, making us reflect upon and articulate our beliefs and assumptions about literacy and its teaching. It is time for the profession to reconceptualize its approach to evaluating and responding to student writing. Instead of just developing alternative methods for couching our commentary, we need to come to an understanding of where our comments come from. What are the constraints teachers work under when they read student writing? What are the occasions for responding? What is a teacher doing when she reads, and what affects her ability to make meaning and assign value?

Before we can begin to answer such questions (and surely a cogent response to all of them is beyond the scope of a single chapter), let us start with a question we can answer. Why do

teachers read student writing in the first place? Ostensibly, we read student writing to teach student writers: “In fact, pedagogical purpose saturates the whole phenomenon of response” (Phelps 2000, 101). It follows, then, that reading like a teacher means reading to teach. As Phelps points out, making a teaching move can be different than just responding to a text, and it might also be noted that in Connors and Lunsford’s (1993) study of teacher commentary, over sixty percent of the comments in the study focused on justifying teachers grades, so while it may be fair to say that overall teachers read student writing to teach student writers, at times this overall goal can become short-circuited. Nonetheless, my approach to teacher response is to start with the teacher’s attempt to use feedback to the writer as a pedagogical device. As with most other techniques used in the writing classroom, teacher commentary should be used to foster writing skills in our students. This claim for the pedagogical value of teacher commentary must be rooted in the contextual nature of language teaching and learning within a curriculum dependent upon abilities learned through practice—as in a classroom where students learn to write by writing. In other words, we can only judge teacher commentary based upon its ability to help a particular student become a better writer within a specific educational context. Rather than categorizing teachers’ methods of response, or developing certain principles, it is time we began to study the dynamics of reading student writing, to know what it means to read and respond like a teacher.

THEORIES OF READING AND RESPONSE

I begin with a rather obvious point: to assess student writing, we have to read it first. As Louise Phelps notes, “Response is fundamentally reading, not writing” (2000, 93). Any constraints attached to the process of reading, therefore, are also constraints on the process of evaluating student writing. In other words, we are limited in our ability to evaluate student writing by the process we use to make meaning of text in the first place. Whether we look at a portfolio, write on papers or via email,

speak into a tape recorder or speak with students in or outside of our offices or over the telephone, we must first read the student's paper. No matter what else we do with the writing after we receive it, we are constrained by the very process of reading. It follows that information about reading is information about responding to and assessing student writing.

Reading is a dynamic, meaning-making activity that revolves around the individual reader's attempt to understand and interpret what has been written. The meaning anyone makes of a given text depends upon her prior background, training, experience and expectations. As Frank Smith (1982) points out, "In a sense, information already available in the brain is more important in reading than information available to the eyes from the print on the page, even when the text is quite new and unfamiliar" (9). In this light, teachers' previous experience with students and their texts adds to and controls their ability not only to respond but to devise meaning from the text itself. Even the very role of teacher can affect the kind of reading given by an individual. Peter Elbow (1973) has noted the different kinds of meaning readers can derive from text depending upon whether or not they play the "doubting game" or "believing game." Robert Tierney and P. David Pearson (1983) coined the term "alignment" to describe the different points of view from which a reader constructs a text while reading: "We see alignment as having two facets: stances a reader or writer assumes in collaboration with their author or audience and roles within which the reader or writer immerse themselves as they proceed with the topic" (572). Tierney and Pearson go on to cite research that shows that differing alignments can affect the quantity and nature of what a reader remembers from a particular text. This concept of alignment as an individual phenomenon can also be extended to the notion of the interpretive community. Stanley Fish (1980) contends that an interpretive community also affects what a reader can see within a text: "What I am suggesting is that an interpretive entity, endowed with purposes and concern, is, by virtue of

its very operation, determining what counts as the facts to be observed” (8).

In his book chapter “A Hero in the Classroom” James Zebroski (1989) illustrates Fish’s point about the way certain theoretical orientations can affect the way we read student writing. Zebroski includes one of his students’ essays in his chapter and offers four different responses based on the different ways in which he might read this student’s work—what Zebroski calls the different voices he hears when reading this particular essay. One response is through the voice of a pop grammarian whom Zebroski labels “Simon Newman,” in which Zebroski focuses exclusively on the errors the student makes and finds the essay completely unacceptable, calling for the student to go back to the basics. The second response is from the new critical perspective of “John Crowe Redemption,” in which the reading focuses on structure and how it relates to meaning. This response calls for the student to begin anew in the middle of the essay, in order to produce a more structurally consistent piece of writing. The third response is from “Mina Flaherty” who focuses on the logic of the writer’s choices, referring to him by name and pointing out to the first two responders that “Dave” does many things right and that he would profit from instruction about audience and other rhetorical matters. The last response and clearly the one most favored by Zebroski is from “Mikhail Zebroski Bakhtin” which focuses on the intertextuality of the writing, looking for the connections between the writer’s ideas and the sources for his sense of reality. This reading traces Dave’s understanding about power relations and his position in a politically-charged world. In Fish’s terms, and through Zebroski’s example, it’s fairly clear that the type of reading given by an individual reader actually controls what that reader can observe within a text. This control of observation as it relates to the reading of teachers is beautifully illustrated in Joseph Williams’s (1981) article, “The Phenomenology of Error” where the reader (usually an English teacher) fails to note the multitude of errors within a piece of writing because she is not looking for them.

She is reading in her role as professional colleague, and she assumes and therefore receives mechanical correctness, whether it is in the text or not, from an author she believes to be an authority.

Arnetha Ball's (1997) study exploring and comparing African American teachers' and Euro American teachers' responses to an ethnically mixed group of students is one of the few examples we have of the ways in which ethnic diversity can impact teacher response. Ball had two sets of teachers, Euro American and African American, read essays from three different groups of students: Euro American, African American and Hispanic American. She found that the Euro American teachers rated the Euro American students highest in overall writing quality with a mean score of 5.06 on a six point scale; African American students were rated 3.98, and Hispanic American Students 2.97 (175). African American teachers, on the other hand, rated Euro American students at 3.31, African American Students at 3.35, and Hispanic students at 2.85 (175). The clear progression of writing quality perceived by Euro American teachers, with Euro American students on top and African American and Hispanic American students one point consecutively below, disappears according to African American teachers. In contrast, they perceive Euro and African American students as about the same and Hispanic American students about a half a point below. Clearly, "writing quality" in this instance is a feature influenced by cultural identity.

The influence of culture seems even stronger when we look at Ball's teachers' scores for students' use of mechanics (sentence boundaries, agreement and spelling). Euro American teachers' mean scores for mechanics for Euro American students was 3.63 on a four point scale (175). For African American students it was 2.82, and it was 2.22 for Hispanic American students (175). These sets of scores for mechanics seem to follow the pattern that Euro American teachers displayed for overall writing quality, since African American students were ranked .8 behind Euro American students with Hispanic American students 1.4 behind Euro American and .6 behind African American students (175). While

these differences appear not quite as marked numerically as the ones for overall writing quality, it should be noted that they are closer than they seem, since mechanics was rated on a four point scale rather than the six point scale used for overall writing quality.

African American teachers' perception of correctness in student writing follows the pattern of difference from Euro American teachers for overall writing quality, but, even more so. African American teachers overall score for Euro American student's mechanics was 2.19 (175), a full point and a half lower on a four point scale than Euro American teachers. African American students scored higher but not much at 2.34, a half point lower than the Euro American teachers, and Hispanic American students scored 2.03, almost two tenths of a point lower than the Euro American teachers. What's interesting in the African American teachers' scores is that they are lower than the ones given by Euro American teachers and that for mechanics, all three groups of students are clustered together within three tenths of a point. In this case, teachers with different cultural orientations saw very different things in student writing.

It's important in talking about the influence of culture in teacher response that we not forget that school itself is a cultural system bound by specific beliefs and attitudes. For example, Sarah Freedman (1984) demonstrated that teachers' perceptions of writing quality were tied to the roles they expect students to assume when writing in a school-sponsored situation. Freedman used a holistic scoring session to include five essays written by professional writers. These essays were judged by the teacher-scorers, trained as holistic raters, to be inferior to student written essays. Freedman noted that the professionally-written essay violated norms associated with student writing: "they were threateningly familiar, some defied the task, they wrote too definitely about novel ideas, and they displayed a literally unbelievable amount of knowledge" (1984, 344). Reading within their roles as teachers, then, these raters judged such writing as inappropriate for student writers.

Lester Faigley's essay "Judging Writers Judging Selves" (1989) discusses the ways in which teacher/evaluators come to assess the value of student writing. Faigley isolates two moments in time, one in the 1930s and one in the 1980s. He examines evaluations of two essays written in 1929 that were included as part of an external review of the College Entrance Examination's Board by a nine-member Commission on English in the 1930s. Faigley discusses the obvious importance of a canonical knowledge of literature and the more academic approach adopted by one of the students versus the use of popular fiction by another writer. Faigley is convincing in his portrayal of the importance of a certain type of cultural knowledge being privileged in the assessments given by both the college board and the external review. Faigley's second moment focuses on an anthology of student writing prepared in 1985, in which composition teachers from across the country were asked to submit examples of the best student writing they had received. Almost all of the student essays were personal narratives, and the discussion of student writing focused on such qualities as how authentic and truthful they were. Faigley's point is that our evaluations of student work are often connected to our sense of value. For example, in the 1930s, teachers valued certain canonical knowledge, whereas in the 1980s, teacher focus was on personal disclosure and its ability to display authentic or truthful human experience. He concludes his essay with a writing sample about a young woman's experience in Paris to highlight how the familiar and valued influence our sense of quality in student writing. Culture and privilege continue to evolve and be marked in different ways, and teachers' reading of student writing is continuously influenced by their cultured sense of value.

One last element important to an understanding of how the process of reading can affect the reading done by teachers is expectation. Since teachers can expect different texts from different students and different assignments or writing situations, expectation should not be considered a constant. Wolfgang Iser (1978) in his book, *The Act of Reading*, coins the term "wandering

viewpoint” to describe the flexible nature of the reader’s expectations in her ability to comprehend written discourse. As Susan Sulieman (1980) points out, expectation, a powerful force in the mind’s ability to anticipate textual clues and construct meaning, can be altered by a variety of factors connected with and even within a particular reading. For example, a teacher would have very different expectations for a first draft than she would for a piece of writing she had already read and commented upon.

So powerful is rater expectation that Paul Diederich (1974) notes that raters score the same essays higher when they were designated as coming from an honors class, and Leo Rigsby (1987) reports significantly higher scores for essays known to be from upper classmen in departmental competency exams. Patricia Stock and Jay Robinson (1987) contend that rater expectation may be as important as the student text itself in determining scores received in direct writing assessment. Because reader expectation is based upon prior experience, it is one of the basic ingredients in the fluent reading process.

It is important for us to understand that reading and responding to student writing constitutes a particular kind of literacy event. For example, Connors and Lunsford (1993) compare the number of errors marked by readers in the 1980s with the number of errors marked by readers in studies done in 1917 and 1930. They sum up their findings in this way:

Finally, we feel we can report some good news. One very telling fact emerging from our research is our realization that college students are not making more formal errors than they used to. The numbers of errors made by students in earlier studies and the numbers we found in the 1980s agree remarkably . . . The consistency of these numbers seems to us extraordinary. It suggests that although the length of the average paper demanded in freshman composition has been steadily rising, the formal skills of students have not declined precipitously. (406)

While I think there is every reason to agree with Connors and Lunsford’s estimation of students’ ability to write error-free

prose, their notion of error ignores the powerful influence of the process of reading on teacher ability to see and respond to a particular feature of student writing. Instead of viewing their findings just as evidence that students make no more formal errors in language conventions in the late 1980s than they did in 1917 or 1930, we might also say that the evidence could mean that teachers still mark about the same percentage of errors as they always have—though data from Ball's (1997) work show us that there is a good bit of variation among individual readers. We might also speculate on just how much error a reader can mark and recognize and still be able to comment on other aspects of student writing and manage to read all of the student writing required for teaching first-year writing courses. To see response as reading changes what we can say about Connors' and Lunsford's (1993) findings or any other data about teacher response, since we cannot ignore the creative properties of the reading process and assume that readers merely respond to stable features within a text.

CONTEXT

We must include in any discussion of reading the context of specific classrooms, teachers and students. We know that reading is a selective process and that meaning is not a stable entity, but rather the individual reader negotiates a particular meaning that is based on prior experience not only as a reader but within her specific role as a reader in a particular context. As such, we cannot understand the ways a teacher might read and respond to her students unless we consider the influences that affect such reading and response. For example, Melanie Sperling (1994) conducted a study in a middle school classroom in which she collected the responses a single teacher gave various students in the class. She found that the teacher responded almost entirely about grammar and correctness to one ESL student who had voiced concern over his ability to write correct prose, even though his writing contained no more surface errors than other students in the classroom. The two

students who received the most rhetorically-based responses from the teacher were the best student in the class and a student who needed “kid-glove” treatment. In this study, it was clear that the teacher was influenced by factors beyond the student texts, and that she read student writing in different ways depending upon her sense of the students’ needs. This influence of extra-textual features of students and their behavior increases the variety of factors that can affect the way teachers read student writing. In summarizing Max Van Manen’s work on pedagogical understanding as it relates to response, Phelps (2000) notes that “It is interactive with the text, the situation, and most of all the person” (103). It is important to remember that when we read and respond to a student text we are influenced by a wealth of factors, many of which are grounded in our interaction with the student herself.

In a simplified sense, our political leanings and ideological commitments make us less than ideal readers for papers on certain topics or those advocating particular positions. Lad Tobin (1991) makes a valid observation about the gender bias in typical first-year sports hero narratives many teachers receive. These biases fall under the constraints of the reading process itself, but they are not wholly insurmountable. Louise Phelps (1989) notes that teachers as readers can become aware of their limitations as they mature and grow in their ability to respond to student writing. In a more complicated sense, teachers need to realize that all of our experiences with students, classrooms, curricula and institutions have the ability to affect the way we read student writing.

It is impossible to appreciate all the factors that go into a teacher’s response to a student’s writing outside of an understanding of that teacher’s relationship with that student. An understanding of specific responses is only possible when we consider the context in which a teacher reads and a student writes. When a teacher reads a piece of writing within a classroom context, she reads to make meaning in a manner that includes not only an interpretation but an appreciation of the

text as text. Reading like a teacher, as in any other reading, involves making a series of choices. The choices a teacher makes in reading student writing and the meaning she composes from this reading is based upon, among other things, her knowledge of the assignment, of the student, of the student's past texts, past drafts, comments in class, process work, work in peer groups and other contents of a portfolio, if there is one. In fact, it is probably a fruitless exercise to try to recreate all the factors a teacher takes into consideration when making an evaluative decision about a student text. An individual reading of student writing is based in and constrained by the structure of the class and the philosophy, training and experience of the teacher. To ensure that teachers can respond in an effective and pedagogically sound fashion, we should focus teacher preparation on the act of reading student writing to make appropriate decisions about how best to teach a specific student in a specific context. This focus will also ensure that our need to assess does not drive our purpose in teaching and that we allow and encourage teachers to use the richness of the teaching moment as the context in which to read and respond to student writing.

Although I have so far couched my remarks in terms of how context influences teachers' reading of student writing, context probably plays a much richer role in the ways people make meaning of language. Michael Halliday (1978), whom I cite in the previous chapter, holds in his germinal work, *Language as Social Semiotic*, that context is the key factor in the human ability to use language to communicate. A classic example of the importance of context in communication comes from Brown and Yule's book *Discourse Analysis* (1983) in which they cite the common occurrence of a doorbell ringing and one person saying to another, "I'm in the bathroom." Clearly, much more is communicated between these two people than a person's location in the house because of the context of the doorbell and what it means to be in the bathroom in our society. This example illustrates the importance of context in people's ability to make sense of a specific linguistic message. It is logical to

assume that teachers' reading of student writing works in much the same way. Without a certain context, it is impossible for a teacher to make sense of what a student has written. This context, unlike the two people who communicate a simple message about answering a doorbell, revolves around a complicated attempt on the part of a teacher to help a specific student learn the complex tasks involved in producing any piece of writing.

TEACHING RESPONSE

A good example of the importance of context in the reading of student writing occurred the night my first graduate seminar in assessing and responding to student writing met for the first time. After the usual routines of a first-day class, I had planned to have the students in the class read the same student paper in groups for different purposes. I felt that having them read for different purposes would illustrate the complexity of evaluating student writing. I was hoping to demonstrate how evaluating for different purposes allows teachers to make different decisions about writing quality. I divided the students, all but two of whom had experience teaching writing, into four groups of three readers each and wrote on a piece of paper the reason why they were reading the paper, so that only each individual group would know the purpose for the reading. I had one group read the essay as if it were a placement exam, and they were to decide whether the student should be placed in basic, regular or honors composition. The second group read the essay as an exit or competency test required for students to successfully complete a first-year composition course. The third group read the essay as if it were the first writing assignment completed by the student, and the fourth group read the piece as if it were the final assignment in the semester.

Three of the groups found the paper quite acceptable, either placing the writer into regular composition, exiting her from the course or giving a low B for the final assignment. The group charged with evaluating the first paper of the semester graded lower, with the scores ranging from D to F. I wasn't too surprised

about the disparity in judgment from the four groups. In fact, I might have been a little surprised at how three of four groups pretty much agreed, since we had had no discussions about rating criteria, and they were reading for different evaluative purposes. What really did surprise me, though, was that every one of the groups embellished the situation. They created curricula, students and whole situations with which to guide their decisions. As I talked to the groups they assured me that they had to have more information in order to make the judgments I had asked. One student declared, with several of the class members nodding their heads in agreement, that she had to have a context or the reading wouldn't make any sense to her. The class was also interested in where the paper had come from, what I could tell them about the academic level of the student and under what circumstances the paper had been written. Some of the "real" background of the writer differed from what the groups had added to their readings, and there was some acknowledgment that the "real" facts would change their judgment about the paper.

At first, I left the classroom that night a little perplexed by what had happened. I thought I had probably screwed up by not giving these teachers enough information for a "real" reading of the student text. I had, however, shared with them the writing assignment and had, I thought, provided them with a context. It seemed to me that I had given them about what raters in large-scale assessment situations use. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that these teachers had not given a textual reading of the paper. In fact, they had resisted reading a text. They were reading the pedagogical context, the teaching moment; they were reading like teachers involved with trying to teach and make informed decisions about a student—which, of course, I had asked them to do, and which purpose drives teachers' responses generally.

This reading given by the teachers in my graduate seminar surprised me at the time, but there is reason to believe that their reading was typical of the way teachers normally evaluate student writing. For example, there is evidence from protocols and

interviews that teachers rating placement essays make judgments about student writing based upon their knowledge of the curriculum and how well the writer of the text being rated will do in particular classes rather than upon the scoring rubric being used as part of the holistic rating procedures (Pula & Huot 1993; Smith 1993). This might mean that holistic scoring procedures work to place students in the proper courses not because of the procedures themselves but because of the tacit context the teachers have for reading the placement essays. In this way, it's important to note that context not only affects the ways in which we read our student writing but actually makes a cogent reading possible.

If, then, we are to emphasize the reading of student writing and the contexts that affect the meaning we can make of that writing, then what kinds of experience and education can we use to prepare teachers who would attempt to improve their response to students? Is reading and the many interactions with students that create and control the context from within which we can read a student's work too powerful a force to allow the teacher any kind of control? Certainly, the picture of student response that I paint precludes offering straightforward advice, like asking teachers to formulate responses based upon certain principles or having teachers respond at the end of a student's essay or write comments within certain constraints. It directs an emphasis away from having new or prospective teachers rank sample papers or comment upon and construct criteria for specific grades which are common practices in courses for teacher preparation (Qualley 2002). Seeing response as reading not only complicates the way we think about the commentary we can give students, but it also complicates the ways in which we can educate teachers about responding to their students. It has caused me in the last few years to change the ways I introduce and teach responding practices to prospective teachers.

Like most classes dedicated to introducing teachers to the teaching of writing, we read some of the scholarly literature on response. Although I often vary the activities around responding

to student writing based upon whether I'm working with college or high school teachers and other factors relative to individual classes, there are at least a few things I seem to include each time. We always take class time to read some student writing, with the whole class reading the same paper. Without talking to each other I ask students to formulate one response, what one thing would they say to this student about her writing. As each student-teacher replies, I keep track of whether or not the response is positive, negative or neutral. I make no record of who said what, but I do share with students the totals for each category. As a class, we talk about the responses we've made and what we think they mean about the paper we read and about the act of responding to student writing. At this point, students are often a little chagrined, since we have been reading about positive and facilitative comments, and we all realize how easy it is to slip into more negative kinds of commentary when we're reading student writing that has, at times, many easy-to-recognize flaws. The next step, which we take either that day or in a subsequent class, is to have students read a paper in groups for various purposes, much like the activity I described earlier. The particular papers I use for the various activities can depend upon the ways I've seen my student-teachers interact with texts. Sometimes I use a text they have read earlier in the class. Once students have read in groups, they then tell the rest of the class what they thought and why they made the decisions they made.

The final step in the process is to include in a take-home final a student paper for their response. These are the instructions:

Respond to the attached student paper. You should create the student and context for the paper and respond accordingly. You may respond on the student's paper, write her a letter, create a response sheet or use any other method that reflects your theory of responding. You should feel free to grade or leave the paper ungraded. Whatever you decide to do should be based upon the context you create and your theories of language and teaching.

Over the last several years, I have been amazed at the range of students that can be created for a single paper. The responses usually include some, if not extensive, reference to the context created by the responder. More importantly, these new teachers learn from such an activity that their comments must be connected to a specific individual in a particular context. These kinds of activities, it seems to me, foreground for teachers that responding involves reading student writing to teach student writers. As the activities illustrate, it is difficult not to fall back into certain patterns. Reading in groups highlights the many ways that individuals can respond and the constraints under which teachers have to work. The last activity gives the teacher a great deal of autonomy and responsibility, linking response to the act of reading and the educational contexts that can affect and control the way we read. Of course, I do not offer these activities as any sort of panacea, nor do I contend that these activities work best for all teachers. What they do, however, is demonstrate that teachers need to focus on the way they read student writing and to become more conscious of their procedures for reading and responding to student writing. As well, these activities exist within a framework in which teachers can learn to question the beliefs and assumptions that inform their readings of and responses to student work. It also strikes me that having readers create the student to which they are responding puts a new wrinkle on the methodology of having different readers respond to the same text (Straub and Lunsford 1995). When we highlight the generative aspects of teachers' process of reading, then we can see some of the reasons why they might respond differently, as they create and rely upon various contexts and pedagogical representations. We might want to refocus our question about what kinds of students teachers think they are responding to.

LEARNING TO RESPOND

Since it is possible that any and all interactions we have with certain classes and students might affect and control the way we read student writing, it makes sense that we look for methods to

help us understand and recognize the influence contextual factors can have on our reading. Certainly, all teachers have experienced a certain dread or pleasure in approaching certain pieces of student writing. The next step might be to see if there are certain patterns in our emotions and expectations about student writing. If we were to notice that certain assignments seem more interesting or pleasurable to read, then it might be appropriate to consider the ways we are assigning writing. One way to respond to certain influences would be to read all student writing blindly, ensuring that we don't let contextual matters affect the way we read. On the other hand, a blind reading is a specific context in and of itself, and without knowing whose writing we're reading, we are in effect cutting ourselves off from important pedagogical clues that help us provide individual students with the most helpful responses possible. If, as I argue in chapter six, assessment is research, then certainly classroom assessment and response should also be seen as research. From the first moment we walk into a specific classroom and interact with students, we are collecting information about students, noticing the ways in which they learn, read and write, interact with us and each other. Just as the teacher in Sperling's (1994) study on response used her interactions with students to respond to them in different ways, so too do most of us consciously or not let the context of our work with students affect the way we read and respond to their writing.

Since we are in a sense continuously gathering and using information about students in our role as teachers and responders, it makes sense that we seek ways to make this data gathering more conscious and systematic. One way to do this might be to use a data collection template like that implemented in the learning record system (Barr and Syverson 1999). In their book *Assessing Literacy with the Learning Record: A Handbook for Teachers, Grades 6-12*, Mary Barr and Margaret Syverson include "reproducible data collection forms" that could be adapted to any classroom or curriculum. (See figure 1.) Such templates allow a teacher to keep track of all of her interactions with

Figure 1
Data Collection Form

Writing Samples

Please attach the writing with this sample sheet.

Dates			
Title/topic			
Context for this sample of student writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the writing arose—assigned or self-chosen • Whether the student wrote alone or with others, in drafts or at once • Kind of writing (e.g., poem, journal, essay, story) • Complete piece of work or extract 			
Student's response to the writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The context of the writing • Own ability to handle this particular kind of writing • Overall impressions • Success of Appeals to intended audience 			
Teacher's response to rhetorical effectiveness of the writing			
Development of use of writing conventions			
What this selected sample shows about the student's development as a writer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how it fits into the range of the student's previous writing • experience/support needed to further development 			

individual students. While Barr and Syverson outline the use of these forms as the assessment system for a specific class, certainly they could be adapted by any teacher wanting to be more systematic about the ways in which she is thinking of her students' need for instruction and its effect on her response practices. Another way to be more systematic could be to create a grid-like template, not unlike those used by ethnographic researchers in classrooms, on which a teacher can quickly jot certain observations about individual students. Of course, more narrative approaches, like a teacher's log in which an instructor writes her impressions and observations about individuals, could also work here. The form of the data collection is less important than the creation of a workable system that helps teachers to keep track of interactions, observations and impressions about individual students. These data, then, can help the individual teacher become more conscious of the kinds of influences that affect and even create her readings of student work.

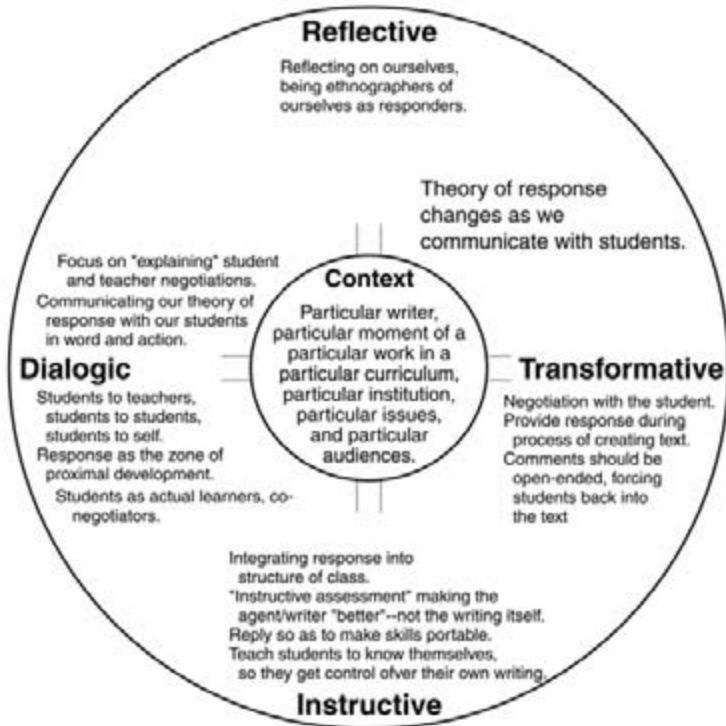
WRITING AS RESPONSE

Although I have emphasized the reading part of response, it's important to note that response also involves either the writing of commentary in some form or another or the verbal communication of some response. As I noted earlier, I mostly agree with principles advocated by Richard Straub (2000) who urges that we be conversational, that we not control the student text, that we limit the number of comments, that we focus on global rather than textual concerns, that we focus on the stage the writing is currently in and that we make use of praise. While I am somewhat concerned about the acontextual nature of such principles, I am more concerned about how we can couch advice for teachers in more theoretical terms, in terms that are grounded in some notion of the ways we think about language and communication. Just as we need to remember that we have to read student writing before we can respond to it, we also need to remember that any response we formulate

needs to adhere to basic notions of how people communicate with each other. If students do not understand what we say to them, then all of our efforts at response are futile. And, unfortunately, there are many instances in the literature where students do not understand what their teachers are asking them to do as they revise. Melanie Sperling and Sarah Freedman's (1987) study "A Good Girl Writes Like a Good Girl" illustrates how a student and teacher continue to misunderstand each other. Mary Hayes and Don Daiker (1984) used protocol analysis to have students read and respond to their teachers' responses and found that students often missed entirely the message their teachers were trying to convey. William Thelin's (1994) study of response in a portfolio class found that students were often surprised and angry at responses their teacher had given. Jennie Nelson (1995) and Russel Durst (1999) have written about wholesale miscommunication between teachers and their students about assignments, response and other aspects of the class. These few studies are but the tip of the iceberg in research that documents miscommunication between teachers and students.

First and foremost, we must be concerned about communicating with our students. The same principles for communication that we attempt to teach our students should also guide our attempt to communicate to students in our responses. First, we must consider our audience, who is the student and where is she in the act of becoming a writer? It may be that for many students, being conversational, as Straub advocates does allow us to tailor commentary for a specific audience, but if we gauge our responses rhetorically, then we have a firm theoretical base for the types of comments we might write and those we might avoid. Certainly, traditional static abstractions like *vag* or *awk* seem inappropriate, since they might have more meaning for an audience of people who give comments rather than those who receive them. Instead, we need to explain as clearly as possible what we mean by *awk* or *vag* and, following Straub's advice, relate this explanation to other interactions

Figure 2
Moving toward a Theory of Response



we have had with students or the class as a whole—not because these are good things to do, but because these kinds of comments situate our students as an audience in a communicative exchange. Consequently, advice about focusing on a couple of points and limiting our comments can also be reframed rhetorically, since providing a reader with a manageable amount of information that is linked to a main point is usually considered part of a coherent rhetorical approach to communicating with anyone. Overall, then, teachers need to think of their own understanding of rhetoric and use the same principles in their responses to students that they are attempting to teach.

CONCLUSION

My attempt to link response-to-student-writing with the principles revealed in research on reading and writing is also an attempt to complicate our understanding of response and to move it beyond simple consideration of classroom technique. It's also important to note that, depending upon the instructional approach, response takes on a different role. For example, my writing courses mostly consist of activities students do on their own and in groups, so that my response to them is often the most direct teaching I do. However, in classes that structure time differently, response could be integrated in a variety of ways, since no matter what pedagogy is being used, instructors must read student writing and compose (in some form) a response.

During a seminar I conducted on assessing and responding to student writing, we spent three weeks reading and talking about the literature on classroom assessment and response. Once we had read most of the available literature, I asked the seminar to engage in a thought experiment in which we attempted to come up with a theory of response based upon what we had read and upon our own experiences as writing teachers.

I include this figure with the participants' permission and note that we called it "Moving Toward a Theory of Response." One problem we had in developing this model was that we wanted to include a myriad of factors that appeared to us to be happening instantaneously within the act of response. Because this model was composed after the class had read a substantial portion of the available literature on response, it reflects the concerns and wisdom of a considerable body of scholarly work. I decided to use this model as a way of organizing my conclusion, in order to get a sense of the ground covered in this essay and of how it compares to existing work on response. This will permit us to see what I have left out as well as allow us to see what contributions this discussion can make.

The model of response consists of a hub surrounded by four basic influences. This hub which appeared to us as central to

the act of response is occupied by the specific context or occasion for response and includes but is not necessarily limited to the writer, the teacher, the class, the institution, the curriculum, the issues to be addressed, and the audience or audiences for the response. I remember how exhaustive we tried to be in creating a context that would control, limit and be constrained by other factors in our model. What's not included is any information about the teacher's process of reading and how various factors would affect the way she read student writing. This reflects the lack of attention given to reading in the literature on response. On the other hand, we did include a reflective element in which we suggest that teachers reflect upon their own processes of response as ethnographers. Certainly, my advice to teachers to monitor their own experiences with students through an ethnographic grid, the use of a journal, or some other template like that used in the learning record would fall into this category. However, to be fair, it seems that this reflective activity should be focused more directly on the teacher's process of reading, since reading is an interpretive act that constructs specific representations based upon several factors in and outside of the text itself. As well, there are no direct references to the act of composing a response or to the need to see this act as rhetorical—as being limited, constrained, and controlled by rhetorical notions of audience, purpose and the like. Clearly, any comprehensive model for response would need to be revised with a greater emphasis on the acts of reading student writing and communicating with student writers.

Further, there are several factors in this model that I have given scant attention to. One section of the model that is underrepresented in my discussion of student response above is the "dialogic," in which student input becomes a factor for teacher response. One reason I haven't addressed this more directly is that in chapter three I argue for a more central role for assessment in teaching writing, with students also having a larger role than traditionally defined. If we see response as communication, then we need to include students' input more fully into

any understanding of what it means to respond effectively with them. Perhaps this notion of student response might best be understood within a rhetorical notion of audience, with students not only as the target of teacher response but as active participants in a “conversation” of response. As I argue earlier in this chapter, if we fail to communicate with students, then we have not been effective responders; we cannot be effective communicators if we ignore the input of those with whom we wish to communicate. It seems to me that response must be dialogic, since effective communication can never be one-sided. As this model notes, then, we must include our students’ interests, opinions and attitudes in any kinds of response that we may assume to be effectively communicated. Integrating my treatment of response with this model could create a dialogic rhetoric of response that strives to enhance communication between teachers and students.

I think I have done a better job of including the instructive element of this model in my essay, though I think it’s important that we not automatically assume (as I think I have done in the past) that teachers’ responses are instructive. It is possible to use classroom practice to control student behavior or establish teacher authority, as in the research findings that depict response as focusing on the justification of teachers’ grades. Another important addition to the discussion in this essay is the model’s distinction between an emphasis on better writing and an emphasis on helping students become better writers. Certainly, this point distinguishes the kinds of responses teachers might give to students from the work many of us do as editors and reviewers, since in the latter instance our effort is focused on the text itself.

The transformative feature of the model is something that I have probably only hinted at. The model does not go far enough in talking about the transformative potential of responding to student writing. As the overall focus of this volume is to change the ways in which assessment is articulated and constructed, it is appropriate to emphasize the ability of response to change the

ways in which we do our work as writing teachers. I second Miller's (1994) and Phelps's (2000) contention that those of us who teach writing need to focus more on the ways we solicit and respond to student writing; this is but one example of the need for a transformative notion of response. If we can change the ways in which we respond to our students in our classrooms and the ways in which we think and write about response in our scholarly literature, then we can harness the power of reading and writing to teach writing to our students, instilling in them the same wonder and struggle that guides all of us who work with language.