5 Responding to Student Writing

I want to set up a situation where [I] avoid conflict. . . . The goal is to reply to an assignment, keeping in sight that it's a combined effort, that the teacher is a facilitator, not the originator of the work.

—Pat

It's wrong if you don't tell him the truth.

—Marlene

Before becoming part of our college's writing lab, all of us, of course, have had plenty of experience responding to student writing. But the experience of tutoring students in the lab has forced us to reexamine our ways of reading and responding to student work. In large part, that has occurred because our reading of those papers is no longer tied to giving a grade; as tutors we have far less vested in the writing. Our comments, whether written or presented orally, are meant to motivate and guide revision, not justify an assessment. We respond in order to facilitate students' efforts to improve their writing.

Inevitably, our lab experience, then, has prompted us to ask, How do we currently respond to the writing of our own students? If our responses do not produce the outcomes that we want, how can we change the way we write and talk back to our students' writing? Responding to student writing is a curious business, to say the least. We spend much time and effort on responding to student work and yet we have little opportunity to reflect on exactly what it is we are doing. What is our purpose in responding? Is it to allow students to return to their work with a clearer sense of what must be done? If so, why do our comments so often serve as a gloss of (or justification for) our grading, rather than an invitation to revise? In many courses, says Debbie, a student tutor in the lab, "there's no room for revision." What kind of motivation is there for students to read and use teachers' comments?

What exactly is happening when students read our comments, anyway? Kathy tells a revealing story of some of her ESL students, who, in "revising" their papers, "included my correcting comments as if they belonged to the text." In some ways, their "mimicking" of the teacher is not so far removed from native speakers' ways of reading teachers' commentary. Our writing does "belong" to the text as codes of acceptable writing conduct, and students know what it will take to get that A (or F) on the basis of the teacher's commentary. The fact that teachers might very well see their

comments as "correcting" as well of course fuels the belief that the writing is the teacher's anyway—so why not give teachers what they want?

Marlene claims to have a different problem: her students sometimes ignore her comments entirely in their revision. "I couldn't understand that," she says. What prevents our students from "getting" what we are saying? Is it a matter of the tone we assume as teacher commentators? Do we turn students off with our exasperated comments? Do we cut corners, rubber-stamp our remarks, in light of the sheer load of papers that we have to grade? Jerry reminds us that a teacher "may have thirty other papers" to grade (composition teachers might double or triple that number). "It is difficult," he says, "to find time to do justice to the writer." Diane notes the wear and tear of reading so many papers with the same kind of error: "The repetitiveness of the errors deadens sensitivity." More fundamentally, however, perhaps our difficulty has something to do with a set of assumptions that we bring to students' work: assumptions about the right way to do an assignment and assumptions about our own authority as readers.

To get at some insights into the process of reading and responding to student work, our group read two pieces that highlight research done on teacher response: one by Nancy Sommers (1982), the other by Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch (1984). Sommers's research, done in collaboration with Brannon and Knoblauch, yields the following findings:

- teachers' comments often divert students from their own purposes in writing to a focus on the teachers' purposes;

- teachers' comments are often not specific to the students' text but "could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text" (Sommers 1982, 149, 152).

As an example of the first finding, Sommers reproduces a paragraph from a student's essay, together with the teacher's marginal and interlinear comments. She notes the "contradictory messages" reflected in the teacher's remarks ("Wordy—be precise"; "This paragraph needs to be expanded"), which set up expectations on the one hand for mere editing changes, and, on the other hand, for more significant ones, including fuller development of ideas (150).

Sommers's findings paint a dismal portrait of the way teachers read and respond to their students' work. Are we really so unreflective and unsympathetic in our reading of student essays? Much of what Sommers has to say strikes a chord with us. Diane, referring to an example of teacher commentary that seems generic or "rubber-stamped," agrees that the teacher's comments as given are less than helpful: "'Be specific' means nothing. It's better to ask a direct question: 'What technology are you referring to?'"

In this particular paper (on nuclear power), the teacher needs to engage the content as well as the form, needs to talk about the seeming contradiction in the point of view. Marlene seems genuinely taken by what Sommers has to say, admitting, painfully, that "all the stuff I have been writing is useless." She sees the need to be "more specific" herself in her commentary, the need to engage the students' words and ideas directly. As I hear Marlene say this, however, I think of those times when we are "specific" and extensive in our feedback and, still, students don't quite seem to "get it." Something else, clearly, is going on in those cases. Very likely, the grades that usually accompany our commentaries shade our students' responses. I share with the group my experiment some years ago with eliminating the grading of drafts in my composition courses. That change seemed to liberate me in ways I could not have anticipated. Students now read my responses with the intention of using them to produce stronger drafts. And I don't have to agonize over whether to give a B- or a C+. Rather I can focus on facilitating students' work through the most precise feedback that I can muster.

Pat raises the ante by asking, "How do we handle the challenge of a student paper that has a wide range of problems?" She tells about the challenge of reading one such paper:

> [My students] hand me about eight papers a semester. There's a lot of writing, and a lot of reading for me, and a lot of comments that I give back. . . .This [student's] paper was unreadable. I waited two hours and said it must be me, I must be tired. I'll get back to it. Over four days I read that paper ten times. And I could not make any sense out of that paper. It did not flow. It was stilted. The language was absolutely unbelievable. Sentences went on and on. It was beyond me.

Her comments ranged from "We need to go over this" to "Your sentences are too long." Kathy rightly reminds the group that such problems fall under editing skills rather than revision. She echoes Sommers's concern that we teachers not confuse the two. The difference between the two, Sommers observes, is the difference between seeing the student text as essentially fixed and seeing it as evolving (151). Too often students come to our paper conferences or to our writing lab with the first notion in mind: that all that needs to be done is "clean up" the grammar. In confusing editing with revision, we at best reinforce that idea and at worst thoroughly confuse and stymie the student writer.

But to return to the scenario posed by Pat: How do we respond to a paper gone badly wrong, reflecting a whole host of problems? What do we do when, as Peter witnessed recently in the writing lab, the writing is "atrocious, full of affectation, posing, lies, dishonesty," and the writer "can barely string together some sentences?" Of course, as Marlene reminds

us, we have to "tell him the truth." But we need as well to provide what Ann Berthoff calls "assisted invitations" (1978, 2): a way of reseeing the text and a motivation to struggle further with it. Our feedback must reside in language that is supportive, truthful, immediate, and without "handbook jargon" (the notorious "awk" or "frag").

Peter offers the view that we can lessen the pressure on our written comments on student writing by achieving an appropriate level of response within our classrooms, that is, by using the classroom to demonstrate a "good critical stance." Early on in his writing courses, he hands out a sheet spelling out such a stance and talks about it. He also brings in "all kinds of good writing" to test out students' responses. Throughout all of this, Peter's students are reading their papers to the class regularly, giving and getting critical feedback.

In creating such an atmosphere of supportive yet frank discussion of student work, Peter goes a long way toward defusing some of the issues that we are discussing: less stress is placed on the teacher's written feedback, since students are also getting feedback from other sources (one another) on a continual basis; and the teacher's mode of response is enacted and demonstrated in class throughout the semester.

It seems that in the process laid out here Peter is shaping his students' responses from the beginning (starting with the handout he mentions): they take their cue from him. More interesting to me would be a process of negotiation wherein students and teacher together enact a mode of response. Doing so would require from teachers a jettisoning of what Brannon and Knoblauch call the "inappropriate tyranny of an Ideal Text" (1984, 121). Teachers must read students' work without imposing on it, as Carol puts it, a "preconceived paper." Students, as all writers do, must attend to readers' expectations, most especially the teachers'.

Too often such negotiation is seen reductively, that is, as a selling out either by student or by the teacher. In fact, one of our peer tutors, Bob, who is an older returning student at our community college, wonders why he would have to "change [his] writing when [he goes] from teacher to teacher." "I write," he says, "my own way." Kathy, recognizing Bob's legitimate concerns, attempts to distinguish between a writer's "person" and the form and purpose of the writing:

> Your person has to come through in whatever you write. And no teacher should try to take that away. But the assignment can change the thrust of how you write. . . . If [Marlene] sets up an assignment asking you to write to the King and Queen of Spain that's a different kind of writing from how you feel about the birth of your daughter.

Bob fears the loss of control over his writing, understandably, given his reading of the negotiation between writer and reader. It doesn't help

matters that Peter, a published writer, reveals that he sees readers (most especially magazine and book editors) as "obstacles . . . to overcome." Peter tells a story of his own dogged efforts to "overcome" the obstacle of a particular reader:

> I've been writing short stories since last summer. [The editor of a magazine] has rejected six in a row. . . . Finally, he told me what he wanted. What he wanted was a story with a comic curve. An old, traditional story with a comic curve. And I realized all of a sudden that this is what he wants. Guess what I'm writing? A story with a comic curve.

We may legitimately ask who is overcoming whom here when Peter must adjust to the formal expectations of his editor in order to get published in a particular magazine. Bob may very well see Peter's story as an example of excessive compromise. But Peter assures us that he has not lost control of his writing in the process of adjusting to his editor's expectations. Within the expansive form in which he is expected to write, he can write the way that he wishes. The fact is, of course, Peter strikes a compromise, in the appropriate sense of the word. Intent on being published in a particular magazine, he is realistic enough to know that he must give as well as take. He strikes a balance between the needs of his reader and his own needs as a writer. In doing so, Peter demonstrates a level of maturity and experience that Bob will have to reach if he wishes to write for others.

Peter's story raises an issue larger than how to write for readers. It speaks to the degree to which any of us wields control over decisions that affect us. I am reminded of this larger theme when I hear Diane speak of the relevance of our discussion of authorship and authority to her own field of nursing:

> In nursing we call that the locus of decision, meaning who has the right to make the decision. There are times when the locus of decision is the patient. If you make the decision not to have chemotherapy, I may disagree with you but that's not my decision. My responsibility is to support you. . . . So with editors, is the locus of decision mine? or his? It's nicest if it's both.

That last observation is terribly important since it avoids a naive reading of the "locus" of authority. Certainly patients have, ultimately, the "right" to make decisions affecting their health and welfare. But those decisions may very likely come after an exchange of views among all parties. Moreover, patients (and students) do not "make decisions" innocent of institutional pressures—the hospital and the school are obviously very much alike in the unequal distribution of authority between doctor and patient (or doctor and nurse) and teacher and student. Patients face enormous pressures to defer to attending doctors when it comes to "what is right"

for them, just as students may have to think long and hard before challenging the authority of their teachers.

If we teachers accept the view (as Sommers, Brannon, and Knoblauch apparently do) that the "locus of decision" ought to be the students, how do we put aside the authority that our institutions expect us to have? Diane puts the question in more concrete and dramatic terms: What do we do as teachers when students challenge our cherished beliefs in their writing? Indeed, the way we read student work differs, she argues, depending on the stake that we teachers have in the ideas expressed. We will read more critically if the position taken runs counter to our beliefs. Generally, she says, "it's very difficult to be objective" under those circumstances.

Peter, for his part, will have nothing to do with the straitjacket that Diane would put him and the rest of us in. "When I read a paper and disagree with everything that is being said," Peter observes, "I honestly try not to be prejudiced." That admission may in fact support Diane's point—that we cannot escape the authority of our position. In this case, Peter must work to "try not to be prejudiced." All papers are not read the same way: Peter must adjust his way of reading when it comes to those papers that challenge his perspectives.

Is there a way, as Marlene suggests, of "letting go of some of that power" that teachers inevitably possess? Can we read and respond to student work in a genuinely facilitative way (rather than in a merely peremptory, directive fashion), allowing students to maintain ownership over their writing? Can we set up conditions so that the "locus of decision" is indeed the student? As a way to get at some answers, we look closely at an illustration given in the Brannon and Knoblauch piece. The authors reproduce a student essay, in draft and in final form, together with comments from the teacher and the student writer. The earlier version of the essay attempts to link smoking—in particular the annoying smoking habit of a roommate—with a decline in morality ("There are no morals left in this world . . . . Unfortunately I live with this example [of immorality] everyday. It is my roommate" [133]). The connection between the decline in morality and the roommate's habit of smoking is not persuasively made at all.

The teacher's comments on this earlier draft point out this rhetorical and logical problem but seem to do so in a fairly tactful and facilitative way, summarizing the student's argument and proceeding to ask probing questions:

> You seem to be saying that there's no more morality left in the world. You exemplify your belief with reference to your roommate's smoking. You seem to be puzzled about why anyone would pick up this immoral habit and thrust it upon innocent victims like yourself. . . .
>
> My central question is why do you link smoking with morality? Is smoking really a misdeed equivalent to illicit sex and cheating? Is

smoking as terrible as stealing? If so, would you explain why? I have
known some kind and generous people who happened to smoke.
Should I consider them to be as terrible as rapists and wife-beaters?
. . . (134)

Upon handing in the revision, the student responds to the teacher's feed-
back (and to a peer's reading of the same paper) in this way:

Thank you for your comments on my draft. Your comments combined
with my group's were helpful. Pamela's reaction to my paper was un-
expected. She thought that my emotions were overriding the theme
of the work. . . .
    But your reactions to my paper, *defensive as they were,* proved to me
that it is impossible to divorce emotion from content. Now that I have
finished the paper I believe it has lost some of the brimstone that I
originally intended. . . .
    Otherwise, any issue as to whether it is morally right or not, is
beyond the intent of my paper and not within my grasp at this point.
. . . (135; italics mine)

As the writer reveals, the new version of the paper leaves aside the theme
of moral decline, focusing on the difficulties of dealing with a roommate
who smokes. The paper shows considerably more control than the ear-
lier draft.

    Our discussion of the teacher's role in the revision draws unexpected
responses. On the one hand, the teacher strikes us as being supportive,
and very far from assertive and directive. Kathy's take is representative of
what many of us feel: "The teacher questions the thesis whether smoking
is a moral issue and asks him to rethink that. The student was free to come
back and make a case that smoking is a moral issue. You could have made
a case." Marlene concurs by saying that the teacher tactfully demonstrates
a flaw in the student's reasoning: "You cannot compare smoking with
rape." The fact that at least one of the writer's peer reviewers sees an ex-
cess of emotion seems to support the teacher's claims.

    But some of us, notably Pat and Diane, read the teacher's comments
as subtly coercive. Indeed Pat infers that the teacher is a smoker and "was
offended by the linking" of smoking and immorality. The student's own
astute comments about the teacher's defensiveness seem to be saying that
the teacher has some vested interest in the subject. The language used by
the teacher would suggest as much, heavily freighted as it is with emotion
("rape", "wife-beaters"). Diane wonders whether the seemingly facilitative
questions really reveal the teacher's own agenda: jettison the morality
theme altogether or suffer the consequences. "If you were really the ideal
[facilitator]," Diane observes, "you would encourage the student to de-
velop the morality theme." It is a shrewd observation, to say the least. The
teacher ought to have entered into the student's argument and stayed

there, offering suggestions that would enable the student to make it convincingly. In other words, the teacher is really not able to engage the student's position imaginatively (to play what Peter Elbow calls the "believing game" [1986, 25]). Perhaps the best evidence of the problematic nature of the teacher's feedback is the revised essay itself. Certainly more reasonable, the piece, however, has lost its edge, its heart ("Moving away to school in a new city can involve many dramatic and new situations," begins the new version [135]). It may very well be true, as Kathy suggests, that the student changes the essay more in response to peer pressure than to teacherly authority, and the importance of such mediating voices cannot be overstated. Nevertheless we cannot but see this paper slipping away from the student.

Can we as teachers provide genuinely facilitative responses to our students' writing? We all believe it can happen, although it requires an acknowledgment of our own prejudices and predispositions. The teacher whose remarks we have been studying may very well have played the facilitative role, given that teacher's knowledge of the student's capabilities and the scope of the assignment (context which is not given in the researchers' account). What is missing, however, is an awareness of the teacher's own implicit position.

Reducing our reliance on an "Ideal Text" may also go a long way toward making us more sympathetic readers of students' work. As we design assignments, we ought to phrase questions or set tasks that have, as Diane says, a "possibility of more than one answer." The difficulty of doing so becomes all too clear when Jerry, on my request, shares an assignment of his own from his introductory statistics course, along with some student samples (and his marginal comments on them). The assignment asks for a comparison of two populations in order "to show the inappropriate comparison being made":

> The death rate of Navy personnel during the Spanish American War was nine per thousand. At the same time in New York City, the death rate of the civilian population was sixteen per thousand. Navy recruiters later used these figures to show that it was safer to be in the Navy than out of it. Assume these figures to be accurate. Show that the figures, as used by the recruiters, are virtually meaningless.

In setting the assignment, Jerry clearly wants his students to learn, as he tells us, "to distrust statistics." He wants them to think critically before accepting such arguments. The difficulty that many of us have with the assignment—most notably Marlene and Diane—is that Jerry leaves his students with little opportunity to make their writing their own. There is but one answer—or a set of answers—which guides the students in their writing and the teacher in his responses to it. Inevitably, students then

must embark on discovering "what the teacher wants," and the teacher must comment on students' responses in light of a "preconceived text." In his marginal comments, Jerry does play the facilitator, asking questions and referring to what students are actually writing ("Age is a factor—but why?"), but he and the students are virtually "on the same page." It should also be noted that because students were not given the option to revise, Jerry's comments could not facilitate improvement in a particular essay.

To reflect on our own language of critique, we read closely one student's essay on the problem. Considered a relatively competent piece by Jerry (the writer showing reasons to "distrust" the numbers), the essay begins tentatively and informally before moving on to provide useful evidence to repudiate the comparison. For Peter, however, the tentative opening reveals a problem of style that he claims mars the piece from beginning to end. The essay begins in this way:

> It pleases me that the fact has been acknowledged that the com-
> parison is very inappropriate. It is inappropriate because the groups
> of people being compared have few, if any, similarities. It is similar,
> however, to comparing apples and oranges.

The paragraph says very little. Peter is struck by the "nervous" tone. The student does not know where to begin, and so adopts a pseudosophis-ticated style (what Ken Macrorie years ago called "Engfish" [1970, 18]).

The next paragraph sees the student adopt a far less formal stance:

> What's frightening is that before taking this course I might not
> have realized such a statement to be inaccurate, at least not as quickly.
> I think the reason for this is that previously, I had such a negative feel-
> ing about numbers. . . . Consequently, I always took statements like
> this for truth without every giving any thought. It is unfortunate that
> many young men may have signed up with a recruiter based solely
> on this pitch.

For Peter, this paragraph is simply proof that the writer has little control over language or material ("He's been very formal all along and ends with 'this pitch'"). The conclusion (which begins tritely with "All things con-sidered . . ." and ends with the bland assertion "The Navy is using two populations with completely different variables") is as ineffective as the opening. Peter ends by saying, "If you're asking for a more effective con-clusion, you're asking him to be a more effective thinker . . . more sensi-tive to his audience . . . more considerate of his material."

Diane, for her part, sees much to like in the work. She likes the self-reflection and frankness of the second paragraph. "It may be worth tak-ing the course just to understand yourself," she claims. As to the rest of the essay, she approves of the evidence brought to bear to support the

writer's point ("They were useful facts"), especially a point about the "social unrest" possible in the civilian group. Like Peter, she believes the ending simply is not up to the task but responds that it "might be helpful to list or summarize the variables." She concludes by saying to the student directly, "[You] had a good grasp of the concepts and variables and demonstrate how they were not used in the comparing of the two populations."

In Peter's and Diane's responses, we see two readers each of whom seems to be applying a different set of criteria (their criteria in turn differing from Jerry's). Peter evaluates the piece in terms of its style, which Peter defines as not merely grammar but "word choice, diction, sentence structure . . . the voice of the speaker." Diane, on the other hand, seems closer to engaging the writing on its own terms (hence the admiration for the seemingly "off-topic" second paragraph), although, in expecting the paper to conclude with a summary of what has been said, she sends a signal to the student that essays must have a certain form, at least in terms of the way they must close.

Faced with readers whose critique of their writing may range as widely as those we have just seen, writers must come to see composing as in large part a matter of negotiation between or among competing claims. Perhaps it is best to say that "the locus of decision" rests not in any particular site, but rather at the borders across which such negotiation takes place.