Writing, Response, and Contexts of Production or, Why It Just Wouldn't Work to Write about Those Bratty Kids

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To respond well to something — whether it is a conceptual problem one is trying to solve, a question asked by a colleague, or a student paper — we need to understand what we are responding to. Unfortunately, we often don't, especially in the case of student papers. While we may (or may not) comprehend the propositional content of a given paper, we seldom understand the equally important influences that shape that content. Flower, Stein, Ackerman, Kantz, McCormick, & Peck (1990) have noted that "the written product can be an inadequate, even misleading, guide to the thinking process that produced it" (p. 21); Wallace (1996) has found that student texts alone don't reveal the range of different problems students face in producing those texts; and Prior (1994) has found that the multiple influences which shape textual production can be "literally marked by their absence" (p. 31). Prior goes on to point out that we need to analyze the unique complex of influences shaping the production of specific texts if we want to more fully understand the nature of disciplinarity. The same holds true for student writing: if we want to more fully understand it, we can no longer ignore its "context of production," to use Nystrand's (1987) term.[1]

Fortunately, a body of naturalistic studies has taught us much about the types of influences that shape student work. Examples of such influences include students' interpretations of the teacher's personality (Prior, 1991); students' views on the extent to which the writing they're asked to do will help them gain access to the "real world" of their chosen career (Chin, 1994); classroom discussion of a student's topic (Prior, 1994); students' interpretation of how routine a task is (Herrington, 1985); students' choices to read the textbook before or after writing (Walvoord and McCarthy, 1990); and students' assumptions about the extent of the teacher's knowledge and authority (Sperling and Freedman, 1987). Taken together, these studies suggest both that student writing is shaped by such contexts to a great extent and that the range of these contextual influences is incredibly wide. They suggest, moreover, that the writing and learning of any given student is shaped by its own unique configuration of such influences.

It is this last issue that poses the problem: since each student's writing is shaped by a unique complex of influences, the students we teach differ both from the students in the research and from each other. Thus, no matter how

much light research has shed on individual students' contexts of production, we remain ignorant of the specific influences that shape each of our students' writing.

What remains unclear is both the cost of this ignorance and what to do about it. Two case studies will be analyzed here to illustrate that this cost can indeed be high — that missed opportunities for learning are rife. Moreover, the analysis of these cases will suggest ways that this cost can be cut — ways that we can learn more about students' contexts of production and then use this knowledge to make our responses more effective. A first step in doing so is to better understand the complexity of these contexts; the analysis will suggest that these contexts are productively seen as a multi-layered complex of inter-penetrating influences and that they can be heuristically divided into top and deeper layers. Top layers of context can be accessed by eliciting students' perceptions of their papers and of the teacher's response; deeper layers can be inferred when teachers account for the student perceptions in the top layer. After examples of these top and deeper layers are discussed in terms of their relationship to student learning, specific strategies for gaining access to them will be proposed. While these strategies may not help teachers understand every layer of the context of production, they will often shed light on particu-larly salient layers. Knowledge of these salient layers, the discussion will suggest, can help us better tailor our responses to the specific needs of each student. Conversely, without awareness of these layers, our responses will be unable to help students tap much of their potential.

Kiesha and Sally

Close examination of specific cases suggests what teachers can lose by being unaware of students' contexts of production. This particular case is taken from a qualitative descriptive research project conducted in a basic writ-ing program at a large midwestern university. As part of this research, I audiotaped and transcribed student-teacher conferences, interviewed students and teachers, gave students questionnaires on writing and response, observed classes, and collected and analyzed two students' drafts and final texts. Typi-cal of the interactions analyzed was part of a conference between a student-teacher pair I'll call Kiesha and Sally. Kiesha was a first-year student; Sally was an experienced teacher whose name had appeared several times on the university's list of excellent instructors. In this particular conference, Sally and Kiesha were discussing the first draft of Kiesha's research paper. The paper made very sparse use of sources in a situation where source use was key.

An important aspect of the context of production was suggested in my interview with Kiesha; she told me that she was happy with this draft of the paper because she had succeed in not plagiarizing. She went on to explain that she didn't include sources because she was afraid of plagiarizing; if she didn't include sources, she wouldn't plagiarize. This logic was apparent when I asked her what she thought of her paper and she replied:

> I was kind of scared that I was gonna end up plagiarizing, or just, you
> know, sayin' exactly what they were sayin'. So, with my rough draft,
> I didn't put anything, any um, I think I like had two quotes in there.
> But everything in the rough draft was all mine. So I wanted to first get
> out what I had to say before, so I wouldn't get caught up with plagia-
> rizing.

While Kiesha attributed the lack of sources to fear of plagiarism, Sally attrib-
uted this problem to general student ineptitude. She told me in our interview,
"I tried to make it clear in class that by this point, they really needed to have a
full rough draft, and Kiesha did not. . . . most other people in the class did not
have a full rough draft. She kinda came into tutorial saying, 'Look, um, I just
didn't get to put my sources in.'"

Since Sally seemed to be unaware of Kiesha's fear of plagiarism, all she
could do was, in her words, "say [to Kiesha] 'Gee, won't the paper be better
when it has sources.'" She felt frustrated and unable to help Kiesha: "I [went
into the conference] thinking 'aw, shoot,' and I left thinking 'aw, shoot,' be-
cause she still had no source material. And I can't help her with that . . ." Sally
wouldn't have felt so unable to help Kiesha had she known about Kiesha's
fear of plagiarism. Had she known, she could have discussed with Kiesha
more productive ways of avoiding plagiarism — ways other than avoiding
sources. In this case, then, and we might infer in many others, the teacher
would have needed to be more aware of the context of production in order to
develop a more effective teaching strategy.

While being aware of student perceptions of the paper can suggest top
layers of the context of production, accounting for these perceptions will help
teachers infer even deeper layers of the context of production.[2] Accounting
for Kiesha's perceptions (or partially accounting for them, since no teacher or
researcher would have access to a full account), suggests that important deeper
layers included Kiesha's assumptions both about the revision process and
about ownership of ideas.

For instance, given Kiesha's belief that plagiarism can be avoided by
adding sources after the fact, we can infer that she viewed the revision process
as merely additive. She told me in the interview "I was going to, my plans were,
like I said, to, to just do the paper and all, what I had to say, and see if that was
okay. And then, for me to just kinda fit in the quotes, fit in my references or
whatever." Since Kiesha did indeed carry out these plans to just insert her
sources — and since she inserted them without re-shaping the rest of the
paper — her revision was less than coherent. (It's worth noting that this
additive view of the revision process also informed the way that Kiesha dealt
with her thesis. She wrote the first draft of her paper without a thesis so that
she could discover what she wanted to say; then, after she finished drafting
the paper, she inserted a thesis in the same way that she inserted her sources,
without significantly re-shaping the rest of the paper.)

Interacting with Kiesha's additive view of the revision process were her assumptions about ownership of ideas. While the study did not yield enough data to fully analyze this deeper layer, Kiesha's strategy of waiting to read about others' ideas in order to first come up with her own suggests that she saw others' texts as problematic sources of information and ideas for her. She seemed to see her ownership of ideas in dualistic terms: either she "owned" ideas which apparently had no connections with others' ideas, and thus avoided plagiarism, or else her ideas were exactly the same as others', in which case she plagiarized. She didn't seem to understand that ideas are socially constructed — that they are born of interaction with other ideas. Or, if she did realize that this was how the ideas in her source texts had been developed, she didn't feel that she herself was capable of developing ideas in this way.

Had Sally been aware of these deeper layers — had she tried to account for Kiesha's fear of plagiarism — she could have formulated even more effective response strategies. In response to Kiesha's view of the revision process as additive, for instance, she could not only have suggested ways to better integrate source material, but she also could have helped Kiesha to reconceptualize the revision process as something that's recursive and transformative rather than additive. In response to Kiesha's assumptions about ownership of ideas, Sally could have discussed with her the socially constructed nature of ideas and ways of interacting more productively with others' ideas. Such response strategies, grounded in specific contexts of production, would obviously vary according to the unique contexts that shape the writing of each student.

Maria and Robert

Juxtaposing Kiesha's case against another case will illustrate the vast difference in the contexts that shape each student's writing; it will suggest that being aware of and accounting for students' perceptions is something we need to do for each student. The following case is taken from a larger study in which I explored writing and response in two college classrooms, one a business and technical writing class, the other an introduction to film class. I observed and audiotaped almost all the classes taught over the course of a semester, collected copies of all handouts distributed by the teachers, conducted both discourse-based and semi-structured interviews with the teachers and most of the students (most participants were interviewed on several occasions), transcribed selected excerpts of the interviews and classes, and collected and analyzed multiple drafts of the students' papers with the instructors' responses.

From these data, I'll focus on a student-teacher pair from the introduction to film class. The teacher, Robert, was considered to be excellent by all but one of the students interviewed. He was a recent Ph.D. who had significant experience not only in film production but also as a publishing academic and a teacher of rhetoric and film. The student, Maria, was a first-year student who

attended almost all of Robert's classes, made frequent and insightful comments in class, and received A's on all her papers.

I'll focus on Robert's response to Maria's third and last paper, which was on Spielberg's film *E.T.* In this paper, Maria argued that narrative, mise-en-scene, editing, sound, and cinematography worked together to convey the theme that children, unlike adults, possess a unique ability to believe in magic and that "only youth can be trusted with *E.T.* because only youth have the innocence of unselfish love." Maria developed this argument in organized, focused exposition, citing and analyzing several concrete examples to support each of her sub-points. Robert gave the paper a 95 out of 100 and wrote in response:

> Maria,
>
> I really enjoyed your essay. This film is more interesting and complex than many believe. Family films are not supposed to be as intelligent as serious dramas and art films.
>
> You support your analysis of Spielberg's development of the magic of youth with specific examples from a host of stylistic systems. Especially nice is where you recognize stylistic motifs that are carried out across the film, as in the film's repeated use of the jump cut progressions to extreme close ups of Elliot.
>
> The description of Williams' music might have been, well, more descriptive, but the guy has done so much and remains so true to his formula that I doubt many would expect any more description.
>
> This belief in the innocence of children comes largely out of the Romantic tradition. Of course not all children are innocent, and this is something that the cynic could note. However, Spielberg seems to fend off this easy critique by giving us other children, and older kids, who are not as innocent and trusting and caring as Elliot. Notice how Spielberg does give us a bratty-kids scene during the pizza dinner. Anyway, this all by way of saying that you've only scratched the surface of E.T.'s development of the magic of childhood. Recall, as well, that divorce and a missing father loom large in this story.
>
> Good work.

It may seem at first glance that Maria and Robert shared similar interpretations of both Robert's response and Maria's paper, and thus that it wouldn't be particularly valuable for Robert to be aware of and account for Maria's perceptions. In the discourse-based interview Robert homed in on the penultimate paragraph of his response, reiterating his point about the "bratty-kids scene" suggesting that not all kids are as innocent as Elliot. He told me that he'd posed this as an "upper level challenge" to Maria, responding to her as he would to a grad student; he said that this "upper level challenge" involved telling her that she'd "maybe just scratched the surface" — that her analysis "oversimplified" things. Maria seemed to understand this response perfectly,

and like Robert, she focused on the penultimate paragraph. Asked about Robert's purpose in writing it, she said "I guess just like to show that when I wrote it, it made it seem all cut and dried. Oh, that [what I wrote] isn't completely true; the movie did include some things that lead against that." She seemed to agree with him: "as far as scratching the surface goes, I know I did, 'cause there's a lot of things I didn't address . . ." Thus, although Robert may not have known what Maria thought of her paper or his response, this lack of awareness seems not to matter. It appears that they had consistent interpretations of the response and that the response was useful, at least insofar as Maria seemed to agree with it.

However, closer consideration reveals that the response didn't fulfill one of its key intended functions; it didn't challenge Maria to write papers — either a revision of this one or future ones — that would recognize a film's complexity or opposing interpretations of a film. In our interview, Maria implied that her future papers would be no different; she said that she would keep the paper as it was, even if she revised it. She told me ". . . there's a lot of [contradictory evidence] I didn't address but of course I couldn't . . . I don't think that's a big problem." Thus although Maria said she agreed with Robert's response, and although the response (in my estimation) addressed the key area where Maria could make her paper even stronger, it failed to achieve much of its intended purpose. Its failure to do so had consequences that were not trivial, for even though Maria's paper had provided an excellent analysis of selected evidence, its elision of contradictory evidence meant that it lacked a characteristic key to the discourse of film studies, not to mention many other disciplines.

Robert's response may have failed in persuading Maria to address this evidence in part because the paper received a high grade, but that is not the whole story. The response was unable to achieve its purpose in large part because it wasn't able to take the context of production into account; the teacher didn't know why Maria had written the paper the way she had. A salient aspect of this context was that Maria noticed contradictory evidence before she wrote the paper; the problem was not that she just missed it. She noticed, in fact, the very same evidence that Robert had mentioned in his response — the "bratty kids" — and she was aware that these kids could be seen as undermining her claims about the innocence of childhood. She also knew that this evidence — and the complexity of the film in general — had been discussed by many of the critics and scholars she'd read. In short, she was aware of contradictory evidence when she was writing the paper and was aware that others had noted it as well. She explained her choice to ignore it by telling me that it didn't matter since there was more evidence supporting her argument than going against it; she also noted that she likes "everything to tie up real great."

Not surprisingly, this general context of production was comprised of more specific layers. These layers, which were interrelated, had to do with Maria's assumptions about what constituted good writing. The top layer, as we've seen, was that Maria didn't seem to think she should address complex-

ity and opposing evidence; she didn't think it was a "big problem," for in-stance, that she didn't. (As Flower et al. [1990] have noted, this is not an uncommon assumption.) Accounting for this assumption yields several deeper layers of the context of production. The most obvious of these is Maria's assumption, confirmed in our interview, that recognizing complexity and con-tradictory evidence gains nothing. Maria had no sense that these rhetorical moves would strengthen her paper.

Had a teacher been aware of this, the response could have been more effective. A teacher might mention, for instance, that addressing complexity and opposing interpretations can make writing more persuasive not only by adding to the writer's credibility (the writer has very carefully considered and analyzed the subject matter) but also by allowing the writer to address oppos-ing interpretations with counter-arguments or to acknowledge them while at the same time maintaining (and perhaps providing additional evidence) that the writer's point still holds. Such strategies, a teacher might point out, can be much more persuasive than simply ignoring complexity and opposing interpre-tations.

Further accounting for Maria's reluctance to address Robert's response suggests still more layers of the context of production. One of these layers pertained to Maria's belief that writers should favor depth over breadth. While the depth over breadth principle didn't necessarily conflict with Robert's sug-gestion to address complexity and contradictory evidence, Maria assumed that it did. Pointing to the last paragraph of the response, she said "Like here, his criticisms. I know but, it'd be hard to include every little thing into seven pages." Her assumption about this contradiction was further suggested later in our interview when I paraphrased it to check my understanding:

> M: . . . I think in like the page number, like if I had to write a big paper, you know,
>
> K: um-hum
>
> M: you know, I suppose. But in six pages I think if there's more things I probably wouldn't be able to do it justice
>
> K: uh-huh
>
> M: and that I wouldn't want to put it in. Do you know what I mean, so
>
> K: um-hum. I know what you mean. That's a real good point. 'Cause you don't wanna just cram it in
>
> M: yeah
>
> K: without explaining it
>
> M: yeah exactly
>
> K: you know, and you also don't wanna explain it and write a 50-page paper
>
> M: [laughs]

Had a teacher known about this underlying layer of context — Maria's assumption that the depth over breadth principle meant she couldn't address complexity — he or she could have pointed out that it's possible to recognize complexity and contradictory evidence with just the occasional well-placed sentence or clause. A teacher might even give an example to the effect of "Although we do see bratty kids in the beginning of the film at the pizza dinner, the film nonetheless suggests the innocence of childhood by . . . " The teacher could then point out that this type of rhetorical move would allow Maria to retain the depth of her argument and remain within the page limit while at the same time recognizing at least some degree of complexity.

While Maria did not address the film's complexity in part because she assumed she could not do so in a short paper, there was still another layer of influence. This other layer seemed to stem from Maria's assumptions that, in a good paper, everything had to relate to the thesis and that recognizing complexity and addressing opposing interpretations would undermine her thesis. These assumptions were implied when I asked Maria what she took to be Robert's purpose in writing the last paragraph of his response:

> M: I guess just like to show that when I wrote it, it made it seem all cut and dried. . . . oh, that [what I wrote] isn't completely true; the movie did include some things that lead against that.
> K: oh, okay
> M: But when I write I don't like any loose ends, you know I like everything to tie up real great. So [if] something is included that would [go against what I have to say] I'd just leave it out. You know what I mean?
> K: um-hum
> M: You know like if I were to write about "there were these bratty kids," it just wouldn't work.

Thus Maria seemed to feel that if she recognized more of the film's complexity, not only would she be unable to develop her points in the given page length but she would stray from and undermine her own thesis.

In response to this assumption, a teacher could point out that the previously discussed "yes, but" strategy would neither undermine the thesis nor stray from it since first, the writer would be maintaining her line of argument and second, she would be explicitly linking the contradictory evidence to her thesis. Alternatively, a teacher might raise the possibility of reworking the thesis into an even stronger one — one that recognizes the film's complexity in a way such that opposing interpretations would no longer be opposing. (A teacher might give an example to the effect of "Much of the film's power lies in the fact that it both recognizes the imperfections of children — we see, after all, how bratty they can be at the pizza dinner — at the same time that it confirms the goodness and innocence of childhood by . . ." The teacher could then encourage the student to go on to discuss what this complex depiction of

children implies.) The point here is not to rewrite Maria's paper for her or to suggest that there's an ideal text she should have written; rather, the point is to suggest that like many students, she was unaware of some of the strategies she could have used to make her writing even more persuasive. To help her learn these strategies, a teacher would need to be more aware of the assumptions that shaped what she did and didn't write.

An interesting side note to Maria's case is that the some of the teacher's response seemed to contradict her assumptions while other parts of it didn't. This is important in light of Lehrer's (1994) conclusion that "[w]hen the instructor introduces material which contradicts commonly held beliefs . . . greater care is needed than when simply presenting confirmatory or new material. The teacher should repeat and call attention to the fact that the common belief is wrong or arguable [or not universally applicable]" (p. 279). Obviously teachers can't do this if they aren't aware of it when students hold beliefs that contradict (or seem to contradict from the student's point of view) what they are suggesting. Only by knowing what Maria "knows" could a teacher have pointed out that there isn't necessarily a contradiction. However, it is important to be aware of student assumptions regardless of whether or not they contradict what we want them to learn. A case in point is Maria's belief that writers gain no benefits by recognizing complexity and opposing evidence; as previously noted, Robert could have explained these benefits if he'd been aware of Maria's assumption. Thus, regardless of whether a teacher's response contradicts or merely adds to what students know, our instruction can be more effective if we know what they know.

Implications for Practice

As the cases of Kiesha and Maria suggest, teachers need to be aware of the influences that shape textual production — in all their complexity and intertwining layers — to respond more effectively to student work. These influences, however, are so dynamic and multi-layered that it is impossible for a researcher, let alone a teacher, to become aware of every facet of them. (Surely, for instance, the interpretive work that Kiesha and Maria did in writing their papers and reading the teachers' responses was even more complex than this research was able to suggest.) If even researchers cannot access all the influences that shape student reading and writing, what does this mean for teachers, who don't have the luxury of interviewing students and poring over interview transcripts and all drafts of student writing?

It means two things. First, teachers need to be aware that our understanding of what students write — and thus our response to that writing — will always be limited to some extent. Second, because we have some control over the extent to which this understanding is limited, we should do what we can to make it less so.

Being Aware of our Limitations

When we're not aware that our understanding of and response to student writing is limited, both students and teachers can suffer. Robert, for instance, occasionally got quite frustrated when students' revisions did not address the issues he had raised in his response; he even told me at one point that two students' revisions really "pissed [him] off." Most teachers have felt this type of frustration — frustration that could be alleviated by the knowledge that in many cases the student tried but could not make use of a response that didn't address the salient aspect of their context of production. We are not the only ones hurt by our frustration; students can suffer as well. Not only might their grades be influenced, but they may get discouraged or angry when they sense teachers' frustration with them.

An awareness of the limitations of our response might not only preclude some of this negative affect (which shapes motivation and learning) but may also help us attribute students' writing problems to the appropriate source. Rather than automatically attributing these problems to student failure, we can ask ourselves if they are attributable to interactional failure — to a response that doesn't communicate what we intended, for instance. If it is a case of interactional failure we will be better able to address the consequences, for while we cannot do anything if the problem lies only in the student, we can do something if it lies within our interaction with the student. To see this possibility of interactional failure where we might previously have assumed student failure, we need to be aware that we do not have access to the full context of production and thus that the effectiveness of our response is necessarily limited.

Strategies to Broaden our Understanding of Contexts of Production

Although our responses to students will always be limited, there is a range of strategies we can use to make them less so. The first strategy that will be discussed, making use of research, can help us gain a general understanding of the ways in which contextual influences shape student writing, while the other strategies, having students self-assess their work and respond to teacher response, can give us insight into the context of production of specific students. These last two strategies may not help us understand this context for every student but will allow us to better understand salient aspects of it for many of them.

The understanding we gain from these strategies, especially from having students self-assess their work and respond to teacher response, must be weighed against the time they take. At first glance it may seem that however productive such strategies are, they won't fit into our already overflowing schedules. But rather than adding them to our list of teacherly things to do, we can use them to reshape this list so that the net time needed doesn't change

much and is better spent. This will be discussed in more detail after the strategies are outlined.

<u>*Making Use of Research*</u>

Becoming familiar with naturalistic research on writing and response is one strategy that will shed light on the powerful influence exerted by students' contexts of production. Researchers have already begun to paint detailed pictures of individual students and the layers of context that shape what they do and don't do. This research needs to continue; teachers can benefit significantly from being familiar with it. In addition to continuing to do this research, scholars should do meta-analyses of these studies; that is, each study should be analyzed not just in isolation but in juxtaposition with other studies. This should have three benefits. First, it should drive home Anson's (1989) point that each student is unique and that we need to be more responsive to each student as an individual whose needs and background differ (a little or a lot) from any other student's. The more we look at specific cases against each other, the more apparent this diversity will be. Second, meta-analysis will help us become more aware of the range of possibilities — the different types of influences that may shape what our students do. It will help us see that, rather than one general undifferentiated problem, student writing that doesn't meet our expectations may be attributable to a variety of very specific problems or assumptions. Third, meta-analysis will shed light on any patterns that emerge across cases. Armed with an awareness of patterns and possibilities, teachers will be more sensitive to influences that may be shaping their students' writing.

<u>*Having Students Self-Assess Their Work*</u>

In addition to research and meta-analysis of research, we need strategies that will elicit information specific to each student we teach. One such strategy is to have students assess their own work and to use what each of them says and implies in the assessment to build a better representation of the context of production.

It was, for example, by asking Kiesha to assess her work that I gained insight into the top layer of the context that informed her text. (She told me about her fear of plagiarism in response to my question "what did you think about your paper?") Although I was a researcher rather than a teacher in that situation, there's no reason that teachers can't ask students similar questions. Such questions might include the following:

- What did you think of your paper?
- How hard or easy was it for you to write the paper?
- Were there any particular goals you were trying to achieve in writing the paper?

- What would you say are the strongest parts of your paper? Why?
- Which parts of your paper are you least sure about? Why?

Teachers could have students write "cover letters" to their papers addressing these issues and then use what students write in the letter to inform their responses.   A more informal version of this would be to have students take five minutes or so to write a little note and/or marginalia on their papers before handing them in. In addition to this or instead of this, teachers could ask these questions in one-on-one conferences with students. We could then ask fol-low-up questions eliciting even more information that might help us better respond to a student's work.

While the question that yielded key information from Kiesha happened to be "what did you think of your paper?" in other cases contextual information might be elicited by an entirely different prompt; each teacher will have a better sense of which issues might be worth asking about given what she or he knows of the student and the assignment. A typical instance in which one of the other questions helped elicit information happened in our university's writing center, where I was working as a consultant. A first-year student came in with a political science paper that was basically a paean to the U.S. Consti-tution; it could be paraphrased "I like this about our constitution," "I like that about our constitution," and "I like this other thing about our constitution." These claims to greatness were both unsupported and unconnected. To gain insight into this paper's context of production, I asked the student what goals he had been trying to achieve. He replied that his main goal had been to "give his opinions" since his professor, upon reading his previous paper, had told him to move beyond summary by including what he thought.

Had I not known this contextual information, I most likely would have responded by raising issues of coherence and support, and the student might have seen these issues as totally separate from his main goal of trying to "give his opinion." However, knowing what I did about the context of production, I thought a more productive response would explicitly address his goal for the paper. I first told him that he'd accomplished this goal (he had indeed given his opinion and avoided summary). I then continued to address his goal by ex-ploring with him ways that he might give his opinions while at the same time supporting them and showing the connections between them. Thus, rather than leaving with the message that he should do X, Y, and Z when only X was his goal, he left with the message that he could do X in such a way that Y and Z happen too. This is especially important in light of Walker and Elias' (1987) finding that the success of the student-teacher conferences they studied hinged not on how much talking was done by the student vs. the teacher but rather on the extent to which the talk addressed the student's felt needs. Thus having students reflect on their work, in addition to having meta-cognitive and other

benefits for students, also can also help teachers identify students' felt needs and other key contexts informing the production of their papers.

<u>*Having Students Respond to the Teacher's Response*</u>

Another productive strategy is to have students respond to teachers' responses (Evans, 1995; Gay, 1995). Certainly this strategy can suggest how a student interprets our response, which is more than we usually know; moreover, it can sometimes help us infer why our responses are interpreted they way they are. More specifically, a response to our response can allow us to infer students' assumptions about what constitutes good writing and how to achieve it — assumptions which shape both their writing as well as their interpretation of our response.

For example, just as Maria's response to Robert's response helped suggest her assumptions about depth vs. breadth and what it meant to have everything "tie up" with the thesis, so too did one of my film students respond to my response in a way that told me much about his paper's context of production. The student, a junior named Chad, didn't understand why I didn't understand the organization of his paper. (I didn't understand because I thought he'd discussed the editing of *North by Northwest* in two separate sections; the paper seemed to raise the issue of editing, discuss another issue, and then jump back to editing.) After I explained why this organization confused me, he responded to my response by telling me that in the first half of his paper he was discussing editing and lighting to illustrate one sub-point, while in the second half he was discussing editing and mise-en-scene to illustrate another sub-point; it wouldn't make sense to put the two paragraphs about editing in the same section since they were illustrating different sub-points.

It was only by hearing his response to my response — by realizing that he didn't understand why I didn't understand — that I was able to see the crucial context of why he'd organized his paper the way he did. Once I became aware of this key context — once I understood that he'd intended the paper to be organized around sub-arguments rather than cinematic techniques — I was able to revise my response to help him rather than confuse him. My first attempt at a response had unwittingly encouraged him to collapse his sub-arguments into one undifferentiated argument; my revised response helped him to better draw distinctions between his sub-arguments. In other words, instead of encouraging him to re-structure the paper to illustrate an argument like "Through editing, lighting, and mise-en-scene, the film illustrates X," we worked on making it more apparent to the reader that the structure of the paper reflected a more complex argument to the effect of "While editing and lighting work together in one way to accomplish X1, editing and mise-en-scene work together in another way to accomplish X2."

There are several different ways we might solicit students' responses to our responses. As happened in the above example, we could meet with them and look for cues that imply their response to what is being said. Or, we could

ask questions specifically eliciting this information. Such questions might include the following:

- Which parts of the response seemed most useful to you? Why?
- Which parts might not be appropriate for you to consider? Why not?
- Was there anything that didn't make sense or that you would like to have illustrated with an example?
- Was there anything my response didn't address that you wish it had?

 Such questions could be asked and answered orally, at the end of a conference, or in writing. If done in writing, one option would be for students to turn in their responses, perhaps accompanied by a copy of their paper and the teacher's response, a few days after the paper had been returned to them. Teachers could then either write a brief reaction or tell students that they'd consider this information when responding to the next set of papers. Still another option would be to have students integrate their responses into a cover letter that would accompany the revision or the next paper.

Time Needed to Have Students Self-Assess and Respond to Response

It may seem time-consuming to have students respond to the teacher's response (or even to have them self-assess and make use of their assessments), but it doesn't necessarily have to be. While it does take time to elicit and read or listen to students' assessments and responses, there are two ways that these strategies can help us save time responding to student work.

First, these strategies can give us a better sense of what students do and don't understand and thus can save us from explaining issues they already grasp. As Onore (1989) has found, what students have learned about writing is not necessarily apparent in their texts. Wallace (1996) has noted, more specifically, that looking at student texts doesn't reveal whether a given problem arises because a student is unable to articulate intentions that would lead to effective writing, or because the student has trouble implementing these intentions, or because the student is unable to judge the fulfillment of these intentions. The more we know about a student's context of production, the less likely we are to waste time focusing on, say, an issue of articulation when the problem lies in implementation.

Second, we can save time by using what we learn about students' contexts of production to help us select one or two issues, out of many possible ones, that our response will focus on. There is nothing to be gained and much to be lost by addressing every issue in a paper. Responses that do so, as we know, are more likely to confuse students, while responses that focus on one or two issues are more likely to help them understand and remember what is

being suggested. Of course to select issues to focus on, we need a basis for selection. Many teachers make this choice based on which problems, if addressed, would make the biggest difference in the overall quality of the work; however, given that more learning happens when students' expressed questions and needs are addressed (Smith, 1975), we should also consider what we glean from self-assessments and responses to our responses when we choose what issues to focus on.

Conclusion

Although it is not possible for teachers to be aware of every influence shaping the production of a paper, nonetheless we can and should be more aware of the most salient influences. To do this, we need to actively solicit information about these influences, and we need to use what we learn and infer in response to our solicitations to develop teaching strategies that are tailored to the specific set of needs, goals, and assumptions held by each student.[3] Just as Mina Shaughnessy (1977) urged us to understand the patterns and logic underlying basic writers' "errors," so too do we need to understand the layers of logic that shape what each of our students does. We can gain this understanding by using strategies such as student self-assessment and response to response — strategies that can help us access the top layers of the context of production. These top layers — student perceptions of their papers and our responses — include any conscious goals a student is trying to achieve and a student's conscious assumptions about what constitutes effective writing and how it is achieved. From these top layers we can often infer deeper layers, which include tacit goals and assumptions about writing and the writing process. Becoming aware of as many of these layers as possible allows us to formulate responses that better address the unique needs of particular students. The better these needs are addressed, the more our students will learn both about their subject matter and how to write about that subject matter.

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Notes

[1] This term is used here in a sociohistoric sense, with the assumption that any human interaction, including student-teacher interaction, is shaped by a confluence of multiple histories — histories that are personal, interpersonal, institutional, and sociocultural. "Context of production," then, as Chin (1994) has noted, encompasses not only what's happening at the moment of composing but also the broader influences that inform that moment. The broader influences discussed here will pertain chiefly to students' assumptions about what constitutes effective writing and how such writing is achieved, although as Chin points out, it is also important to consider how such factors interact with material and other influences.

[2] By "accounting" I mean contextualizing within a more global framework (as opposed to establishing a neat and direct causality).

[3] The implications of seeing response in this way warrant further thought. It is apparent that like the effectiveness of any text, the effectiveness of a teacher's response cannot be judged in a vacuum. Just as any text might work in one situation but not another, so too is the case with response. Its effectiveness is determined not by having a certain fixed set of characteristics (e.g., it can be oral or written, short or long, directive or suggestive) but rather by its ability to understand and adapt to particular situations and people.

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