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Writing and Responding

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I learned to write—I mean really learned something about how best to send a message I cared about to a largely anonymous audience—when I was in my twenties, had completed four years of college, and was trying to make a living as a freelance journalist and critic. My belated instruction came courtesy of an editor at a magazine that I wrote for regularly. Her lessons did not take place in a classroom—did not even take place in person—and consisted solely of detailed responses to my writing. Occasionally now, when I'm racking my brain to come up with an innovative lesson plan, I think of my editor's lessons and acknowledge that what I do in a classroom may be less important to my students than what I tell them about the essay that they've just turned in. In other words, the universally dreaded task of responding to a stack of student papers may be our best opportunity for teaching.

The teacher whose comments on my writing now serve as a model for my own responses to students was an editor at *Dance Magazine* whom I'll call Rachel. In what I now recognize as a gesture of blind faith, Rachel had hired me to write a monthly column of reviews. At the time, I had been living in New York City for a couple of years. Caught up in the excitement of the New York theater and dance scene, my wife and I had been attending plays and dance performances several nights a week. Gradually, as I became more knowledgeable about what I was seeing, I began writing reviews and features for some New York City weeklies. After a few months of this, I decided to take a long shot and sent a couple of sample reviews to *Dance Magazine*, a national magazine edited in New York. Soon afterwards, I got a call from Rachel. To my surprise, she put my name on the masthead, assigned me some performances to review, and told me not to miss my deadline. Suddenly, I was a dance critic.

The problem was that not only did I have little experience writing dance criticism, but in four years of college I had learned little about writing in general. As an English major, I had dutifully turned in dozens of essays. My teachers had dutifully graded and returned them. But during all those years of grades and brief comments—"Good work" or "Your interpretation of the poem isn't fully developed"—no one had ever asked me to revise a paper or told me anything about how I might approach the next essay differently. No one, that is, had taught me how a writer works.

Since *Dance Magazine* is a monthly, the deadline pressure was not as intense as at the weekly magazines that I'd written for previously. Rachel, a naturally gifted teacher, had time to instruct me in the craft of writing. Every month, I would type my reviews on the magazine's special narrow-column paper with numbered lines and turn them in to Rachel. The next day I'd get a phone call from her. "Do you have your copy with you?" she'd begin. "Okay, let's start with page one, line twelve: Doesn't this sentence contradict what you said about the performance in your opening?" And so it would go, page by page, line by line, with Rachel asking one question after another. She never rewrote anything for me, never even altered a comma. Mostly, she just asked questions. Sometimes she questioned my use of a semicolon, but she was just as likely to ask about the principles behind what I'd said. "Page twelve, line seven: you say that the dance should be shortened. Do you really think that it's a critic's task to advise an artist how to alter her work?" While we talked,

I scribbled notes. The following day I would deliver my revised article to the magazine.

Though Rachel was a good teacher, I can't claim to have been a particularly quick student. But over the course of the three years that I wrote for the magazine, my monthly conversations with her gradually became briefer. She had fewer questions to ask about what I had written, and her queries more often dealt with specific issues of style or content rather than with basic approaches to writing criticism. In short, I was becoming a better writer, able to anticipate the questions that Rachel—or any reader—might have.

I eventually left New York City and freelance journalism in order to go to graduate school. Like most English graduate students, I soon found myself teaching freshman composition. And like most beginning teachers, I discovered that one of the most difficult parts of the job was figuring out how to respond to my students' writing. For me, the dilemma was choosing between different models of response. On the one hand, it was easy to fall into the pattern set by my college and graduate school teachers: responding to student essays by simply writing a grade, some marginal comments, and a brief endnote. On the other hand, my experience with Rachel suggested a different way of teaching students to write. If I followed Rachel's methods, my comments on students' completed essays were largely irrelevant. The time to respond was while essays were still in draft, and my response should consist mostly of questions aimed at helping students to revise.

During my first semesters of teaching, I began reading articles and books about the process theory of teaching composition. It didn't take long to figure out that my English professors followed what has been called the "current-traditional" paradigm of teaching writing, paying attention only to the written product. Rachel, I realized, instinctively held to a newer paradigm that focuses on the process by which writers arrive at a final product. To use Donald Murray's metaphors, my English professors saw their role as that of judge, evaluating students' completed essays. Rachel was not judge but physician, diagnosing what ailed the drafts of my articles and prescribing measures for improving them.¹

Over time, I began modeling my teaching more and more on

¹Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) 19.

Rachel's example. I tried to abstract the principles that made her responses to me so helpful and use them in my own comments on student writing. Later, when I became director of a university composition program, I started to teach those principles to novice instructors and came up with four basic guidelines for responding.

MOST COMMENTS SHOULD BE AIMED AT REVISION

When I first began teaching, I spent lots of time writing extensive comments on my students' finished papers. I thought this was part of being a conscientious teacher, even though I often watched in dismay as students glanced at their grade and ignored all my carefully crafted remarks.

Now I follow Rachel's model. As a professional editor, Rachel responded only to writers' drafts; once an article was completed, she considered her work done. I try to bring some of the same professionalism into the classroom. I now write only a brief comment on a student's final paper; all that's needed is to explain the reasoning behind the grade. My detailed response appears on work-in-progress, when I know students won't ignore my remarks in favor of the "real" message of a grade.

I try to remember, though, that shifting most of my commentary to drafts doesn't automatically mean that my responses will be helpful. I've benefited a lot from Nancy Sommers's cautionary tale in her article "Responding to Student Writing," which reports on her study of college teachers' comments on students' drafts.² She found that the instructors' responses—supposedly written to encourage revision—were frequently contradictory; teachers would tell students to make major revisions by adding, deleting, or reorganizing information, while at the same time giving suggestions for editing individual sentences. The sentence-level comments were at best wasted effort, since any individual sentence was likely either to disappear or to be significantly altered as students revised. At worst, the contradictory comments prompted students to concentrate on fixing easily correctable stylistic problems while ignoring more significant issues such as content and organization. Sommers's article serves

²Nancy Sommers, "Responding to Student Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 33 (1982): 148–56.

as a useful reminder that comments should help students to understand revision as a genuine re-seeing of what they have on paper, not just as a process of getting the commas right.

RESPOND TO CONTENT

While she was attentive to the style of my writing, Rachel's main focus was on what I had said. Were my points clear? Had I adequately defended my judgments? Like music, dance is a notoriously difficult art to describe, and Rachel was ruthless in pointing out instances where I had failed to give a clear picture of what the movement on stage looked like.

As a professional writer, I took for granted Rachel's focus on the content of my articles. Several years later, as a composition program director reviewing instructors' comments on student papers, I was struck by how common it is for teachers to ignore what students say and to comment exclusively on how they say it. Nancy Sommers reported that the teachers in her study gave so little attention to content that the comments on any paper could have been rubber-stamped onto any other.

Good writing depends in part on the writer's desire to communicate a message. When teachers respond only to an essay's form—no matter whether to lower level stylistic concerns or to major issues of organization—students are left to assume that we don't take their message seriously. Writers who get nothing but criticism of their errors are likely to view writing as a journey through a minefield of potential errors; they may well conclude that the best way to prevent making frequent mistakes is to avoid writing as much as possible once they leave our classes. Even writers who receive positive comments about form—such as "good introduction," "effective transition," "strong conclusion"—may come to regard writing, at least, classroom writing, as a mechanical process of following the rules, not as a means of communicating a message they care about.

When I began leading workshops for writing teachers, I found that some instructors who agreed in principle with my arguments for responding to the content of students' essays were nevertheless reluctant to do so. Often, they mentioned the difficulty of responding to essays on controversial issues such as abortion, capital punishment, feminism, or race relations. On the one hand, they pointed out, students may try to guess the teacher's

opinion in order to be rewarded for promoting the "right" view; on the other, students may view a teacher's negative response to content as punishment for being on the "wrong" side.

I agree that we have to be careful in responding to provocative or controversial essays, but I don't think we have to abandon attention to content. One solution is to adopt a persona. For example, I've taken on the identity of a poor, unmarried teenage mother to respond to student essays on abortion. Once I used the voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"—an essay we'd studied in class—to respond to a student who wrote about race. But it's not necessary to adopt a formal persona in order to respond to a controversial topic without imposing an opinion on students. Comments that raise questions and suggest how various readers might react to an essay provide a way to talk about content and point out shortcomings in a student's argument while still demonstrating respect for students' right to their own views.³

ESTABLISH A DIALOGUE

Rachel's monthly telephone conversations were superb opportunities for teaching and learning. She could raise questions about my intended meaning, and I had the chance to respond immediately or to note problem areas and rewrite them later. Though the composition classes at my college are alarmingly large, I try to follow Rachel's model by holding individual conferences with each student several times during the semester. These conferences are an invaluable means of establishing a dialogue, of making sure that students have the major say in determining how to revise their writing.⁴ Of course, holding a conference does not guarantee that real dialogue will take place; I know how easy it is to transform a conference into a monologue in which the student's only role is to listen passively to my instructions on how to fix a paper. However, so long as I keep the

³I describe other strategies for responding to content in "Is Anybody Listening?": Responding to Student Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 37 (1986): 87-91.

⁴Some pioneering instructors use conferences as their sole means of responding to student writing; Roger Garrison and Donald Murray have written influential articles describing entire composition courses based on one-to-one conferences.

emphasis on questioning a writer's choices rather than prescribing solutions, I find conferences one of the best ways to respond to student writing.

I also use a variety of techniques to help establish a dialogue on paper. One simple method is to ask students to turn in a separate page of commentary along with their essay. I ask them to respond to questions: What is your purpose in this essay? What's your favorite part? What part are you unhappy with? And I have them ask me questions in turn. I find that students can often identify perceptively the aspects of their papers that need revision; their questions are often calls for confirmation and suggestions. "Do you think my introduction is dull?" one student recently wrote in her commentary. "Do you have any ideas of how I could grab readers' attention better?" A student doing a paper on teenage drinking asked, "Do I need to add some statistics into my argument? Should I do some research on auto accidents involving teenagers who are drunk?" Comments like these make a teacher's job easy and encourage me to see my role more as friendly adviser confirming students' own ideas about how to revise rather than as draconian enforcer of rules.

When it comes to writing my own response, I follow three self-imposed rules to encourage a sense of dialogue. First, I start by addressing the student by name, and I use first person frequently. It's harder to assume a magisterial tone or to fall into sarcasm when you write a comment in the same style that you'd use in a letter to a friend.

Next, following Rachel's model, I ask a lot of questions. Some questions are repeated frequently: What's your purpose in this paragraph? Why do you say this? Other questions are more specific. For a recent set of papers on America's drug policy, I asked one student, "Aren't there any people who oppose needle-exchange programs for drug addicts?" To another I wrote, "I'm confused by your section on legalization of drugs. Are you saying that one option is to legalize cocaine and heroin but not marijuana?" Obviously, some of my questions are more open-ended than others. But any question can let students know that they have a role to play in this dialogue about meaning; students' responses to queries will determine how they revise their papers.

Last, when I think it's appropriate to give students a direct suggestion for revising, I try to offer alternatives. For example, one of my students writing about drug policy didn't narrow her

topic sufficiently. I wrote to her, "You treat both legalizing drugs and emphasizing prevention. That's a lot to cover in a short essay; this could be more effective if you limited yourself to one of those topics in your revision. As it stands, your discussion of prevention is much more specific, but the legalization topic has a lot of potential. Which would you prefer to focus on?" Offering alternatives for revision is another means of ensuring that I don't impose my own ideas on a student; it's a way of demonstrating the significant choices that writers have as they shape their work.

POINT OUT GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF GOOD WRITING

As an editor, Rachel's immediate concern was improving the articles scheduled for next month's issue. But as a natural teacher, she often went beyond making suggestions on how to revise a particular piece and raised general issues about writing, which I could then apply to future articles.

To help ensure that my comments on student papers address larger issues of writing, I read a paper over once before I write anything on it, and I put most of my commentary in an endnote. Reading the entire paper first helps me to avoid overwhelming the student with advice. Putting most of my commentary in an endnote aids me in pointing out to students what issues are most important. When students look at marginal comments, a note about usage may well appear to have the same importance as a remark about logic or structure; putting the bulk of my response in an endnote allows me to set priorities more easily.

I also try to include a recommendation for the student's next essay in all my responses. For example, I might ask a student to write a different type of introduction, to use a more concise style, or to provide more supporting evidence. Of course, if I ask a student to try a particular technique in a future paper, I have to remember what I said so that I can comment on how successful the student was. Rachel, who worked with only a few writers, could keep in mind her previous comments and each person's general progress. For those of us with one or more large composition classes, it's not so easy to remember either a student's work or our own responses. I find it crucial to keep some sort of record. Since I started writing my comments on a computer a few years ago, record keeping has become a simple

matter. I set up for each student a computer-file where I save all my responses; each time I write a new comment, I can rapidly review what I've written earlier. Teachers who type their comments can slip in some carbon paper in order to make a record. For teachers who handwrite their comments directly on the paper, it's a simple matter to jot down a brief summary of the response and note any recommendations made for the next paper.

Keeping a record of my comments is useful not only as a means of tracking my students' progress but as a way of monitoring my own methods of response, of noting when I fall into the easy, authoritarian modes of telling students how to revise rather than asking questions and encouraging them to find their own solutions. Occasionally, I find myself asking how Rachel might handle a particularly difficult paper. She continues to serve as a model, reminding me that responding to writing is at the heart of helping students learn to write.

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