TEACHER COMMENTARY THAT COMMUNICATES: PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH IN THE WRITING CLASS

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A few years ago, I had a student come to my office, sit down, and pull out her paper on which I had spent a lot of time writing comments. When she pulled out the paper, I felt a sense of accomplishment, expecting her appreciation for the time and effort I had devoted to responding to it, confident that she understood what she could do to improve a subsequent draft. Instead, the tone of her voice was angry, the expression on her face indignant. "I have read all the marks you put on my paper, and I'm not sure what exactly you want. Do you want me to scrap this paper and start over?" she asked.

Surprised by her reaction, I told her that I wasn't sure what she meant, and she proceeded to ask me what I meant by the many abbreviations and the frequent bits of advice and alternatives I had scribbled in the margins, and the extensive comment I had written at the end of the paper. Looking at the paper sideways as she pointed to my remarks, I saw my commentary and marks from a different angle and became particularly sensitive to the word "meant" which both of us used repeatedly. My comments on the paper appeared messy and rude. I had drawn lines, made circles, inserted arrows,

filled up long sections of the margins with my words, and finally exhorted her to rearrange, refocus, edit, and proofread. As we reviewed the paper and my comments, I saw that I was not communicating what I had intended; in fact, I was doing exactly what I was recommending that she not do in this paper. I was sending contradictory messages that were alienating the student and discouraging her from participating actively in reformulating the text in a another draft. What my commentary did was not communicate to a person but make marks on a text, marks that were random and disparate criticisms of the formal properties of a text; in effect, notes to a paper, not responses to a writer.

The irony was that I was losing sight of the very rhetorical aims of communication that I was recommending to students and that all the time and effort responding to the student's writing was time not well spent. My intentions were good, but my effects were poor. Clearly, I had attempted to do too much, but more importantly, I had forgotten about the need for clarity, for an adequate knowledge of the writing subject, one's reader, and, most importantly, the context. I was doing exactly what D.G. Kehl noted in the article "The Art of Writing Evalutive Comments": many instructors expect from their students clear and "forceful" prose, but do not respond on the writings with "equal lucidity or force" (973).

My extensive commentary, I must have thought, would solve most of the problems in one full-sweep. But it is clear to me now why that traditional product-centered commentary is not such a sweeping remedy. The diverse and random responses in the "all-inclusive" commentary do not usually address a student in a consistent, focused, and effective manner. As Muriel Harris explains, the problem with the "over-graded" paper (the paper that receives an abundance of diverse responses and corrections) is that the teacher "has lost both a sense of focus and a point of view" (92). That approach doesn't usually work because the communicator's (i.e. instructor's) purpose is not clear to the students. The tendency is to respond with many purposes in mind (reacting to content, correcting, editing, warning, recommending, etc.) because a writing product can be criticized from many perspectives. Unfortunately, without a clear focus, the responder usually barrages the student with a lot of conflicting messages.

It is no wonder that a teacher's responses are, as Lou LaBrant claims, a "severe test of the teacher's own power of communica-

tion" (37). I have discovered, from what I preach to the students, that such a "power" of communication depends on their interest in and knowledge of the writing subject, the context, and audience, and the ability to determine an appropriate purpose and role—proven rhetorical methods which the writers of commentary should not ignore, that is if they want to communicate understandable, usable, and appropriate responses.

Reader comments on texts are actually responses to the process of developing the text in a context. We do not scratch responses on a text for posterity, or show that we caught everything, or protect ourselves from the critical eyes of other readers. We must recognize that our responses on one text are only a part of that larger dialogue we carry on with the student. Those responses are only one of many responses we make to students about their writings, so that it is not necessary to try to accomplish everything on one text. What is necessary for effective response is that our audience sense is clear, we're sensitive to the writer's subject and rhetorical aims, and we understand fully the effect of the context on the writer.

Context

The traditional "product-centered" commentary does not require a sensitivity for and broad view of the writing context, since the focus is on the text, what the text "did" correctly and incorrectly. Knowing the complexity of a text and the many critical features we have been trained to identify in literature, I am not surprised that we clutter student texts with our critical training.

We have for years concentrated on the text as representative of students' writing abilities. The article "Evaluating a Theme," which appears in Sister Judine's *A Guide for Evaluating Student Composition*, provides examples of response and evaluation resulting from a traditional focus on the formal text, with little if any attention devoted to the context, other than a brief explanation of the assignment and notification that the sample paper was written by a high school junior. The college teachers who were asked to grade and comment on the student paper responded primarily to the structural properties of the text, such as paragraph development, unity, and the proper use of standard English. Few responses were made to the student's message or aim. Some of the professors disregarded entirely the situation in which the writing was produced; one ex-

plained that in "high school, accurate writing of standard English is more important than the expression of ideas" (85). While a few of the teachers acknowledged other features that influence a student's "performance," such as the age-level, stage of development, and assignment, most ignored the character of the student, the actual function and context of the writing, and the writer's intended reader. In fact, the responders' emphasis on the isolated elements of form was so overwhelming they seemed to forget about the student's aim to communicate. If that student had received those responses on the theme, he would realize that the aim of classroom writing is not communication to readers but a performance for a critic. Just as my student, I am sure, realized that what I wanted, unfortunately, was her text and not her active participation in the writing context.

Without a full understanding and sensitivity for the context, an instructor may be forced to address formal features of a "text" and ignore the writer who produced the text. The personal, exploratory writing that I had assigned to that student's class deserved my awareness of her aim to explore and learn through writing and to communicate to interested readers. My responses, however, essentially were written by a detached critic, not an interested reader. One reason that my responses were not communicated effectively was that I was not a participant in that writing task and thus was not fully aware of the demands of the writing context.

I needed a "sympathetic" understanding of the context, and that required my participation in the same task in which my students were participating. One must do what David Harrington recommends, and that is discard one's "protective shield" and do the assignments right along with the students (14). The advantage of participating in the tasks is explained by Mary Webber and Betty Tuttle, who found in their study requiring teachers to participate in the same assignments as the students that the teachers gave the students more constructive and positive responses on their work. The project revealed that those teachers became familiar with the demands associated with the writing and thus more understanding of the students. Of course teachers do not have the time to participate as the students do in all assignments, but at least with periodic participation teachers can understand difficulties and the demands of writing and as a result respond and communicate more sympathetically and effectively.

The Writing Subject

Another way to improve the effect of one's responses is by looking into and acknowledging the student's subject. Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch suggest that teachers need to recognize what the student is actually trying to communicate (161). Teachers have, according to Brannon and Knoblauch, traditionally judged the student's text by how well that text stands up to the teacher's ideal conception. The instructors tend to ignore the student's subject and to focus instead on "parts" of the writing performance.

Instead of focusing on parts of the text, judging the text by how well it measures up to my ideal standards, I try to appreciate and read what the student is saying, to recognize the "holistic" message in the writing. This reading leads, I am convinced, to a holistic response and understanding of the writer's subject. If I had spent my time reading and not scribbling on the student's paper, I could have given her a more pertinent "reader" response, one closer to her expectations and knowledge of the subject. Because I was trying to look for too many things, my responses became distorted.

Some might complain that it is our job to deal with many things, including formal features and substantive ones, and that we read and look for all of those things. However, research has shown that instructors cannot focus simultaneously on the so-called meaning and form of a writing, or read to analyze the text and react to the rhetorical subject. Searle and Dillon's study, for example, found that although teachers expressed a primary interest in the "content" of the student writing, most of the teachers actually responded to the form. And Joseph Williams, studying similar reading problems, examined the causes and effects of two different reading habits of writing instructors and concluded that "when we read for typos, letters constitute the field of attention; content becomes virtually inaccessible" (154). In other words, the focus of reading precludes other essential features of the writing. Williams distinguishes between what he calls an "ordinary reading" that is unreflexive and a reading that is consciously directed at a specific feature of the writing. His point is that teachers may be too concerned with errors in writing, and as a result ignore other features. His distinction serves also to explain how a narrow focus in reading limits one's understanding of the writing and weakens the eventual response to that writing.

To make a holistic response to a writing, without being

significantly influenced by other predetermined, formal matters, I make an "ordinary" unreflexive reading. I read the paper to read, not to write responses. I don't hold a pen when I read. Picking up the student paper as if reading a newspaper, I read to consider carefully what the student is saying and attempting to say about his or her subject. Following the unreflexive reading, I read the paper again to understand my initial reactions before responding. Other instructors recommend similar processes. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. and Lou LaBrant comment on student writing only after a reading of the entire paper (159). Janny Tripp silently considers a variety of features in the first reading and later translates those features into open-ended questions (360). Joan Yesner avoids the temptation to write and respond by reading the writing first without a pen in hand, and then during the next reading records reactions on a separate sheet to put later into a note or to explain to the student in a conference (842).

I suspect that when I do look for "my" subject in the first or second reading, I tend to ignore the student's subject. To read and appreciate the student's subject, as Donald Murray so often recommends, we should read not with many instructional intentions but with one specific goal and from one specific role.

The Communicator's Role

The most obvious cause for ineffective responses to a text is the instructor's tendency to respond with a variety of purposes and from a variety of perspectives. Just as I recommend that my students use a consistent and appropriate voice, I too as a communicator must also reconsider carefully my role as a responder and the corresponding role of the student reader. When conflicts occur between these roles, the intentions of the responder are not achieved. I have seen many student papers commented on by teachers and have observed a combination of responses that reveals a variety of roles from the same instructor: interested reactions to the message from the reader, grammatical corrections from a critic, and evluative remarks from a judge. The responder dons many masks, poses, and stances, all of which fall under the larger role of "teacher." But few students are capable of understanding and applying the many and various reactions and directions. Many learn how to "play the game," but others become confused and alienated when they receive responses that come from a variety of roles.

The problems created by conflicting roles on student papers

are significant. Greg Cowan in "The Rhetorician's Personae" contends that the overlapping of the conventional roles of the English teacher (the experiencer, examiner, and evaluator) distorts the teacher's messages to the students (261). When the student's role is a candidate, the appropriate role of the teacher is an evaluator. If the student's role is an apprentice, the teacher should act as examiner; and if sharer, the teacher's role should be experiencer. The foul up comes when the student wants to share information with an experiencer but instead shares it with an evaluator or examiner. In a case like that, the expectations of the student are consequently disturbed. The student interprets the information he or she originally wanted to share as expressions to be judged or examined. Cowan believes that when such conflicts in roles occur, the responses are "garbled" and "short-circuited" (261). When the responses are appropriate to the roles, the messages are clear and easily understood. Cowan recommends that teachers should comment consciously from an appropriate persona in order to avoid the overlapping and the resulting confusion.

Teachers lose their sense of focus, Muriel Harris claims, when they respond from a variety of roles. Harris compares the lack of a teacher's focus in responses to a student's habit of writing without a consistent perspective. She observes that "the teacher who overgrades leaps from suggestion to correction to criticism, from being an editor to a coach to a reader" (92). The effects are similar to those in a student writing that is not focused and does not reflect a consistent role. Because of the inconsistency, the reader (the student) often must reevaluate the writer's (teacher's) perspective and question the specific intentions, as my student obviously did.

Still, some students suspect that behind my reader interactions lurks the spectre of the evaluator or the stereotypical, multi-faced English teacher. Last year some freshmen who received my reader-responses to their writing told me they were confused, that they expected the traditional evaluative remarks and interpreted the reader-responses as evaluative ones. The questions I wrote in the margins of their papers did not elicit answers, but suggested to the students that the corresponding passage failed, or worse yet that their writing skill was questioned. In that case, I was clearly at fault for the confusion because I had not explained my position and discussed my role as responder. Since that class, I have in other classes defined clearly my role and have explained in detail that my evalu-

ation of their work and progress is not based on individual "themes" but on their accumulated work and progress apparent in folders. I have reconsidered my role as a responder and no longer approach a paper as a "teller" but as a "shower." I show by reacting as a reader to the writing—asking questions, reacting to the "student purpose," agreeing, disagreeing, noting my problems understanding. I do not, now, tell the student "what to do"; I let the student see the effect the text had on me and make decisions based on that.

The Reader

We preach audience sense. As an essential feature of response method, a specific "audience sense" influences significantly the effect of responses. When I respond I write to the student and consider the nature of the student, his or her attitudes about writing, the ability to accept or understand responses, and most importantly the student's communicative aim. I write responses which are personalized, and often use the student's name in the response. Personal responses show my students I am communicating to them and also help remind me that I am communicating.

Responses to formal texts do not communicate to a specific person but point to things on the text. Those standard or stock responses seldom express a specific audience sense and often alienate the student. Nancy Sommers concludes in a research study of response that standard, "rubber-stamped" comments cause the student "great difficulty," because the student does not know how to interpret the "vague" comments (153). In a study involving 225 ninth grade students, Roger Sweet observes that students who receive free, individualized comments on their essays show a significant improvement in attitudes about the writing process, but those students who receive just a grade and a stock response show no improvement at all (8). Based on his findings, Sweet warns of the ill effects of the "depersonalized practice of using 'stock' comments" (10). He recommends that "the teacher make truly personal comments, comments from which a student can get the feeling that the teacher really is conscious of his efforts, or the lack of them" (10). It is, as D.G. Kehl insists, important that "every comment about student writing should communicate, in a distinctly human voice, a sincere respect for the writer as a person and a sincere interest in his improvement as a writer" (976).

To develop a specific audience sense, I get to know the stu-

dent personally. Free journal writings, regular personal conferences and in-class work with individuals allow me to know the students better than I would if they would remain names on my roster and people in the class. The teacher, David Hamilton recommends in "Writing Coach," should become "more sensitive" to the student's intentions reflected in the work (156). And greater sensitivity requires a knowledge of the individual. I recognize his or her special writing subjects, unique attitudes about writing, and interests outside of the classroom. By recognizing the individual, the teacher can "keep check on emotional temperatures" (Dusel 264), which is similar to the advice of the classical rhetoricians. Aristotle advised that the orator judge carefully the emotional nature and character of the audience because the effect of the appeal depends on the emotional disposition and type of character of the listener. The orator who understands how an angry audience reacts to the subject, for example, determines the "right" appeal by judging the character of that audience. Clearly the same consideration is necessary for the teacher-responder. An angry student who dislikes the writing classroom would need, obviously, a special form of encouragement that the confident and interested student would not need. If we recognize how a student reacts to a remark, the subsequent responses will certainly be more appropriate and effective.

James Moffett insists that responses must be pertinent to the "action," which suggests that we must recognize the student's actual communicative aim and respond to that aim. From the student's perspective, the responses that are not pertinent to the action seem to emphasize classroom performance more than the essential aims of writers. But when the teacher focuses on the actual message, as an ordinary reader would, the responses reveal a concern for the communicative aims rather than a concern for doing the writing right according to an abstract standard. After his examination of over 2000 marked student papers, Gary Sloan became convinced that the teacher should acknowledge the actual intentions of the student and be "sympathetic" to his or her aims (34). To do what Sloan and Moffett recommend requires that the responder is not influenced by an ideal conception of the text or an aim, but is guided by a sincere interest in the reader-interaction with the writer. When the responder reacts to the person writing, the responses subsequently interact with the student and reveal a sympathetic understanding of the demands of the task and context.

With clearly defined roles and purposes, the traditional tensions between student and teacher are reduced, promoting instead a relationship that D.G. Kehl insists "must be corresponsive" (980). But corresponsiveness comes from communication, not miscommunication. And as a student and teacher, I have observed and produced a lot of miscommunication in the commentary on student writing. I used to believe that writing teachers were judges and critics and the comments on papers were more like knife jabs than communications. I jabbed and jabbed, wasting considerable time and effort, until I realized that I wasn't communicating but wounding and doing very little good in the process. So what I do now is practice in my commentary what I preach in my classroom. I read carefully, address my specific audience, maintain a clear and specific role, remain aware of the context, and stay sensitive to my student in that context. From what I see in my students' writing and in their attitudes about writing, I believe I am now communicating to them much more effectively than I used to, and consequently helping them to become better writers in the process.

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