RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' CREATIVE WRITING: MODES OF TEACHER COMMENTARY

Richard Straub

If Alexander Neubauer's recent collection of interviews with teachers, *Conversations on Writing Fiction,* is any indication, creative writing teachers espouse three wide-ranging approaches to classroom instruction: a directive approach that emphasizes the teacher's agenda, a nondirective approach that looks to minimize teacher intervention, and a moderate, or integrated, approach that attempts to offer direction while not determining the values or practices that students adopt. At the heart of these different approaches is the issue of teacher control: How much should teachers direct students' work with writing or push a particular agenda? How much should they stand back and allow students to pursue their own directions and develop their own styles? Each of these approaches seems to have its favored methods, emphases, and goals. Each of them, it seems reasonable to expect, would also involve different ways of reading and responding to student writing. More than the general principles we voice or the image of writing we uphold, it is what we say about our students' writing itself that carries most weight in the classroom. It is how we receive and comment on the words they put on the page that speaks loudest in our teaching. But how do teachers who espouse one or another of these approaches make comments on their students' writing? Are there certain strategies of response that are more appropriate to one

approach than another? And, if so, how would teachers using a given approach do best to shape their comments? How might teachers begin to examine the kinds of responses they make on their students' creative writing and determine whether they are doing the work for them that they have in mind?

The teachers in Neubauer's collection make an occasional remark about responding to student writing. Some teachers, we are told, "resist the urge to fix anything too quickly." Others, in the style of Kurt Vonnegut, make use of only a few, general remarks: "I like this" or "I don't like this very much." We are told how some teachers write detailed comments and how some make tough line-by-line editings as a piece is drawn to a close.[1] But their talk—and the overall scholarship on teaching creative writing—remains brief and general about the issue of teacher response. Even books devoted ostensibly to response to student writing—Alberta Turner's *Poets Teaching: The Creative Process* (1980) and Patrick Bizzaro's *Responding to Student Poems: Applications of Critical Theory* (1993)—deal mostly with ways of reading and evaluating students' writing, not with how teachers communicate with writers about their work.

In this essay, I will examine how four well-recognized teachers respond to their students' creative writing, describing how they shape their comments and analyzing what those comments suggest about their teaching styles and classroom goals. I will focus my examination on these teachers' *modes of commentary*: on how, by framing their comments in certain ways—for example, as advice or commands, as criticism or reader responses—they establish various relationships with students, assume varying degrees of control over student writing, and imply various teaching goals. The modes of a teacher's responses are not the only factor in determining the extent of control she assumes in her responses. Other factors clearly affect how much a teacher takes control or allows the student to retain control over her writing choices: the number of comments, the focus of the comments, the range of comments the teacher takes up, the specificity of the comments, the degree to which the comments are elaborated, the placement of the comments (either on the pages of the student's text or in a separate end note or letter), and the extent to which the teacher holds the student to the parameters of a given

assignment or genre. But the modes of a teacher's comments are crucial in establishing a teacher's response style. By analyzing their modes of commentary, teachers can get a good sense of how they are creating themselves on the page and how their comments are working toward the purposes they have in mind.

Consider, for example, the following sets of comments.[2] The first set, written by Robert C. S. Downs, responds to an eight-page short story handed in at the beginning of an intermediate fiction writing class: "The Growing Season" is about a father's attempt to come to terms with both the recent death of his wife and the growing up of his sixteen-year-old daughter. The following paragraphs capture well the style of the piece as a whole:

> *George and Lynn Talmont were eating supper, faint traces of sunlight shining through the beige kitchen curtains and falling across the worn wooden table, when the phone rang. It sounded loud in the silence. They had talked about Lynn and her schoolwork; Pierce Marlin, who had died recently in a freak accident; and the frost that had killed off George's first planting two weeks ago, March; and had then said nothing. The clink of silverware had filled the kitchen, maybe the occasional "pass the salt" or "where's the butter," but nothing else. A clock had chimed five, sunset was at 5:34, and nothing else needed to be said.*
>
> *And then the phone had rung.*
>
> *George and Lynn both paused, looking up over their raised spoons at each other. Neither moved. Then Lynn set her spoon down.*
>
> *"I'll get it." She scraped her chair on vinyl floor and brushed her hands through her cornsilk hair, so much like her mother's, then picked up the phone. "Oh, hello, Mark," she said, glanced up, then moved around the corner into the living room, where George couldn't hear her. She sounded guarded, but pleased.*

George set his fork down and stared at his plate. He suddenly didn't feel like eating. He began to pick up the plates, dumping them into the sink.

In the living room, he heard Lynn laugh, short and excited. She spoke into the phone again, a murmur, then swung around the corner and hung up, smiling. She was tense, as if she could barely contain herself, her thin sixteen-year-old arms crossed on her chest tightly, her hands squeezing her arms. She bit her lower lip, then stepped close and hugged him.

George laughed, his hands plunged deep in the soapy wash-water. Plates rattled together and water spilled out onto the counter. "Who was that on the phone?"

"It was Mark," she said, talking into his slate shirt. Then she let go and picked up the rest of the table. "He's asked me to the junior prom."

[Lynn goes for a ride on her horse. George is followed over the next hour or so, as he finishes the dishes, studies an old family picture, and goes through a box of momentos of his wife, Evelyn, removing the corsage she wore to her prom. The story ends with the following paragraphs.]

In the kitchen, he left the corsage on the table and began to mix up a cake. He watched Lynn return, placing Storm in the paddock, as the sun began to drift slowly behind the hills. He saw the first thin shoots of new corn rising in the fields.

When Lynn came into the kitchen, breathless and chill, he gave her the corsage and hugged her gently and firmly, and whispered into her soft yellow hair, "Evelyn," and let her go.

Here is Downs's response, a typewritten note attached to the writing:

I'd just like to say right out that the fears you've expressed about your creative abilities are wholly unfounded, or so I would surmise from this story. There's a real sense behind this effort of

what fiction truly is, and your grasp of character here, and of the feelings experienced, is mature and most moving. But you've got a couple of things to learn yet, all of them readily available. One is to set a scene better. You should have told us that George was having supper with his daughter, Lynn, and that outside were the pastures and the paddock, etc., so that when Lynn gets the idea to ride the horse we're prepared for it. Another thing is to learn not to withhold the information that George is going through the funeral flowers and other preserved things until the end of the scene. Doing that makes us guess at what they are, and that distracts our attention away from him and his feelings. Finally, the last short paragraph here sentimentalizes the story, something you don't want or need, and I suggest that you simply take it out. The astute reader, after all, knows precisely what the "first thin shoots of new corn" really are. Leave it underwritten. Lovely story.

Downs is upbeat, reassuring, and direct in this response, the only comments he makes on the story. He affirms the student's abilities as a writer and then moves matter-of-factly into three areas for improvement.

The second set of comments is written by Chase Twichell in response to the following short poem from a graduate poetry class:

Ties

From men's crotches leap frogs
flowers, stars and stripes, patterns of power
neon tubes from Adam's apple
to belt buckle, halving their bodies,
orphaning nipples.

In Autumn, goosebumps
raise stubble on men's cheeks
while in the hills
wolves' coats silkily thicken.

Wind blows down into cities
lifting ties like strips

of sky, forest, and river
over men's shoulders

where, in the still warm shadow
of the long hunted, wild and wildlife
reunite: salmon leap, quail soar, and foxes dart
in continually tightening circles,
coolly taking men by the throat.

Twichell writes several interlinear comments on the poem and a lengthy end note on a separate page. Consider how the style of these comments—especially the persona Twichell creates for herself on the page—compares with the style and persona in Downs's comments.

Marginal comments

[Stanza 1:] *Warm-up lines?*

[Stanza 2:] *The language here is much more interesting than that of the first stanza, which, though fancifully descriptive, doesn't really take us anywhere.*

[Stanzas 2–3:] *Good stanza break*

[Last five lines of Stanza 3:] *These lines are crucial, the place where the poem was to come to its meaning. But it's unclear to me what happens here, both literally and figuratively. Push beyond the current ending?*

Printed end note

This is a good example of a poem in which an idea is causing trouble. The poem's structure is still tied to its inception: the irony of men wearing ties with animals and "nature" on them, as if men were in harmony with nature rather than, in some ways, its enemy. The language of the poem is polished and economical, but what does it say, exactly? If you break it down into a rough paraphrase, it seems to say that animals are somehow strangling human beings, an assertion I'd say was truer in the reverse.

So what do you do when the poem you're trying to write seems to be at odds with the poem you're actually writing? The poem always wins, so give in to it! In "Ties," the second stanza has a

lovely simplicity about it. You link the wolves in the hills with the men in the cities in a way that's natural and inventive, and which raises the central issue of the poem: what really is our relation to wild animals? Are we enemies? Kin? Are they alien or deeply familiar in some way? The poem has barely begun to raise these interesting questions when you suddenly shut it down, putting a lid on just as the pot begins to boil. It's always worth identifying those places in a poem where you feel the impulse to stop, to end it, or to quickly move on to another passage. Sometimes it's simply that you hoped you were writing a short poem, and suddenly you have a blockbuster on your hands. More likely, you touched some nerve or other and didn't like the little jolt of anxiety it gave you. Those twinges are nearly always worth exploring.

I don't yet know what this poem wants to be about, and I suspect you haven't fully come to terms with it either. I don't think it's about the irony of ties around the necks of men, the human-animal reversal. My instincts tell me it's about something much more complex and difficult of access. I'd go back to the blank page on this one, temporarily leaving behind the lines you already have that please you. Come back to them later, after you have a big, wild, ambitious, confusing draft to fool with. Face the dark closet of the poem first, then find the language to make whatever you find there public.

Even on a first reading it is clear that Twichell's comments are markedly different from Downs's commentary. While Downs cuts to the chase, adopting the role of critic or master reader and directly pointing out the strengths and weaknesses in the writing, Twichell slows down in her response and deals fully with each point she makes. Assuming the roles of reader and teacher, she gives a reading of the poem and then, through it, offers a short lesson in writing. She closes by suggesting a way of returning to the poem for revision. But how do the two styles differ exactly? And how can we account for the differences? The key to both questions lies in the modes of commentary the two teachers employ. Downs writes eleven comments in his end note.[3] Six of these present evaluations of the writing, three of them positive, three negative:

I'd just like to say right out that the fears you've expressed about your creative abilities are wholly unfounded, or so I would surmise from this story.

There's a real sense behind this effort of what fiction truly is, and your grasp of character here, and of the feelings experienced, is mature and most moving.

Lovely story.

One [thing you've got to learn] is to set a scene better.

Another thing is to learn not to withhold the information that George is going through the funeral flowers and other preserved things until the end of the scene.

Finally, the last short paragraph here sentimentalizes the story, something you don't want or need . . .

In these comments Downs adopts a position well above the writer (the most typical stance taken by writing teachers) and makes detached judgments about the writing. The comments assert a definite control over the text, pointing out in no uncertain terms where it is working and where it needs to be improved. Such comments create the teacher in the role of critic and presumably would be part of a teaching style that is highly directive.

Instead of presenting these criticisms in isolation, however, Downs goes on to explain each one in a follow-up comment:

One [thing you've got to learn] is to set a scene better.

> *You should have told us that George was having supper with his daughter, Lynn, and that outside were the pastures and the paddock, etc., so that when Lynn gets the idea to ride the horse we're prepared for it.*

Another thing is to learn not to withhold the information that George is going through the funeral flowers and other preserved things until the end of the scene.

Doing that makes us guess at what they are, and that distracts our attention away from him and his feelings.

Finally, the last short paragraph here sentimentalizes the story, something you don't want or need . . .

The astute reader, after all, knows precisely what the "first thin shoots of new corn" really are.

These explanatory comments go back over the ground of the earlier evaluations and have the effect of tempering some of the directiveness of those primary comments. By getting more specific and explaining what he means, Downs gives his commentary the feel of helpfulness, not simple criticism. Notice how, without these follow-up comments, the response would be strongly critical, if not biting:

One [thing you've got to learn] is to set a scene better. Another thing is to learn not to withhold information until the end of the scene. Finally, the last short paragraph here sentimentalizes the story, something you don't want or need.

Other factors that help temper Downs's control in this response. He makes a relatively small number of comments. He does not attempt to cover all the areas and issues he might have addressed. He does not make line-by-line editings. And he works with the writer's meanings and intentions, not overlooking them in favor of his own agenda. But the major issues he does address in his response are cast in modes that assert his authority and control over the writing. His style is not authoritarian, but it is clearly authoritative and directive.

In her response to the poem "Ties," Twichell makes 26 comments—half of them in modes that assert her control as a responder, half that moderate her control. Like Downs, she balances her criticism with praise. But her evaluative comments form a significantly smaller portion of her response—and they are stated in ways that make her comments more interactive. She writes four praise comments and four straight criticisms of the poem:

The language here is much more interesting than that of the first stanza. [Stanza 2]

Good stanza break. [Stanzas 2–3]

The language of the poem is polished and economical . . . .

In "Ties," the second stanza has a lovely simplicity about it.

[The first stanza], though fancifully descriptive, doesn't really take us anywhere.

This is a good example of a poem in which an idea is causing trouble.

The poem has barely begun to raise these interesting questions when you suddenly shut it down, putting a lid on just as the pot begins to boil.

[Twichell disagrees with the poem's implicit claim that animals are somehow strangling human beings. She says it is "an assertion . . . truer in the reverse."]

These criticisms are not harshly stated. In fact, Twichell seems to go out of her way to be accommodating. She does not say the description in stanza 1 doesn't work; she says, after noting its fanciful quality, that it "doesn't really take us anywhere." She does not say that the poem doesn't work because the idea overwhelms the images; she says, "This is a good example of a poem in which an idea is causing trouble." She even uses a colorful image to express her dismay at the poem's brevity—the lid on the pot that is just beginning to boil—a device that gives her talk a casual tone and softens some of the weight of her judgment. In fact, throughout the comment she creates an informal voice that reaches out to the student, engaging her in a dialogue about the writing. Twichell writes two additional pieces of criticism, and on both occasions she goes out of her way again to soften her criticism by explicitly acknowledging the subjectivity of her assessment. Instead of saying, "The poem isn't clear," she says: "But it's unclear *to me* what happens here, both literally and figuratively." Instead of saying, "The poem is confusing and you seem confused," she says: "*I don't yet know* what this poem wants to be about, and *I suspect* you haven't fully come to terms with it, either." These comments are presented not as criticisms so much as difficulties she encounters as a reader. They acknowledge her subjectivity as a single reader instead of positioning her as an objective critic.

Twichell's style is made all the more distinguishable from Downs's commentary by what she does *beyond* presenting evaluations of the student's writing. Here, in capsule form, is Twichell's basic commentary:

> *This is a good example of a poem in which an idea is causing trouble. The language of the poem is polished and economical, but what does it say, exactly? I'd let go of the poem you want to write and try to get at the poem that is emerging here. In "Ties," the second stanza has a lovely simplicity about it. But the poem has barely begun to raise these interesting questions when you suddenly shut it down, putting a lid on just as the pot begins to boil. I don't yet know what this poem wants to be about, and I suspect you haven't fully come to terms with it, either. I'd go back to the blank page on this one, temporarily leaving behind the lines you already have that please you. Come back to them later, after you have a big, wild, ambitious, confusing draft to fool with.*

Below is the full text of her commentary, with the comments she makes beyond this basic response highlighted in bold type. What is she doing in these comments, and what impact do they have both on the way she comes across in the response and on the control she exerts over the writing?

> *This is a good example of a poem in which an idea is causing trouble.* ***The poem's structure is still tied to its inception: the irony of men wearing ties with animals and "nature" on them, as if men were in harmony with nature rather than, in some ways, its enemy.*** *The language of the poem is polished and economical, but what does it say, exactly?* ***If you break it down into a rough paraphrase, it seems to say that animals are somehow strangling human beings, an assertion I'd say was truer in the reverse.***
>
> *So what do you do when the poem you're trying to write seems to be at odds with the poem you're* actually *writing? The poem always wins, so give in to it! In "Ties," the second stanza has a lovely simplicity about it.* ***You link the wolves in the hills with the men in the cities in a way that's natural and***

inventive, and which raises the central issue of the poem: what really is our relation to wild animals? Are we enemies? Kin? Are they alien or deeply familiar in some way? The poem has barely begun to raise these interesting questions when you suddenly shut it down, putting a lid on just as the pot begins to boil. ***It's always worth identifying those places in a poem where you feel the impulse to stop, to end it, or to quickly move on to another passage. Sometimes it's simply that you hoped you were writing a short poem, and suddenly you have a blockbuster on your hands. More likely, you touched some nerve or other and didn't like the little jolt of anxiety it gave you. Those twinges are nearly always worth exploring.***

I don't yet know what this poem wants to be about, and I suspect you haven't fully come to terms with it, either. ***I don't think it's about the irony of ties around the necks of men, the human-animal reversal. My instincts tell me it's about something much more complex and difficult of access.*** *I'd go back to the blank page on this one, temporarily leaving behind the lines you already have that please you. Come back to them later, after you have a big, wild, ambitious, confusing draft to fool with.* ***Face the dark closet of the poem first, then find the language to make whatever you find there public.***

Twichell's evaluative comments and advice are only part of her overall response. Fully half of her comments go back over her primary comments, giving substance to and elaborating on them. These follow-up comments do not direct the student to take up particular revisions as much as they involve her in thinking about her choices as a writer and allow her to retain control over the writing. They are interactive rather than authoritative, and they take three different forms. In them, Twichell plays back her way of reading the student's text, in several *interpretive* comments:

If you break it down into a rough paraphrase, it seems to say that animals are somehow strangling human beings . . .

I don't think it's about the irony of ties around the necks of men, the human-animal reversal.

My instincts tell me it's about something much more complex and difficult of access.

She elaborates on her views with *explanatory* comments, going back over the ground of earlier comments, explaining them:

[This is a good example of a poem in which an idea is causing trouble.] The poem's structure is still tied to its inception: the irony of men wearing ties with animals and "nature" on them, as if men were in harmony with nature rather than, in some ways, its enemy.

[In "Ties," the second stanza has a lovely simplicity about it.] You link the wolves in the hills with the men in the cities in a way that's natural and inventive, and which raises the central issue of the poem: what really is our relation to wild animals? Are we enemies? Kin? Are they alien or deeply familiar in some way?

And she uses the poem as an occasion for presenting *brief lessons* on writing, moving away from simply trying to improve the text at hand and using it to teach certain principles and strategies of writing:

So what do you do when the poem you're trying to write seems to be at odds with the poem you're actually *writing? The poem always wins, so give in to it!*
It's always worth identifying those places in a poem where you feel the impulse to stop, to end it, or to quickly move on to another passage. Sometimes it's simply that you hoped you were writing a short poem, and suddenly you have a blockbuster on your hands. More likely, you touched some nerve or other and didn't like the little jolt of anxiety it gave you. Those twinges are nearly always worth exploring.

[I'd go back to the blank page on this one, temporarily leaving behind the lines you already have that please you. Come back to them later, after you have a big, wild, ambitious, confusing draft to fool with.] Face the dark closet of the poem first, then find the language to make whatever you find there public.

Together, these interpretations, explanations, and lessons involve the student in coming to terms with how the writing is working and how it may be made to work better. The comments offer help in place of simple judgments. They look beyond the text to the student behind the text, and, instead of calling for changes, try to engage the writer in the process of revision. In doing so, they blunt the edge of her critical comments and temper her control as a responder. Ultimately, Twichell's blend of authoritative comments and interactive comments creates her as a kind of facilitative responder, one who provides direction for the student without directing her about what to change or how to change it. By framing comments in certain ways—for example, as straight criticism or qualified evaluations, as requests for change or suggestions for revision, in greater or less detail—Downs and Twichell establish different implicit relationships with their students, assume varying degrees of control over student writing, and imply various classroom methods and goals.

Modes of Commentary

What I have been doing is distinguishing styles of commentary by doing a detailed, comment-by-comment analysis of the modes in Downs's and Twichell's responses. These modes delineate the ways that the form, voice, and content of individual comments give way to various images of the responder and invoke varying degrees of control over the student's writing. Is a given comment presented as an objective judgment? Is it a request to make some change that the teacher, in the role of a critic or expert reader, deems necessary? Is the comment framed as a qualified judgment or as a piece of advice, forms of response that temper the teacher's control over the writing? Is it a question? An interpretation? An explanation? The modes of commentary define the various ways that comments may be framed, based on the assumption that the way a teacher phrases her comments has an important impact on how those comments are to be taken by the student. The modes range from those that are highly authoritative and lay out a course for revision to those that seek to engage the student in discerning the relative strengths and weaknesses of a

piece of writing and deciding a course for revision on his own. The following rubric identifies six general modes of commentary, from the most directive to the least directive:

Six Modes of Commentary: Definitions and Examples

1. STRONGLY AUTHORITATIVE
(Corrective, Evaluative, Imperative)
The teacher makes a change in the writing, makes what is presented as an objective criticism, or requests a change.

- Awkward syntax.
- In the first six pages here there's nothing for the reader to concentrate on, no central tension.
- You need to clarify the idea.
- Give some thought to which of these stories you want to tell.

2. MODERATELY AUTHORITATIVE
(Qualified Evaluative, Advisory)
The teacher presents a negative evaluation of the writing but calls attention to the subjective nature of the response or suggests some change or course of action.

- Maybe pushing it a little.
- It's not clear to me what happens here.
- A little more on the emotional progression would help.
- You might think about the consistency of the narrative voice.

3. PRAISING
The teacher makes a positive judgment about the writing, whether it is presented objectively or acknowledges the subjectivity of the responder.

- Very fine ending.
- Interesting images.
- I like the openness of the poem.

4. QUESTIONING
The teacher uses a question to guide the student to make changes in the writing, to imply that something is wrong (closed questions), to invite the student to consider his ideas further, or to call attention to some issue or potential problem (open questions).

- What is there to the piece besides the public service message?
- But is this metaphor compatible with the other?
- Wouldn't the father intervene here?
- Why is she so transfixed by this woman?

5. READER RESPONSE
The teacher interprets the text or somehow highlights her way of reading the writing.

- It's a dark and wry little piece.
- I end up feeling pretty sorry for Mitch.
- I feel a little let down in the end.
- I was surprised a bit that the father used a gun to kill Charlotte.
- The opening line—"David is wearing my wig"—drew me in at once.

6. EXPLANATORY
The teacher either explains an earlier comment, points to some example or place in the writing, or offers a lesson. (Also includes hortatorical comments: see the last example.)

- [Maybe pushing it a little.] This can suggest a sorrow that doesn't quite fit the end.
- Titles help entice readers into reading and guide them as they go along.
- With some tightening and development, this will be very fine.

This spectrum of modes assumes that comments framed, for instance, as corrections or evaluations tend to exert greater control over the student's writing choices than, say, qualified evaluations and that imperative comments tend to exert greater control than advisory statements or questions, and so on. This is not to say that any given evaluative comment is necessarily more controlling than any piece of advice or any question. The comments from one category may shade into the gradations of control of another category, if they are phrased in a way that is uncharacteristically sharp or qualified. The spectrum suggests the *typical* degrees of control implied in various ways of framing comments, not a firm hierarchy. Neither do all comments in a given mode imply the same degree of control. The comment "This image is worn and ineffective" is more

controlling than "This image poses problems," though both of them are evaluations.[4]

Using this rubric for analyzing a teacher's modes of commentary, we can see that Downs writes seven of his eleven comments in authoritative modes and praise, making him rather directive, but he then goes on to temper some of this directiveness by framing four additional comments as explanations. If he wanted to make his commenting style less directive, he could write fewer evaluative comments and instead simply play back how he reads the text: what he understood it to be suggesting and where he had difficulty. We can see that Twichell balances her use of authoritative comments and praise, on the one hand, and nondirective modes, on the other. She distributes her commentary rather evenly across the six categories of modes: four strongly authoritative comments, four moderately authoritative comments, five positive evaluations, three questions, four reader-response comments, and five explanatory comments. In doing so, she provides a clear direction for revision yet leaves the student in control of the changes that are to be made. If she felt her commentary wasn't doing enough to provide direction to students, she could provide more advice about where and how the writer could add substance to the poem. She could even direct the student to take up a particular line of thought that she thinks would be particularly useful: say, pursuing the irony in men's believing that they have gotten nature under control even as it is clear that the very attempt to tame nature portends their own undoing. Of course, we might well be able, intuitively, to discern these differences in Downs's and Twichell's commenting styles. The proposed rubric simply offers a set of lenses for looking more systematically at our responses—and shaping our images as teachers more purposefully on the page.[5]

Using Modes to Distinguish Different Types of Commentary

To see how these modes of commentary can help distinguish among various response styles, let's take a look at the comments of two other responders—both of whom are, in

different ways, less directive than Twichell.[6] The first set of comments is made by Wendy Bishop on the following poem from an intermediate poetry class. (The two sets of brackets are part of Bishop's response to the poem.)

[Ghazal]

It's time for leaves to turn brown and for me to get serious
[When] the poster on the wall reads "Evil has many faces."

In the flickering shadows she's dyed and dressed to kill, stealing
My extravaganza of dreams and entwining with hardcore reality.

She makes a run for the money, to the Land of the Free, where nihilism is cool and
Working stiffs tell themselves they've made it without becoming jerks in the process.

They remember to keep our secrets – to never tell anybody anything
[Because] if they do they'll start missing everybody.

In another breath, they avoid women who love too much and men who love too little
She knows they have all forgotten to love just right.

She says Loosen Up, America, but she knows it
The chaos theory means even changes in nature have enormous consequences.

It's where being different is like running it up the flagpole
And thousand dollar suits always skirt the issue.

She knows it. Winning by losing. Climax and purgation. Decadence.
She's what is out and what is in, what is hot and what is not.

She's the Age of Innocence and the Age of Cynicism
She's the bandwagon of capitalism that overcomes the nature of things.

Bishop makes no marginal comments, just the following notes at the end of the poem:[7]

Wow – I like what's going on here. I don't need more but I do think some cutting and rearranging would be good. Stanza 3 seems too long just because I can imagine turning it into 1 and 1/2 or 2 ghazals so I have space to get the impact of rewording. I think a title would help me read it – titles help entice readers into reading and guide them as they go along. I get very interested in this "she." [ ] words here seem to add too much transition. I like the juxtaposition of statements when you leave them out. What do you think? I look forward to another version.

Bishop's response has some of the authoritative feel of Down's commentary, but her comments establish her less as a critic and more as a reader who offers casual, subjective reactions to the poem. She writes four authoritative comments, but all of them are cast in moderate forms – two qualified evaluations and two pieces of advice:

Stanza 3 seems *too long just because I can imagine turning it into 1 and 1/2 or 2 ghazals so I have space to get the impact of rewording.*

[The bracketed] words here seem *to add too much transition.*

I do think *some cutting and rearranging would be good.*

I think *a title would help me read it . . . [emphasis in each is mine]*

She presents two additional assessments of the poem in terms of her experiences as a reader, in reader-response comments:

I don't need more . . .

I get very interested in this "she."

Together these comments identify Bishop's concerns about the poem even as they show how the poem is acting on her as an individual reader. The comments are directive inasmuch as they offer a clear sense of direction for revising, but they do not dictate changes to be made. Bishop moderates her control further by writing five interactive comments: two comments that explain other comments, a question that is left for the

writer to consider, one comment in the form of a brief lesson, and one hortatorical comment:

> *[Stanza 3 seems too long] just because I can imagine turning it into 1 and 1/2 or 2 ghazals so I have space to get the impact of rewording.*
> *{[The bracketed] words here seem to add too much transition.} I like the juxtaposition of statements when you leave them out.*
> *What do you think?*
> *[T]itles help entice readers into reading and guide them as they go along.*
> *I look forward to another version.*

These comments call on the student to consider her choices and invite her to take responsibility for her own revision. In voice and form, then, Bishop's commentary is moderately directive.

Bishop's commentary, however, also reveals some of the complexities of control in teacher response. Although the modes of her comments indicate a moderately directive style, other choices she makes as a responder lead her to be significantly less directive than her modes alone suggest. Her comments illustrate how other factors—in this case, the number of comments, the focus of the comments, and the teacher's agenda—may influence the control, and the overall style, of a teacher's response. Bishop's comments have a limited scope. They deal only with local matters of arrangement and convention. She accepts the overall content of the poem as it stands and doesn't look for a fuller working out of the ideas on the page. She chooses instead to invoke what seems to be a process agenda where the principal aim is to give students experience and practice in various writing activities and where the writer is allowed, and even expected, to make her own decisions about the content of the writing. The issues she does take up—and those she refrains from taking up in her response—make her commentary only mildly directive.[8] If she pointed to the need for greater explicitness at key points in the poem ("What are these 'hardcore realities' you speak of in stanza 2?"), if she called on the student to reconsider certain choices ("Why do you want America to loosen up?"), or if she

asked the writer to clarify her purposes through the piece ("Is the center of the poem to be found in the fragmentation that results from the speaker's conflict between wanting to be an individual and feeling a need to conform?"), she would intervene more fully in the writing, provide greater direction, and become more directive and controlling—and, depending on her goals, perhaps more helpful—in her response. The comments she does make are moderately directive in mode, but her overall responding style, finally, is not directive or even facilitative, but relatively nondirective.

The next set of comments, made by Joe David Bellamy on a short story handed in for an upper-level fiction writing course, is less directive than Bishop's commentary both in the modes he employs and in the overall control he exerts over the student's writing. The response comes on a thirteen-page story that traces the inner life of Elaine, a mother of two and a secretary in a small insurance business, as she finishes a day's work and stays home the next day to have her stove repaired. After the repairman has left, as she considers how she might best give the rest of the day to herself, she is surprised to find Joe Beale, the quiet, enigmatic manager from the office, at her door. While the first two-thirds of the story focus on Elaine, the story, interestingly, suddenly shifts to Joe, who arrives in the middle of the day, drunk and expressionless, saying nothing about his motives for showing up unannounced.[9]

Bellamy's comments are short and direct. He makes only two comments in the margins of the text, writing "Good" next to a bit of dialogue and again next to an image he likes. He then hand-writes the following note at the end of the story:

> *This narrative gives the reader the comfortable feeling that he/she is in good hands. I can't say precisely why I remain so interested in your narrator's domestic rituals and her decision to avoid them on this particular day. But I guess it's because I know that everything will count and that something else is coming. What does come is certainly a surprise. I like the concise way you deal with it. However, I end up thinking I would like to know just a bit more about it. Has he made a death threat or an indecent proposal or just written a weird note or threatened to kill himself? Should I be able to figure it out? With just a bit*

more information, I think you've got yourself a fine story, already close to publishable quality – or already there.

There are eleven comments in the margins and end note. Most of the comments either play back Bellamy's understanding of the writing or offer praise. Notably, almost all of these comments are cast in terms of his experiences as a reader, not as a critic:

I can't say precisely why I remain so interested in your narrator's domestic rituals and her decision to avoid them on this particular day. But I guess it's because I know that everything will count and that something else is coming. What does come is certainly a surprise.

Only one of his comments offers some direction for revision, and it too is presented from Bellamy's perspective as a supportive reader: "However, I end up thinking I would like to know just a bit more about it." The comment is followed by two questions—one in which Bellamy wonders out loud what the character might have written in the note, a kind of interpretive comment meant to demonstrate his uncertainty about the ending, and the other a question posing a problem for the writer to consider: "Has he made a death threat or an indecent proposal or just written a weird note or threatened to kill himself? Should I be able to figure it out?" Both of the questions are open-ended, not directive, leaving the writer to address the matters on her own. In the only other instance where he gets even somewhat directive, Bellamy offers an indirect suggestion, presenting advice in what is ostensibly a hortatorical comment: "With just a bit more information, I think you've got yourself a fine story, already close to publishable quality—or already there."

The overall response is made even more nondirective by the brevity of the commentary and by the fact that Bellamy identifies only one issue for revision, the content of Joe's note to Karen. Everything else about the story, presumably, is all right for him as it is.[10] Most of Bellamy's comments are presented as reader-response comments, interpretive comments, or praise, and provide little information or direction about improving the

story. His response offers far less direction and is far less interactive than Twichell's commentary, and in many ways it is more hands off than Bishop's. Bellamy looks to offer support to the writer by indicating how he experiences the writing and what he likes about it; he leaves the writer to find whatever other changes she wants to make. Ultimately, his style is the most nondirective of the teachers whose responses we have studied here.

By doing such detailed comment-by-comment analyses on several sets of a teacher's responses, we can chart her typical practices and use them to describe her responding style. The following chart compiles the analyses of several sets of comments by each of the four teachers above, showing individually and comparatively their dominant modes of response.[11]

Analysis of the Four Teachers' Modes of Commentary
(in percentages)

	Downs	Twichell	Bishop	Bellamy	average
Strongly Authoritative (Corr-Eval-Imp)	41	12	5	10	17
Moderately Authoritative (Qual-Eval-Adv)	3	17	33	2	14
Praising	21	18	21	32	23
Questioning	6	12	8	10	9
Reader Response	0	16	14	27	15
Explanatory	28	24	19	17	22

Downs frames 41 percent of his comments in strongly authoritative modes, over three times as any other responder. He frames another 21 percent in praise. He frequently adds

brief comments to explain these primary comments, but he rarely uses questions and reader responses. From this information, we can draw a composite of Downs's style as a responder. He tends to adopt the role of critic and presents, straight up, his sense of what works and what doesn't work in a piece of writing. He makes little attempt to soften the impact of his criticism, to show how his judgments grow out of his reading of the writing, or to lead the writer to make her own choices about revision. He does not create himself so much in the role of critic, however, that he does not take the time to go back over the ground of his key comments and explain them.

From Twichell's composite we can see why she comes across as a facilitative responder. She makes a balanced use of the whole spectrum of responses. She writes almost half of her comments in authoritative modes, employing both strong and moderate evaluative comments and complementing her criticism with praise. She writes the other half of her comments in interactive modes, offering her reading of a poem in interpretive comments, providing brief explanations and lessons, and now and then presenting questions for the student to consider. Such a style provides a fair amount of direction even as it engages the writer in the issues of revision.

Bishop's use of qualified evaluations and advice, instead of the more authoritative forms of criticism and commands, largely explains why the comments she makes are less controlling than Downs's comments. Her frequent use of authoritative modes and praise also make her commentary, removed from the full context of her responses, seem more directive than Twichell's commentary. (On closer examination, as noted above, we can see how the brevity of Bishop's comments and her reluctance to engage in the overall content and shape of a student's poetry make her comments less directive than they appear to be in terms of her modes of commentary alone.)

Finally, the chart goes far toward explaining why Bellamy's style is the least directive in the group. He frames only 12 percent of his comments in modes that point to some problem in the writing or call directly for a change in the text. Almost 60 percent of his comments are framed as praise or reader responses, showing his interest in playing back his way

of reading the text and encouraging students about their writing. His style is made even more nondirective by his tendency to write short end notes and limit his responses to only one area for revision.

Modes of Commentary and Teaching Styles

Since different types of teacher commentary invoke different degrees of control, it is possible to link different styles of response with the three general approaches to teaching creative writing identified in Neubauer's collection, marked as they are by different degrees of teacher intervention. Downs's heavy use of evaluative comments and his rather controlling style suggests a directive approach to teaching writing, where the teacher lays out certain principles for students to follow and then looks to see how well those principles are put into practice. If his comments are any indication, Downs sees the writing class in terms that are similar to writers like Stanley Elkin who describe themselves as directive teachers. Elkin makes it clear that he pushes his agenda in class:

> So what I do with the undergraduates—and if I can get them to do this I feel I've done my job—I teach from situation. I try to get them to understand what the hell a situation is. As a matter of fact the first day of class, always, I tell them the story of Bartleby the Scrivener, which I think is a marvelous story, and is a marvelous story because of the tightness of the situation. And the only thing that can happen in that story is what happens in that story, because of the tightness of the situation. I hope I demonstrate this, and then I ask them to jot down a situation in seven minutes. They turn them in and invariably they're bad. But I can point out why they're bad and how they could be made good. If we change term A and make it term B, B to C. It's toward that end that I direct every class. I am, or try to be, a story doctor . . . . (Neubauer 102)

Bellamy's and Bishop's use of moderately authoritative modes, praise, and reader-response commentary is consistent

with the teachers in Neubauer's collection who describe themselves as nondirective. Bellamy seems content to allow students to establish their own standards for writing and develop their own strategies for revision. Bishop is directive about the revisions she chooses to point to, but she is more concerned with turning students back into their writing processes and leaving them in control over what they work on and what they strive for as writers. Both responders are reluctant to deal more fully with possible areas for improvement and to intervene in the overall content of student writing. They seem to put into practice a "laissez-faire approach" to writing instruction, the kind espoused by Richard Dillard, George Garrett, and Madison Smartt Bell. In such an approach, according to Dillard:

> the central effort is to encourage people to write the best they can the way they write. That is, not to impose a house style. . . . [N]o one is ever going to say, 'This is how I would have written this story.' Instead they're going to say, 'I think I understand what you're doing, and I think if you do this it will be better in terms of what you are trying to do. And a nice kind of mutual respect develops.' (Neubauer 76–77)

For these teachers, as for Bellamy, the responder's most important task is to give the student's work a supportive reading. As Bell explains, "After there's a text in hand, George [Garrett] or Richard [Dillard] or I will help you read it and understand it better and then you see perhaps how you can make it better" (Neubauer 4). This emphasis on playing back the text, understanding it "on its own terms," and leaving the writer to make his own revisions can also be seen in Bellamy's responses and, to a lesser extent, in Bishop's commentary.

Twichell's balanced use of authoritative and interactive modes clearly indicates that she favors a moderate approach to teaching writing. Her willingness to provide direction through direct and indirect criticisms and recommendations, on the one hand, and to engage the student in her own revisions by offering detailed interpretations, questions, and lessons, on the other, calls to mind the practices of the moderate teachers in

Neubauer's collection. Like Twichell, Clarence Major seems to look for what students are trying to do and help them achieve their own purposes. At the same time, he sees the role of the teacher "to sort of nudge the writers along in the right direction." He adds, "Not to say, 'Listen to this; don't listen to that,' but to say, 'Try this and see if it works.' I try to be as diplomatic as I possibly can" (Neubauer 184). Similarly, Rosellen Brown tries "not to impose too much from the outside but rather to lead people to understand what they're trying for and help them realize the means to achieve that end" (Neubauer 48). They look to guide but not control their students' work.

Whether consciously or not, the four teachers whose responses are the focus of this study bring certain teaching principles to their classrooms and, it seems safe to say, a complementary set of practices for reading and responding to their students' writing. Through their example, they suggest that teachers would do well to examine the ways they comment on student writing, link their responses to their individual styles and classroom goals, and find ways to make their responses fit the needs of their students.[12]

Clearly, there is not one best way to teach creative writing—or one best way to respond to students' writing. The best responding styles allow teachers to create themselves on the page in a way that fits in with and helps them pursue their classroom purposes. Using the modes of commentary as guides, we can analyze the kinds of comments we make on student writing and determine whether we are constructing the kind of persona we would like to project on the page. How much should we make comments that tell the writer what is working, what is not working, and how to make her writing better? How much should we allow the student to figure out her own course for revision or follow her own way as a writer? The modes of commentary offer teachers a repertoire of responding strategies from which they may develop their own style of response and make comments that more effectively put their intentions into practice. They remind us that our comments, first of all, are interpersonal exchanges with student writers, ways of talking with them and leading them back into their writing. They remind us how all comments implicitly take

place within an intricate web of conventions and institutional constraints, establish various relationships between teacher and student, and imply different goals. They offer a practical way for teachers to shape their comments in ways that will complement and enhance the larger classroom conversation and help them bring their instruction to bear on their students' development as writers.

NOTES

[1] Here is a listing of most of the remarks the teachers in Neubauer's collection make about responding to student writing. Notice the range of control that these teachers assert in their commentary. T. Coraghessan Boyle: "I go through every line, and it's got to be perfect. I'm very hard on them in that sense. There's none of this 'we love you, Joe, and we love your story.' That's useless to everybody, and I've been in workshops like that, everyone so supportive, loving each other. Great. But what's accomplished? Nothing. I'm very tough line-to-line. This is professional" (25); "I write the student a thing *this long* and correct every error" (23). Rosellen Brown: "I'm very honest and pretty critical. I'm not eager to be ingratiating, and I *may* say, 'put that story away.' I mean, I don't like to let a lot of futile work go by. But there are ways of doing it. You can say to someone, 'Look, I just don't think your story is going anywhere,' or, 'I think you're becoming preoccupied with something that's more trivial than you thought.' That's different from refusing to finish reading the story, or saying, 'This is an example of tripe'" (51). Richard Dillard: "With novelists turning in their drafts, what you almost have to do is resist the urge to fix anything too quickly. Let it grow for a while" (79); "Everyone has to learn to be more helpful, a little more patient, because sometimes someone is going to turn in something really bad and you just have to bring it along, find a nice way of saying, 'Back to the drawing board'" (82). Clarence Major: "I try to be as diplomatic as I possibly can. I've discovered that a lot of good writers can be bad critics. But I don't want to alienate anyone. I'm not a rude person anyway. It's really a difficult tightrope to walk, to keep everybody on the positive side and also direct them where I think they're going to benefit from what they're exposed to [in a workshop class]" (184); "I think that had I the opportunity of insistent and continuous critical feedback, I would have benefited greatly. I didn't have people around me who could read my work and give me some smart criticism. I only had honest friends whose judgment I trusted. That was the way it was done" (191). Eve Shelnutt: "When I alone comment on their stories, I can pressure my students to work harder than they can be pressured to work within a discussion format" (201).

[2] The responses are taken from a book-length study of response that Heather Sellers and I are currently working on, *Models of Response: How Distinguished Writers Respond to Students' Creative Writing*. The four pieces of student writing that are to come were written by the following writers: "The Growing Season" by Joshua Palmatier; "Ties" by Robbie McKay; "Divine Inspiration" by Christine Scott; and an untitled ghazal by Kimberly Carlisle.

[3] I am counting each statement that addresses a new focus or area of the writing, in a different mode, as a separate comment. For a detailed discussion of analyzing teacher

comments, see Richard Straub and Ronald F. Lunsford's *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1995).

[4] It is also important to note again that a teacher's control is more than just a matter of the modes she employs. The number of comments she makes, the focus and range of those comments, and the agenda she brings to her reading also influence teacher control. But her choice of modes is a dominant factor in the images she creates on the page and the control she assumes over the student's writing.

[5] Of course, written responses about specific pieces of student writing are only part of the picture: the comments on the page must be viewed in light of the larger conversation of the class, the teacher's classroom persona, and the relationship that has been established between teacher and student. Nevertheless, the images we create of ourselves on the page are important too; arguably, during the time that students read a teacher's comments and take in the images there, the comments *become* that teacher: they instantiate the teacher as a teacher reader and give substance to the positions and values she takes up in class.

[6] For a style that is remarkably similar to Twichell's, both in its balanced use of authoritative and interactive modes and in the moderate control it exerts over the student's writing, look at the following set of comments by Clint McCown, written on a two-page short-story exercise:

Marginal Comments

This line seems out of place in the paragraph. (qualified evaluation)
Nice. [re ideas] (praise)
Add phrasing. [re wording] (imperative)
Nice [re naming]. (praise)
Tense problem. (evaluation)
Why? (closed question)
Why now? (open question)
Has she gone even crazier? (explanatory)

Printed end note

1. I like the characters you establish and the relationship between them. (praise)
2. You cover a lot of ground in a single page. (explanatory)
3. There's a quirky charm to the piece that kept me engaged. (praise)
4. I do have a few concerns you might want to think about if you decide to expand this piece
5. . . . and I'm intrigued enough to think this is worth expanding. (hortatorical)
6. The source of the narrator's connection with Roslynn (emotionally) isn't clear. (evaluation)
7. Why is she so transfixed by this woman? (open question)
8. What personal connection or identification does she make . . . with her? (open question)
9. How is Roslynn's situation relevant or analogous to her own? (open question)
10. The end strikes a wrong note for me because it merely restates Roslynn's problem. (qualified evaluation)
11. Thus, the story has made little progress beyond what we learned in the opening paragraph. (explanatory)
12. The page works, I think, as an opening, (praise)
13. but so far the piece lacks movement; it remains stalled on the opening premise. (evaluation)
14. I think there's wonderful potential here. (hortatorical)

15. I'd have been willing to dwell longer in the scenario you've created. (positive reader-reaction)
16. By the way, watch your phrasing and sentence structure. You need to exercise tighter control over language and its conventions. (advisory)
17. Technical awkwardness can defeat any beautifully imagined work. (explanatory)

Twichell writes 13 authoritative comments and 13 interactive comments, McCown 13 authoritative comments and 11 interactive comments. Both of them balance their use of straight negative evaluations with their use of qualified evaluations and advice. Both make remarkably even use of praise, questions, and explanatory comments. They also focus one-third of their comments on local matters and two-thirds of their comments on large, conceptual matters. Their styles are as similar as one could expect from two different responders.

[7] On this occasion, Bishop is responding not only to the text but also to the student's own comments and questions about the poem, submitted by the writer with the draft: "Wendy—this is *very* rough. I was concerned about line length. Does it matter how long or short the lines are? Also—there are at least 2-3 stanzas/couplets I would like to add. I know I need to do some revising—but does it make too much sense or does it need to be more abstract?"

[8] Teachers can be directive and even authoritarian when they focus excessively on local matters of correctness and form and ignore the writer's content and purposes. The tradition of teacher response, in fact, has been dominated by such heavy-handed editorial commentary. Of course, teachers can also be directive and even authoritarian when they take control over the content of student writing, foisting their idealized version of the poem or story on the student's text. By the same token, however, they can go to the opposite extreme. They can distance themselves from the writing so much that they refrain from giving either direction or help to the writer and become detached. Bishop is not detached in her commentary here. But she does begin to move in that direction. She deals with local matters, in moderately directive modes, and leaves the larger matters of content alone, distancing herself from the content and shape of the poem and accepting more or less what the student has to say. Her reticence about engaging more fully with the content of the writing may suggest that she has other purposes in mind for her comments than leading the student to produce what some might see as a better subsequent draft.

[9] Here are the last two pages of the story, relating the exchange between Joe and Elaine in the house and then a phone call with her office friend Karen later that afternoon:

> *"Elaine." He said her name as though it was a statement, meaningful in and of itself. This is the way he'd said it earlier too, on the phone. He didn't look up. "It's the way she laughs that does it to me. Makes me want to cry. Sometimes, when I sit there and listen, I want to ask her to show me, you know, show me how she does it, laugh like that, like she really has something to laugh about. Something happy and really funny, something that seems light in her heart. Or maybe it's not in her heart at all, but in her soul." Elaine hadn't ever heard Joe talk so much. She couldn't think of anything to say back to him. She sat and kept on looking at him, at his shoulders and the top of his head, his fingers curled around the edges of his skull. She could hear him breathing. The clock on the stove, the one that was to be replaced, made a swishing noise as the big hand rubbed cross the little hand, reaching out to a new hour. Joe had a bald spot, a small perfect circle, gleaming and naked on the top of his head. Elaine had never noticed it before, that empty spot.*

He swung his head up towards Elaine, looking at her again with the same expressionless face he'd had on the front porch. His eyes were very dark blue, navy, the color of a sky full of starlight. And as she looked she saw the color change, fade just a little bit. Something washed out of them. A layer peeled away, revealing something deeper, pristine and untouched, newly exposed to the light. Joe seemed to see Elaine for the first time and see himself and where he was, sitting in Elaine's kitchen at her table. He stood up abruptly and said he'd go, and he opened the door and walked down the stairs, one step at a time. With his back to her he said he hoped her stove got fixed okay.

Elaine watched him walk down the street, straight along the center of the sidewalk. He walked like a man who was trying very hard to walk a straight line. Concentrating the way he might if he was trying to prove he was sober and all right to drive. Thinking with every step. She stayed watching, looking down the road after he'd gone around the corner. There was a park at the end of the road. Joe would be there by now if he kept walking in the same slow steady way. There would be some kids there too. They came every day from the preschool, bright spots of energy spread across the green square of grass.

Karen was laughing into the phone, hysterical. She was crying too and Elaine had a hard time understanding what she was saying. Something about how she never pays attention to what she's typing, but Joe left a letter and she read it, and she'd phoned the police but now she really felt like praying. It seemed like that was the only thing to do.

[10] Even when Bellamy writes responses that are less complimentary or even critical, he writes only a few comments, filters many of his comments through his experience as a reader, provides little direction for revision, and remains nondirective, as in the following two end notes:

1. Strong voice and dialogue. I end up feeling pretty sorry for poor Mitch, though. I don't think his actions constituted a punishable offense of the size that Missy seems to think. Why give her the last word and all the revenge when she is not the point-of-view character and Mitch doesn't really deserve it? I enjoyed the story quite a bit up to that point. Well, afterwards too, in spite of the injustice. Another point in Mitch's favor was that it was Missy that he really responded to at Super Sex. What a bum rap for Mitch! Overall, . . . this is direct, well-focused, and entertaining – your best piece of the semester.

2. This would have to be considered a tongue-in-cheek crime drama. It is a bit gimmicky, plot-driven, and occasionally contrived-seeming. But the reader has the impression that these aspects are, in fact, deliberate and intended to get a laugh. The consequence is that the whole [piece] is swiftly moving, dramatic, and entertaining; it is closer to Hollywood than it is to "art," but it does what it does rather well.

[11] Downs's analysis is based on a total of 29 comments he makes on three stories, all of them in typed end notes. Twichell's analysis is based on 74 comments she writes on three poems, in marginal comments and end notes. Bishop's portrait is based on 43 comments she makes on five poems. And Bellamy's portrait is based on his comments on five stories, where he makes a total of 47 comments. The four teachers as a group write 193 comments on 16 pieces of writing, an average of 12 comments per writing. The chart shows that each of the four sets of responses displayed in this essay is representative of these teachers' overall styles of response.

[12] There are some strategies that all teachers, regardless of their individual styles, would do well to put into practice in their commentary:

1) write out the comments in full statements, instead of cryptic words and phrases,

2) make minimal use of symbols, abbreviations, and technical terms, and use language that is specific to the student's text,
3) address a limited scope of concerns,
4) offer praise as well as criticism, and
5) make at least some use of nonauthoritative modes of commentary.

Most of these principles can be seen at work in the styles of the four teachers whose responses are examined here.

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