

# **“IT DOESN’T BOTHER ME, BUT SOMETIMES IT’S DISCOURAGING”: STUDENTS RESPOND TO TEACHERS’ WRITTEN RESPONSES**

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In using Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Ways of Reading* with my freshmen writers the past two years, I have found the excerpt from chapter two of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* the most beneficial of the text's many rich readings. The phrase "most beneficial" is used selfishly, for while this reading does not necessarily provoke the best papers or even the best discussions among my students, I think it enables students and teacher to confront issues that are fundamental in building the type of learning community that we all value in a writing course. Foremost among these issues is what Freire terms the "teacher-student contradiction," where teacher and student stand at opposite poles, the one all-knowing and the other waiting to be enlightened. To simplify Freire's sensitive and sophisticated discussion, the route

toward resolution of this contradiction is through communication, dialogue, which can begin only when the teacher is willing to learn from the student.

As all writing teachers know, building a trusting community takes time and effort, and there is no guarantee that every student will be convinced of the teacher's genuine interest in learning from the class. However, if we begin to approach all facets of our teaching as dialogic, we can exhibit an openness true to the spirit of Freirean teaching. For me, what is the most difficult and time-consuming aspect of teaching writing, responding to and grading student papers, is also the most challenging task to approach dialogically. Certainly students, and to varying degrees teachers, tend to look at the teacher's written response on the final draft as a sort of last judgment on the merit of a piece of writing. The teacher records some sort of grade or evaluative mark, and the student contemplates the grade and/or responses, rarely if ever perceiving these as part of an ongoing conversation, something that she, the writer, has a right and perhaps even an obligation to address in turn.

Much has been written on theories and methodologies of responding to student papers, and most of it is quite helpful.<sup>1</sup> But questions continue to nag us as we respond, questions such as whether a particular response is too directive or too vague. We wonder whether our written comments are responsible for a student writer's improvement or regression, if the student is interpreting our response as we intended, or if the student is reading them at all. In an attempt to address such questions, to continue my growth as a reader and respondent, and to encourage student-teacher dialogue, I went to the students.

Over the space of two years, I interviewed students in freshmen writing courses at two schools, New York University and Boston University's College of Basic Studies. Students were asked to choose two final drafts that I had graded and commented on, and to respond to my written responses. I chose my own students in order to involve them in my research, to reinforce that they could teach me. I also felt that talking to students from my class was a way of validating the dialogue, often conducted in writing, that takes place between student and teacher over a semester or year, since students at Boston University's College of Basic Studies have the same writing teacher for the entire year. I asked students to go over my comments and tell me what type of written responses

were most and least beneficial to them as writers, and to suggest alternative ways for a teacher to respond. Along the way, students were invited to raise other issues pertaining to the marking of student papers. Our conversations were tape recorded and transcribed. My sampling was relatively small: twenty students in all, most of them volunteers. But I solicited some of the interviews, in an attempt to ensure a range of writing competency among the interviewees. The students ranged from consistent A/B writers to those who more often received C or even D grades. Our issue, however, was not grades (unless one feels that grades cannot be separated from written responses), but rather how student writers perceive and respond to a teacher's written responses. My philosophy, which I was able to discuss with students during these conversations, is that the written response need not be a justification for a grade. I wanted the student writers to be able to regard my comments as exclusive of the grade and to be motivated by something other than the grade.

As I began conducting the interviews, the issues I thought might be addressed were the importance of or preference among students for margin-responses, only end-of-paper responses, or responses on a separate sheet; the effectiveness of reader-response questions for the writer; the most beneficial method of responding to mechanics; and how to respond in a way that might provoke revision, even on a paper with a terminal grade attached. This was my agenda, but the students raised some issues of their own: among them were the importance of consistent, rather than obligatory, positive responses; the need for clarity and specificity in comments; the appearance of the first page of a returned paper and the nature of the first written response; and the placement of comments in relation to paragraphs. The range and sophistication of the student responses suggest that we have much to learn from our students about responding to their writing and that the field remains wide open for research by writing teachers.

One particularly interesting issue was to what degree students appreciated comments in the margins of their papers (in addition to the end-of-paper comment), as opposed to a clean paper with only the end comment, or comments on a separate response sheet. Having used all three models over the past few years, I was interested to hear Maxine Hairston recently speak of renouncing marginal responses in favor of the separate response sheet, one that addresses various pre-determined categories such as depth

of critical thinking, focus, and organization. Part of the issue is avoiding the tendency to overmark the student paper, as well as urging students to focus on their entire paper rather than the localized comment when their papers are returned.

Almost unanimously, however, the students I interviewed claimed to prefer having comments in the margin of their papers. One student, who had received all three types of responses on papers during two semesters of freshmen writing, said:

I like having the response on the paper, and I like having it in the margin. The reader was reading, had a response, right there, and you get it. Having to go back and forth, looking at a response sheet, is a problem for me. It breaks your concentration. (student #12)

Other students echoed this feeling. When I pointed out that some writers had pinpointed a need for greater specificity in my responses, and that the margin often didn't afford room for that, he replied: "Well, end comments are a time for getting more specific." The main reason that most students cited for preferring comments in the margin was that this technique of responding seemed more dialogic, almost as if the writer could *hear* the reader responding. A few pointed out that if I urge them to annotate and ask questions in the margins of the essays we read for class, that I might want to similarly emulate a dialogue when I read their papers. Freire's essay had apparently taken hold.

A particularly strong writer, one who had at least one paper returned with no marginal comments, only an end response and a high grade, said:

I think you need the margin comments. I was surprised not to see any comments in the margin. Immediately I started thinking, 'Oh, I didn't make a single mistake.' I started thinking in terms of not doing anything wrong in the paper, which shouldn't be the focus. Too many comments might tear down the dignity of the writer and hurt the student's relationship with the teacher, but some comments are needed. I put a lot of work into my writing, and I expect feedback. (student #)

With the strong writers, it may be tempting to save time by responding only at the end of the paper, but more than one good writer told me, "There's no such thing as the perfect paper, so I would hope you always find something to comment on." (student #5)

What I sensed here was the element of feeling cheated—despite the high grade and positive response at the end of the paper—if other students received feedback within the margin while the stronger writers did not. It is also interesting that the student previously quoted claimed that the *absence* of comments in the margins made him focus on error, in a reverse sense: “I didn’t make a single mistake.” Most writing teachers are very aware of not marking too many errors, leaving more time to respond to a paper’s content. This writer’s comment may suggest that often the student’s natural inclination is to think in terms of error no matter what the nature of the teacher’s response. Another comment he made during the interview revealed that through the years he had been almost conditioned to expect response error: “Most professors I know go through the arduous task of circling every comma splice, and I think the writer just stops paying attention.” (student #3)

While nearly all students interviewed stressed that they wanted responses in the margin, at least one did see the purpose of the separate response sheet. When I noted that most of my marginal comments seemed to be on style, with the end comment addressing her paper’s content, she steered the conversation toward the issue of the response sheet.

I don’t mind, as long as there is the occasional question in the margin, related to the content and designed to make me think. On the rough drafts, I like when you use a reading response sheet, rather than writing on the paper, because it makes me go back and read through my paper to match your comments with the paper. That’s good for me because with a final draft, I often just look at the comments, without reviewing my paper. (student #)

This writer went to the heart of the issue with the response sheet: its attempt to urge the writer to review her paper as a complete piece of writing rather than to focus on local passages or sentence units. When I asked her why she particularly appreciated the response sheet for rough drafts, she astutely commented that with rough drafts she needed to remind herself to rethink the paper in its entirety. But we should remember that what worked for this student was termed a problem by a student quoted earlier, who claimed the response sheet hindered concentration. For me, the lesson is that there is no universally beneficial mode of response,

that different techniques will always work to a greater or lesser degree for individual students.

An issue related to marginal response is the use of what might be termed reader-response questions. Placed in the margin of student papers, these questions pertain solely to content and are designed to urge students to think about what they have written, to push their thoughts further. When I use such questions, particularly on rough drafts, I do not necessarily expect the writer to attempt to answer the question, but merely to think about whether considering it might help deepen, clarify, or even complicate the discussion. Most writing teachers I know who use these questions want to emulate the sort of dialogue one might have during a conference with a student, and they make their purpose clear to students at the outset of the course. If students are continually reminded of why questions are used and how they should not be read as directions, they can be useful not only in sparking revision, but also during peer review sessions.

A large majority of the students interviewed appreciated the use of questions as a way of encouraging reflection and motivating revision. The following response was typical: "When you ask a question it doesn't tell me what to do, but asks me to consider what I said, by rereading my own writing." (student #14) Another student echoed this feeling, but emphasized the importance of teacher accessibility to explain the question that might befuddle:

You ask a lot of questions about this paper, and questions deserve answers. They make me think, and often your questions are what cause me to come in and conference with you after I get the paper back. But if I couldn't conference with you, a direction might be better than a question. (student #12)

My response to this student was that while I was more than happy my questions motivated him to come in and discuss his paper, I also felt that they could not be replaced by what he termed "directions," because mine were merely questions—perhaps even irrelevant ones—that occurred to one reader. I suggested that he should feel free to ignore questions that did not seem pertinent. Not surprisingly, the student thought that I was joking. He was so used to taking every written comment to heart that he could not imagine dismissing any sort of teacher response.

This reality presents a paradox for the writing teacher who wants to utilize questions: while we want our responses to be read as sincere and meaningful, that very desire can cut against our wish for the student-writer not to interpret those responses as prescriptive. Again the suggestion is that students are geared toward thinking that teacher responses necessarily address error. Take this excerpt from another conference:

*Teacher:* But does the comment make you think? I didn't intend it to be prescriptive. You wrote: 'Man's instincts have been conditioned due to society.' My response was: 'Are you suggesting that instincts aren't really instincts at all, that if they've been "conditioned," that there's no longer the chance of reacting naturally or spontaneously?'

*Student:* But again, the comment made me think I had chosen my words wrongly. (student #6)

No matter how often we say it, I think we need to keep reminding our students that we don't intend our comments to be prescriptive or directive. In addition, when responding to papers, we have to remind ourselves to practice what we profess.

One thoughtful writer reminded me that queries should not be cryptic, that a mere "why" or "how" with a question mark attached is not enough, and is often perceived as an obligatory response. She felt that questions are a sound technique for encouraging revision, particularly on early drafts, but urged the teacher to make the questions as clear and specific as possible. This student also provided a wonderful insight on another benefit to posing questions.

Questions are also good because the next time we discuss a student's draft in class, I might respond in a similar way as you did here, by asking questions. (student #7)

Most writing teachers have encountered the difficulty of getting students to respond to content rather than mechanics and style during peer review. Here we have a student suggesting that our style of responding to student papers may be more effective in teaching the art of peer review than any verbal instruction we might give.

Some students felt that questions could also be useful in responding to mechanics problems. One writer who had the prob-

lem of stringing together short, choppy sentences pointed out that I had responded in two different ways on one of her papers. At one point I had written, "Your prose would read more smoothly if you could combine some of these short, choppy sentences;" at another point I wrote, "Read this aloud. Do you *hear* how mechanical these short sentences make your prose sound?" The student commented that the question was a preferable response, since reading her own writing to detect the problem was what she needed to practice in proofreading.

The statement just tells me that it's wrong, but the question asks me to consider *why* it's a problem. It's like later, when you say, 'Don't you think so many spelling errors might make your prose difficult to read?' That gets across that there's a *reason* that I should work on spelling, rather than just saying it's wrong, or bad spelling. (student #20).

Despite the wisdom of this student, writing teachers are aware that many students are puzzled as to why we don't "correct" their grammar and mechanics errors. Recently, when I told my current freshman writing class that all the evidence we have suggests that correcting errors on student papers does not teach them how to catch and correct these errors on their own, I was met with looks of disbelief. Last year during second semester with my classes I tried a check mark system, where checks at the top of the page, along with a brief description of the error, were used to indicate that there was an error of a certain kind on that page. Some students were critical of the system.

I think it would be better if the error was marked, at least once somewhere in the paper. Clearly, I didn't know there was an error, or else it would have been corrected. Now, I have to go back through the paper to try to find these errors, but I may not be certain these things are errors. Especially with wordiness, I need to have it marked. (student #2)

I attempted to explain to the student that having her "go back through the paper to try to find these errors" was exactly what I had in mind, that for me the issue was urging her to take accountability for her own paper, rather than depending on me to *show* her every error. After all, this was second semester, and she couldn't count on her writing teacher being there to edit her work



forever. This made sense to her, and she responded: "I think it's true that if you marked every fragment, I would be less likely to go back and read through the whole paper." I asked her how she reacted to papers I returned to her early in the first semester, when I did mark more of her errors, and she replied with a line that offers precious insight into what the writing teacher faces in terms of how students perceive our comments: "It doesn't bother me, but sometimes it's discouraging." Finally, we reached a compromise. Even though this was our second semester together, I agreed to mark, or at least bracket, the first error of each type in her paper, and then say something like: "There are other sentences in your paper with the same problem." Unfortunately, it was too late in the year to discern if this model of responding truly helped her to improve mechanics.

Most students interviewed reluctantly agreed that as the class progresses, it is desirable to have the teacher mark fewer mechanics errors, and instead simply let the student know the errors exist while finding some way of shifting the responsibility for correctness onto the writer.

I think maybe it's O.K. to rewrite my sentence early in the year, to suggest how I could do it, but then later on to make sure that I do it for myself. (student #18)

To my surprise, a number of students agreed that if a paper is submitted with so many mechanics problems that the teacher finds it difficult to read, the paper should be returned with the comment "This paper isn't ready to be handed in yet." As for the check mark system, students were evenly divided. The pattern was for writers with consistent and numerous mechanics problems to criticize the system, while better writers tended to see its virtues. Most writers suggested that the check marks at least cause them to review their entire paper and to proofread more carefully next time; some even claimed that they felt urged to sit down and work on the errors.

If I'm going to come in to talk with you about the paper, I go through and look those things over, so I can ask if I'm revising in an appropriate way. (student #18)

A very accomplished writer, quoted earlier as saying that lack of comments in the margin made him focus on error by thinking

in terms of “no mistakes,” contended that I wasn’t “picking up” his spelling errors because I wasn’t marking them. I called his attention to his assumption, and pointed out that I was more interested in responding to other issues, particularly ideas. While he claimed to want all the minor errors marked, our conversation revealed otherwise, suggesting that this expectation had more to do with his image of English teachers than his own desire for meticulous marking.

*Teacher:* But if the paper is overmarked, don’t you stop reading the comments after a while?

*Student:* Sort of. Or you start trying to evade the errors that were marked when you write your next paper.

*Teacher:* You said “trying to evade errors.” Does that inhibit you when you try to write that next paper?

*Student:* Yeah. I get mad, because I see errors in published work, and when the teacher expects 100% perfect grammar and punctuation from the student, I can’t buy it, because that doesn’t hold true with published writing. (student #3)

The student becomes teacher, reminding us of what Peter Elbow and others have said, that an over-awareness of correctness inhibits the ability to generate prose. After listening to this student-writer, a teacher should be ever more aware of not overdoing it with grammar and mechanics. Indeed most professional writers do have editors who proofread and make changes in their writing, so our expectations for students who must serve as their own editors should be realistic. While this student appeared to be asking his current writing teacher to mark even minor errors, what he was really saying is that he feels teachers who do so are wrong.

This insight was not the only one provided by student-writers during our interviews. Apart from the issues I was interested in, I tried to allow students to emphasize their own concerns about the way teachers respond. As mentioned earlier, many students wanted to be certain that I realized the importance of positive response. As one writer pointed out: “Positive reinforcement is important, even if the grade is not wonderful. Everyone puts time into their papers. There should be a balance in the comments.” (student #16) At the same time, I was also reminded that positive responses might often seem obligatory, especially those used to introduce an end comment which then goes on to point out a paper’s weaknesses. Methods students recommended to counter

that danger included placing the positive responses throughout the paper, as well as thoroughly explaining what is being praised and why. A refreshingly frank student critiqued an end comment which said in part, "a good paper overall, one with nice reflective thoughts."

To me, this isn't really positive, because it sounds like a typical teacher response. It's in between, wishy-washy, and doesn't urge me to go back to the paper. Of course they're 'nice reflective thoughts.' That's what a paper does, reflect. (student #12)

Praise has benefits other than affirmation, suggested another writer. She spoke of how the positive response can help legitimize the other written comments on the paper.

As a writer, positive response encourages you to go on, and it also makes it easier to pay attention to less positive comments. When you praise something that I thought I did well, then I take your other comments more seriously, too. (student #11)

This is hardly a new insight for teachers, but one that we do need reminding of as we respond to group after group of papers. One of our major concerns is whether our comments are read, and if so, are they heard or understood. One method of increasing our chances, according to this student, is to make sure that we acknowledge a writer's accomplishments.

Students called for clarity and specificity in all types of responses, not just positive ones. In one instance where a semicolon was used instead of a colon, the writer was pleased that I took time to explain in detail the various instances where a colon can be used. Another explained:

I appreciated how when you said, 'You need to be more specific on this point,' you went on to add 'because . . . .' Your adding three more sentences really explained to me why I needed to be more specific. (student #7)

Of course to truly explain what we're trying to say often requires more room than what is provided by the margin. In one conference a student observed that when my comments were placed at the end of paragraphs, they were longer and more detailed,

perhaps because there is often enough space for a few sentences of response between paragraphs. While I always read a paper through at least once before making any comment in writing, the student may not be aware of this. If a response is placed at the end of a paragraph, he suggested, it sends a message to the writer that he is being given the chance to develop and explain his thoughts before the teacher responds.

This writer seemed particularly attuned to psychological effects of responses on the writer. He pointed out that when a paper is returned, the look of the first page and the tone of the first written response are crucial. If the first page has written responses all over it, the writer is likely not to want to read them, he claimed. In addition, the tone of the first comment can go far in influencing the writer's openness toward the other responses on the paper. Again, while this makes perfect sense, having the fact reinforced by a student might help a teacher remember it the next time he responds to student papers.

Comments like this reaffirm that Freire's teaching pedagogy encourages a sensitive, open, dialogic relationship between teacher and student. Now, when I sit down to respond to a set of student papers, I often review the transcripts of these recorded conversations, as a way to remind myself of students' needs and expectations. I am certain that some of my responses miss the mark, but if they are motivated by an honest reader's reaction rather than my playing the role of teacher, I think the student-writer is more likely to attempt clarifying her meaning or intent by continuing the dialogue. As one student-writer put it when asked what sort of written response from the teacher is most beneficial:

The most honest opinion possible. A teacher who has an amiable relationship with a student, where there's mutual respect, may feel a need not to be severe in his commentary. But I want the teacher to disconnect himself from his relationship with the writer, and from his role as teacher, and give the most honest feedback possible. That's the best. (student #3)

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See particularly the following: Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977); C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, "Teacher Commentary on Student Writing: The State of the Art," *Freshman English News* 10, 2 (Fall 1981): 1-3; Robert E. Land, Jr. and Sandra Evans, "What Our Students Taught Us About Paper Marking," *English Journal* (February 1987): 113-116; W. U. McDonald, "The Revising Process and the Marking of Student Papers," *College Composition and Communication*, 24 (May 1978): 167-170; Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith, *The Practical Tutor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), particularly chapter seven; Michael Robertson, "'Is Anybody Listening?': Responding to Student Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, 37 (February 1986): 87-91; Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Nancy Sommers, "Responding to Student Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, 33 (May 1982): 148-56; Melanie Sperling and Sara Warshauer Freedman, "A Good Girl Writes Like a Good Girl: Written Responses to Student Writing," *Written Communication* 4 (1987): 343-69; Nina Ziv, "The Effect of Teacher Comments on the Writing of Four College Freshmen," in *New Directions in Composition Research*, ed. Richard Beach and Lillian Bridwell (New York: Guilford, 1984): 362-79.

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