MOTIVATING THROUGH RESPONDING

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Faced with a stack of final drafts, many of us composition teachers prefer to clean the oven, pay the utility bills, or groom the collie. We play games to help ourselves through the task—"Five more tonight and I deserve a brandy before bed." Many of us find the hours spent writing responses to final drafts to be the most time-consuming and most demanding mode of teaching. The fifteen to thirty minutes spent on one paper can mount to 23 to 45 hours for a teacher with a not unusual load of ninety students. These hours exhaust our heads and hearts because more than any task in the teaching process, this job demands that we, as Peter Elbow puts it, "embrace the contraries." (327). The teacher who has coached students through the process of writing by providing written or oral responses to earlier drafts and by arranging for peer critiquing finds herself facing the final draft as both student advocate and student evaluator. She wants her comments to give students a sense of themselves as able writers and capable revisors as well as a realistic sense of the amount of work it takes to write well. She is both nurturer and critic, responder and evaluator. Her unanswered questions abound: Do students even read these comments? Do they understand them? Do they see how these suggestions apply to their next paper? Are they feeling needlessly discouraged or unrealistically confident? Are they motivated by these comments to write more and better papers? What is the purpose of all this work, all these hours spent responding and evaluating? Surely it must be more than to satisfy the university registrar with a grade on a grade card. We teachers believe that our responses to papers teach and motivate our students, but few of us are ever sure to what extent we succeed. Through our experiences as tutors in our university's Writing Center and through years in the composition classroom, we were aware that teachers'

intentions are often unrealized, that written communication on papers is often misunderstood or misinterpreted by students.

Others in the field share our concern. In *Freshman English News*, Knoblauch and Brannon note, "The depressing trouble is, we have scarcely a shred of empirical evidence to show that students typically even comprehend our responses to their writing, let alone use them purposefully to modify their practice." (1) Elsewhere, (*Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*), they suggest that attitudinal adjustments in students may be more important than improved performance. They say that "a willingness to improve, to be serious about composing" are symptoms of growth that often occur *before* improved performance. In that case, it is important that the responses we make to our students encourage that "willingness to improve" (168).

Recognizing that only students themselves can really tell us how their teachers' responses affect their attitudes toward writing, we designed a questionnaire to test some of the assumptions we have heard and read about. We distributed our questionnaire to 197 freshman composition students at Michigan Technological University. In order to avoid the situation of students trying to respond as they thought teachers wished them to, all responses were anonymous and pertained to the class the student had been enrolled in the previous quarter, rather than their present class.

The students had been in the class of one of six instructors who used similar classroom practices, emphasizing draft work, editing, conferencing, and peer critiquing. In evaluating final papers, all instructors took revision into consideration, looking at how well their students used peer and teacher suggestions. They all addressed content as well as development and organization in their evaluations and called attention to stylistic and mechanical strengths and weaknesses. We selected students from these classes because we felt the instructors were representative of enlightened, process-based composition teaching. However, although the six instructors taught and responded similarly, their methods of grading differed.

One gave no grade but used an analytic check list to rank such areas as development, organization, style, and grammar on a scale from strong to weak (see Appendix). A second instructor also used an analytic scale but assigned a numerical value to items on the scale, giving each student a percentage grade. (Both

teachers who used scales also wrote marginal and summary comments.) The other four teachers used letter grades with marginal and summary comments. One of them included reference numbers to sections in the handbook for specific problems. Our questionnaire was designed, in part, as a measure of comparison among these different grading methods, especially to see how grades affected students' attitudes toward writing, revision, and teachers' suggestions.

We focused our survey on final draft responses with the belief that final draft response is essential even in a process-oriented class. Teachers must periodically assess work completed and communicate the assessment to the students. In addition, the pressure of academic schedules demands that students and teachers reach some sense of closure before moving on to further work.

The results of the survey confirm some of our long-held beliefs about the response/evaluation process, challenge others, and suggest possibilities for change. The suggestions we offer come from hearing our students confirm what recent research suggests. Although our student body is above average in both mathematical and verbal skills, their responses to our questions were surprisingly similar to the responses of a group of basic writers surveyed in 1978 by Lynch and Klemans. Our suggestions are (1) omit grades, (2) respond to final drafts as papers-in-progress, (3) balance praise with an equal amount of criticism, and (4) resist the impulse to appropriate student texts.

OMIT GRADES

Certainly one of the primary reasons for a teacher's reading a "final" draft is evaluation. We periodically record our assessment of student performance because at the end of the term the registrar's office demands an evaluation. The grades do not teach students, they only label them, but grades are so ingrained in the system that many students and teachers see them as motivators. For many teachers, grades are a way of showing students that we take our course seriously, that we uphold standards, that we expect them to work hard. Many students have come to see the grade as the ultimate motivation for writing the paper. As one student wrote, "We are all here to get a 4.0, and if we don't know how close we are to it, there isn't enough incentive to try for it."

When teachers grade papers, we change roles from responder to evaluator. Many of us abandon our "teacher-as-helper" role entirely at this point, reading the paper as if we had no knowledge of the student or process behind it. Rather than offering suggestions for improving the piece, we are likely to place a grade on it, offer some justification for it, and then try to soften the effect with some encouraging words. The following comment is typical of this style: "C+ Good choice of subject and interesting development but needs work on organization and coherence. Watch spelling!"

After studying the response of students to our survey, we suggest that if teachers want final draft response to teach and motivate, they should discontinue placing grades on papers and continue to offer suggestions for revision even if it is unlikely that students will have the time or option to revise. Our reasons follow.

In comparing the students in the classes that received letter grades with those who did not receive grades, we found much more hostility and closure in the graded groups. We looked at the open-ended question that asked, "Explain what you did when your personal narrative was returned." In the group that received a grade, one third of them mentioned it first. A typical response was, "I looked at the letter grade, at the comments, compared my grade with others in my group and let it go at that. I really never gave the paper much thought after that." Their primary concern seemed to be "What did I get?" rather than "What can I learn from this paper?". In general, the students who didn't receive a grade described a more careful review process. The following responses were typical:

First I looked at my analytic checklist; then I carefully read my paper with the comments. Then I looked at the checklist again and re-read the paper and comments.

I first looked at the checklist and comments on it. Then I compared it with the previous paper's list to see my improvement. Lastly I paged through the paper looking for problems indicated and mentally correcting them, and also noted any additional comments.

Students in the groups that did receive a grade expressed hostility more frequently:

> I looked at the "C," read the comments briefly, and then folded it and put it in my book. I was mad. I worked hard on the paper and the teacher gave me a "C."

> I was so disgusted with the grade that I didn't even look at it till the next day. Then I went to the professor to find out why I got what I got. She told me and I didn't agree with her.

The graded groups also told us where they "stuck" their papers, suggesting that out-of-sight was also out-of-mind. A negative sense of closure is evident in these comments:

> "Looked at the grade. Wasn't impressed. Looked at comments. Put it in my folder."

> "Read the comments and stuck it in my notebook."

This response confirmed our tutorial experience. In response to our inquiries about a paper, tutees would tell us they received a "C +" on a paper but frequently needed coaxing to find the paper and bring it in for discussion.

Both of us discontinued placing grades on papers after finding the survey response confirmed the language lab experience. We do, however, put some kind of mark in our grade books for our own records, and we do tell students we are willing to discuss grades with those who are anxious about them. But we are convinced that a paper marked with a letter or number grade may as well have gone to the dead letter office. A "marked" paper shuts off communication. James Britton, in recommending that evaluation "be kept as distinct as possible" from teaching, quotes a six-year-old who already recognizes the difference—"Teacher didn't want to *read* my story, he only wanted to *mark* it!" (197). Surely our college students also recognize the difference.

TREAT FINAL DRAFTS AS PAPERS IN PROGRESS

If not grades and justifying comments, what *do* we write on student papers? How do we encourage, instruct, motivate? The students in our survey strongly support the idea, widely proposed in composition research, that our responses are most beneficial when they address the text as work-in-progress. Even though many students will not be revising each paper, they are still interested in suggestions aimed toward revision. Brooke K. Horvath, in

discussing the work of Elaine Lees and Nancy Sommers, describes the difference between response as grade justification and response to a paper in progress:

> When an essay is treated as a finished product, comments will tend to judge, to describe, and to correct; but when an essay is treated as a draft to be revised, comments will tend to be suggestions, questions, reminders, and assignments; responses placing learning where it belongs—with the students. (138)

The students surveyed preferred to have even final drafts treated as papers to be revised. When asked whether they found comments on development, organization, style, or mechanics most helpful on final drafts, the greatest number of students chose development comments like "Give example" or "Explain how this is different from point in previous paragraph." Second most often chosen were comments on organization, such as "Transition needed," or "Paragraph lacks unity." Comments on mechanics were least often selected as helpful. Their response suggests that even at final draft stage, students are still interested in the major issues and still think in terms of revising rather than simply editing out errors.

BALANCE PRAISE WITH AN EQUAL AMOUNT OF CRITICISM

Our most surprising finding was the students' attitudes toward praise and criticism. Students expressed a strong preference for criticism and an ambivalence about praise. In one section of our survey, we gave students a list of seven types of comments and asked them to rank them in terms of their usefulness. Three of the comments were labeled *complimentary* and four of the comments were labeled *critical*. Seventy-one per cent of the students chose a critical comment as *most* useful even though these were comments on final drafts. Their response, although surprising, suggests that students recognize the instructional value of criticism and reconfirms that they are capable of seeing their last draft as a paper still in progress.

In responding to a question that asked "What types of comments make you want to improve?" students again expressed a

preference for criticism. The following table shows students' responses to the choices given:

What kinds of comments make you want to improve?

Students' Responses

	Always	Sometimes	Never
Specific compliments	63	114	7
Personal response to my subject	69	99	12
Suggestions for improving organization	109	72	3
Suggestions for improving my style	101	65	17
Attention called to my mechanical errors (sp., punc., etc.)	58	95	31

We suspected that by final draft stage students would be more interested in what they had done well. For years we had subscribed to Paul Diederich's advice in "In Praise of Praise:"

Find in each paper at least one thing, and preferably two or three things, that the student has done well, or better than before. Then, if you must, find one thing, and preferably not more than one thing, that he should try to improve on in his next paper. (59)

Our students prefer more criticism than Diederich suggests. They are looking for two or three things that they can *improve* in their next paper. Students are not telling us that they don't like praise, but that they have trouble seeing it as "useful." As one student wrote, "Positive comments are all right, but they don't help you improve the weak parts of your paper." Their response doesn't suggest that we be even more stingy with praise, but that we make it more specific. We can suggest, for example, why a particular word is effective rather than just labeling it "good" or how an effective strategy in one section of a paper may be used similarly in another section.

Their response does suggest that our students aren't as vulnerable as we thought they were. We have mistakenly assumed that students have a strong emotional stake in their writing and that their fragile egos would be incurably wounded by criticism. The response to one question on our survey challenged that assumption. We asked students "How do instructors' comments make you feel?" Their choice of response was:

No feeling in particular	141
Positive feeling	17
Negative feeling	15

The majority of students who answered the question were clearly telling us that feelings are not as closely connected to their writing as we had expected.

RESIST THE IMPULSE TO APPROPRIATE STUDENT TEXTS

There is a delicate line between dramatizing the presence of a reader and appropriating the student's text. Comments that describe a teacher's personal reactions, "I like this," or "This does not work for me," shift the focus away from the text onto the teacher. As Don Murray has pointed out, "The student can learn to appeal to that one reader and to satisfy that one reader. That's too easy" (190). Students, while learning to please that one reader, may not and should not be willing to trust that what one teacher likes or dislikes is also what another teacher or another audience will like or dislike. As Elaine Lees has pointed out, "Comments that stop at emoting, although they are in one sense about the paper, are more obviously about the teacher" (371).

Students seem to see personal response as a teacher appropriating the text. Knoblauch and Brannon have noted that two-way communication occurs only when teachers abandon their own hobbyhorses and pay attention to "what matters most to writers by starting with their meanings instead of teacherly priorities when responding to their writing" (119).

Student ambivalence about teachers' personal responses or suspicions about the idiosyncratic nature of response showed up in response to the final question on our survey which asked students to tell us how teachers could make their methods of marking papers more useful to them. Many students responded to this open-ended question in a way that was easy to categorize as the following table shows. (Note again the preference for criticism over praise.)

How Can We Make Our Method of Marking Papers More Useful to You?

No answer	16%
Expressed satisfaction	20%
More comments	11%
More critical comments	11%

More specific comments	8%
Conference to discuss paper	6%
Give examples	2%
Grade on improvement/effort	2%
More positive comments	2%

However, about 20% of the responses to this question were difficult to categorize. Because these students didn't seem to be answering our question, our first impulse was to dismiss them. Some of the answers made us chuckle; some made us feel hostile. But soon we realized there were too many to ignore. What we saw in these comments was an unwillingness on the part of students to grant the teacher authority over their texts. These students see teacher intervention in the writing process as an intrusion into their privacy. A sampling of these comments follows:

"I think writing should be one's own thoughts so how can someone put a grade on that?"

"At times the teacher could be a little less picky on the paper itself and a little more on the grammar."

"Read between the lines, figure out the point the author is making. If it makes sense and is logical it should be good."

"Take into account if the student has the approach and possibly gets lost in the writing. He/she shouldn't be graded down upon."

The basic writers in the Lynch and Klemans study had even more difficulty granting the teacher authority to comment on content. Lynch and Klemans noted that basic writers who found comments on content least useful used up more space to defend their position and quoted the following student response:

Least useful are comments on content. I feel that the content on my papers are not all that bad, but instructors tear up my ideas and illustration that I use with comments like "so what?" "Why do you feel this way?" and others of this sort. Some papers I feel I have done well on, I receive a poor mark in content and visa versa. The way instructors comment on papers, they could comment on any story and give it a poor mark. If a student handed in a story that we had to read, an instructor might make poor comments just because they (the instructor) doesn't like it. (170)

What concerns us here is the students' refusal or inability to recognize the teachers' role in the writing process. Students who are confused or hostile about the role of the teacher are, we believe, those who feel they have had their writing "taken over" by an instructor. There is a relationship that needs to be established, where the student recognizes the teacher as a writing facilitator with some expertise and the teacher recognizes the student as primary creator of the text. Our students need to understand that we are experienced writers who can help them, but we need to remember that our goal is to teach them to write well *without* us.

Writing is a very personal experience, and in that way it is different from many of the other studies in our students' curricula. Because of the personal nature of writing, attitudes are all-important. The relationship between student and instructor is precarious. We must learn to "embrace the contraries" of responder and evaluator in such a way that we foster our students' willingness to learn to write well.

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APPENDIX

Assignment II Narrative

Name_____
Date_____
Section Number_____
Group Number_____

	WEAK	AVERAGE	STRONG
FOCUS/"THE POINT" conflict/tension/change significance/"insight into the human heart"			
CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT (includes self-physical and biographical details)			
SCENIC DEVELOPMENT showing vs. telling re-creating mental images using sensory detail			
ORGANIZATION/TIME HANDLED brisk pace, appropriate amount of time, smoothness, strong start			
STYLE using specific words and variety of sentence, patterns effective dialogue, avoiding cliches repetition, wordiness			
GRAMMAR/PUNCTUATION			
SPELLING			