Improving Our Responses to Student Writing: A Process-Oriented Approach

“Awk!” “Frag.” “Unity?” “Coh.” Such are the response symbols on which composition instructors have traditionally been reared. Of course many writing teachers have come to reject such responses and the evaluative approach to commentary they bespeak, viewing them as useless (Knoblauch and Brannon, “Teacher Commentary” 285-88), if not downright harmful (Hartwell 9). In recent years a significant number of instructors have adopted more thoughtful, enlightened attitudes in commenting on student writing, in some cases not merely eschewing the strictly evaluative response, but going so far as to “deconstruct” drafts in order to perceive student intentions so that these may be “mapped onto later drafts” (Comprone). It is just such a “deconstructionist” approach that we would like to set forth in this essay, although our method, rather than consciously drawing on post-modernist literary theory, emphasizes the attitude of the error analyst in responding to writing (Shaughnessy; Kroll and Schafer; Bartholomae). We hope the essay will also constitute a step toward taxonomizing some of the more process-oriented responses to student writing.

A brief survey of recent literature on responding to student writing indicates that the dominant model for instructors’ comments is still the traditional evaluative response. In their first of several statements on the subject, for example, Knoblauch and Brannon reported that product-centered, judgmental responses have overwhelmingly remained the norm; they noted, “Our assumption has been that evaluating the product of composing is equivalent to intervening in the process” (“Teacher Commentary” 288). Even less flattering to our profession was Nancy Sommers’ “Responding to Student Writing” (148-56). In the responses of the instructors whose work she studied, Sommers found “hostility and meanness” (149). Moreover, she judged most comments to be confusing to students because they failed to differentiate between low-level and high-level textual problems. In a follow-up to their earlier article, Brannon and Knoblauch concluded that instructors tended in their responses to appropriate students’ texts, devaluing them in relation to some “Ideal Text” the instructor had in mind (“On Students’ Rights” 158-59). Knoblauch and Brannon’s most recent treatment of the subject discusses at length the type of “facilitative commentary” that might profitably replace the traditional evaluative response (Rhetorical Traditions 126-30). They appear to endorse Sommers’ belief that
“We need to develop an appropriate level of response for commenting on a first draft . . .” (155).

In our approach, instructors encourage student potential by identifying draft weaknesses and interpreting them in the light of recent findings about the composing process. Specifically, we propose that, by analogy to the work of those who practice error analysis, writing instructors routinely undertake close readings of student drafts in order to pinpoint rhetorical or structural problems that might signal legitimate intentions rather than simple failure or inadequacy. Although draft weaknesses are not technically “errors” in the same sense as syntactic or grammatical problems, we believe that the attitude involved in error analysis—the desire to comprehend the mental process that underlies some evidence of difficulty in creating a discourse—is appropriate in reading and responding to the writing of learners. We have recognized that many textual weaknesses represent useful stages in the writer’s composing process. Such an approach seems particularly valid in light of the work of process advocates and researchers, who tell us that normal composing often includes the production of incomplete or flawed drafts (Murray; Hairston 85-86). Our method, then, calls for instructors to approach draft difficulties as potential keys to understanding student writers’ intentions, and in some cases as keys to helping the writers better define their intentions in their own minds.

We have chosen three examples to illustrate our method and to provide the beginnings of a taxonomy for this kind of response. In addition, in our conclusion we briefly identify several more kinds of draft weaknesses and suggest appropriate responses. Each of the three main examples was selected because we believed it represented some issue that teachers of writing may face while responding to student drafts and because we were successful in guiding revision by first identifying a draft weakness and then interpreting it as resulting from a healthy difficulty in composing. In each case we explain what the initial problem was, how we interpreted it as signifying a potentially legitimate difficulty in composing, how we responded, and what happened in subsequent revisions.

Our first example begins with a paragraph written in a basic writing course, addressing the topic of “an unreasonable assignment made at school or work.” We can see that the student began with the intention of discussing unreasonable math assignments but then moved away from that idea:

I had a math teacher in junior high named Mr. Douglas that I thought gave a lot of homework. Maybe it was because I didn’t like math that much. I feel as you get older you start to realize that you have to have some sort of responsibility. In a way I think homework
is a form of responsibility. In my first year of high school I hardly ever did any homework and barely passed. In my junior year I did a little better because I started realizing that homework was important. At the end of my junior year I told myself that I was going to put homework first on my priority list as far as school work went. I never really had an unreasonable assignment made at school. I think I was blessed with some good teachers in my first 12 years of school.

If we evaluate this paragraph according to traditional standards, we must judge it as disorganized and uncertain in focus, particularly in relation to the assignment it was addressing. It is the type of writing that can all too easily lead a composition instructor to resort to the “mean-spirited” marginal comments that Nancy Sommers found so prevalent in her study. However, a closer look at the paragraph’s major flaws shows that the rambling organization and uncertain focus, while they make for a weak text, do appear to be leading the student to some kind of understanding about his school career. Starting with sentence three, we can detect a group of sentences that apparently leads the writer toward the realization that his attitude about assignments changed.

Sensing this possibility, the instructor decided not to concentrate on the paragraph’s weakness as a sign of failure, but rather as a potential reflection of a healthy difficulty in composing, as the messy residue that can accompany writing as discovery. In so doing, the instructor decided against urging the student to revise in order to create her own “Ideal Text”—one that would discuss “an unreasonable assignment made at school.” Instead, she responded by noting that the paragraph suggested the student had learned something important about assignments while in school, and that the writing seemed to be helping him to discover what it was he had learned.

The instructor’s response, then, was not a negative evaluation of the paragraph but an assurance to the student that the paragraph was indeed a good way to have begun his composing, though it was not necessarily a good finished product. Instead of strongly criticizing the paragraph, she conveyed a positive message about it and emphasized the new awareness the student had reached through the act of writing it. She concluded by asking the student to revise. The following is his second draft:

I guess I never really had an unreasonable assignment made at school, although sometimes they seemed unreasonable to me. In junior high school I did think my ninth-grade math teacher gave an awful lot of homework, but maybe it was because I didn’t like math that much and didn’t understand the importance of school work. Over the years I realized that homework is important and should be
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put high on the priority list as far as school goes. It's no coincidence that I started getting better grades once I changed my attitude. Now that I'm older I can look back and say none of my assignments was unreasonable. They helped teach me a sense of responsibility.

The second version is better organized and has a clearer focus. It could, of course, be improved further. However, it shows that the student, having been encouraged to view his original paragraph as a promising draft rather than a flawed text, has begun to understand how he can improve both his writing and his awareness of the process that effective writers often follow.

Our second example focuses on another common student text weakness, plot summary in the critical essay on literature. It can perhaps be most usefully understood as a manifestation of what Linda Flower and John Hayes call “writer-based” prose, prose which uses patterns borrowed, in the case of plot summary, “from a structure inherent in the material the writers examined” (459).

This student’s initial text was laden with sections in which she retold parts of Faulkner’s “The Bear,” adding few interpretive remarks and seemingly allowing the story to speak for itself. In this case the instructor’s initial response was more traditional. He had disparaged the paper as a poor critical essay that substituted plot summary for interpretation.

Bringing her marked paper with her to her conference, the student expressed her frustration with comments in the margin about the need to avoid summarizing the plot. That advice, she said, is what her English teachers had always given her, but she couldn’t understand how it was possible to do what they told her to. How, she asked, could she write any generalizations about the story when she didn’t know what they were until she worked through some of the important parts of the plot on paper? Her method had been to choose instinctively the events she felt to be important and to let her discussion of them lead her to an understanding of them. By writing down exactly what happened, in the order it happened, she clarified, even discovered, the meaning of the material. What she had not realized was that her weak “finished papers” might be legitimate discovery drafts. For her, the chief effect of the instructor’s plot-summary comment was to make her doubt the value of the way she was composing as much as the text she composed.

Reconsidering her paper, the instructor attempted to understand how its chief weakness might reflect some legitimate problem of composing. For this writer, it occurred to him, retelling the plot was apparently a necessary stage in invention. Thus she was perplexed by responses that criticized her own approach and enjoined her to “put generalizations first.” She apparently needed a response that initially valued her plot summarizing as a useful drafting technique, but
then recommended a revision in which the plot summary, having served its heuristic purpose, would be condensed or eliminated to create a more presentable finished paper.

In her revision she was in fact able to pare down her retelling of the story and to add more interpretive generalizations about the importance of the episodes she did discuss. The problem finally did not rest in her inability to interpret the story or to express herself. It rested in her inability to function well within the traditional single-submission, evaluative-response system, for given only one chance at drafting, she had an inability to distinguish between the written record of an invention technique and an acceptable finished text.

Writer-based prose such as plot summary may be a natural stage in the process of learning to write more effectively, but both students and instructors need to be aware of this before students can improve. Moreover, the nature of the instructor's response is often crucial in determining whether a student such as the one just discussed will come to recognize the distinction between a discovery draft and a completed paper.

Our final extended example is somewhat similar to the first one we discussed in that the student apparently failed to do the assignment requested of her. But the reasons in this instance were much different. In such a case we've found it's important for the instructor to tailor a response by first attempting to determine the writer's intentions. Whether the assignment is completed unsatisfactorily because of an honest misunderstanding, because of ineptitude, or because of chicanery, for instance, should make a big difference in the instructor's response to it. In our example the instructor learned that the student's first draft signified her attempt to negotiate a rhetorical situation complicated enough that she could not accomplish her aim without some further guidance.

The following paragraph is the introduction to a four-page draft in which the student apparently failed to respond adequately to the assignment her women's studies instructor had given her. She was to interview an older working woman and then write an essay analyzing the pressures that woman had faced during her career. The opening paragraph reflects the content of the draft:

Mrs. Thelma Morton Arnold has worked for Oberlin College for thirty years. In December of 1981, she was promoted from the position of dormitory custodian to that of supervisor of dorm custodians on the north end of campus. Last week, Mrs. Arnold talked with me about her life.

Essentially, the paper that followed was a straight biography of Mrs. Arnold, with no apparent analysis of any pressures she had encountered. Significantly, there were passages in the draft that could be construed as bearing on career
pressures, but the writer herself didn’t seem to recognize their relevance. The instructor noted these points in his initial response.

In conference, the student confided that she in fact knew her draft had evaded the issue. Apparently she had avoided explicitly analyzing the pressures in Mrs. Arnold’s career because she had promised to let Mrs. Arnold read the paper that would result from the interview. Mrs. Arnold was such a trusting, pleasant woman that the student could not bring herself to do what she regarded as a “cold, clinical analysis” of her life. She was so uncomfortable with this notion, in fact, that she was willing to accept a low grade in her women’s studies course to avoid displeasing Mrs. Arnold and embarrassing herself.

In this case the student had written the paper mainly to one audience—Mrs. Arnold—because she assumed that writing more to her other audience—her women’s studies instructor—would ruin the paper for Mrs. Arnold. Her composition instructor attempted to convince her that it was possible for her to juggle the expectations and demands of both audiences, to please both Mrs. Arnold and the women’s studies instructor. If she could see herself at some points in the role of the lab-coated clinician, but at other points in the role of, say, the main speaker at a testimonial dinner for Mrs. Arnold, she might be able to satisfy both audiences. Here is the opening paragraph of her revision:

Mrs. Thelma Morton Arnold has worked for Oberlin College for thirty years. In December of 1981, she was promoted from the position of dormitory custodian to that of supervisor of dorm custodians on the north end of campus. As a black working woman, she has faced discriminatory pressures in choosing her occupation, as well as in her attempts to earn promotions and equal pay. She has fought to overcome these pressures and gain just treatment for herself and others.

While the first two sentences of this paragraph are the same as in the earlier version, the third sentence of the earlier version—“Last week, Mrs. Arnold talked with me about her life”—has been replaced with two sentences, each of which represents a nod toward one of the two competing audiences. Sentence three of the new version is aimed at the instructor, for it encapsulates the analysis of pressures which is to come in the paper. Sentence four, on the other hand, prefigures the tone of praise which will also characterize the paper to come.

Having conferred with her composition instructor, the student was able to revise in such a way that her dilemma was solved. Her first draft represented her view of a problem which she was unsure of handling. In one sense her attempt reflected a genuine strength: She had chosen a single audience toward which to write, a legitimate intention underlying the weakness in her draft. To make the
most helpful response in this instance, the instructor needed to recognize another facet of the composing process, one also stressed by proponents of the new pedagogy: that writing does in fact occur in the context of a rhetorical situation.

In our examples we have examined three types of draft weaknesses: uncertainty of focus, plot summary in the critical essay, and lack of attention to some aspect of the assignment. In all cases, the weaknesses in the initial drafts resulted either from difficulties related to writing as a process of discovery, or from an inability to negotiate a particular rhetorical situation. In each instance we were able to respond most helpfully to our students by interpreting their difficulties as evidence of legitimate attempts to deal with the complexities of composing.

We want to suggest some other possible situations in which our approach would help students revise their work. For example, the student narrative, whether written about historical events for a history class or about personal experiences for a composition class, will often feature an overabundance of short, simple sentences and a lack of subordination and complicating modification. Rather than simply indicating a weak style or even an inability to interpret the material, such writing often stems from the student’s respect for reporting the verifiable facts related to a given event. In other words, some students produce flat, deadpan narratives, not because of limited verbal ability or inadequate analytic powers, but because they believe they are doing the right thing in producing what they consider to be a camera-copy of reality. Probably the most helpful response in such a case is to correct the student’s view of the purpose of such writing, to clarify what the audience’s demands and expectations really are, as opposed to what the student supposes them to be.

Similarly, consider the case of the student paper which is written in overblown generalities and which makes use of pompous academese. Typical responses to such writing urge the use of more concrete details and specific examples, which is certainly fine advice. Yet the most effective response may be the one which recognizes that the student’s writing has resulted from a belief that his or her audience values overblown generalities, and which then attempts to clarify the student’s picture of the audience.

The often artificial nature of the classroom setting may also create difficulties in students’ composing processes. We have encountered, for instance, reasonably diligent students whose concern for the form of an assignment may override any considerations of what they actually have to say. They then produce writing which employs the required “comparison-contrast” or “descriptive” modes, as the case may be, but which is woefully inadequate in terms of content and style. We have found that by discussing with students their motivations for choosing, for example, a given pattern of development, we can determine whether the
students made their selections after following sound invention strategies, or whether they selected on the basis of pressure to turn in papers which fit the required form. If the latter is true, then an effective revision may result after the student is counseled to follow better heuristics for invention.

Digressions are another common text weakness, the exploration of which may lead to an improved product. In our experience digressions sometimes signal that a writer’s thinking has moved in a potentially more interesting or valuable direction. Discussing with students the way in which writing can encourage thinking, and suggesting that perhaps that is why a particular digression occurred, may lead them to realize that they are just beginning the writing process for a paper they assumed was completed. In short, the apparent digression may actually represent a fruitful line of inquiry stimulated by the composing process itself. We have seen many cases where students have successfully revised their work by refocusing it on ideas initially thought to be “digressions.”

Finally, students who produce drafts with repetitive ideas couched in somewhat different terms have generally been criticized for producing texts weak in both structure and content. But is their repetition always the sign of a tenuous grasp of exposition and a paucity of ideas, or might it reflect a more positive attempt to try out different ways of saying something in an effort to achieve greater clarity or effect? Might not a repetitive discourse sometimes reflect a healthy attempt to achieve a fuller command of style and substance?

Certainly for some instructors this method of interpreting draft difficulties in order to understand the mental processes that gave rise to a writer’s problems is not completely new. Particularly those instructors who teach process-oriented courses featuring multiple drafts and revisions may already be reading and responding to drafts in ways similar to those we have recommended. Still, the findings of Sommers and Brannon and Knoblauch suggest that our profession as a whole is far from adopting such “facilitative” approaches to commentary. We believe that, with further attempts to identify and codify various categories of draft weaknesses matched with the kind of comments we have recommended above, our profession can make successful inroads against the domain of the evaluative response.

Works Cited


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