

Re-Visions

Rethinking Nancy Sommers's "Responding to Student Writing," 1982

***Editor's Note:** This is the second installment in the Re-Visions series—an occasional series for which I invite essays that reconsider important work previously published in the pages of CCC. The full text of Nancy Sommers's "Responding to Student Writing" (CCC, May 1982, 148–56) is available at www.inventio.us/cc. Nancy Sommers, Carol Rutz, and Howard Tinberg's commentaries follow excerpts from Sommers's 1982 essay, below.*

Excerpts from "Responding to Student Writing"

We do not know in any definitive way what constitutes thoughtful commentary or what effect, if any, our comments have on helping our students become more effective writers. (148)



In commenting on our students' writing, however, we have an additional pedagogical purpose. As teachers, we know that most students find it difficult to imagine a reader's response in advance, and to use such responses as a guide in composing. Thus, we comment on students' writing to demonstrate the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves,

because, ultimately, we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing. (148)



The first finding from our research on styles of commenting is that *teachers' comments can take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers' purpose in commenting*. The teacher appropriates the text from the student by confusing the student's purpose in writing the text with her own purpose in commenting. (149)



Moreover, the comments are worded in such a way that it is difficult for students to know what is the most important problem in the text and what problems are of lesser importance . . . The language of the comments makes it difficult for a student to sort out and decide what is most important and what is least important. (151)



The second finding from our study is that *most teachers' comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text*. These comments are not anchored in the particulars of the students' texts, but rather are a series of vague directives that are not text-specific. (152)



Instead of offering strategies, the teachers offer what is interpreted by students as rules for composing; the comments suggest to students that writing is just a matter of following the rules. (153)



The problem here is confusion of process and product; what one has to say about the process is different from what one has to say about the product. . . . Our comments need to offer students revision tasks of a different order of complexity and sophistication from the ones that they themselves identify, by forcing students back into the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning. (154)

Across the Drafts

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For the past thirty years, I have been a teacher of writing—work that I love, especially teaching first-year students. I have always been curious about the ways in which students read and interpret my comments—why they find some responses useful, others distracting, and how these comments work together with the lessons of the classroom. In 1982, I published an article in *CCC* on this very topic, but rereading this essay twenty-four years later, I feel the absence of any “real” students who, through voice, expertise, and years of being responded to, could offer their teachers valuable lessons. In returning to a topic that has captured my imagination for over a quarter of a century, I’m also returning to a topic that is part of our collective imagination, with so much scholarly attention paid to it that if you search “responding to student writing” on Google, you arrive in 2.7 seconds at the first of about 230,000 entries (Harvey 44).¹ Our collective interest in responding, I suspect, is deeply professional and *personal*. We feel a weighty responsibility when we respond to our students’ words, knowing that we, too, have received comments that have given us hope—and sometimes made us despair—in our abilities as writers. The words teachers scribbled on our papers, inscribed in memory, are often the same words we scribble in the margins or at the bottom of our own students’ pages—well-intended, most often written with great care, though sometimes carelessly, often caffeine-induced, usually late at night. These words, we hope, our students will take with them as they move from our class to the next, from one paper assignment to another, across the drafts. We don’t take this responsibility lightly. The work of entering into our students’ minds and composing humane, thoughtful, even inspiring responses is serious business. Given the enormous amount of time it takes to comment fairly upon a single paper, let alone twenty or thirty, we often wonder whether our students actually read our comments and what, if anything, they take from them.

As I look back across a quarter of a century of my own drafts, I remember that my first impulse when researching the topic of response was to imagine a hierarchy of effective and ineffective comments that could be isolated, identified, even memorized by new writing teachers. I quickly learned the limits of such research when I tried to separate comments from the context in which they were written—that is, the language established in the classroom. There is

a story behind each effective comment that animates it for a student, making it more than mere marks on a page. But in our professional literature about responding, we too often neglect the role of the student in this transaction, and the vital partnership between teacher and student, by focusing, almost exclusively, on the role of the teacher. We offer prescriptions to new teachers that imply a hierarchy of comments: offering praise, for instance, is more constructive than criticism; posing questions is better than issuing commands; and using green or blue ink is always preferable to red.

The new perspective I bring to this topic today comes from the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, which followed four hundred students for four years to see college writing through their eyes. With the leisurely perspective of time, and with the collection of over six hundred pounds of student writing, five hundred hours of taped interviews, and countless megabytes of survey data, my fellow researchers and I have witnessed the wide range of comments that students receive, not just in one course or from one teacher, but over four years and across the disciplines.² To see these comments through the eyes of college students is a kaleidoscopic experience: papers never returned; papers returned with bewildering hieroglyphics—dots, check marks, squiggly or straight lines; papers with responses that treat students like apprentice scholars, engaging with their ideas, seriously and thoughtfully. That students might benefit from a decoding ring to determine whether the check marks and squiggles are a good or bad thing will not surprise us. That students might find comments useful throughout the process—before and between drafts, not just at the end—will also not surprise us. What did surprise us, though, is the role feedback plays in the complex story of why some students prosper as college writers while others lag.³

It would be comforting to think that those fortunate students who receive the most useful comments make the greatest leaps in writing development. And it would be equally comforting to think we could link the lack of writing development to a student's scorecard of useful and useless comments. But in the matter of writing development, nothing is straightforward. The movement from first-year writing to senior, from novice to expert, if it happens at all, looks more like one step forward, two steps back, isolated progress within paragraphs, one compositional element mastered while other elements fall away. For some students, progress is uneven but continuous. Other students stall and become stuck writing the same kind of formulaic paper, again and again, no matter what assignment they receive. We wondered—would more or better comments have made a difference to these stalled writers? And what

relationship could we perceive between those who progressed as writers and the comments they received?

A quarter of a century ago, I wouldn't have known how to ask such questions, let alone answer them. At that point, I focused entirely upon comments written in first-year composition courses to prompt revisions. And I concluded, "We do not know in any definitive way what constitutes thoughtful commentary or what effect, if any, our comments have on helping our students become more effective writers" (148). In the Harvard Study, though, we looked at all comments students received over four years. Outside the first-year or upper-division writing courses, we learned, students rarely receive writing instruction and are rarely required to revise. Consequently, instructors' comments on final drafts take on an even greater role; they often become the only place for writing instruction. After following four hundred students for four years, I now challenge my earlier conclusion by arguing that feedback plays a leading role in undergraduate writing development when, but only when, students and teachers create a partnership through feedback—a transaction in which teachers engage with their students by treating them as apprentice scholars, offering honest critique paired with instruction. The role of the student in this exchange is to be open to an instructor's comments, reading and hearing their responses not as personal attacks or as isolated moments in a college writing career but, rather, as instructive and portable words to take with them to the next assignment, across the drafts.

Colleges have great expectations for their students. But if we understand how slow writing development is—that is, how long it takes to learn *how* to write a college paper, to have something to say to a reader who wants to hear it—we become rather humble about the enterprise of commenting. If our comments move students forward as writers, they do so because such comments resonate with some aspect of their writing that our students are already thinking about. As we learned from the students we followed, most comments, unfortunately, do not move students forward as writers because they underwhelm or overwhelm them, going unread and unused. As one student suggested, "Too often comments are written to the paper, not to the student." The underwhelming comments look a lot like check marks and squiggles, or papers returned with the most cryptic of comments like "B+; your style needs improvement; otherwise, a good treatment of the topic." The overwhelming comments assume too much on the part of a student, as if instructors imagine their job is to comment on every compositional element all at once, and as if

they believe that pointing out such errors will prevent students from ever making them again.

What emerged in every conversation we had with students about their college writing is the power of feedback, its absence or presence, to shape their writing experiences. As one student told me, “Without a reader, the whole process is diminished.” That students care deeply about the comments they receive was revealed in our survey of four hundred students, who were asked as juniors to offer one piece of advice to improve writing instruction at Harvard. Overwhelmingly—almost 90 percent—they responded: urge faculty to give more specific comments. And when we asked students each year to describe their best writing experiences, two overriding characteristics emerged: the opportunity to write about something that matters to the student, and the opportunity to engage with an instructor through feedback. What became clear from students’ testimonials is that feedback plays a much larger role than we might expect from mere words scribbled in the margins or at the end of a paper; feedback plays an important social role, especially in large lecture classes, to help students feel less anonymous and to give them a sense of academic belonging. As we learned from the students we followed, it isn’t just that without a reader “the whole process is diminished”; rather, it is *with* a thoughtful reader that the whole process is enriched, deepened, and inscribed in memory.

One might easily imagine that this partnership around feedback is so valuable to students because it affirms them as writers. And, yes, affirmation is often the end result, but a key finding is that constructive criticism, more than encouraging praise, often pushes students forward with their writing; constructive criticism more than praise reveals instructors’ investments in their students’ untapped potential. In the case of praise, the messages it contains—*you* belong at this college; you are *not* the admissions committee’s one mistake—are vitally important to propel first-year students forward with their writing and to inspire them to work harder. But over a college career, when such praise is not paired with constructive criticism, when it doesn’t involve a back-and-forth exchange between student and teacher, writer and reader, it has the opposite effect. Instead, undeserved praise neglects to offer students an incentive to improve, nor does it provide any alternative approaches for future papers. Students who repeatedly receive comments from their instructors such as “I have nothing to say about this well-written paper,” often stall as writers because they are never asked to do anything differently, never shown what skills they need to develop, nor are they engaged in a dialogue that challenges their own thinking.

The surprise was watching so many students make great leaps in their writing development after receiving what they identified as tough and honest assessment of their work. For one student, Ellery, the harsh critique he received as a junior was the only thing that could shake him from his glibness. His political science instructor wrote: "Ellery, this is supposed to be an essay, not a rush-hour radio talk show. What you write is a good piece of entertainment, but it is not the kind of writing that goes under the label of academic." Though blunt, this response was written not as a pronouncement, but in the context of a lengthy comment in which the instructor engaged with Ellery and his ideas. She goes on to model the kind of questions he might have asked and to model the way in which skeptical readers might look at the same evidence. Although tough in her assessment, Ellery's instructor treated him as a colleague, someone capable of great things, even if not yet achieved. This kind of intellectual partnership created through feedback showed Ellery that he was part of an academic community, made up of thinkers sorting out ideas, arguing with each other, and questioning each other's thinking. Criticism is not enough; like praise, it has to be paired with instruction. But in the call and response of feedback, when instructors model for their students a live, listening person, they offer students an image of a reader at the other end of the writing process, someone willing to listen and comment, critically yet constructively.

The success of this partnership has as much to do with students' willingness to hear and accept honest assessment of their work as it does with instructors' willingness to offer such responses. Ellery, for instance, received honest assessments of his writing his first and second years, but these assessments didn't help him become a stronger writer because he dismissed these responses as his instructors' idiosyncrasies. Or, in the case of Jackson, another student in our study, who, when asked as a junior how he might use his instructors' comments in future assignments, responded: "I don't think I can use these comments since each paper is a different assignment and a different kind of paper to work through." Jackson intuited the great challenge of undergraduate writing: to move from discipline to discipline, writing about Confucius in a philosophy course one semester, a Haydn piano sonata in a music course the next. But on another level, Jackson's observation makes clear that it will be difficult for him to apply even the best comments to future writing assignments since he believes that each essay assignment is defined by its topic, a discrete unit. In Jackson's view of writing, comments are tailored to each essay but also isolated from all other essays, and their purpose is, simply, to show students what they did wrong on a particular assignment.

We learn from Jackson's undergraduate writing career that part of becoming a good writer involves learning to receive criticism, both in understanding what an instructor intends and in the practical sense of knowing how to put that advice into effect in other courses and contexts. Jackson is correct that his essay on Confucius is a text onto itself, but part of Jackson's stasis as a writer stems from his belief that there is no continuity from one assignment to another. Because he sees no way to transport lessons from one paper to the next, he reads his instructors' comments as isolated moments in his college writing career, not as bridges between assignments. Even the best, most thoughtful comments will not move students like Jackson forward as writers.

But for any writer learning *how* to receive and accept critique, how to read comments not as judgment about one's limitations as a human being, or about one's failings as a writer, is not simple, especially for beginners who are quick to dismiss or deflect feedback. For first-year students, feedback is *monumental*, their most personal, most intimate and direct interaction with their college writing culture. And feedback comes, implicitly or explicitly, with messages of hope or despair about who they are and who they might become as students. While one student will respond, "My greatest reaction to all that red ink is gratitude," another first-year will shrug and say, "I guess all these comments mean he didn't really like my paper." Or, if a first-year student believes, as one told me, that the purpose of her composition course was to teach her how to "write quickly, adequately, and painlessly," we understand why such an attitude might prevent her from being open to comments that ask her to slow down, read texts closely and carefully, and, in a word, change. The differences among first-year students, we found, are less about ability and more about an openness and receptivity to comments, a way of seeing their writing experiences as something under their control, not random and outside of themselves. We found that one of the important predictors of undergraduate writing development is a first-year student's willingness to accept and benefit from feedback, to see it as instruction, not merely as judgment.

At its best, feedback comes out of an exchange in which instructors explain to their students what is expected of them as college writers, and students are open to learning about these expectations. By giving students a generalized sense of the expectations of academic writing, teaching *one* lesson at a time, and not overwhelming them by asking them to improve all aspects of their writing at once, instructors show their students how to do something differently the next time. The comments that students identify as

the most helpful are responses that straddle the present world of the paper at hand with a glance to the next paper, articulating one lesson for the future. Consider, for instance, the feedback Louisa, another student in our study, received in response to her weak thesis and introduction. Here is her instructor's comment: "Louisa, a technique that can work well for opening a paper is to begin with an intriguing detail, especially one you find difficult to account for. Beginning in this manner not only draws in your reader, but also forces you as a writer to grapple with a troubling aspect of the text, which can often be a key aspect that you had previously set aside. This, in turn, can focus your thesis and argument."

As a sophomore, Louisa had complained in an interview: "It's tough getting better as a writer when nobody is showing you how." But as a junior, she was fortunate to work with an instructor who didn't assume that she arrived in his class as a fully formed writer. Instead, the instructor treated Louisa as an apprentice, an evolving writer. The tone of his comment is phrased, respectfully, as a writing lesson on how to arrive at a thesis, and how to engage a reader with an arguable claim. By giving Louisa a generalized sense of what academic writing calls for—write about what you don't understand; those things you have dismissed might be more important than you first imagined; start with details because they engage readers—Louisa's instructor composes his comment to offer a bridge for her to cross to future writing assignments. We concluded that when students have been taken seriously as apprentice writers, when instructors model the role of an attentive reader, such comments function to anchor students in their academic lives and, ultimately, make a vast difference in their college writing.

Writing development is painstakingly slow because academic writing is not a mother tongue; its conventions require instruction and practice, years of imitation and experimentation in rehearsing other people's arguments before being able to articulate one's own. The conclusion from the Harvard Study is that feedback shapes the way students learn to write, but feedback alone, even the best feedback, doesn't move students forward as writers if they are not open to its instruction and critique, or if they don't understand how to use their instructors' comments as bridges to future writing assignments. For students to improve as writers, a number of factors are necessary: in addition to honest comments, they need plenty of opportunities to practice writing throughout their college careers, not merely in one course or in one year, and plenty of opportunities to receive writing instruction in and beyond the first year, especially instruction in one discipline's method.

Feedback is rooted in the partnership between student and teacher, and as in any relationship, it develops its own language and meaning. That this relationship provides students their most direct contact with their college writing culture seems simple enough. But what isn't simple is the profound influence the relationship created through feedback has, not only upon students' writing development, but also upon students' sense of themselves as thinkers. When students receive feedback telling them they have "great insights" that their instructors have "never seen the topic discussed this way before," or that there might be "a whole level of other questions" for them to imagine, students understand that their teachers view them as people "with things to say," thinkers capable of insight and asking other levels of questions. Or, when a student tells us that he will always hear his instructor's voice telling him to change his ideas, revise his thinking, it is not just the instructor's words the student hears and carries with him across the drafts; it is also the instructor's belief in the student as a thinker, someone capable of doing good work, even if as a first-year student he is not yet accomplishing it. When students respond to feedback as an invitation to contribute something of their own to an academic conversation, they do so because students imagine their instructors as readers waiting to learn from their contributions, not readers waiting to report what they've done wrong on a given paper.

I once read a definition of a "true gift" not just as a possession passed from giver to receiver but, rather, something that is kept in motion, moving back and forth between giver and receiver, and outward into the world. One college senior, reflecting on the role of feedback in his undergraduate writing career, told me about such a gift: "If I bumped into one of my professors twenty years from now, I would know what this professor thought of my work; our minds connected at this juncture of my paper, and I will always be indebted." The word *indebted* caught me off guard. Indebtedness, after all, carries with it a connotation of obligation, of being beholden. But indebtedness also carries with it a feeling of appreciation and gratitude, a legacy of connectedness. And indebtedness goes two ways, like any bridge. As teachers, we respond to our students' great insights because we are grateful for the insights they have given us. And in encouraging our students to imagine other levels of questions, we, too, are inspired to think more widely and deeply. Feedback doesn't need to be monumental, but its influence often is.

As our students teach us, their papers don't end when they turn them in for a grade, nor do our comments end when we write them. The partnership between writer and reader, between student and teacher, creates something

new—a collection of ideas that are larger than the paper itself, ideas milling around, moving forth into the world, across the drafts.

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Notes

1. A rich and abundant literature exists on the topic of responding to student writing. In particular, I would mention the important work of Chris Anson, Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch, Summer Smith, Richard Straub and Ronald Lunsford, and Kathleen Blake Yancey.

2. To learn more about the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, see <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos>. To date, scholars in our field—Marilyn Sternglass, Anne Herrington, Marcia Curtis, Lee Ann Carroll, and Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford and colleagues have demonstrated the value of longitudinal studies to provide a wider perspective than research focused upon one college course or one undergraduate year.

3. To bring the voices of undergraduates into a larger pedagogical discussion about responding, my colleague, Jane Rosenzweig, and I created a film, *Across the Drafts: Students and Teachers Talk about Feedback*. In this film, we follow one student, Jon Stona, and his writing teacher, Tom Jehn, as they move through the process of composing the last assignment in Jon's first-year writing course. The film also features a wide range of students, first-years through seniors, as well as their professors, speaking about the challenges and rewards of receiving and giving feedback. The film can be viewed on the Harvard Study Web site, <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos>; copies of the film can be obtained by writing to wrstudy@fas.harvard.edu.

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Recovering the Conversation: A Response to "Responding to Student Writing" via "Across the Drafts"

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Nancy Sommers and I agree on her assessment of her 1982 essay, "Responding to Student Writing"—that it reflects "the absence of any 'real' students." Even though Sommers and her colleagues conducted interviews of student writers in connection with their research, the thrust of the 1982 essay is textual criticism, using both the student text and teacher comments as the sites for analysis and critique. As Sommers points out, the "language established in the classroom" is missing—and, with it, the context for the relationship between student and teacher in a given classroom. Without that context, both the atmospherics of the classroom and the local meanings established in that climate vanish, leaving textual artifacts that reveal only part of the communicative story.

Sommers is not alone in paying insufficient attention to the classroom context in her early research on student writing. Other thoughtful studies by prestigious scholars have produced impressive analyses of teacher comments

without benefit of the assignment presented to the student—much less the understandings, overt and subtle, in operation among students and teacher in a writing class. Two examples will serve.

First, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford (“Teachers’ Rhetorical Comments”) used a sophisticated classification scheme to analyze teacher comments recorded on three thousand samples of student writing. Trained readers sorted out the teachers’ notations and classified them according to the rhetorical features of the commentary. The sample was originally collected from a larger inventory of 21,000 college-level papers to provide evidence for the top twenty errors committed by college students (“Frequency”). Because the earlier study did not require assignments or any input from students other than the text submitted to teachers, no contextual information was available beyond the general level of the course and the kind of institution where the course was taught. Therefore, the sample lacked context, but the three thousand papers chosen for the response study provided a wealth of student writing ornamented with marginalia, end comments, and grades from dozens of faculty members.

Connors and Lunsford’s study provides wonderful information about patterns of response, including the affective dimension of teacher commenting. Among the valuable contributions made by their study is the poignant reminder that a great deal of teacher commentary is produced under conditions of fatigue—not to mention frustration, impatience, and perhaps despair. Empathy with colleagues, however distant and anonymous, can inform advice for faculty development, teaching-assistant training, and writing center pedagogy. However, concomitant empathy for the student writer is more difficult to engender from textual evidence alone. One can assume that a student writer is making a good faith effort, but in the absence of the task assigned and the student’s testimony about her understanding of the assignment, abstract reader generosity proves nothing. Instead, the reader is left with the teacher’s traces on the student text but no sense of the rest of the story. What does a student make of her teacher’s advice? What writing behaviors change—or persist—in the face of teacher critique? What classroom situation gave rise to the student’s decisions about the text and the teacher’s words written in response? How can their dialogue be captured? Textual analysis goes only so far in addressing such questions.

Another example: Richard Straub and Ronald Lunsford conducted an ambitious study published in 1995 (*Twelve Readers Reading*) that examined teacher response in a more controlled research situation. Twelve well-known

composition scholar-teachers were recruited to respond to the same set of sample student essays. The students were anonymous, but the readers were given a brief description of the assignment for each paper, which was more information than was available in the Connors and Lunsford study. (Yes, there are two composition scholars named Lunsford doing excellent work on teacher response.) The object of Straub and Lunsford's study was to develop responder profiles for each scholar who participated, using a classification system and trained readers—similar to the methodology in the Connors and Lunsford study.

The study did indeed yield descriptive profiles of several response styles, which were developed and analyzed at length. However, once again, the student voices were missing. Furthermore, even with a specific set of student papers as a common factor among all twelve readers, the study imposed some unusual audience considerations on the reader-responders themselves. First, the twelve readers were aware of the artificial reading situation that contrasted with the response situation in their own teaching. As experienced researchers themselves, they had to be concerned about the evaluation of their responses by the study authors, who would be drawing conclusions from the comments readers produced. Second, all readers would have assumed that the study results would be published; consequently, their comments and the accompanying analysis of them would be made available to a much larger audience of professional peers. That second audience would be an extension of a third audience, the twelve readers themselves, who would be tempted to compare their individual responses with those of their colleagues. When we pause to remember that the typical audience for comments on a student text is the student writer, we can appreciate how this study tended to dislodge that writer from the center of the reader's concerns to the periphery. This study, like the Connors and Lunsford study, collected comments that were offered outside of a classroom relationship, where the student writer seldom shows teacher comments to anyone other than a roommate or writing center tutor. In contrast, the twelve readers could not ignore the prospect of public scrutiny of their comments that was built into the study itself.

Despite all of these potential audience distractions, readers tried to frame their responses as if they were addressing students they knew. Some even supplied a back story to construct a relationship with the student, positing the paper under review as one in a series of submissions during a term. That instinct toward creating a narrative context for the paper speaks to the awareness on the part of the twelve readers—like all who read and respond to student

writing—that real people write student papers, and real people read and comment on them. That insight speaks to Sommers' findings from her longitudinal study at Harvard.

Having done a modest study myself¹—one that involved classroom observations, interviews of students and teachers, plus the kind of textual analysis performed in the Connors and Lunsford and Straub and Lunsford studies—I admire the Harvard study's methodology and sheer scale. My small study followed students and teachers in four first-year writing courses at the University of Minnesota. I was allowed to observe their class sessions and collect drafts with written teacher comments from the students in each class who chose to participate. As in the two studies cited above, the teacher comments were counted and classified by a team of independent raters, and general tendencies for each teacher were noted, based on the comments alone. Unlike the other two studies, my study included interviews with teachers about their philosophy of response to student writing and what they intended to convey with specific comments. Using the same papers, I also conducted separate interviews with the student writers as a means of uncovering what the students understood they were to do in response to comments on their drafts.

The four instructors differed widely in their response habits, which was borne out by the textual analysis of their comments. For example, one instructor used coded references to a writing handbook for recurrent surface errors. Another instructor ignored surface error and provided a full page of single-spaced typed commentary for each student; perhaps half of the typed comments were based on macros that the teacher had composed in advance and customized for the student and topic at issue. A third instructor line-edited every draft, correcting surface error, requesting examples and clarification, and posing questions for the writer to consider. The fourth teacher wrote almost nothing on the student text, but she required each student to meet with her individually on every draft. Within the sample, each instructor was consistent in her or his approach to student drafts.

The interviews were also consistent, but they told a different story, one not captured through textual analysis. The teacher who coded surface errors explained that he was trying to help students learn how to use the handbook as a reliable reference. This tactic was understood by his students, one of whom sighed at the number of comma splices in her draft, but reasoned that it was better for her to look them up, consider examples, and make her own decisions rather than have the teacher correct her sentences. My observations of that classroom supported the interviews; the teacher who appeared to be a

comma cop on paper was a thoughtful, dedicated, and subtle writing coach for students who were rather insecure about their writing ability.

The other interviews provided equally illuminating insights into the dialogue between student and teacher that marginal comments only begin to reveal. I learned from my study that clear messages between teachers and students about *how drafts will be read* promote meaningful communication. The understanding about assignments and revision established in class—whatever that understanding was and however it was articulated—played out in the interviews. Even a student who was frustrated by repeated criticism and low grades acknowledged that the teacher’s expectations were never in doubt. That student admitted to scheduling work and other activities to avoid having to meet with the teacher outside of class, despite repeated invitations. The student’s knowing avoidance was undetectable from the draft itself, as was the teacher’s attempt to reach the student. This particular draft did not include the “See me” note often appended to a paper, and given the student’s reluctance to engage, a personal approach made sense—even if the conversation was thwarted.

My work on response to student writing, though far less exhaustive than the Harvard study, reveals a disconnect between the understanding operating in a classroom and the thoughtful assessment of teacher responses by trained readers. I am not surprised that the Harvard study speaks to the critical importance of including the classroom relationship between those who teach and assign writing and those who submit writing to their teachers, and I look forward to detailed analysis of the material collected by Sommers and her colleagues.

The real contribution of the 1982 essay and the reason for its pride of place in faculty development programs is Sommers’s direct call for integration of response and instruction: multiple drafts with dialogic, respectful exchanges between writer and reader. Her advice to writing teachers requires no apology on Sommers’s part. That she now bases her advice on testimony from students and teachers as well as the marks made on student texts affirms a stance that was prescient as well as sensible and humane.

Sommers’s new essay draws poignantly on the voices of Harvard students to argue for the classroom relationship as the vehicle for writing instruction. The bridge metaphor works perfectly with the dialogic assumption from 1982 to encourage teachers to retire their comma-cop badges and, instead, become reader-colleagues for their students in courses at all levels. Honest, focused critique addresses thinking and composition—just as we who write for schol-

arly venues value substantive writing advice from reviewers as well as editorial polishing prior to publication.

Note

1. Some of the findings are discussed in my chapter, “Marvelous Cartographers,” in Ed Nagelhout and Carol Rutz, *Classroom Spaces and Writing Instruction*.

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From “Self-Righteous Researcher” to “Fellow Teacher”

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In rereading her Braddock Award-winning essay, “Responding to Student Writing,” I couldn’t help but feel enormous gratitude to Nancy Sommers. In collaboration with colleagues Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, Sommers put response to student writing on our emerging discipline’s research agenda (as she had done for revision a few years earlier). She sent the clear and unequivocal message that attention to the writing process ought to include the rhetoric of our own response. By so doing, Sommers created a sub-specialty to which scholars such as Knoblauch, Brannon, Richard Straub, and Ronald Lunsford have contributed mightily. For her part, Sommers’ research offered two startling conclusions: first, that teachers’ comments, rather than helping students to clarify their meaning, shifted the focus from students’ intention to our sense of an ideal text; second, that those comments amounted to rubber stamping, giving little evidence of direct engagement with students’ ideas and intentions.

Sommers had, in effect, placed a mirror in front of nature. She had forced us to face uncomfortable truths. I, for one, had resorted often to such directive, context-free expressions such as “wordy” and “Be specific.” And—this was stunning to me—I had given confusing messages to my students: sweat the small stuff but make certain to “think more.” I had not considered creating a landscape for my commentary: that I needed to prioritize the concerns and have students do the same. Before I had ever set foot in a writing center, Sommers had instructed me in what has come to be writing center orthodoxy: Distinguish between higher- and later-order concerns.

A Snapshot from the 1990s

I was leading an intensive workshop on writing in the disciplines for community college faculty tutors in our college’s brand new multidisciplinary writing center. Among our readings: Sommers’ essay and Knoblauch and Brannon’s “Responding to Texts” from *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*, a significant work appearing some two years after Sommers’ essay. Knoblauch and Brannon built on Sommers’ work, providing powerful evidence of teachers’ rubber stamping commentary. I had expected immediate consensus that Sommers, Knoblauch, and Brannon had gotten it right, that their research had found the guilty culprit in these disinterested essays that students were producing: The enemy was us.

Imagine my surprise when several people around the table expressed anger—and even hurt—all directed in a personal way at Sommers and her research colleagues, but especially Sommers. One faculty member, from our English department, took special offense. I thought to myself: Were Sommers’ findings now outdated? Had we really gone beyond placing “awk” and “frag” next to “elaborate”? In fact, as I learned, a clear sense enveloped the room that Sommers had constructed a mere caricature of the classroom instructor. Who responds to student work in this way, my colleague from the English department observed? Who would treat students so cruelly and thoughtlessly? I had not anticipated these questions, nor the intensity of the response. Perhaps I should have. Perhaps I should have considered how serious a matter it is when any of us constructs not merely an Ideal Text but a reductive and categorical image of a classroom practitioner. I wonder, in retrospect, whether Sommers, and by extension, the discipline itself were so intent on establishing themselves—Sommers as a serious scholar and researcher and the discipline as a field engaged in Important Work—that they needed to separate themselves from the messy work of the writing classroom.



In “Across the Drafts,” a reconsideration of her earlier work, Sommers candidly acknowledges the somewhat reductive approach that she had taken in the Braddock essay. Rather than place all the responsibility on teacher commentary for writing improvement, she wisely sees now that students and teachers are engaged in a “partnership” that “has as much to do with students’ willingness to hear and accept honest assessment of their work as it does with instructors’ willingness to offer such responses.” Rather than see the utility of commentary as solely tied to the text of a particular essay, Sommers now sees that an important test of teacher commentary is its “portability” from one writing task to another. Even more profoundly, Sommers has learned, from the longitudinal study of student writing that she is leading at Harvard, that teacher commentary contributes not only to the development of writing abilities but also to students’ sense of “academic belonging.” This finding would seem to reinforce the conclusion reached in Richard Light’s study of the Harvard undergraduate experience: writing plays a huge role in shaping that experience.

But what’s most fascinating to me about Sommers’ reconsideration or revision of her work is the extent to which she has reconfigured the relationship between herself and her research subject. In the “Afterword” that accompanies a 1999 reissue of all the Braddock winning essays, Sommers concludes with this observation:

If I were to write “Responding to Student Writing: Part Two,” I would try to write less in the voice of a self-righteous researcher, pointing her finger at her fellow teachers, and more like a fellow teacher. . . . As I reread my 1983 essay, I feel the absence of any “real” students whose voice, expertise, and years of being responded to could offer valuable perspective, and the absence of any “real” teachers, other than the stereotypical composition teacher, who seems in my essay devoid of expertise. . . . (“Afterword” 130–31)

As if she were modeling the very same kind of recursion/revision that she asks of students, Sommers has often returned to her earlier work to offer a candid reassessment of that work and of herself as a scholar/researcher. In her second Braddock Award-winning essay, “Between the Drafts,” published a decade after “Responding,” Sommers reflects on a talk that she had given at conference session:

What strikes me now, in this paragraph from my own talk, is that fictionalized self I invented, that anemic researcher, who set herself apart from her most passionate convictions. In that paragraph, I am a distant, imponderable, impersonal voice . . . I speak in an inherited academic voice; it isn't mine. ("Between" 27)

"Words can be retracted," Sommers writes elsewhere in that same essay (26). Yes, indeed, they can be, but, as my quoting from these various sources suggests, retraction is necessarily accompanied by citation of the original work. A record is left that charts a career, a scholarly trajectory. Unlike her somewhat reductive notion of what is or isn't "mine" (it's all ours, or nothing is), Sommers provides a powerful model of a lifelong, scholarly project in revision. The Nancy Sommers that we have constructed through her years of writing is complex and richly nuanced.



I'd like to make the same claim about the discipline to which Sommers has contributed so much over the years—or perhaps I'm really issuing a challenge to the discipline. I prefer to think that composition is a field wholly committed to revisiting, even as it honors, cherished positions and foundational scholarship and research. I prefer to think as well that the field is committed to presenting multiple and, yes, authentic voices of students and teachers in its scholarly work. These are preferences, rather than sureties, because in its rush toward disciplinary prestige and legitimacy, the discipline, like a young, ambitious, and determined researcher, may be more intent on making a name in academe than fostering teaching and learning. When I entered the field of composition, as a still-young and tentative two-year college faculty member, I was stunned by the array of voices, by the vibrancy of the ideas circulating, and by the equally vibrant and passionate commitment to classroom instruction. At my first 4C's, I recall vividly hearing Bakhtin's voice (new, to me) amid the many voices of students (whose words were often quoted) and of teachers who were intent on examining the learning that did or did not occur in their classrooms. With Sommers, let's continue to view the work done in first-year composition as a fitting and rewarding academic task. Much good work has been done. Much more remains.

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