“Starting with What Is”: Exploring Response and Responsibility to Student Writing through Collaborative Inquiry

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This article examines student teachers’ investigations of issues related to writing pedagogy, response, and evaluation in an English methods course, including their use of descriptive review of student writing (Carini, 2001) to analyze adolescents’ work collaboratively. Beginning with an examination of prevailing understandings of writing assessment and common instructional models in schools, the article explores critical inquiry–based approaches. This research documents how collaborative investigations encouraged student teachers to explore meaning and intentionality in student writing and to regard students as authors with intentionality and purpose. Findings substantiate adolescents’ and student teachers’ intellectual and experiential resources, suggesting how these can be a foundation for expanding conceptions and practices related to writing pedagogy, assessment, inquiry-based teaching, and teacher education.

As part of an inquiry into responding to student writing in an English methods course, Jared, a student teacher, offered a close reading of one sentence from an 11th grader’s autobiography:

[Reading] “Like I was forced to grow up and act mature before I was ready.”
It’s really interesting: several of the words [HB] used here—“forced,” “grow,” “act,” “mature”—describe a very intricate relationship with the way he views his past: “made to,” “change,” “pretend,” “be.” That made me think of the other part of identity, his defining his identity in the next sentence we keep talking about: “Now I want to be me.” But to me, in terms of what he’s saying in this last sentence, that’s really a question: “Now I want to be me”—but what is “me,” really? What is “me,” this thing that I’ve been forced to be?

Through analysis of language, building on a collaborative inquiry, Jared endeavored to better understand a student writer and his work. Jared explored the author’s linguistic choices in relation to his broader concerns,
including issues of identity, and the deeper meaning he was trying to communicate through his writing. He responded to the author’s intentionality and capacities as a writer, using close reading as a means of surfacing questions and criteria for understanding and assessing writing (Carini, 2001).

In contrast, the following comments were elicited from a teacher using a standardized writing assessment to evaluate students’ “letters to the editor” (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999):

There is no clear opinion stated and no development of an argument. The details are not clear, and the ideas are not organized. There are several major errors in language conventions. (p. 156)

This response synthesizes evaluative criteria from a prefabricated rubric. As external forms of assessment influenced by standardized testing increasingly shape writing instruction and evaluation, comments like these become commonplace (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Hillocks, 2002; Smagorinsky, 2006; Wiley, 2000). Following a framework that orients response toward structural qualities and supporting details, interpretations are stated as definitive evaluations. The response is framed in terms of deficits—what the writer and the writing is not or does not do well—rather than aptitude or potential. As in Jared’s observations, these comments indicate a concern with surface features of the writing. In this case, the focus is not on the efficacy or intentionality of the writer’s language choices, but on errors of convention, orthography, and organization. The comments are not contextualized. There is no mention of an author or her intended meaning. There are no questions.

These examples present two different responses to student writers, grounded in divergent approaches or discourses of writing assessment (Ivanič, 2004). The second response exemplifies one form that writing pedagogy and assessment in secondary English has taken, emphasizing efficiency and consistency through the use of standardized rubrics (Kohn, 2006; Mabry, 1999). Jared’s observations illustrate a more situated practice-based approach, rooted in an analytic investigation of issues in student work intended to surface understandings and raise questions (Himley & Carini, 2000). What implications do these forms of response suggest for teaching and teacher education related to writing pedagogy and assessment?

There are, to paraphrase Elizabeth Ellsworth (1996), no innocent readings of student work. Responses to student writing are always interested, always in the service of something (or someone). Teachers’ evaluations can “be more or less useful, practical, ‘just,’ or effective, given what a particular reading is for” (Ellsworth, 1996, p. 140). In Ellsworth’s terms, the difference between these two responses to student work may be in how they represent
divergent interests, different interpretations of what the teaching of writing and the process of reading student work is and should be for. How might teacher educators encourage student teachers to become more interested—and more aware of their interests—as readers of student writing? What are the implications of teacher education practices that attempt to encourage student teachers to notice and advance adolescents’ capabilities—rather than their deficiencies—as writers? What happens when student teachers shift their responses from fidelity to assessment instruments toward increased attentiveness and responsibility to student writers?

In this article, I address these questions through an exploration of student teachers’ inquiries into issues related to reading and responding to student writing. I begin by discussing trends in the field shaping writing assessment. Then, drawing on group discourse and inquiry projects from an English methods course, I look at how a community of student teachers used a collaborative inquiry process called descriptive review of student writing (Carini, 2001; Strieb, Carini, Kanevsky, & Wice, 2011) to develop an inquiry stance toward student work and their own pedagogical responses (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, 2009). These student teachers used this process as a means of raising questions—about evaluation, adolescent authors, and themselves as readers of student work. They critically negotiated intricacies of student work and challenges of response socially, bringing them into dialogue and, at times, disagreement. I argue that inquiry-based processes such as descriptive review of student writing can be a productive means of preparing student teachers to make sense of the complexities of teaching writing they encounter in classrooms. This entailed learning to approach student work with more “gentleness and generosity” (Kanevsky, personal communication, 2005), becoming attentive to adolescent authors’ strengths rather than deficits: starting with what their writing is, rather than what it isn’t. I end with implications for how teachers, student teachers, and teacher educators can, against the grain of increased pressure for accountability and standardization, develop responses to writing that are more responsible to adolescent authors and to the promising qualities of their work.

What Counts as Writing and Response?

Some researchers in English education have constructed the problem of teaching writing as one of tensions between insights gained from research and practice, among the ways that writing pedagogy is constructed in curriculum and policy, how the teaching of writing is attended to in teacher education, and how writing is taught in schools (e.g., Hillocks, 2006). As in other areas of the field, high-stakes testing and accountability are increas-
In his review of state writing assessments, Hillocks (2002) describes how forms and evaluation of test-based writing have had pernicious effects on the quality of writing pedagogy and assessment and, by extension, the quality of student writing and learning. In his study Hillocks presents numerous examples of how writing instruction has been affected by standardized assessments, reducing process approaches (Atwell, 1998; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1972) to constructed response (Livingston, 2009), formulas (Wiley, 2000), and five-paragraph themes bemoaned by teachers and teacher educators (Emig, 1971; Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thompson, & Fry, 2005). Similarly, Wiley (2000) describes how formulaic writing programs like the “Jane Schaffer Method” (Schaffer, 1995) have taken hold in schools, precisely because they claim to replicate results found in high-scoring essays on high-stakes exams. Pressures to perform on benchmarks have superseded encouraging students to write for other interests. As Applebee and Langer (2006) note, the increasing prevalence of high-stakes tests is in many cases “shifting attention away from a broad program of writing toward a much narrower focus on how best to answer particular types of test questions” (p. 3). In their most recent analysis of writing instruction in middle schools and high schools, Applebee and Langer (2011) note that nearly 10 years after Hillocks’s study of state writing assessment, what counts on high-stakes exams continues to significantly influence writing curriculum and instruction.

Paradoxically, instrumental approaches are often referred to as “process oriented.” While this phrase implies grounding in writing process pedagogies (Atwell, 1998; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1972), as Applebee and Langer (2006) state, its meaning is unclear and may “mask considerable variation in actual patterns of instruction” (p. 2). Gordon (1996) notes that although schools and districts commonly claim to teach writing using “writing process” they often mean different things by it, sometimes using the term to “represent some monolith . . . packaged into a neat, uniform formula” (p. 37). Process-oriented language and practices continue to be prevalent in schools and curricula, even where the ideological perspectives and theories underlying them seem to conflict, for instance privileging form and correctness over process (Whitney et al., 2008).

In the most distressing example among the several states whose assessment practices he reviewed, Hillocks (2002) describes how writing exams

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are evaluated in the state of Illinois, which ships writing to North Carolina for scoring. “According to my source, the speed of scorers is at the level of 60 compositions per hour, a minute a piece” (p. 120; italics added). To put it mildly, the idea that the substance and quality of writing can be effectively determined in 60-second evaluations is worrisome. More troubling still is that the evaluation process is oriented toward what is coded as reliability—interpreted as encouraging responders to avoid using their individual judgments about writing, “to get the ‘right’ score using the official criteria . . . to minimize disagreement.” When responders do not agree, they may be “retrained.” Ultimately, if “a rater cannot maintain reliability, the rater is removed from the team” (Hillocks, 2002, p. 120).

What are the implications of these assessment practices for writing teachers? While this example may seem like an outlier, it is illustrative of the problem with formulaic writing and assessment. Common approaches such as prefigured rubrics share concerns for standardization, speed, and efficiency and exhibit similar problems (Kohn, 2006; Mabry, 1999; Wilson, 2006). Rubrics vary in substance and use. They can be grounded in teachers’ and students’ local concerns and writing communities, and emphasize more descriptive rather than prescriptive frameworks (Turley & Gallagher, 2008). Externally imposed rubrics, however, tend to emphasize ranking and classification based on generalities and uniformity rather than particularity. As Kohn (2006) argues in his critique of rubrics, while “consistent and uniform standards are admirable, and maybe even workable, when we’re talking about, say, the manufacture of DVD players,” the process of interpreting and evaluating writing “necessarily entails the exercise of human judgment, which is an imprecise, subjective affair” (p. 12). Going further, Mabry (1999) argues that rubrics are not merely outlines of efficient scoring criteria and guidelines, but “arbiters of quality and agents of control” (p. 676).

Prefigured and prescribed writing assessments can rationalize formulaic expectations and a focus on surface features of student work. At the same time, they often encourage “vacuous” writing (Mabry, 1999, p. 678; Hillocks, 2002) and have been demonstrated to disadvantage culturally and linguistically diverse students (Carbone & Orellana, 2010; Moore, 1990). As Christensen (2007) notes, standardized writing curricula and assessment “masquerade as social justice reforms” in that they equate standardization with equity by providing all students with equal access to the same—in her terms “insipid”—anchor assignments and assessment tools (p. 144). Further, these practices can discourage teachers from developing their own understandings and theories of teaching writing grounded in their own research and readings of student work. Hillocks (2002) found that “by and large, the actual parts of the assessments (prompts, types of writing, criteria, scoring
guides, and so forth) were seldom subjected to analysis by teachers”; in absence of analysis it is “common for the state assessment to become the theory of writing upon which teachers base their teaching” (p. 198).

For student teachers entering English classrooms powerfully figured by instrumental pressures, it is critical to develop more critical, inquiry-based, and student-oriented pedagogies and theories of teaching writing. Toward that aim, Luke (2004) recommends more integrative context-based approaches, noting “the challenge facing teacher education, curriculum, and school reform is not to find, standardize, and implement the one true method, but for teachers to develop flexible repertoires of field-, discourse-, and text-specific pedagogies” (p. 90). This resonates with the idea of inviting student teachers to take what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001, 2009) have called an inquiry stance on approaches to teaching writing. This notion of inquiry as stance is intended to suggest a way of knowing and working in classrooms that invites critical questioning and systematic research, situating pedagogy and curricula in local contexts, supporting individuals to learn across a professional lifespan and connect to broader research networks and social movements (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

For teacher educators, an inquiry-based approach involves encouraging student teachers to question ideas about writing developed within and outside of their classrooms, as a basis for generating their own theories of writing and approaches to teaching. Inquiry-based approaches encourage teachers to regard writing classrooms as sites of research and inquiry (e.g., Fecho, Allen, Mazaros, & Inyega, 2006; Simon, 2009; Whitney et al., 2008) and regard writing as a means exploration and inquiry for students (e.g., Christensen, 2009; Yagelski, 2009, 2012). This work is social and collaborative. It requires that issues in teaching and assessing writing not be reduced to monologue, efficient scoring tools, or easy answers. Rather, writing pedagogy and assessment becomes the focus of investigation into competing paradigms and practices (Brauer & Clark, 2008; Luke, 2004), the subject and object of student teachers’ inquiries.

Context and Methods

The inquiries into writing that form the basis for this article were drawn from a multiyear study that explored the intellectual work of a community of 18
student teachers. The primary site of this study was a middle and secondary literacy methods course I taught in a one-year teacher education program at a large northeastern university. In this course I encouraged student teachers to consider English in relation to literacies frameworks that regard teaching as a locally embedded and intrinsically ideological practice, and literacy as multiple, socially situated, and shaped by linguistic, technological, and cultural diversity (Christensen, 2009; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Cummins, 2009; Gee, 1996; Lytle, 2008; Simon, 2011; Street, 1995). The secondary site was an inquiry community that 8 student teachers and I formed, that met regularly through their completion of the program, into their first years as inservice teachers, and included opportunities for collaborative writing and presentation (Carlough et al., 2006).

As a requirement of their program, which emphasized preparing students to teach in urban classrooms, student teachers, predominantly of European American descent, were placed in schools situated in a large urban district affected by underfunding, and racial segregation—85 percent of students in placement schools were of color, and over a third attended a school that was more than 90 percent one race. Student teachers came into this district in the midst of an aggressive reform agenda, a broad effort to manage and encourage teaching and learning that incorporated mandated curricula linked to frequent benchmark exams. This included a newly adopted “writing plan,” marked by many of the instrumental qualities outlined above. While the writing plan mentioned “inquiry-based strategies,” it contained no questions. Rather, it was concerned with ensuring that “at every grade level, students are prepared to take any assessment and demonstrate proficient and advanced abilities in writing” (Thornton & Cannon, 2005, p. 4).

The larger multiphase study involved ethnographic emersion (Heath & Street, 2008) and practitioner research (Campano & Simon, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012), including participatory and collaborative research in phase two, which incorporated an explicit concern for supporting participants’ professional learning and agency through participation in a community of inquiry in their first years in the classroom. As a methodology, practitioner research emphasizes the coextensive relationship between knowledge and practice, generating understandings from educational contexts that in turn inform new educational possibilities and further research. This framework informed my research, my pedagogy, and the particular assignments used in the course I studied, including my use of descriptive review as a means of learning with student teachers.

Within the larger study, I examined a range of data collected from
the methods course I taught and the subsequent inquiry community that developed. Additional data were drawn from student teachers’ classroom research. These data included field notes; audio taped and transcribed discussions from 15 class sessions of three hours each; transcriptions of individual and group meetings; interviews; email exchanges; relevant policy and course documents; and teachers’ written work, including writing online on a class Blackboard site, class and program portfolios, and write-ups of five inquiry projects, which required collecting and analyzing classroom data such as transcribed classroom literature discussions and student work.

Analysis involved open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), including assigning conceptual and thematic categories, within and across data sets. This process entailed determining and coding patterns and themes, such as the uses of particular terms, emic theories, discourse patterns, and discrepant cases, with the intention of developing understandings about student teachers’ concerns in learning to teach English. Initial codes were cross-categorized and tested using the constant comparative method, documented through the use of analytic memos. Axial coding was used to explore relationships among conceptual categories derived from initial codes. Close analysis was also done using modified descriptive review processes like those described in this article (Himley & Carini, 2000), generating emic categories that iteratively informed the coding process. Member checks were used as a means of validating findings, and participants were invited to review and comment on conceptual categories and findings at various points in the research process.

Among other issues, I analyzed student teachers’ interrogation of outside discourses that held purchase on their practices as English teachers—including their critical analysis of writing curricula and policies such as the aforementioned district writing plan—and their explorations into practice—including the inquiries into approaches to assigning, reading, and responding to student writing explored in this article. Findings from this research highlight the ways that student teachers construct expert knowledge in the process of learning to teach, for example, how student teachers develop their own theories of literacy and pedagogy, and use these as a basis for teaching and investigating issues they encounter in classrooms (Simon, 2009, 2012).

Collaborative investigations into issues in practice encouraged student teachers to develop understandings constructed from and tested in daily experience, and to regard teaching as local, political, and intellectual work. As the examples I describe in the remainder of this article demonstrate, practitioner inquiry is a useful means of countering the interpellation of student teachers within particular subject positions and ideologies in schools (Althusser, 1971), for example, the ways they are readily positioned as imple-
menters of instrumental discourses and mandates such as those related to assigning and assessing writing. Inquiry can form the basis for developing more critical and equitable approaches to teaching, grounded in noticing and responding to students’ cultural and linguistic strengths, regarding them as both meaningful and instructionally relevant.

**Descriptive Review of Student Writing**

In an attempt to invite students to take an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, 2009) on writing, in the course I taught we took up issues in teaching writing as a process of wrestling together with questions such as, Where does writing come from in our classrooms? What counts as writing in school and out? In what ways and for what purposes do teachers assign, read, and respond to student writing? Why do students write? Why do they not write? For whose purposes and what audiences? Why does all this matter? And to whom?

We began a three-week section of class focused on teaching writing by looking closely together in class at an example of student work using a process called descriptive review of student writing developed by educational phenomenologist Patricia Carini and a community of teacher researchers affiliated with the Prospect Center in North Bennington, Vermont (Carini, 2001; Himley, 2002; Strieb et al., 2011). Like other systematic approaches used by practitioner research communities, descriptive review of student writing is a collaborative, oral inquiry process. It involves using close reading in structured rounds to suspend quick judgment and encourage collaborative analysis, inviting participants to “regard their students’ works not as transparent indicators of development or achievement but as complex, culturally embedded constructions that must be ‘read’” (McDonald, 2002, p. 122).

Beginning with a group reading and general impressions of a piece, the process involves several rounds of focused, increasingly analytic, description. These may include line-by-line paraphrasing, looking for patterns, recurrent images or themes, attending to structural issues or looking at sections of the piece in relationship to the whole work (Himley, 2002, p. 21). Between rounds, a designated chairperson makes integrative restatements of themes from the conversation. Descriptive review of student writing is methodical, unsettling, and revealing.

I was introduced to this method of inquiry through the work of Philadelphia Teachers’ Learning Cooperative (PTLC), a teacher inquiry community that has met weekly for more than 30 years using descriptive review processes to analyze issues in practice and student work (Abu El-Haj, 2005; Philadelphia
Teachers Learning Cooperative, 1984). I invited Rhoda Kanevsky, a founding member of PTLC, to visit my class to explain and introduce the process to my students, and to chair a descriptive review of student writing in class. Following our in-class use of the process, student teachers used descriptive review in groups to study examples of student writing collected from their placement classrooms. I then asked them to write a brief paper describing the process and reflecting on its usefulness, including a response to the student writer.

Before taking up issues related to assigning and assessing writing, we used descriptive review of student writing as an attempt to foreground students’ capacities as writers, and to call into question what Carini (2001) has referred to as “familiar categories for classifying and generalizing” student writing (p. 163). Moore (1990) and others (e.g., Carbone & Orellana, 2010) have noted that common practices of reading student writing for “errors” disadvantage students of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and are imbedded in and reproduce “risk-laden discourses” about the cultures, languages, and literacies of urban students (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009, p. 3). Rather than focus on exterior features of student writing that match (or do not match) predetermined frameworks or categories, descriptive review uses close reading as a way to suspend judgment, a means of surfacing ideological assumptions and encouraging questions. As Carini (2001) notes, descriptive review allows student work to remain the subject of sustained attention. The process promotes awareness of what we do not know about students, highlights their intentions and abilities, encourages participants to notice what is working in their writing, and can form the basis for supporting adolescents’ growth as writers.

“Starting with What Is”

For our in-class descriptive review of student writing, Rhoda and I chose to use a three-page excerpt from an autobiography written by an 11th-grade boy, HB. HB’s piece was an interesting and challenging example of student writing: a meditation on his upbringing, his place in the world, and his hopes for the future. It was both evocative and unfinished, evidencing the author’s capability and creativity, as well as ambiguity and surface-level errors. After handing out copies of HB’s piece, I introduced Rhoda, who introduced the descriptive review process, noting that the goal of the process was to remain descriptive rather than evaluative: situating our readings in “what is” rather than focusing attention on what isn’t working in HB’s writing.

Following Rhoda’s introduction, the class moved to an opening round of first impressions. Student teachers’ impressions were detailed, affirmative, and grounded in the text:
LAURA: [HB is] motivated and ambitious. Aside from the content, I see it in that he’s experimenting with his style, with his tone, and even with the paragraph lengths, and some of his transitions. He’s ambitious even in the way he’s expressing himself . . . .

JARED: [HB] has a lot to say. And it’s worthwhile, what he says, too. He has a developed interest in his environment and in who he is, and he also has an agenda for what he sees himself becoming and for what he wants his role to be. The last thing is that he accepts responsibility for . . . not just who he is or who he becomes, but also what his dream of his external reality should be like in the end. Something needs to change, and he can enact that.

Jared and Laura pointed out qualities in HB’s writing that they found interesting or admirable. Following Elbow (1993), they based their readings in finding things to like about HB’s work. Jared focused on content, highlighting HB’s interest in improving himself and his environment, his concern for himself and his community, and his intention to enact change. Laura pointed out textual features indicating HB’s willingness to experiment and his ambitiousness, both as an individual and as a writer.

In subsequent rounds, the depth and intensity of student teachers’ readings of HB’s writing increased. For example, in the third round we looked closely at specific sentences in relationship to the larger themes and structures in the piece as a whole. An hour after giving his first impressions, Jared presented a meticulous analysis of one line, the first section of which is quoted in the introduction:

[Reading.] “Like I was forced to grow up and act mature before I was ready.” It’s really interesting, several of the words he used here—“forced,” “grow,” “act,” “mature”—describe a very intricate relationship with the way he views his past: “made to,” “change,” “pretend,” “be.” That made me think of the other part of identity, his defining his identity in the next sentence we keep talking about, “Now I want to be me.” But to me, in terms of what he’s saying in this last sentence, that’s really a question: “Now I want to be me”—but what is “me,” really? What is “me,” this thing that I’ve been forced to be?

So for me, actually, the answer is slightly further down, when he says that “I would hate it in the end if I was just HB, because that’s not who my parents brought into the world.” What makes the difference here is that the person his parents brought into the world is full of potential, unbounded by the limits of a label. In this, he expresses his deep understanding of the relationship between time and definiteness and limits. All that great stuff that seems very essential in this paragraph. He can become something because of his potentiality, but the value is not in what he is, nor in what he
can become, but in what he always has been: That unbounded potentiality that he was born with. What his parents made him, what brought him into the world.

Margaret Himley (1991) has used the phrase “deep talk” to indicate the intensity and insightfulness of responses elicited by descriptive review of student work. Jared’s reading provided an example of this. In his evocation of HB’s capaciousness, his attentiveness to particularities, and his concern with discovering an author in the work, Jared demonstrated a thoughtful and unconventional reading of student writing. Highlighting HB’s word choices and his ideas, Jared examined several specific lines, analyzing their relationships to each other and to the idea of “unbounded potentiality” that HB expressed, literally and figuratively. Jared unpacked HB’s meditation on what potential meant to him and described HB’s potential from his own perspective. In doing so, he moved between a microanalysis of language and a broader, interpretive register. Though Jared’s analysis sometimes spiraled into a kind of existential questioning, his reading began and ended in the text. In Rhoda’s terms, Jared’s analysis generated from and attempted to illuminate “what is.”

Description as Social Inquiry

The descriptive review encouraged analysis, but importantly, it was a collaborative process: Individual readings extended and were sometimes challenged by the readings of others in the group. In the following excerpt taken from the third round of description, Tony elaborated on an observation Ben had made previously about the rhythmic quality and variation of HB’s writing. He explored the relationship of language, structure, metaphor, and meaning in one of HB’s sentences:

[Reading.] “I’m trying to be more in control of what I do and say and build, so I can drive my life in the right direction.” The first part of that sentence, “I’m trying to be more in control,” I found interesting because I feel like as a writer, he has so much control. Each one of his sentences—the longer sentences, the shorter sentences—have so much, they’re so generative. His writing is very conducive to this type of exercise. We could sit here and talk about each one of his sentences.

And what Ben was saying about the cadence of his writing: I really like “what I do and say and build.” There’s a nice flow to that. It’s interesting how he pushes that to the end in this sentence, “so I can drive my life in the right direction.” So in this one sentence he goes from saying “I’m trying to be more in control” and ends with “[driving] in the right direction,” which I think is really cool.
Like Jared, Tony drew the group’s attention to HB’s word choice and sentence construction. He picked up on the significance of the word *control*, using it as a heuristic to consider the deliberate construction, variety, and effectiveness of HB’s sentences. Tony’s reading built systematically upon Ben’s, and others’, previous comments. Tony connected the idea of *control* with Ben’s observation that HB’s writing contained sentence structures that seemed to be intentionally varied, including “short sentences, that force us . . . to really *look* at it.” Tony extended this idea, describing how the cadence of the sentence he was looking at mirrored its meaning, structurally and figuratively moving the work forward.

This example demonstrates how analysis was constructed collectively. Unlike conventional ways of responding to student writers, response took the form of an “oral text” created socially by the group. The collaborative aspects of the descriptive review of student writing are significant. Lortie’s (2002) famed egg crate, an image used to characterize teachers’ felt and literal isolation within the cellular construction of schools, could characterize how teachers are encouraged to read and respond to student writing. Response and evaluation are commonly understood to be something individual teachers do in seclusion rather than in conversation with other teachers. As Elbow (1993) has argued, teachers’ isolated readings are often narrowed to grades, which he describes as “crude, oversimple ways of *representing* judgment—distorting it, really—into a single number, which means ranking people and performances along a single continuum” (p. 191). The rise in use of prefabricated rubrics has done little to counter belief in the objectivity and universality of grading, further affirming practices of categorizing what counts as effective writing *a priori* (Kohn, 2006). By contrast, descriptive review of student work is a collaborative process rather than an isolationist one, predicated on setting aside prior categories.

**Description as a Means of Exploring Challenging Aspects of Student Writing**

Social dimensions of the descriptive review process make it useful for making sense of challenging passages in student writing. Descriptive review highlights ambiguities that are present in student work, allowing them to raise questions and inspire conversation, rather than glossing over these qualities, viewing them as errors, or attempting to fit them into the non-permeable categories and hierarchies of assessment tools. It encourages student teachers to hold the ambiguities of student work in focus.

After several pages of autobiographical writing, in which the author...
wondered about his upbringing and his place in the world, HB moved to broader social commentary, arguing for the importance of better schools and technology for urban children. I quote the following conversation at length to capture how the group collectively took up a challenging section of HB’s piece, where the focus and tone of his writing seemed to shift:

**AMBER:** I was just thinking, I was kind of confused . . . . Why, in his last few sentences, he ended on this part about computers? It just kind of throws me.

**SYLVIA:** Uh-uh. [Others agree.]

**ROB:** Hmm-hmm.

**RHODA:** OK. Can you say something about that?

**AMBER:** Just because he’s writing about himself and what he’s going to do—it’s really about him—then I feel like he’s talking about things he wants to do for his race, and then all of a sudden it’s about computers.

**RHODA:** Uh-huh.

**ALEX:** That is kind of funny, actually. It’s just really like this righteous thing: “Man, we’ve got to learn computers.” [Laughter.]

**RHODA:** All right. Let’s talk about that for a minute. Where do you think that’s coming from? [Many people talking.] Because there’s more than just computers in there . . .

**ALEX:** No, there is. And if we isolate it it’s funny. But he’s talking about the quality of schools—

**RHODA:** Yes.

**ALEX:** —and how he wants to go into politics to change society. That’s what he knows the most about—

**RHODA:** [Overlapping] He knows the most about schools . . .

**ALEX:** —because he’s a 17-year-old kid.

**AMBER:** Yeah.

**RHODA:** And the lack of computers.

**ALEX:** Yeah.

**AMBER:** But it still seems weird to end on that. I felt like he was going to make another statement about himself and what he was going to do.
ALEX: It stands out, because the whole thing flows so brilliantly. You know what I mean? And then it just, it ends on this note. You know, if this were a polished piece of writing by a—if he was a 30- or 40-year-old professional politician, if he were giving this as a speech, and giving it in a real sort of spoken style, he wouldn’t end with that. He would wrap it up with something that touched on everything.

JARED: Well, not always. I think that, more so, he’s actually giving almost a debate-style reaction. He’s given his motive; he’s now providing his means. He’s saying what his platform will do. He’s saying, “And this is what I’m going to do about it. We’re going to make computers.” And obviously it’s important to him. There’s precedent for why he’s writing it this way . . . . But you also wonder if that’s him taking control, taking responsibility?

This conversation demonstrates how the group used a moment of dissonance to think together. What may have been interpreted as a structural problem or an error of logic was reframed as an issue to be taken up by the group, inviting questions and alternate readings: What might the author intend by this shift in emphasis? In what ways is it problematic? And what are alternative interpretations?

When Amber wondered about the suddenness of HB’s shift in tone and focus, there was a sense of judgment being warded off. Alex noted that the juxtaposition of this paragraph with what came before it was awkward and funny, eliciting laughter from the group. Alex revised his initial reading, encouraged by Rhoda, recasting this passage as an example of social and political advocacy—though he wondered about the intentionality of its inclusion and execution: Would a more mature author have ended on this note? Jared picked up the thread of advocacy and action to argue for the idea that this move was intentional and precedented. He noted the similarity of this passage to rhetorical patterns in political debates. To ground his argument, Jared recalled the theme of control that HB touched on earlier in his piece, wondering if this might be read as a moment in which HB attempted to take “control” of both his writing and his worldview.

Analysis of the ambiguities in the final paragraph of HB’s text worked from the assumption that the author intended to communicate a specific meaning. The assumption of meaning placed the burden of interpretation on the group rather than on the individual reader or author. It positioned HB as an author with deliberate purpose, attempting to marshal complex ideas and rhetorical strategies to say something that mattered to him. This
In a conversation following our reading of HB’s work, Nora noted that the process encouraged the group to reconsider judging his writing from a deficit perspective:

When we read it the first time, I think there was a sort of conditioning to get a sense of the piece, but also to immediately look for [problems]: the grammar, or the end that is sort of ambiguous. That’s what hit me the first time. And as we read through it the second and third [time], I forgot about those things. That’s why I think we all chuckled then when it got brought back up at the end. Because you really did give yourself a chance to absorb everything that was really great, rather than getting distracted by the—what?—two or three things that we felt [weren’t].

Nora presented another take on the laughter that followed Alex’s parody of the last paragraph, “Man, we’ve got to learn computers.” Having set aside focusing on problems in HB’s writing, the laughter following Alex’s comment was read by Nora as the reappearance of conditioned ways of reading. Nora described how the process refocused her attention from problems she first noticed toward other aspects of the piece: moving past her initial judgment, she was able to appreciate the work’s other qualities. Repeated readings, multiple perspectives, and the deliberate attempt to focus on different aspects of the work substantively changed how Nora and others regarded it.

Rereading the Reading

Following our descriptive review of HB’s writing, several students raised concerns about the practicality of the process. For example, Sylvia commented that, for better or worse, student writing often only gets one look, and she questioned the feasibility of using this process with all student work: “I mean, for time’s sake, you couldn’t possibly do this with every piece of student writing.” Rhoda responded:

I’m glad that came up, because the question always comes up and it’s really important to address: What’s the use of this if I can’t do this with every kid? I guess I have to say, and I think Rob would concur in this, that from doing it with one piece, and looking so closely at one piece, we get to understand the possibilities that there may be in every piece. And at least our awareness of that possibility can make us read the piece with more gentleness and generosity. More openness, perhaps, to what it is that the writer is after.

In her comments, Rhoda suggested that the descriptive review process is about stance more than method: developing habits of mind, learning to approach
student writing with care and with the knowledge that all readings are partial.

In class the following week I asked my students for their thoughts about the descriptive review of student writing. They raised a number of concerns, about the feasibility of the process and its trustworthiness. Several of them wondered about whether the process elicited close readings of “what is” as Rhoda had claimed, or whether we had superimposed our own meaning onto HB’s work. For example, Jared commented:

I thought [the process] was very interesting. My only problem personally with it is questioning how much of what we put in there is what the writer said and how much of it is what we put in there.

Along similar lines, Kelly noted her concern about the kinds of comments the process encouraged her to make about HB’s piece:

[The process] got us beyond feeling like we can’t read this because of the grammar, because of the form, or the style. Because here’s what HB really wants to say. That was useful to me. But then beyond that, getting into the style that he used, I found myself saying things that I didn’t quite think were true, and that I didn’t actually think were intentional on HB’s part necessarily.

In class Rhoda had described the process as “keeping close to the material, not going off into some kind of imaginative realm of inference about what the student might have thought.” Rather than question the practicality of the process, as Sylvia had done, Jared and Kelly raised questions about its veracity. Kelly’s statement that she said things in class she did not believe is difficult to interpret—had the process encouraged a group reading that Kelly felt overwhelmed her own impressions? Jared wondered whether, rather than make clear HB’s intentions, our readings masked, superseded, or distorted them. The descriptive review of student writing claims to highlight the author’s presence in the work, growing from the assumption that all student work “bears the imprint of the child and that the imprint left there is neither accidental nor merely happenstancial” (Himley, 2002, p. 20). My students called this idea into question: Had our reading illuminated HB’s intentions or our own?

Sylvia agreed that the descriptive process privileged our readings over HB’s intentions, but noted that this might not be a bad thing:

Maybe, with Rosenblatt and everything, that’s the point of reading? That author intention doesn’t matter . . . . I’m sort of shifting toward thinking that the reading experience is what’s real.
Drawing upon her knowledge of reader response (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1994), Sylvia made a case for reading student writing as a transaction—and teachers’ readings as tentative, situated, social constructions.

Gadamer (1996) has suggested that interpretation involves moving past commonsensical or “self-evident” readings, to actively construct understandings from readers’ unique “horizons” (p. 183). In Gadamer’s hermeneutics, as readers interpret, we interpret ourselves in relationship to a text. All acts of understanding are implicitly acts of “self-understanding” (p. 97). Similarly, Sumara (1996), drawing upon the hermeneutics of Derrida and Heidegger, emphasizes that reading involves “self-interpretation” and “re-invention” (p. 33). Descriptive review makes readings of student writing public in a way that surfaces and socializes analyses, revealing aspects of participants as readers and interpreters while highlighting features of the work being described. In their reflections on the descriptive review, Sylvia, Jared, and Kelly offered rereadings of the descriptive process and of the work itself, but also of themselves and the group as readers of student work.

Others wondered about how descriptive review process might shape their teaching of writing or their attempts to help student writers. Rather than question the efficacy of the process, Nora wondered about next steps:

When you’ve done all this work to find the wonderful aspects that you’ve transacted with in the piece then what do you do? Are you looking for the writer to improve it? Is it great now? I think I made the comment that you really do start to see all these wonderful things. But then we lose sight in the end of the things we noticed immediately, for better or worse, which were: the form, the content, and the grammar. We’ve lost sight of that. Is that less important . . . ? Do we then go back and talk with [the writer] about that?

Nora’s comments suggested that the descriptive review of student work changed our understandings about what could be improved in student writing. Having set aside initial concerns to delve deeper, how do we now regard surface “errors”? And how might we move toward supporting the growth and progress of student writers like HB? Nora suggested possible next steps, which might include conversations, comments, and specific strategies for supporting student writers’ development. She and others developed these ideas in looking at examples of their own students’ writing.

**Description as a Basis for Response**

Following our reading of HB’s work in class, I asked students to form groups and use descriptive review of student writing to analyze a draft written by
one of their students, then to write a paper that addressed questions such as, What is the writer trying to do? How do the parts of this piece relate to the whole? What seems to be the writer’s purpose? Who is their intended or imagined audience? What is “working” in this piece, and where might the writer take the next draft? In addition to narrative analysis and reflection, students were asked to write comments and develop a plan for conferencing with the student writer.

**Reading Student Work as Negotiating Difference**

In their papers student teachers expressed a range of reactions to the process. Noting tensions between different group members’ readings of a paper by his student, AB, Jared commented on the contingent and subjective nature of response:

AB has so many great ideas and includes so much expression that it is almost tragic that one member of my descriptive review team could not seem to get past the fact that the author’s ideas were repetitive. I, however, thought that AB’s use of repetition was one of the strongest devices in his writing.

As in our group reading, the process drew Jared’s attention to an aspect of AB’s writing that he viewed as a strength. That his group members did not agree indicated that responses to student writing are situated and subjective. This is an important facet of collaborative inquiry, one that highlights the problems inherent in distal assessments that purport to objectify evaluation and minimize difference (Hillocks, 2002). The group’s readings were embedded in the social and material contexts in which they occurred (Sumara, 1996). Further, individuals within the group stood in different relation to the student work that was being described: Each of them approached student writing from unique social locations (Lytle, 2000). Jared brought the experience of knowing the author, AB, over time. He likely read his writing in relationship to other written work, and through the lens of his own goals as AB’s teacher. Similarly, the member of Jared’s group that read “repetition” as a problem in AB’s work approached the work through the lens her own experiences, without the emic privilege of knowing AB. Allowing readings of student work to be a locus of difference is one of the strengths of collaborative analysis.
Reading Themselves as Readers of Student Work

Others found that the process helped them to understand more than just aspects of the example of student writing they described. Suggesting the possibility that reading is as much about self-understanding as about understanding a text (Gadamer, 1996), Ben noted that his group’s readings raised questions for him about how he read and evaluated student writing:

This project turned out to be more insightful than I anticipated. Not only did I gain clarity about the needs that Nia has as a developing writer, I also realized the shortcomings I have as an evaluator. Crone-Blevins [2002] writes that teachers learn from paper to paper how to provide helpful, valuable feedback [p. 98]. I have been writing responsive questions and comments on all the writing I have received thus far, but I have yet to try to understand the individual needs and perspectives of the students. It seems that one-on-one time with them is even more important than I previously thought. When does a teacher find the time to make connections with all of the students?

Drawing on the work of Crone-Blevins (2002), who argues in favor of forms of evaluation that nurture student writers, Ben described reading and responding to student work as a learning process. This presented an image of evaluation that was intrinsically different from ranking and matching student work to categories on externally produced rubrics or frameworks: evaluation takes time, effort, and attention, and is connected to relationships with students over time.

Nora reflected on how describing student work challenged her assumptions and encouraged her to reevaluate how she reads and responds to students’ writing:

So many of the assumptions I have made about teaching and what it means to teach have changed in the last six months, but perhaps no assumption has changed as much as what it means to grade, assess, and evaluate. Student writing, at one time, meant something that I had to dissect for all its inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and occasional moments of brilliance . . . .

The descriptive review process has certainly taught me to move away from seeing inadequacies as surface level mistakes toward instead examining the more subterranean meaning my students are bringing to their work. Of course, not every piece of student writing will get as much attention from me as this one did; however, I see the review process as a way to develop an evaluative stance that can sensitize me to what might be there instead of looking for what isn’t.

Like Ben and others who read the process back on themselves as readers of student writing, Nora suggested how expectations shape teachers’
approaches to evaluating student work. Reiterating Rhoda's concept of appreciating “what is” in students' writing, Nora proposed that evaluation was about stance as much as process: How teachers respond to student writing has everything to do with how they regard student writers and, in turn, how they encourage students to regard themselves as writers.

**Reading External Standards through Reading Student Writing**

Several student teachers took on external standards for “good” writing and writing pedagogy. For example, Sylvia wrote about the problem of externally imposed biases, questioning the presumed relationship between “good” and “correct” writing. She noted tensions among various notions of good writing: her own, those of other readers, those forwarded by curricula or policy, and those that a student writer brings to a work. Sylvia asked:

> Is it acceptable for the standards to be a bit flexible? Should I be so surprised when a student struggling with the nuts and bolts of English grammar and vocabulary turns in such a beautiful and reflective piece of writing? How much of my expectations and notions of what is “good” should I allow to permeate my recommendations for revisions or my grading?

One of the significant outcomes of this process was the way that student teachers interrogated assumptions about writing and writing pedagogy. Sylvia’s notions of “good” writing were embedded in the context and ethos of her classroom, her relationships with particular student writers, and the broader culture of writing she established with them. Placing the term in quotation marks was a recognition of the contingent nature of what counts as “good” writing and response, a deliberate move away from approaches such as constructed response (e.g., Livingston, 2009) that claim to objectify and typologize “good” student writing.

In the conclusion of his paper, Alex addressed the issue of correctness in relationship to students’ unique perspectives and purposes as writers:

> This inquiry was an enlightening experience for me. Analyzing my student’s writing in such depth and analyzing the writing of my colleagues’ students in the same manner made me realize that the words our students choose to put on paper can be extremely sophisticated, subtle, and meaningful. Although I chose a very well-written poem for this analysis, the process helped me critically examine aspects of D’s writing that a superficial reader could dismiss as mistakes. For example, the phrase “A bandit house” helped
me recognize and appreciate D’s understanding of the abandoned houses in her neighborhood. This particular phrase raised some interesting questions. Did D create this phrase on her own? Is this a phrase a parent or friend uses? Is this a common phrase for the neighborhood? It also raises questions about the nature of language. Which is “better”: an expressive “mistake” or a common cliché? Which language is more valid: the common language of a small community, or the “proper” language of a culture at large? In light of these questions, a rigid curriculum that focuses on writing for standardized tests is a constraint for students and teachers who want to focus on writing as an expressive transaction.

Alex used D’s unconventional word choice to wonder about her intentions as a writer as well as her social and cultural context. Alex’s paper was constructed as a microanalysis of D’s poem. In his inquiry, Alex took an open and questioning stance toward this student writer. True to the intended spirit of the descriptive review process, he used close reading to attempt to get close to the author in the work (Himley, 2002). Alex raised questions about language-in-use and competing notions of “better” writing, suggesting that his students write from locations of epistemic privilege (Campano, 2007). He used a close reading of D’s poem to argue for the local nature of language use and to question the authority and preeminence of a global, disembedded, “standard” English.

Descriptive Review as a Stance on Teaching and Learning

Student teachers were willing to critically reflect on themselves as assessors of writing, and they developed critical readings of the policies and practices that legislate and guide writing pedagogy. In his paper, Alex critiqued the limits and affordances of “rigid curriculum” that imposes categories on student writers and writing teachers, which he viewed as constraining rather than enabling students’ creative expression. This critical impetus suggests the potential of collaborative inquiry as a locus for individual and collective change.

The impact of these experiences on Alex and other participants, currently inservice teachers in their sixth year in the classroom, has been significant. While each of these teachers is working within limitations of time and constraints of external assessments, among other demands of full-time positions in secondary English classrooms, inquiries into student writing have appreciably influenced their approaches to teaching writing. For example, Sylvia recalled that descriptive review of student work helped her to both humanize and improve her writing instruction, encouraging her to “honor writers where they are”: 
I definitely recall being “softened” by the experience in a way that did not lessen my expectations or dilute my ability to prepare students for the unsavory task of writing for a test . . . . I was, and still am, hyper vigilant in showing students that writing has many different purposes, and I’ve been very explicit in showing them there are many ways to approach the task of putting words to paper.

Importantly, Sylvia noted that situating evaluation within the context of students’ words and intentions, in the service of encouraging their growth as individual authors, can also help to prepare them for more instrumental tasks, including test-based writing.

Jared noted that these experiences have not only shaped his writing pedagogy but also his instruction more broadly:

It was one of the major catalysts that moved me to such an aggressively student-centered approach with a firm focus on relationships. If I could use reader-response theory to discover that kind of meaning in a [student’s] essay, I could use it as a lens by which to analyze my own practice. I still use that understanding today. While it is true you can’t do it for every student and every essay, it is a habit of mind that I believe/hope leads to more effective, humane instruction.

Jared described how descriptive review informed his theory of practice, including attempts to analyze his classroom teaching more reflexively. This speaks to the importance of encouraging student teachers to explore frameworks for teaching writing as a basis for constructing their own understandings, theories, and approaches to teaching. Jared noted that this can support more reflective, relational, and, in his words, more “humane” approaches to teaching.

Similarly, Alex noted that the descriptive review process “was definitely transformative.” In his current practice, Alex asks students to write frequently for a variety of purposes and audiences, and keep portfolios of their writing, which he responds to “as evolving bodies of work throughout the year.” While he does not have the time to work through each student paper with the kind of close readings this process encouraged, this experience has led Alex to read and respond to student work differently:

Instead of looking for what’s wrong with student writing, I try to look for what is right and build from there. I try to focus on ideas rather than simply wording and grammar, and I try to vary the types of assignments I give to appeal to the strengths of different students. When I provide detailed feedback to students (which I usually do by writing directly on their papers or through one-on-one conferences) I try to emphasize the positive . . . . By emphasizing the positive, I’ve found that students tend to take more risks with their writing and grow more throughout the year.
In addition to shaping their individual practices, these investigations of issues in teaching writing influenced some participants to take on leadership roles and involve themselves in communities of inquiry related to teaching writing. For example, Sylvia described these experiences as a catalyst for her decision to found a student-directed writing center at her school, “a testimony to my attempt at honoring writers where they are, and treating their ideas and words with conversations before red pens”:

[This experience] heavily influenced my work in the Writing Center, basing the sessions on talking and questions versus proofreading. It has trickled down to influence the teaching staff and students, I think, in making writing assignments more public as well. In sharing a piece of writing, whether before or after it’s been graded, with a student in the Center, it makes public many things—their ideas, the class curricula, the teacher’s comments and grading style—and by making this “publication” the norm (and a frequent one, at that) I do think it’s subtly influenced teachers to take more care with comments and the planning of assignments.

Sylvia’s current theories of writing practice reflect the value in making writing, assignments, and response public and communal. As Sumara (1996) argues, making private readings public invites critique, creating the conditions and possibility for re-invention (p. 33). The writing center that Sylvia founded teaches students to evaluate their own writing and the writing of their peers. Student “writing fellows” respond to other students’ writing and make recommendations for revision. Under Sylvia’s leadership, this project has led to a broader community of inquiry made up of teachers and students who collectively explore issues in teaching writing. This approach has significantly changed how writing is taught and evaluated in their school.

**Discussion: From What Is toward What Might Be**

*Describing I pause, and pausing, attend. Describing requires that I stand back and consider. Describing requires that I not rush to judgment or conclude before I have looked. Describing makes room for something to be fully present. Describing is slow, particular work. I have to set aside familiar categories for classifying or generalizing. I have to stay with the subject of my attention. I have to give it time to speak, to show itself.*

—Patricia Carini, *Starting Strong: A Different Look at Children, Schools and Standards*

This work suggests several important implications about evaluation and the value of collaborative inquiry as a means of learning to respond to writing. One of the most significant aspects was the ways that student teachers used the process to dilate time. In their readings of HB’s essay and their own
students’ writing, these teachers used descriptive review as a means of pausing the rush to judgment that commonly marks evaluation of student work, allowing for increased attentiveness, questioning, and analysis of what Nora called the “subterranean meaning my students are bringing to their work.”

Expanding or extending time is a common feature of teacher inquiry communities. The Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative (1984) was founded to mitigate the problem that “teachers don’t have enough time” for the kinds of systematic inquiries explored in this article. Similarly, the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar (2004) developed processes for studying classroom transcripts as a means of stopping “the relentless pace of the school day” (Ballenger, 1999, p. 84; see also Phillips & Gallas, 2004). While research has demonstrated the significance of teachers analyzing aspects of their practices such as responses to student writing, school-based projects like Sylvia’s student-directed writing center, local teacher research communities, and networks like the National Writing Project have created time and space to make that work more possible and more public (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The examples I have explored present an argument for inquiry-based teacher education that draws upon the innovations and collaborative research processes that support learning in teacher inquiry communities.

While pausing the rush to judge student work may seem like a small outcome, it represents a seismic shift—recall the gone-in-60-seconds approach to writing assessment adopted by the State of Illinois (Hillocks, 2002). Alex noted that inquiries into student work revealed how “the words our students choose to put on paper can be extremely sophisticated, subtle, and meaningful.” Recognizing these nuances requires time. Zebrosky (1987, cited in Himley, 1989) describes how interpretation is shaped by time and attentiveness—what he refers to as “tempos of meaning”—arguing that “close readers” discover different texts than “holistic scorers” (p. 15). This certainly proved true in student teachers’ inquiries. In the insights they expressed about HB’s essay, as well as in the concerns that they raised about the process afterwards, these teachers encountered a different text than they might otherwise have, one that provided a platform for collaborative intellectual exploration. As full-time teachers, they cannot make the time for these in-depth investigations with all student writing. Nonetheless, these experiences sensitized them to the substance of student work, encouraging them to develop alternative approaches to structuring writing opportunities and responding to students.

The process encouraged student teachers to ask questions—one of the most notable aspects of the process was how many questions it raised for them—and in many cases revise ideas about how adolescents’ writing should be read and evaluated. It provided a framework for them, in Carini’s terms
(2001), to set aside “classifying or generalizing” (p. 163) to regard aspects of student work as a surplus of possibilities rather than a collection of deficits. Looking closely at writing also inspired wider inquiry—for example, into external standards and assessment practices—and more local reflection on their own and each other’s practices as readers of student work. For instance, Alex noted that “rigid curriculum that focuses on writing for standardized tests is a constraint for students and teachers,” arguing for more local and relational approaches. Similarly, Ben explored the “shortcomings I have as an evaluator” as a basis for cultivating alternative approaches that nurture student authors. In these ways, student teachers’ inquiries formed a ground for constructing the figure of their own theories and practices of teaching writing.

These examples reinforce that if literacy educators are—as we need be—concerned with advancing methods of response that support adolescent writers, student teachers should be encouraged to develop critical dispositions toward instrumental writing pedagogy and evaluation instruments and explore alternatives. Sylvia, Nora, and others raised questions about next steps—how they might move from recognizing promising aspects of adolescents’ writing toward developing approaches to improvement. One possibility, as Peter Elbow (1997) has suggested, is for writing teachers to shift their concerns from summative assessment—evaluating the quality of student work as “good” or “bad”—toward the more formative and “intellectually interesting work . . . [of] asking and answering many of our most common analytic and academic questions—questions that invite us (though they do not require us) to step outside the mentality of evaluation” (p. 17). This process of asking and investigating questions related to writing and assessment can make responses to students more meaningful and intellectually interesting. These student teachers’ inquiries suggest that this approach can also make responses to students more ethical and more responsive, in the sense of being more focused on students’ needs and interests as writers. In Jared’s terms, this can support “more effective, humane instruction.”

The collective aspect of this work is significant. These inquiries have demonstrated that approaching inquiries into teaching writing as a collective project is central to the ethical dimensions of response. Bourdieu (1977) has described how the seemingly value-neutral activities of everyday school experience can become vehicles for social reproduction and social control.

As full-time teachers, they cannot make the time for these in-depth investigations with all student writing. Nonetheless, these experiences sensitized them to the substance of student work, encouraging them to develop alternative approaches to structuring writing opportunities and responding to students.
Nowhere are attempts to depoliticize practice more materialized and more naturalized in schools than in assessment, which “extort[s] the essential while seeming to demand the insignificant” (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 94–95; see also McCarthey, 2008).

Evaluation is always ideological (Ellsworth, 1996; Žižek, 2008). While the descriptive review of student writing offers promise for addressing the politics of evaluation, even in collectivities, individuals can unite around a problematic reading. These teachers’ inquiries demonstrate the value of having multiple participants from diverse perspectives in conversation together about student-authored texts. For example, what might otherwise have been interpreted as structural errors in HB’s writing became the basis for inquiry. The more that ideological readings are surfaced and named, the more that problematic assumptions can be questioned—and the greater opportunity teachers are afforded to move their readings toward more just orientations.

One of the most significant implications of these collaborative inquiries into teaching writing is how it encouraged student teachers to regard culturally and linguistically diverse students in different subject positions: as agents, creators, rhetors, and authors. Jared described HB as “full of potential, unbounded by the limits of a label.” This is particularly significant in light of the fact that the student writers whose work they explored have been historically deficitized. The baseline assumption that all children are authors is one of the central tenets of the descriptive review process (Carini & Himley, 2009). This entails valuing individuals, but it is not merely micropolitical. Teachers’ interestedness can support adolescents to regard themselves as interested and able to rhetorically express their interests. This can form the basis for individual but also broader social change.

Kress (in an interview with Bearne, 2005) invites us to imagine classroom practices that send the message to every child that “you are somebody with interests, you are a producer, you are an author.” Kress notes:

If every child in every classroom . . . came out of school thinking: I am a person whose interests count and I know how to put my interests into the public domain, how to represent my interests in the world in different kinds of representations and messages as forms of communication, then I think different social forms would come about. (p. 297)

This entails regarding teaching writing as political and intellectual work. Nora described how investigating writing helped her to move past “conditioned” ways of regarding students, to fully “absorb” the ways that adolescents mobilize language to represent their interests and intentions. Carini and Himley (2009) have described this as “fostering noticing”: in other words,
this process encourages student teachers to develop more critical, interested, and questioning stances toward students and their writing, as opposed to offering particular strategies for assessment.

“Fostering noticing” (Carini & Himley, 2009) can be a basis for regarding assessment as an ongoing inquiry, rather than a closed set of strategies. In a sense, as Ellsworth (1997) reminds us, all literacy teachers and teacher educators have to work with are our own and others’ “interminable readings” of the various texts we encounter (p. 135). These student teachers’ readings of student writing demonstrate that unsettling interpretations and surfacing alternate perspectives on writing can impact how teachers think about who their students are, and what counts as quality student writing, effective writing pedagogy, and meaningful assessment.

To adapt Ellsworth’s (1997) argument for analytic dialogue, as a pedagogical approach and a stance on learning to teach, collaborative inquiry allows for “shocking displacements of our fancies of understanding the world and of knowing ourselves and others” (p. 135). Given that student teachers enter classrooms in which instrumental writing pedagogy and assessment are increasingly the norm—where comments like “There is no clear opinion stated and no development of an argument” (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999, p. 156) are both invited and pass for “reliable” readings—perhaps shocking displacements of our collective fancy for these forms of assessment are exactly what is needed. What literacy teacher educators and teachers might achieve in the process, Ellsworth (1997) suggests, is our ability to change—answers to questions, impasses to possibilities—creating the conditions for developing more equitable and responsible writing classrooms. In this sense, “starting with what is” may become a foundation for moving students’ and teachers’ work closer to what it might become.

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References
S i m o n  >  E x p l o r i n g  R e s p o n s e  a n d  R e s p o n s i b i l i t y  t o  S t u d e n t  W r i t i n g


Simon > Exploring Response and Responsibility to Student Writing


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