



Recent Developments in Writing: How Teachers Manage Response

Sarah Warshauer Freedman

The English Journal, Vol. 76, No. 6. (Oct., 1987), pp. 35-40.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0013-8274%28198710%2976%3A6%3C35%3ARDIWHT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8>

The English Journal is currently published by National Council of Teachers of English.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ncte.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Recent Developments in Writing: How Teachers Manage Response

Sarah Warshauer Freedman

Jody, a college freshman, reminisces about her school experiences involving response to her writing. She completes a questionnaire at the beginning of her first semester for her English teacher:

And I like English, but I've had so many different English teachers, all saying different things about my writing, that I really can't know what to believe. All teachers want different things, and it's hard to please all of them without changing my way of writing. Hopefully you won't try and change the way I write, but just try and help me on the things I do badly.

Jody's teacher, Ms. Lane, is intrigued by Jody's forthright assessment of her past teachers' responses to her writing, and touched by her plea. In a later interview, Ms. Lane invites Jody to talk more about her past experiences and current needs as a writer. Jody gladly continues:

English is really easy, cause it's easy to get a good grade, if you know what the teacher wants. So that's what I've been doing, you know, all through grammar school and high school . . . You just, like, you know, in your first paper or something you write, and they'll say, "Oh you should do this, or you should do this," and you go, "Uh ha, I know what they want" and then you just write the way they want, and they go, "Great! Excellent writing." You know. Houh! "Okay, that's this semester taken care of." You have a new teacher, and they like this. So you say, "Okay, I'll put that in my writing." And they just love you for it. But then you end up in college, and you don't know how to write, for yourself. You just write for other people.

What went wrong in Jody's previous school experiences? What can Ms. Lane do to make Jody's first college writing experiences more pro-

ductive? Past research on response to writing provides only minimal guidance: (a) respond positively (don't just criticize) (e.g., Lees), (b) don't litter student writing with red ink since this approach discourages and overwhelms students; instead, write comments selectively (e.g., Beach; Butler; Hahn; Sommers), (c) aim response at helping students revise, not just at justifying a grade (e.g., Beach; Sommers). Ms. Lane will have to more than follow such guidelines to address Jody's problem fully. She will have to maintain her role as instructional leader while keeping the responsibility for communicating and text ownership in the hands of her student writers.

Educating Jody: A Study of Successful Teachers and Their Students

Some clues about educating Jody emerge from a study of how some of the most successful teachers of writing in our country organize writing instruction and how their students feel about the instruction they are receiving (Freedman, in press). For this study, I conducted a national survey of successful teachers and their students so that I could answer the following questions:

1. What do some of the most successful teachers of writing in the nation emphasize when they teach writing; more particularly, how do they arrange response to their students' writing?
2. At the secondary level, how do the students of these teachers understand the instruction they are receiving?

Knowing that it is often difficult, given the ways schools are organized, to execute our ideals, I also wanted to know what remains problematic for even the most successful teachers and their students. What questions have these teachers, as a group, not yet answered? What could they have changed about Jody's experience, and what would have been difficult even for them to have changed?

The surveys provide the equivalent of photographs taken with a wide-angle lens—broad and fairly comprehensive views. They were completed by 560 teachers (K–12) and 715 of their students at the secondary level. To identify the successful teachers, I asked the 116 National Writing Project site directors to recommend six of the most outstanding teachers of writing in their regions: two teachers at the primary level, two at the junior high/middle school level, and two at the senior high level. Then, in each region, I asked one junior high and one senior high teacher to select four students to complete surveys. The students—two males and two females and within each pair one higher-achieving and one lower-achieving—were to be chosen from a specified class. Of the teachers and students receiving surveys, the return rate was almost 90%, substantially above the usual 60% for mail surveys.

Reasons for Assigning Writing

The national surveys revealed that these successful teachers of writing do not use writing for testing students or for having students practice form and mechanics; rather, without ignoring mechanics and form, these teachers want students to write primarily so that they will learn to think for themselves and to connect their learning to their own experiences. In his general survey of secondary teachers, Applebee found the opposite; the average teacher assigns writing in order to test student knowledge of proper form and mechanics.

Students will feel ownership of their writing only if they have a reason for writing beyond being tested by the teacher and following the teacher's orders. Students relinquish ownership when they write to be tested, to maintain a respectable grade point average. They need to gain some personal satisfaction from writing. This means that teachers must see their students' writing as something beyond a test to be graded.

In free comments at the end of the questionnaire, one of the successful teachers expressed the group's values particularly well: "I think writing

can be used by *any* teacher to teach *any* subject. Writing is thinking on paper; by writing, students learn to organize, to restructure, to reflect, to synthesize, and to draw conclusions based upon their own discoveries."

These successful teachers of writing see the writers in their classrooms as critical thinkers who are writing to integrate what they are learning in

Successful teachers de-emphasize response that comes after a piece of writing is complete.

school with their personal experiences. And one key to how students' ownership of their writing is promoted likely involves how writing is valued in the community of the classroom.

Successful Teachers Arranging Response

As Jody indicates, a central way that teachers communicate what they value is through response to their students' writing. Let us examine how these successful teachers arrange response to student writing.

First, successful teachers de-emphasize response that comes after a piece of writing is complete. These teachers defy the stereotype of the beleaguered writing teacher, red pen in hand, bleary-eyed from reading, grading, and writing comments on large stacks of student essays. Successful teachers report that written comments and grades on final versions of student writing are among the least helpful kinds of response. Most teachers have watched both the angry student and the uninterested student defiantly or casually throw a newly-returned piece of writing into the classroom wastebasket, after looking at the grade but without even glancing at the written comments; yet most teachers continue to give grades, the more dedicated continuing to labor over written comments. In contrast, the successful teachers in the surveys understand that their students learn little from grades and written comments (see also Sommers, and Sperling and Freedman, for additional information about students' lack of understanding of written comments).

How do the successful teachers handle the issue of grading, given the evaluation requirements of most school systems? First, as one teacher writes, "Teachers do not need to 'grade' every piece of writing." Another concurs—"Don't grade student writing!"—and continues with her solution: "Of

course, we're still saddled with giving students grades, but we can grade their *progress* instead of grading how well/poorly they did on one essay in comparison to other students in the class." Another shows some variation in practices with respect to grading as he says, "I do mark the final draft and give a letter grade." Of particular interest is the fact that teachers of high numbers of poverty-level students report less frequent use of grades and written comments than do the other teachers. As Ogbu demonstrates, these students probably do not feel as much pressure to get good grades once they reach secondary school since their early experiences in school often teach them that they do not obtain high marks with the same work that their middle-class counterparts do. If the students do not feel that they can obtain good grades, the fact that something will be graded probably does not motivate them to try particularly hard either.

Knowing that the successful teachers in the surveys generally devalue written comments and grades, let us turn to how they do respond to their students' writing. Simply put, they focus their attention on response during the writing process. In particular, they value one-to-one conferences above all other types of in-process response. However, these teachers admit that they have difficulty managing to hold sufficient numbers of individual conferences. Secondary schools especially are usually not organized in ways that support individualized teaching.

Overall, the teachers in the surveys are inconsistent in their opinions about the helpfulness of other in-process techniques (that is, of peer groups, written comments, grades, and student self-assessments). Yet a clue to how these teachers uniformly handle in-process response is revealed through the emphasis they put on discussing topics with their students before the students write, and on furnishing their students plentiful opportunities to talk about what they are writing about. Although this kind of activity is not normally classified as "response to writing," since written text may not be involved, it does in fact constitute a major type of in-process response in these classrooms—response to ideas in formation. This kind of response can occur across response settings—in whole-class discussions, in one-to-one conferences, in peer groups. In fact, in a recent study of peer response, I found that ninth-graders are particularly good at discussing their ideas with

one another whereas they are reluctant to give one another feedback about other aspects of writing, particularly when the feedback involves some kind of implicit or explicit evaluation (Freedman & Bennett).

Finally, successful teachers believe that they themselves are the most useful responders to their students' writing (more helpful than classmates, other teachers, parents, or other adults).

The Student Experience

With their focus on critical thinking and meaningful learning and with their emphasis on in-process response, these successful teachers must be having powerful effects on their secondary students. But do their students' experiences differ

Students say that response to finished pieces promotes learning more than response during the process.

from Jody's? Counter to my expectations, the students of even these highly successful teachers seem at least partly trapped in Jody's world view of schooling. The students completed their surveys in the spring, after most had worked with these teachers for almost the entire academic year; yet even at this late point in the year, these students express values that are in marked opposition to their teachers'.

The students say that response to finished pieces of writing promotes their learning significantly more than response during the writing process. They find written comments on finished pieces more helpful than any other type of response. Following written comments, individual conferences during the process are most helpful to them, followed by grades on their finished pieces. Unlike their teachers, the students perceive that their teachers almost always give grades and write comments on their finished pieces of writing. It is unclear whether the students value conferences because they see them as a way to find out what the teacher wants before the paper is complete or because they actually see conferences as useful to their learning.

On a more encouraging note, the students confirm that their teachers discuss topics with them before they write, and that they have opportunities to talk about what they are writing about. The students also value their teachers' response most,

but they value their parents' responses more than their teachers value parents' responses.

Lessons to Learn

There are several important lessons to be learned from these successful teachers and their students. First, all value *individual instruction* in the form of conferences. Second, these *teachers are good responders*, better than anyone else to whom their students have access. Third, the teachers and students spend a lot of time *talking about ideas and topics for writing*.

However, the contrasts between the teachers and their students raise several issues. First, response during the process is key but problematic; the mostly middle-class students of even these

Change will have to take place in the institution; changes in individual teachers will be insufficient.

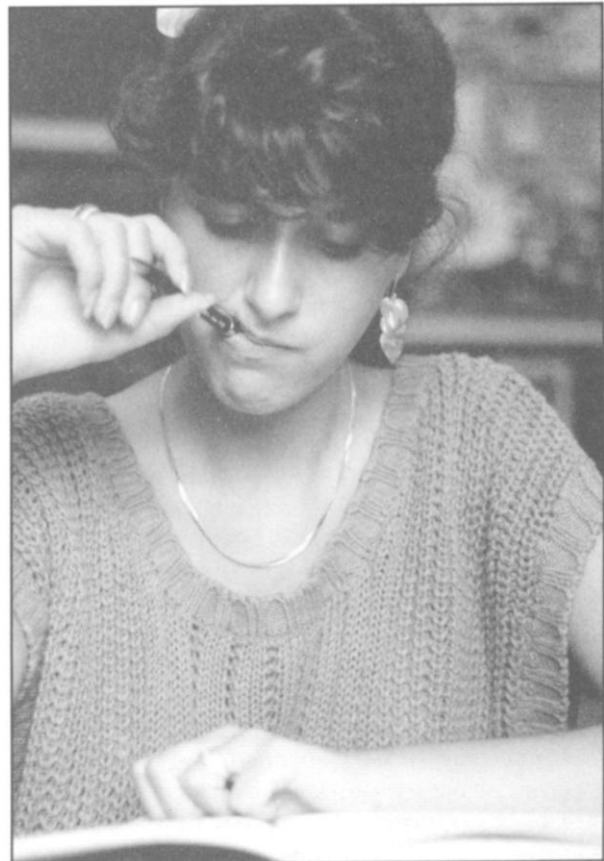
highly successful teachers are product-oriented and grade-oriented. Like Jody, these students see themselves writing mostly in order to play the school game; they do not give evidence that individual teachers can change their sense of ownership of school writing. This student orientation can create tensions between successful teachers and their students and can make the teaching and learning of writing difficult. Students who write only for grades fear taking risks and will do "anything" to please grade-giving teachers, even in the best instructional situations (see Sperling & Freedman). Most importantly, such students are in danger of developing an impoverished view of the functions and uses of writing if they continue to see writing only as something to be done for a grade in school.

What does it take to change students' views of writing in school? Gifford argues that change will have to take place within the institution of teaching, that changes in the practices of individual teachers will be insufficient. He writes about changing the nature of schools, their organization, and the organization of the system of which they are a part. He argues that individual teachers can effect only limited changes as long as their classroom doors are closed. The opinions of the secondary students in these surveys seem to support Gifford's claims; these students are ensconced in the values of a school system which

encroach upon the sanctity of their classrooms. Ideally, change will span classrooms and grade levels (see Perl & Wilson for a case study of writing in a school district implementing such change).

In the meantime, some changes could be made by collectives of teachers. First, grades need to be placed in a productive perspective. Although grading is an institutional fact, it is possible to give grades at required intervals without grading every or almost every piece of writing a student does. In mainstream schools, grades act as a powerful motivator, an attention grabber; students work most on those assignments that "count," that are graded. In non-mainstream schools grades may be used less frequently because students march to a different beat.

One solution that allows teachers to decrease the frequency of their grade-giving is portfolio evaluation. Students collect their writing over a period of time, and a grade can be given to the portfolio rather than to individual pieces. Another approach allows students (with the option of help from their teacher) to select pieces in the portfolio for revision and grading. In this way, students can



revise and receive a formal evaluation of their best pieces. Their best is what is worth revising. And their best is what they want someone else to evaluate, to judge them on. There is even movement in some states, local school districts, and universities (e.g., the state of Rhode Island and SUNY-Stonybrook) to move to formal portfolio assessment and away from timed proficiency tests administered under strict testing conditions. In fact, Educational Testing Service is showing increasing interest in this form of assessment, which is the way writing is assessed on national examinations of writing in England.

How can teachers decrease the amount of grading while still keeping students' attention and maintaining their motivation? Simply put, the activity has to be motivating in and of itself—writing has to be seen as purposeful. Most purposeful writing activities include having students write for audiences beyond the classroom. Some suggest having students submit their work to contests (e.g., Dunn, Florio-Ruane, & Clark), having them share their work with other students through computer networks (e.g., Levin et al.), publishing it for audiences beyond the classroom—in the form of school or class newspapers, exchanges with other classes inside or beyond the school (Heath & Branscombe; Freedman & McLeod), or books written for audiences of other students and collected in the school library (Graves). Other more personal but functional uses of writing which are generally not graded include dialogue journals—private correspondence between the teacher and individual students (Staton, et al.) and learning logs. Many of these activities were first developed by teachers and researchers working with non-mainstream students who do not respond to grade pressures.

These ideas are not new. Britton and his colleagues have long argued for the importance of expanding the audience for student writing beyond the teacher as examiner—to include writing for real audiences. The time is past due to implement them.

In the next couple of years, through the Center for the Study of Writing, I am working with Alex McLeod at the Institute of Education in London and with teachers in England and the US to begin a set of audience exchanges between pairs of classes. As part of the exchange project, we are looking carefully at the effects of expanding the audience for student writing and at the interaction

of grading and other kinds of response on student learning. We will be able to compare the teaching and learning of writing in the US and the UK and study the barriers to and potential costs and benefits of implementing purposeful writing in schools.

*University of California
Berkeley, California*

Works Cited

- Applebee, Arthur, and others. *Writing in the Secondary School: English and the Content Areas*. Research Report No. 21. Urbana: NCTE, 1981.
- Beach, Richard. "The Effects of Between-Draft Teacher Evaluation versus Student Self-Evaluation on High School Students' Revising of Rough Drafts." *Research in the Teaching of English* 13 (1979): 111–19.
- Britton, James. *The Development of Writing Abilities: 11–18*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1975.
- Butler, John I. "Remedial Writers: The Teacher's Job as Corrector of Papers." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980): 270–77.
- Dunn, Sandra, Susan Florio-Ruane, and Christopher M. Clark. "The Teacher as Respondent to the High School Writer." In S. W. Freedman, ed. *The Acquisition of Written Language: Response and Revision*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985.
- Freedman, Sarah. *Response to Student Writing: Teaching and Learning*. Research Report. Urbana: NCTE, in press.
- and J. Bennett. *Peer Groups at Work in Two Writing Classrooms*. Final report to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (G008690004). Berkeley: Center for the Study of Writing, 1987.
- and Alex McLeod. *US/UK Audience Exchanges*. Berkeley, Center for the Study of Writing, in progress.
- Gifford, B. *Disseminating Research in Writing*. Final Report to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (G008690004). Berkeley: Center for the Study of Writing, in progress.
- Graves, Don. *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann, 1983.
- Hahn, J. "Students' Reactions to Teachers' Written Comments." *National Writing Project Network Newsletter* 4 (1981) 7–10.
- Heath, Shirley B., and Amanda Branscombe. "'Intelligent Writing' in an Audience Community: Teachers, Students, and Researcher." In S. W. Freedman, ed. *The Acquisition of Written Language: Response and Revision*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985.
- Lees, Elaine O. "Evaluating Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 30 (1979) 370–74.

- Levin, James A., Margaret M. Reil, Robert D. Rowe, and Marcia J. Boruta. "Muktuk Meets Jacuzzi: Computer Networks and Elementary School Writers." in S. W. Freedman, ed. *The Acquisition of Written Language: Response and Revision*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985.
- Ogbu, John U. "Learning in Burgherside: The Ethnography of Education." in G. M. Foster and R. V. Kemper, eds. *Anthropologists in Cities*. Boston: Little, 1974.
- Perl, Sondra, and Nancy Wilson. *Through Teachers' Eyes: Portraits of Writing Teachers at Work*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann, 1986.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 33 (1982) 148-56.
- Sperling, Melanie. "A Study of Student-Teacher Conferences in a Ninth-Grade Writing Class." Diss. U of California, Berkeley, in progress.
- Sperling, Melanie, and Sarah Freedman. "A Good Girl Writes Like a Good Girl: Written Response to Student Writing." *Written Communication* 4, in press.
- Staton, Jana, Roger Shuy, Joy Kreeft, and L. Reed. *The Analysis of Dialogue Journal Writing as a Communicative Event*. Final report to the National Institute of Education (NIE-G-80-0122). Washington: The Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982.

Call for State and District-Level Programs for Teacher Improvement

Have you developed at the district or state level any programs in the areas described below? The National Council of Teachers of English is seeking to identify and publicize state and district-based programs that are meeting inservice and career development needs of *K-12 teachers of all subjects*. The areas of concern are as follows:

1. Do you have a program of *help for beginning teachers* in which experienced classroom teachers (that is, teachers currently in the classroom at least part-time) are used as consultants?
2. Do you have a program which provides *inservice or other staff support specifically for minority teachers*?
3. Do you have a *career development program for teachers* in which advancement includes continued classroom teaching?
4. Do you have a *teacher evaluation program* in which teacher competency is determined to some extent through direct participation of other classroom teachers?

If such programs exist in your district or state, please write a brief description (maximum three double-spaced pages) of the main features of the program, attaching such supplementary documents as are on hand. Send the materials not later than November 5 to Charles Suhor, Deputy Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

1988 NATE Conference Study Tour

NATE is offering a Study Tour/Conference package in Easter, 1988. The Study Tour will begin in London on 31 March, and will run for six days. There will be two main emphases: the English Romantics and Elizabethan Theatre. The tour will include Keats' House, Blake's and Turner's paintings, Jane Austen's House, Wordsworth's homes, creative writing in the Lake District, Byron's ancestral house, and three theatre visits, including one at Stratford-upon-Avon. It concludes with a visit to the Brontë Parsonage. The tour will end in York, venue for the 1988 NATE Conference (5-8 April).

Academic credit for the Study Tour is being negotiated through Virginia Tech. The 1988 Conference Programme Committee has reserved space on the NATE Conference programme for Study Tour members who might wish to present papers at York.

For further information, please write to

Dr. Colin Harrison
 1988 NATE Conference Study Tour
 School of Education
 Nottingham University
 Nottingham NG7 2RD
 U.K.
 (Phone 602-506101)

LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 1 of 1 -



You have printed the following article:

Recent Developments in Writing: How Teachers Manage Response

Sarah Warshauer Freedman

The English Journal, Vol. 76, No. 6. (Oct., 1987), pp. 35-40.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0013-8274%28198710%2976%3A6%3C35%3ARDIWHT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8>

This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.

Works Cited

Remedial Writers: The Teacher's Job as Corrector of Papers

John F. Butler

College Composition and Communication, Vol. 31, No. 3. (Oct., 1980), pp. 270-277.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-096X%28198010%2931%3A3%3C270%3ARWTTJA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

Evaluating Student Writing

Elaine O. Lees

College Composition and Communication, Vol. 30, No. 4. (Dec., 1979), pp. 370-374.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-096X%28197912%2930%3A4%3C370%3AESW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G>

Responding to Student Writing

Nancy Sommers

College Composition and Communication, Vol. 33, No. 2. (May, 1982), pp. 148-156.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-096X%28198205%2933%3A2%3C148%3ARTSW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8>