



Moving beyond the Written Comment: Narrowing the Gap between Response Practice and Research

Author(s): Jane Mathison Fife and Peggy O'Neill

Source: *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Dec., 2001), pp. 300-321

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/359079>

Accessed: 01-09-2015 15:53 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College Composition and Communication*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Jane Mathison Fife and Peggy O'Neill

Moving beyond the Written Comment: Narrowing the Gap between Response Practice and Research

While our field's response practices have changed dramatically over the past two decades to involve more student comments on their own texts, empirical studies have lagged far behind classroom practices, focusing almost exclusively on teachers' written comments as texts. By broadening our notion of response—and acknowledging the many and varied ways that teachers respond to student writing as well as the many and varied ways that students influence and interpret those responses—we will be able to narrow the gap between our teaching practices and our research questions.

Improving the effectiveness of teachers' written comments on student papers has been a continuing conversation in composition studies for decades. Because written commentary is such an obvious teacher intervention into students' writing practices, and because it is where most of the direct teaching happens in student-centered pedagogy, writing teachers and researchers have carefully scrutinized the implications of comments for the development of students' autonomy as writers and their attitudes toward writing. However, our field's empirical studies of response practices have lagged far behind peda-

CCC 53:2 / DECEMBER 2001

gological practices. While methods of teaching writing have changed dramatically over the last twenty years to involve students much more in assessing and commenting on their own (and other students') texts, empirical studies of response have largely ignored these changing practices and have envisioned teachers' written comments as the only "response" to student writing that goes on. Another problem with recent response studies is the tendency to view comments from the researcher's perspective alone, analyzing the comments as *text* apart from the classroom *context* that gave rise to them. These research practices are problematic because just as they tend to study teacher comments in a vacuum, disconnected from other teaching practices and their collective effects on student writing, they also tend to offer advice for pedagogical practice that envisions teachers commenting in a vacuum, separated from the rest of what we do as writing teachers. This can lead to a bracketing off of response as a special subcategory of both composition research and pedagogical practice instead of a necessary connecting of response and its theory with the discussions that drive the rest of our teaching and research.

We became aware of these limiting focuses of response research as we began a research project that originally focused on how teachers commented when they used portfolios for grading students compared to how they commented in a more traditional classroom where individual essays were graded. We found an impressive body of literature on responding to student writing and many research studies about teacher commentary¹; however, we soon realized that most of the work provided textual analysis of comments with little information about how the comments functioned as part of the class. Trying to code comments based solely on textual analysis proved very frustrating for us because the comments were not considered as part of the classroom context so that the results of the codes did not seem to be consistent with what we knew of the teachers and with what their students said about them. This disjuncture and discomfort led us to reexamine our textual approach to the comments while it also caused us to examine more closely the composition community's research on response and teacher commentary.²

In 1982, two landmark research essays on teachers' response to student writing were published: Nancy Sommers's "Responding to Student Writing" and Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch's "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response." These two essays have made a lasting contribution to the discourse on teacher commentary in our field and the criteria we use to guide our research about the effectiveness of teachers' written response. The literature on teacher commentary frequently cites Nancy Sommers's

observations that comments need to be appropriate for the stage of the draft (so that, for example, editing matters are not mentioned in response to a first draft) and that comments are often vague, “rubber stamped” without specific reference to the individual paper. Brannon and Knoblauch are noted for their observation that teachers appropriate students’ texts, subverting the students’ ability to control their texts because teacher comments evaluate student writing against an ideal text and not in terms of students’ goals for that writing. These important insights have greatly influenced the direction of empirical research on response to student writing: Most response research has focused on teachers’ styles of written commentary in order to address the problems noted by Sommers and Brannon and Knoblauch. The prevailing assumption of the research has been that the problems of ineffective response and loss of student textual authority lies in the teachers’ written comments; solving these problems, then, means improving and changing the written comments.

Almost twenty years after the Sommers and Brannon and Knoblauch articles, our research literature still offers us very similar strategies for making

Conceptions of teacher response reflected in this research also have remained stable: The important response, the response that counts, is the written comment to the student draft.

comments more effective and making the response process a more positive learning experience for students (Connors and Lunsford; S. Smith; Straub, “Concept,” “Students,” and “Teacher”; and Straub and Lunsford). Conceptions of teacher response reflected in this research also have remained stable: The important

response, the response that counts, is the written comment to the student draft. Interestingly, during this same period, pedagogical theories and practices have changed dramatically as we have embraced social construction and all that it implies. Texts are understood in context and more and more teachers recognize the importance of the whole classroom context as a framework for response and move toward including student voices in discussions about writing. These practices are crucial to take into account when examining response to student writing because they add many layers of complexity and interaction to the traditional response dynamic of students writing and teachers evaluating isolated essays. However, empirical research about response generally does not reflect this more complex configuring of response in recent classroom practice.

In light of changing classroom practices fostered by social construction theory, this essay focuses on two neglected insights from Sommers and Brannon and Knoblauch—the importance of connecting comments to classroom con-

text and inviting student metacommentary on their drafts—as we examine the current state of research on response to student writing. Specifically, we argue that if empirical research is to accurately interpret and evaluate teachers' response, it needs to consider the particular context in which response occurs as well as the students' and teachers' perspectives, and that this has not been done in published research on response to date. In making this argument, we re-evaluate the metaphor of conversation that has been repeatedly used to describe teacher response, arguing that the implications of this metaphor have not been adequately explored.

Research on response to student writing: bracketing the pedagogical context

Besides the oft-cited observations from the 1982 research essays by Sommers and Brannon and Knoblauch mentioned above, two other insights, which have had little influence, have significant implications for empirical studies of response practices. In her essay, Sommers argues, "The key to successful commenting is to have what is said in the comments and what is done in the classroom mutually reinforce and enrich each other" (155). Her advice suggests that attempts to improve our commenting styles should integrate written comments with other pedagogical practices; we should make sure that written comments and other activities that structure writing complement rather than subvert the other's efforts. Brannon and Knoblauch's suggestion of a broadened "model of teacher response" in their essay augments this approach.

They argue that in order to allow the student to "reassert control" over her or his text, response should be structured as a negotiation or dialogue between student and teacher about how the text can be revised to best achieve the student's intention. Brannon and Knoblauch recommend that students incorporate into each draft (in a wide column to the right of the text)

explanations of "what they were trying to say or do and how they expected the reader to react to it" (163). The teacher could then respond in terms of how well the text worked toward achieving the student's desired audience responses. Both of these recommendations suggest that communication that enhances student textual control and revision skills cannot begin with teachers' comments written on student drafts. Instead, these comments must be

Communication that enhances student textual control and revision skills cannot begin with teachers' comments written on student drafts. Instead, these comments must be contextualized by efforts to position students to speak authoritatively not only *through* their writing, but also *about* their writing.

contextualized by efforts to position students to speak authoritatively not only *through* their writing, but also *about* their writing and writing decisions. Brannon and Knoblauch's study incorporates a statement of student intentions into their research design for studying teacher response; they also recommend this as an important classroom practice. These early studies offer pedagogical advice that connects teacher response inextricably to a broader web of classroom practices, and the past decade has seen a trend toward incorporating students' attempts at self-evaluation into classroom response practices (for examples see Conway; J. Sommers; Welch; Yancey, *Portfolios and Reflection*), but the design of recent research studies of response has not included classroom context to investigate these practices (for example, see S. Smith and Straub and Lunsford). Melanie Sperling's work in a secondary classroom, however, not only challenges this trend but also underscores the influence of context on teachers' comments. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers' written response, more research studies need to begin to examine these complex pedagogical practices, taking into account the full context in which composing/response/revision/evaluation occurs.

There have been important efforts toward analyzing teacher comments from a perspective other than that of teacher or researcher. Some studies have attempted to contextualize written commentary by examining students' interpretations of teachers' comments to determine what comments students find most helpful (Auten, "Rhetoric" and "How"; Fuller; Hayes and Daiker; Jenkins; E. Smith; Straub, "Students"; Ziv). David Fuller, Ruth Jenkins, and Ernest Smith investigate how students in their classes react to teacher comments, situating these comments within the contexts of the teachers' goals for their commentary. Some studies use a survey format to ask students about their reactions to comments (Auten, "How"), even using sample comments that were not in response to papers the students had actually written (Straub, "Students"). Significantly, however, all of these attempts to take student perspective into account limit their focus to teachers' written comments, not attempting to describe the response situation of the classroom. One important exception is Melanie Sperling and Sarah Freedman's "A Good Girl Writes Like a Good Girl," which focuses on data gathered as part of an ethnographic classroom study to compare the perspectives of a teacher and a student to the teacher's written and oral comments. Generally, studies that do envision the response situation as larger than teacher written comments usually focus only on one aspect of response such as student-teacher conferences (Newkirk, "First"

and "Writing"; Patthey-Chavez and Ferris) or peer group conferences (Di Pardo and Freedman; Nystrand and Brandt; Walvoord). Research that begins to address the interconnections of these aspects of response is still needed.³

Most of the recent published research on response to student writing has neglected to account for the context of pedagogical practices. Research such as Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford's, Richard Straub's, Richard Straub and Ronald Lunsford's, and Summer Smith's does not address the potential for classroom practice to influence not only the textual form of the comments but also the role that teacher response plays in the structure of the class and the students' development as writers. For example, Straub and Lunsford's 1995 book, *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing*, provides a close textual analysis of response to student writing that, while it provides detailed profiles of twelve teachers' response styles, is acontextual in terms of actual classroom environment. One of their readers, Chris Anson, creates a context for his response by imagining a student meta-text or reflective memo to accompany a draft and responding to issues raised by the student in this imagined note, but Straub and Lunsford do not discuss the implications of this shift in focus for the response situation (305-20). This seems to us to be a fundamental shift: Anson strikes us as focused on improving Anne as a writer—increasing her awareness of why she's doing what she's doing—and not just creating a better piece of writing. Of course, Anson's focus on the writer over the writing is not new, but composition research on response doesn't recognize the difference. We need to design studies that ask whether such practices make a difference and if so, what kind of difference they make.

Richard Larson, another of Straub and Lunsford's twelve readers, explains in the book's epilogue the limitations he experienced in responding to the student texts in this study:

As an invited outside reader, I did not know fully what the task was. I did not know most features of the instructional context that contributed to making the assignment what the student constructed it to be. Part of that context is what might be called the overall "ecology" of the instruction: the details of what the student wrote on earlier assignments, the discussion in class (if any) that preceded the writing, the comments that the student had received on earlier writings, the instructor's normal procedures in dealing with student writing . . . the facial expressions, the tone of voice used in giving the assignment, the examples (if any) used to illustrate it, the readings (if any) assigned just before the current assignment . . . and the interpersonal relationships that had already developed among the students. (375)

While Straub and Lunsford's study design works well to show contrast in these teachers' response styles through their responses to the *same* student texts, we could learn so much more that is crucial about teachers' response practices if researchers began to describe some of what Larson refers to as the "ecology" of instruction. Larson highlights the need for context to guide reading and responding, acknowledging that what happens in the classroom influences what the students write and how he responds to it. We believe, along with Nancy Sommers, that the same holds true for the written comments that teachers write: The comments are part of the larger context and informed by that context. In other words, reading and examining teachers' written responses outside of authentic classroom contexts provides an incomplete picture. As Louise Phelps notes in her discussion of *Twelve Readers Reading*, this analysis of commentary completely divorced from any classroom context surrounding it shifts the focus away from the surprise and learning involved in good response conversations ("Surprised"). Instead, research centered on analysis of

Besides neglecting the pedagogical context of the comments, research that relies solely on the researcher's or teacher's interpretation of a response violates what we know about reading and making meaning.

teacher comments hypothesizes how the language of those comments (just one small part of this whole pedagogical interchange) might affect students, vastly underestimating the pedagogical complexity of the response situation.

Besides neglecting the pedagogical context of the comments, research that relies solely on the researcher's or teacher's interpretation of a response violates what we know about reading and making meaning. The outsider's interpretation—no matter how reliable with other researchers' interpretations—is not necessarily going to concur with the reading of an insider—the student who is the real audience of those comments. By analyzing the comments as texts, which response researchers typically do, they are assuming that the comments have a "true" meaning inherent in the text and not influenced by the classroom context. Postmodern theory—as well as linguistics and pragmatics—tells us this isn't true of texts: "structure, qualities, features, meanings—are not fixed, are not given or inherent in the work itself but are at every point the variable products of particular subjects" (B. Smith 48). Though some apply these ideas to the texts students write (Lawson, Ryan, and Winterowd; White, Lutz, and Kamusikiri), they don't consider the texts teachers write in response to student papers in their arguments about the variable, contextual meaning of written texts. Teacher comments, after all, are an attempt at communication and, like all forms of communication, we need to understand the events

and features that construct that communication in order to understand it fully. Michael Halliday argues that “any account of language which fails to build in the situation as an essential ingredient is likely to be artificial and unrewarding” (qtd. in Huot 559). In other words, the texts that teachers write in response to student writing are influenced and informed by the contexts in which they function; consequently, any interpretation of these teacher-written texts needs to consider the texts’ particular contexts, not just a generic one. By considering only their own interpretations, Straub and Lunsford assume that students’ interpretations of the comments would be the same as theirs, or that the students’ interpretations aren’t as important. Either assumption is problematic. Sperling and Freedman found that a student’s and teacher’s understandings of the teacher’s written response don’t always coincide even after face-to-face conferences.

This absence of consideration of pedagogical context in most research studies of teacher commentary is a concern because over the last decade, many practices that can significantly alter the response dynamic, including portfolios and reflective or metacognitive writing, have been widely adopted in writing classrooms. These changing pedagogical practices have the potential to re-envision response as a more complex dynamic, but most recent research on response hasn’t begun the needed investigation of whether/how these practices realize this potential for restructuring response practices that may have become routine. These goals of enhancing student learning and self-evaluation skills that these practices share, like the goals of improving teacher response, are difficult to enact: Students and teachers are frequently unfamiliar with these practices and are often uncomfortable with the shifts they cause in the response structure of a classroom. As William Thelin found in a portfolio class he studied, teachers’ response is not always consistent with the other aspects of the class and students don’t always know how to use it, no matter how facilitative or conversational it is. Therefore, it is important that research on response begin to focus on the complexity of implementing these practices.

As we reviewed recent studies on teacher comments, we were struck by how little seems to have changed in twenty years in terms of the “state of the art” of teacher commentary as well as some of the advice for improvement

These changing pedagogical practices have the potential to re-envision response as a more complex dynamic, but most recent research on response hasn’t begun the needed investigation of whether/how these practices realize this potential for restructuring response practices that may have become routine.

offered by researchers. For example, Summer Smith argues that teachers' end comments function as a relatively stable genre across time and institutional setting based on her study of 192 end comments. She contends that the stability of this endnote genre may detract from its effectiveness for facilitating revision and growth in students' writing if they come to see these comments as formulaic rather than specific to their individual texts and needs as writers (although Smith provides no evidence that the comments she studies are effective or ineffective or even representative). This chief insight of Smith's study is very similar to Nancy Sommers's "rubber-stamp" warning fifteen years earlier. To prevent formulaic and ineffective comments, Smith recommends a textual solution: Teachers should resist many of the generic conventions she traces in her sample, "always being certain to match the resistance to the situation"

But sound advice like Smith's that we take context into account as we compose our end comments could be helpfully extended if some of our research designs began to examine more of the context in which we teachers comment.

(267). There is nothing wrong with this advice to be aware of your situation for response. But sound advice like Smith's that we take context into account as we compose our end comments could be helpfully extended if some of our research designs began to examine more of the context in which we teachers comment. Just as Smith urges teachers to break free from the routine genre of the end comment, we urge researchers to break free from the routine genre of research on teacher comments (textual analysis of teacher written response in a vacuum).

Some of the most interesting insights about the response situation occur when a researcher begins to look beyond the end comment. Smith notes one comment as an exception to the generic conventions she observed because of the reference it makes to a student's comment about the process of writing the paper. This comment begins: "You've done an excellent job with this evaluation you found so difficult to write" (265). Smith praises this comment because it sounds sincere rather than formulaic: ". . . the teacher begins with a positive evaluation of the whole paper, but personalizes it with a reference to the difficulty of writing the paper, information the teacher must have remembered from conversations with the student" (266). Conversations (whether written or spoken) such as this one Smith infers the teacher remembered need to be included in our studies of response to allow for just such interesting insights. As our technological context changes, email interchanges with students about texts are becoming more common and yield another written artifact

Some of the most interesting insights about the response situation occur when a researcher begins to look beyond the end comment. Smith notes one comment as an exception to the generic conventions she observed because of the reference it makes to a student's comment about the process of writing the paper. This comment begins: "You've done an excellent job with this evaluation you found so difficult to write" (265). Smith praises this comment because it sounds sincere rather than formulaic: ". . . the teacher begins with a positive evaluation of the whole paper, but personalizes it with a reference to the difficulty of writing the paper, information the teacher must have remembered from conversations with the student" (266). Conversations (whether written or spoken) such as this one Smith infers the teacher remembered need to be included in our studies of response to allow for just such interesting insights. As our technological context changes, email interchanges with students about texts are becoming more common and yield another written artifact

that could be easily studied. However, studying *only* these written texts will not give us all the insight we need: Response research has generally overlooked any parts of the teacher-student interchange that don't produce written artifacts for convenient analysis. Studies that go beyond these convenient written artifacts to employ such methods as conversations and interviews with students and teachers are important to conduct despite their very time-consuming and challenging design.

Theorizing the need for new research designs

In her recent effort to examine how authority is distributed in response practices, Janet Auten observes that teacher commentary is one of many manifestations of “teacher talk” that usually conforms to the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern of classroom discourse:

In composition classes, teachers Initiate action in giving a writing assignment. But ordinary rules of asking and receiving information rarely apply here. Instead, the teacher is an “asker who already knows the answer,” and therefore the student must Respond, as expected, with a display of appropriate knowledge. The student composition, then, fits neatly into the pattern, ready for the teacher to Evaluate—in the form of commentary with a grade. (“Rhetoric” 5)

Following Auten's analysis of the way student texts and teachers' response can fit into the usual structure of school discourse, we can see how envisioning a conversation in which the student participates only by providing a text to which the teacher responds (and even revises in response to the teacher's comments to which the teacher again responds with commentary that functions as an evaluation of the student's efforts) structures this response exchange in a way that offers the student limited authority and may limit the student's learning and engagement throughout the writing process. Auten argues that any commentary on student texts attributes greater authority to the commentator. She contends that “it is the nature of teacher commentary to displace the authority of the student as writer and emphasize the commentator's authority. Simply altering one's style of commenting or the tone of the teaching ‘voice’—the voice of authority—still leaves the textual problem in place” (“Rhetoric” 6).

Auten's analysis suggests a drawback of much of the empirical research on response and the advice it offers teachers: By framing the problem of response as a “textual problem” and suggesting textual solutions (like changing one's commenting style), we still leave unaddressed the larger structures for discourse that shift authority to the teacher and away from the student. Auten

suggests that we need to move from a textual framing of the commentary “problem” to a contextual one:

Many comment studies are teacher-focused, and they imply that if somehow comments were more cogently written and more carefully offered, then hapless student readers would at last “catch on.” But the challenge for teachers in writing comments is not just to be clear or “audience aware” but to reconcile their context for writing comments with students’ awareness and ability to read comments. (“Rhetoric” 13-14)

In order to reconcile our context for commentary with our students’, Auten suggests that we introduce students to our purposes by giving them a “rhetoric of commentary”: explaining why we use certain kinds of comments and the results we intend these approaches to yield. Auten’s attempt to make response research more aware of context is an important one. But such a contextual focus for research also needs to be extended to include the way writing and response are structured in the classroom and how this implies certain patterns of discourse.

In his article “Teacher Response as Conversation,” Richard Straub argues for revising our usual understanding of teacher commentary as conversational. He explains that “conversation” in relation to teacher comments has been far too general a term to be useful anymore: “The idea of response as a *conversation* has become a catch-all for any teacher response that is informal, positive, and nurturing, or even for any response that is nonprescriptive. The term has come to refer to any response that puts the teacher in the role of reader or coach rather than the role of critic or judge” (381, emphasis in original). Straub argues for a closer examination of how comments can be conversational and advocates commentary that, in an interactive mode, suggests questions and revision possibilities to enable students to engage in “richer pursuits of meaning” than they would on their own: “Only by elaborating one’s comments in a way that opens up the matters under discussion for a mutual investigation by writer and reader can a teacher make his comments conversational in the sense I am pursuing here” (389). Straub’s discussion of teacher comments as conversational in this “interactive” sense describes comments that involve students in revision as a mutual investigation with the teacher. Making comments conversational in this sense constructs the student as an active, knowledgeable participant in the process of writing and revision. Sarah Freedman suggests a similar philosophy for a collaborative model of response: “. . . it becomes clear that response (1) should be collaborative between a writer and someone more

expert on the issue being discussed, (2) should try to help developing writers solve writing problems or write in ways that they could not alone, and (3) should lead to independent problem solving" (9).

In order to reach this goal of response as interactive conversation, Straub suggests specific textual strategies. In his description of the kind of commentary he sees as richly conversational, he explains the important role of teacher comments in "constructing" the students' conceptions of themselves as writers:

These responders seem to concentrate on the subject at hand, not on the student reading the comments, and engage the writing in a way that they hope will engage the writer. By constructing themselves as investigators, the teachers implicitly construct the student writer as an investigator. By treating the issues raised in the writing as real issues, real matters to be discussed and considered, they accept the student as someone who has something to say, something well worth exploring. By talking about the text as an act of writing and reading, they create the student as someone who is both capable of, and interested in, working through these issues of writing and improving himself as a writer. ("Teacher" 390)

Straub emphasizes the importance of the teacher's comments in establishing the roles teacher and student can assume in this textual interchange. This insight has important implications for composition pedagogy, but it still conceives of the issue as a "textual problem" to be addressed by the kind of commentary we write. Our research needs to examine how roles as writers and readers are constructed for students and teachers through the structure of all writing activities, not just through teacher commentary. The pedagogical context of the comments must also be examined to interpret more effectively how commenting practices construct roles for teachers and students. Straub comments that "the particular context has an effect on how students view teacher response," acknowledging that in "the full context of the classroom, the directive comments of one teacher may not be comparable to the directive comments of another teacher" ("Students" 113). In other words, when researchers code comments without reference to the classroom context in which they occur, the coding may not be accurate. Textual analysis of teacher comments can suggest important characteristics of response that encourage students to see themselves as writers, but we need to look at the broader structure of the exchanges about writing that go on in the classroom to see how these dynamics can encourage or inhibit a real conversation with students about their writing.

The pedagogical context of the comments must also be examined to interpret more effectively how commenting practices construct roles for teachers and students.

Encouraging real conversation through response

As Straub notes, “conversation” or “dialogue” has long been a metaphor for the interchange involving student texts and teacher responses. While we agree that conversation is a useful way to conceive of the response situation, we contend that the implications of conversation as a metaphor for the teacher-student interaction need to be discussed more fully in light of the reflective writing practices that are becoming more common in classrooms.

Conversational researchers such as John Gumperz and Erving Goffman emphasize the contextual nature of conversation, explaining that it is a socially embedded activity that can only be understood in the context in which it occurs. According to Goffman, someone coming to talk “out of the context of events, relationships, and mutual knowingness in which it was originally voiced might misunderstand,” while the “speakers and hearers nonetheless can be perfectly clear about what is intended” (11). In order to understand a conversational exchange, Gumperz calls for intensive case studies of key encounters that explore context and listen to the participants’ perceptions of what happened (7). Important factors influencing the participants’ understanding of the exchange include the physical setting, personal background knowledge, attitudes toward each other, socio-cultural assumptions concerning role and status relationships, and social values associated with various message components (Gumperz 153). Other characteristics of conversation identified by Gumperz include conversation’s patterned turn-taking and its reliance on negotiation between the participants. These features highlight the “dynamic process” (Gumperz 131) that distinguishes conversation from many other language performances.

We need to investigate what patterns of discourse inform our response practices: “IRE” patterns of “teacher talk” with the teacher knowing the “right answer” all along—reminiscent of the teacher’s ideal text that Brannon and Knoblauch argue against—or patterns for conversation found in other settings marked by a mutual negotiation of meaning between participants.

Although we realize that conversation by definition is an oral exchange, the response situation shares—or can share—

many of these features. We need to investigate what patterns of discourse inform our response practices: “IRE” patterns of “teacher talk” with the teacher knowing the “right answer” all along—reminiscent of the teacher’s ideal text that Brannon and Knoblauch argue against—or patterns for conversation found in other settings marked by a mutual negotiation of meaning between participants. What rules, explicitly stated or implied, structure the kinds of contributions students and teachers make in the writing and response interchange?

What rules exist about turn-taking? Who gets to set the topic? Who is authorized to speak *about* the student's writing and suggest plans and rationales for revision? What pedagogical practices invite the student to respond to the teacher's comments?

Teachers who choose to model writing and response on real conversational practices instead of discourse practices that exist only in school settings can create opportunities for students and teacher to engage in discussions—orally, or in writing, or both—about textual goals and strategies. To reach the goal of creating and sustaining a mutual inquiry about writing between teachers and students, students can be invited to comment on their texts in the same forum (written or oral) that the teacher uses. And, as the literature on student-teacher conferences reminds us, students need to be offered the opportunity to *begin* the conversation, to initiate the process of inquiry by stating their observations, goals, and concerns (Beach; Newkirk, "First"). As Richard Beach explains: "Students not only need to be able to define their own logical or rhetorical strategies, they also need to know why they are using those strategies. This requires them to be able to reflect on what they are doing and why—a metacognitive awareness of their own rhetorical behaviors" (131). While Beach describes discussions of this kind in the context of the student-teacher conference, such explicit conversation can also be initiated by students in their explanations of their writing goals and an assessment of what they need to do to meet them in written forms like writers' memos (see Katz; J. Sommers). When students' writing is only commented on by the teacher and not by the student writers themselves, dialogue does not take place on the same plane of writing—on a metacognitive level that discusses possibilities and rationales for writing decisions. Instead, the student's contributions to this dialogue become the implementations of the teacher's writing decisions, as Auten suggests.

We need to make sure that our research designs allow us to look for exchanges about writing with our students that invite metacognitive comments on their part—and not just welcome them as serendipity when we run into references to such conversations. If we as teachers have goals of helping students to learn how to think as writers, then we as researchers need to examine the means of achieving those pedagogical goals. We need research that explores how teachers are already trying to establish this broader sense of conversation in the larger context of their classroom, and the difficulties as well as achievements that result from these attempts.

Broadening our concept of response research

We need to begin to rethink what we as a field have traditionally categorized as empirical research on response. Louise Phelps argues for reconceptualizing research on response by including studies with varied emphases as well as diverse methods: "Rather than claiming only the thread of research that has studied commentary and response styles rhetorically, we should recognize and exploit a wide variety of research traditions and theories in the field that bear on different topics and phases in the phenomenon of response . . ." ("Cyrano's" 99). According to Phelps, Chris Anson's essay "Response and the Social Construction of Error" and Susan Callahan's essay "Responding to the Invisible

We agree with Phelps' call for a more inclusive approach to what is considered research on response to student writing and would like to suggest specific examples of empirical studies that can also contribute to our understanding of teachers' response.

Student" fit within her vision of a broader concept of response research, although as Sandy Murphy commented, the students' voices and perceptions are still missing from these articles. Phelps also identifies work on transactional theories done in the 1970s and 1980s, protocol studies of reading, rhetorical and literary critical methods, studies that connect response to reflective practice, arguments for composition as a

critical discipline with student texts as its canon, as well as several other areas as appropriate for inclusion in response research. We agree with Phelps' call for a more inclusive approach to what is considered research on response to student writing and would like to suggest specific examples of empirical studies that can also contribute to our understanding of teachers' response.

One particularly rich area to consider is the research done in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) or Writing in the Disciplines (WID). For example, Paul Prior's work on enculturation into sociology includes feedback on the graduate student's reading, reaction, and processing of the comments and feedback she received from her dissertation direction. While his case study focuses primarily on the role the response to her writing played in her socialization into her field, it also provides an in-depth look at how a developing writer reads and uses the comments she received. Using close textual analysis—which has come to be the traditional method associated with response studies—as well as discourse-based interviews, Prior demonstrates how response and revision were influenced and shaped by personal, interpersonal, and institutional histories. He concludes, "Pedagogically, this fine-grained image of the uptake of response points to the need to ask how response is situated in interpersonal and institutional contexts . . ." ("Tracing" 320). Other

studies, such as those by Larry Beason, Anne Herrington, Greg Myers, and Carol Berkenkotter, Tom Huckin, and John Ackerman, considered in the WAC/WID canon also contribute to our understanding of what constitutes response to student writing, how teacher comments fit within the broader context in which they occur, and how students process the response.

Besides WAC/WID research, our understanding of teacher response to student writing can be illuminated by studies from other areas such as revision, basic writing, or literacy. For example, in "Remediation as Social Construct: Perspectives from an Analysis of Classroom Discourse," Glynda Hull and her colleagues argue that the teacher and student interaction in the classroom affected the teacher's evaluation and response to a particular student so much so that even though the student wrote well and the teacher's written response was positive, the teacher accounted for the student's improvement "by surmising that she had probably gotten help from her parents" (310). The written comments alone would never have revealed the teacher's evaluation of the student as a problem thinker or uncovered the student's problems communicating with the teacher in the classroom, but these are very important aspects of the classroom and the teachers' response. In another type of study that also involved following a group of basic writers for five years, Margaret McLaughlin and Eleanor Agnew found that writing instructors at their institution responded differently to white students and black students with negative consequences to speakers/writers of African American Vernacular English that had profound effects. Not only, then, do we need to re-think how we categorize our research, we also need to think about the methodologies we use to gather and analyze data. As Prior, Hull et al., and others reinforce, written texts have meaning in the context in which they occur.

Finally, researchers in composition studies need to include the work done in K-12 education instead of isolating college writing teachers from their K-12 counterparts. Much of the work done in response and evaluation in elementary or secondary classrooms goes uncited and probably unread in composition studies. For example, Sperling and Freedman's research is not mentioned in most of the composition response research we reviewed although its theories and implications extend to writing classrooms of all levels.

By broadening our notion of response—and acknowledging the many and varied ways that teachers respond to student writing as well as the many and varied ways that students influence and interpret those responses—we will be able to narrow the gap between our teaching practices and our research questions. To help accomplish this goal, we need to continually challenge ourselves

as researchers to remember the questions we wonder about as teachers. Nancy Sommers underscores the importance of allowing this teacher perspective to guide our research as she reflected on her groundbreaking study fifteen years after its original publication:

If I were to write "Responding to Student Writing: Part Two," I would try to write less in the voice of a self-righteous researcher, pointing her finger at her fellow teachers, and more like a fellow teacher. For it is as a teacher that I am curious about the ways in which students read and interpret my comments, why they find some comments useful, others distracting, and how these comments work together with the lessons of the classroom. I am also curious about the ways in which our colleagues across the disciplines respond to student writing. As I reread my 1983 essay, I feel the absence of any "real" students whose voice, expertise, and years of being responded to could offer valuable perspective, and the absence of any "real" teachers, other than the stereotypical composition teacher, who seems in my essay strangely devoid of expertise. ("Afterword" 130-31)

Connecting our conversations about teaching and research

Creating and fostering genuine conversations in our writing classrooms—instead of metaphorical ones—as we respond to student writing is not just an academic concern. Language interaction, as John Shotter argues, constructs reality and is instrumental in making knowledge. Shotter argues for the inclusion of multiple, diverse voices where participation in the process is considered valuable: "In other words, what matters is not so much the conclusions arrived at as the terms within which arguments are conducted. For to talk in new ways is to 'construct' new forms of social relation, and to construct new forms of social relation . . . is to construct new ways of being . . ." (9). By encouraging our students to participate in dialogue, and by including their voices in our interpretations of the situation, we are changing the terms that usually define response as well as the reality of it. Getting students to talk and write about their writing like writers can construct a reality where they are writers. When the conversation about student writing consistently includes students' metacognitive contributions, the responses from the teacher can address, as Brannon and Knoblauch recommended, the rhetorical issues of how well the writer is reaching his or her intentions. Additionally, in our pedagogies that increasingly value students' abilities to evaluate their own texts, conversations about their reflective assessments can offer important forums for teachers to validate and encourage the development of the complex self-awareness that is so necessary for good writers.

Many writing teachers already configure response in their classrooms in a way that authorizes students to speak about their own writing and encourages them to think about themselves as writers, often through reflective writing about their own texts and written or oral responses to the teacher's comments. Our research on response to student writing needs to acknowledge this broadened response situation and the two-way reflective conversation about writing that it enables. Our conception of response to student writing and the response practices advocated in teacher training materials must be informed and complicated by the reflective writing practiced in so many composition classrooms. Research about such an important area as our conversations about student writing needs to be responsive to changing pedagogical practices so that it can, in turn, revitalize our pedagogies by offering new insights about the complex dynamics of these practices.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Nancy Sommers, Marilyn Cooper, and the anonymous CCC reviewer whose comments contributed to the final form of this essay. We would especially like to acknowledge Brian Huot who encouraged our initial collaboration and continued to support our work through the lengthy evolution of this project.

Notes

1. In order to make our discussion clearer, we will use "research" to refer to empirical studies of response instead of discussions of classroom practice outside of a research study. This division is not intended to devalue descriptions of classroom practice, but because we are calling for studies of classroom context to supply information that we can't gather with normal teaching practices, we want to make this distinction clear.
2. As we worked on other research projects, however, we postponed analyzing the data from other parts of our study on how teachers read and respond to portfolios. As we argue later, the time-consuming nature of contextual research on response is probably a large reason why more of it isn't done. We have since published some of our study results that focused on students' perceptions of teacher response (O'Neill and Fife).
3. Sarah Freedman's highly contextual study of a high school English class, *Response to Student Writing*, does address these different forms of response; however, as we mention later, her example has seldom been followed in studies of response in college writing classes.

Works Cited

- Anson, Chris M. "Response and the Social Construction of Error." *Assessing Writing* 7 (2000): 5–21.
- . ed. *Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989.
- Auten, Janet Gebhart. "A Rhetoric of Teacher Commentary: The Complexity of Response to Student Writing." *Focuses* 4 (1991): 3–18.
- . "How Students Read Us: Audience Awareness and Teacher Commentary on Writing." *The Writing Instructor* 11 (1992): 83–94.
- Beach, Richard. "Showing Students How to Assess: Demonstrating Techniques for Response in the Writing Conference." Anson 127–48.
- Beason, Larry. "Feedback and Revision in Writing Across the Curriculum Classes." *Research in the Teaching of English* 27 (1993): 395–422.
- Berkenkotter, Carol, Thomas N. Huckin, and John Ackerman. "Social Context and Socially Constructed Texts: The Initiation of a Graduate Student into a Writing Research Community." *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*. Ed. Charles Bazerman and James Paradis. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991. 191–215.
- Brannon, Lil, and C.H. Knoblauch. "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response." *College Composition and Communication* 33 (1982): 157–66.
- Callahan, Susan. "Responding to the Invisible Student." *Assessing Writing* 7 (2000): 57–78.
- Connors, Robert J., and Andrea Lunsford. "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers." *College Composition and Communication* 44 (1993): 200–23.
- Conway, Glenda. "Portfolio Cover Letters, Students' Self-Presentation, and Teachers' Ethics." *New Directions in Portfolio Assessment: Reflective Practice, Critical Theory, and Large-Scale Scoring*. Ed. Laurel Black, Donald A. Daiker, Jeffrey Sommers, and Gail Stygall. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1994. 83–92.
- DiPardo, Anne, and Sarah Warshauer Freedman. "Peer Response Groups in the Writing Classroom: Theoretic Foundations and New Directions." *Review of Educational Research* 58 (1998): 119–49.
- Freedman, Sarah Warshauer. *Response to Student Writing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1987.
- Fuller, David. "Teacher Commentary that Communicates: Practicing What We Preach." *Journal of Teaching Writing* 6 (1987): 307–17.
- Goffman, Erving. *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1981.
- Gumperz, John J. *Discourse Strategies*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Hayes, Mary F., and Donald Daiker. "Using Protocol Analysis in Evaluating Responses to Student Writing." *Freshman English News* 13 (1984): 1–4.
- Herrington, Anne. "Composing One's Self in a Discipline: Students' and Teachers' Negotiations." *Constructing Rhetorical Education*. Ed. Marie Secor and Davida Charney. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992. 91–115.
- Hull, Glynda, Mike Rose, Kay Losey Fraser, and Marisa Castellano. "Remediation as Social Construct: Perspectives from an Analysis of Classroom Discourse." *College Composition and Communication* 42 (1991): 299–329.
- Huot, Brian. "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment." *College Composition and Communication* 47 (1996): 549–66.

- Jenkins, Ruth. "Responding to Student Writing: Written Dialogues on Writing and Revision." *The Writing Instructor* 6 (1987): 82-86.
- Katz, Norm. "Reading Intention." *Encountering Student Texts*. Ed. Bruce Lawson, Susan Sterr Ryan, and W. Ross Winterowd. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989. 111-19.
- Larson, Richard L. "Writing Assignments: How Might They Encourage Learning." Straub and Lunsford 375-85.
- Lawson, Bruce, Susan Sterr Ryan, and W. Ross Winterowd, eds. "Introduction: Interpretive Issues in Student Writing." *Encountering Student Texts: Interpretive Issues in Reading Student Writing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989. vii-xvii.
- McLaughlin, Margaret A., and Eleanor Agnew. "Teacher Attitudes toward African American Language Patterns: A Close Look at Attrition Rates." *Attending to the Margins: Writing, Researching, and Teaching on the Front Lines*. Ed. Michelle Hall Kells and Valerie Balester. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1999. 114-30.
- Murphy, Sandra. "A Sociocultural Perspective on Teacher Response: Is There a Student in the Room?" *Assessing Writing* 7 (2000): 79-90.
- Myers, Greg. *Writing Biology: Texts in the Social Construction of Scientific Knowledge*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1990.
- Newkirk, Thomas. "The First Five Minutes: Setting the Agenda in the Writing Conference." Anson 317-31.
- . "The Writing Conference as Performance." *Research in the Teaching of English* 29 (1995): 193-215.
- Nystrand, Martin, and Deborah Brandt. "Response to Writing as a Context for Learning to Write." Anson 209-30.
- O'Neill, Peggy, and Jane Mathison Fife. "Listening to Students: Contextualizing Response to Student Writing." *Composition Studies* 27 (1999): 39-51.
- Patthey-Chavez, G. G., and Dana R. Ferris. "Writing Conferences and the Weaving of Multi-Voiced Texts in College Composition." *Research in the Teaching of English* 31 (1997): 51-90.
- Phelps, Louise Wetherbee. "Cyrano's Nose: Variations on the Theme of Response." *Assessing Writing* 7 (2000): 91-110.
- . "Surprised by Response: Student, Teacher, Editor, Reviewer." *JAC* 18 (1998): 247-73.
- Prior, Paul. "Tracing Authoritative and Internally Persuasive Discourses: A Case Study of Response, Revision, and Disciplinary Enculturation." *Research in the Teaching of English* 29 (1995): 288-325.
- Shotter, John. *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life Through Language*. London: Sage, 1993.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988.
- Smith, Ernest. "'It Doesn't Bother Me, But Sometimes It's Discouraging': Students Respond to Teachers' Written Responses." *Journal of Teaching Writing* 8 (1989): 253-65.
- Smith, Summer. "The Genre of the End Comment: Conventions in Teacher Responses to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 48 (1997): 249-68.
- Sommers, Jeffrey. "The Writer's Memo: Collaboration, Response, and Development." Anson 174-86.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Afterword to 'Responding to Student Writing.'" *On Writing Research: The Braddock Essays 1975-*

1998. Ed. Lisa Ede. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. 130–31.
- . “Responding to Student Writing.” *College Composition and Communication* 33 (1982): 148–56.
- Sperling, Melanie. “Constructing the Perspective of Teacher-as-Reader: A Framework for Studying Response to Student Writing.” *Research in the Teaching of English* 28 (1994): 175–203.
- , and Sarah W. Freedman. “A Good Girl Writes Like a Good Girl: Written Response and Clues to the Teaching/Learning Process.” *Written Communication* 4 (1987): 343–69.
- Straub, Richard. “The Concept of Control in Teacher Response: Defining the Varieties of ‘Directive and Facilitative’ Commentary.” *College Composition and Communication* 47 (1996): 223–51.
- . “Students’ Reactions to Teacher Comments: An Exploratory Study.” *Research in the Teaching of English* 31 (1997): 91–119.
- . “Teacher Response as Conversation: More Than Casual Talk, an Exploration.” *Rhetoric Review* 14 (1996): 374–98.
- , and Ronald F. Lunsford. *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 1995.
- Thelin, William. “The Connection Between Response Styles and Portfolio Assessment: Three Case Studies of Student Revision.” *New Directions in Portfolio Assessment: Reflective Practice, Critical Theory, and Large-Scale Scoring*. Ed. Laurel Black, Donald A. Daiker, Jeffrey Sommers, and Gail Stygall. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1994. 83–92.
- Walvoord, Barbara E. Fassler. “Student Response Groups: Training for Autonomy.” *The Writing Instructor* 6 (1986): 39–47.
- Weinbaum, Kerry. “Portfolios as a Vehicle for Student Empowerment and Teacher Change.” *Portfolios: Process and Product*. Ed. Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1991. 206–14.
- Welch, Nancy. “Sideshadowing Teacher Response.” *College English* 60 (1998): 374–95.
- White, Edward M., William D. Lutz, and Sandra Kamusikiri, eds. *Assessment of Writing: Politics, Policies, Practices*. New York: MLA, 1996.
- Yancey, Kathleen Blake, ed. *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom: An Introduction*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992.
- . *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 1998.
- Ziv, Nina D. “The Effect of Teacher Comments on the Writing of Four College Freshmen.” *New Directions in Composition Research*. Ed. Richard Beach and Lillian Bridwell. New York: Guilford, 1984. 362–80.

Jane Mathison Fife

Jane Mathison Fife teaches writing and rhetoric at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Her teaching and research interests include engaging students more effectively in response to their writing and investigating the possibilities they envision for effecting change through writing. Her essays have appeared in *Composition Studies*, *Dialogue*, and an edited collection.

Peggy O'Neill

Peggy O'Neill teaches writing and directs the first-year composition program at Loyola College in Maryland. Her primary research interests include writing assessment and composition pedagogy. Peggy's work has appeared in *Composition Studies*, *Dialogue*, and *Assessing Writing* as well as in edited collections.