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“What Are You Thinking” Understanding Teacher *Reading* and Response Through a Protocol Analysis Study

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This article discusses results of a semester-long study on how composition teachers read and respond to student writing. Using protocol and textual analysis, along with interviews, the study focused on composition teacher reading strategies and what influences these teachers as they read and respond to student writing. From analysis of the data, I found that composition teachers employed multiple reading strategies while responding to student texts, and these strategies were often influenced by contextual factors related to the classroom, student-teacher relationships, past preparation in the teaching of writing, and nonacademic influences. I argue that the field of composition needs to devote more attention to how teachers read student papers and how these readings influence the comments we offer to students about their writing through stronger teacher preparation programs and by expanding our dialogues about response to include a focus on how teachers read student papers.

Donna: I've read so many stories, so many personal narratives from students who grew up in White County and took part in the [local newspaper's] Young Authors Award. Sadly, it seems to be too often the only good writing experience they have. This sounds like something similar [writes "positive" on the student's paper]. I'm going to come back and add to this, but before I forget, I wanted to get that down.

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Betty: I like that. I like the bracketing of the quote, the explanation, the act of going back to the president's words to reinforce and tie together the point. One of the things I'm working on all the time in 102 [a second semester research writing class], in a relatively mechanical kind of way, is to get students comfortable with the idea of drawing other people's words into their papers and setting it up. I think the student does a pretty good job with that.

Ron: Stacy [a student in Ron's class], I just believe...this course is just a starting point for you, and this kind of initiative as a writer is the kind of thing you can't really teach . . . you just have to stand back and admire what has been done. It's very gratifying to read this stuff . . .

What do composition instructors think about when reading student writing? What strategies or approaches do they use? How does the act of reading affect the verbal or written response(s) offered to students? What influences instructors as they read (including contextual, emotional, and pragmatic influences)? I believe (and hope) that many in the field would argue that these are pertinent, if not vitally important, questions to ask about the nature of written response, because reading is the paramount step in responding to student writing; as Brian Huot suggests, before one can respond to a student paper, he or she has to read it first. Although some studies and discussions focusing on teachers as readers are evident (Huot, 2002; McCracken, 1985; Phelps, 2000; Sperling, 1994; Tobin, 2004), I also believe that the field has not produced enough research and discussion over the past two decades on how and why instructors read student writing, with a focus on the strategies used and what influences them as they read. From the perspective of researchers, teachers, and students, the response process tends to be depicted and most often understood as two steps: the teacher takes the paper and then the student gets it back (usually with some form of comments and/or a grade written on it), even though the time between these two steps can take hours, days, even weeks; this limited information leaves composition instructors and researchers unprepared to adequately talk and understand the act of reading student writing.

Is this two-step process an accurate picture of teacher response? No. I found that composition instructors (such as the ones quoted earlier) who participated in a study on teacher reading and response displayed highly contextual and varied ways of reading student papers and highlighted the importance of reading student writing. For these instructors, reading was an instructive event, one that allowed them to learn more about their students and their classrooms while also assisting students toward becoming stronger writers. Reading was an emotional event, as instructors experienced feelings of happiness, frustration, anger, elation, sadness, gratification, and confusion. And reading was a reflective event, offering instructors a chance to reflect both in and on current (and, at times, past) courses in order to gauge the success or failure of assignments, activities, lectures, responses, and the course itself (Schon, 1982).

In this article, I discuss how research on teacher response needs to include a stronger focus on the act of reading student writing, especially the perspective of

how teachers read student writing and what influences their reading. Building on the work of Huot, Phelps, Sperling, and others, I further argue that by not participating in a substantial discussion on how teachers read, the field of composition is receiving a limited view of the response process. My arguments are based on findings from a research study I conducted that asked teachers to participate in think-aloud protocols while responding to student texts from their own classes. During this study, the teachers used various strategies while reading student papers and these strategies influenced how the instructors approached written comments. The findings also illustrate that reading is a highly contextual activity, influenced by factors outside of just the written words on student papers. I end by offering suggestions on how to make reading a more visible component of research and pedagogy through future research and classroom practices.

Response Research

For the past two decades, the written comment has been the main focus of research on teacher response. Previous studies tend to categorize, discuss, and evaluate the type of comments teachers write on student papers without an eye toward the reading process used to construct these comments. Sommers (1982) suggested that teachers need to tie their comments more closely to student papers while avoiding the more vague “awk” and “punc” that, at that time, dominated their responses to student papers. Connors and Lunsford (1993) conducted a large-scale study of student papers with written comments, finding that most comments (which tended to be negative in tone) were offered to justify grades while focusing on the paper as an isolated text. In an earlier study comparing texts from different eras, Connors and Lunsford (1988) found that teachers were not marking as many errors as initially believed and that errors were not increasing in student papers—even though the amount of writing students produced had increased dramatically. Straub (1996) discussed the difficulty in defining facilitative and directive comments and advocated the need to look at the focus and structure of comments; a year later, Straub (1997) asked students for their feedback on teacher comments, finding that they preferred specific, elaborate comments that offered positive feedback along with advice and explanations. To these studies, we could add the work of Brannon and Knoblauch (1982), Smith (1997) and Elbow (2000). All of these studies increased knowledge about how instructors respond to student papers and constructed important strategies for writing responses, such as offering specific comments while avoiding more vague ones, writing comments in a more conversational tone, offering a mixture of facilitative and directive comments, and, in the case of Elbow, questioning whether response is always necessary.

Yet, although these studies have increased knowledge about written response, they have also unknowingly directed teachers away from considering other important aspects. For any new teacher or graduate student in the field of composition, it would be hard to imagine response as more than just the written comment on the student’s paper. Others have pointed out how this research rarely offers students a voice (O’Neill & Fife, 1999, Murphy, 2000; Phelps, 2000) and how context needs to be considered when responding to student texts (Anson, 2000b; Fife & O’Neill,

2001). What is also missing is a strongly focused study and discussion on how teachers read student texts.

Although it is my belief that how teachers read student papers has not yet been fully analyzed, there has been some discussion on how readers and teachers read, understand, and interpret texts, and I place this study within the context of these past discussions. Those advocating the critical stance of reader response, including Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, and Louise Rosenblatt, all advance the view that the reader maintains a powerful role in shaping any literary experience. As Holland (1975) suggested, different readers will have different responses to the same text depending upon the context, content, and reading situation. This built on Rosenblatt's (1938) earlier work focusing on individual responses to texts. Rosenblatt argued,

The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text. (pp. 30–31)

Iser (1974) further suggested that readers must often "read in" parts of a text in order to connect their reading to their prior knowledge and understanding; yet, the text often attempts to confront and contradict this prior knowledge in order to create an unfamiliar and, at times, uncomfortable situation for the reader. These theorists advanced the belief that there is more to the written text than just what is on the page, connecting what one reads to one's contexts, beliefs, values, and assumptions. I suggest that these arguments be applied to the situation of teachers reading student texts.

Reader-response theories were brought into composition studies as researchers began to think about how students, teachers, raters, and others read texts. White (1984) advocated that readers, especially in standardized, large-scale testing environments, employ a more "holistic" reading style. As White defined, "to read holistically is to see things as units, as complete, as whole, and to do so is to oppose the dominant tendency of our time, the analytic spirit" (p. 400). As part of his understanding, White suggested that holistic reading views writing as a whole while also taking into account factors such as time, place, and circumstances that are rarely acknowledged in more objective, artificial reading environments. Purves (1984) further suggested that teachers often maintain multiple roles or approaches when reading and responding to student papers, including the critic, the gatekeeper, the proofreader, the common reader, and the diagnostician/therapist. Purves suggested that all of these roles could be useful "depending upon the nature of the situation in which the writing is produced" (p. 263). I also believe it is necessary to situate this study on the work of Sperling (1994), particularly her research on teacher as reader. Sperling, in a study on how a specific teacher reads student writing, found that the teacher often responded to students in different ways depending on the context surrounding the situation, with the more successful or stronger writers receiving peer-like, positive feedback, whereas less adept writers received comments that focused more on the negative qualities of the text and/or on mechanical and grammatical problems with directives on how to correct these

problems. Thus, Sperling highlighted how teachers will take on different reading and responding personas for different students, possibility leading to negative or even harmful assessment strategies.

In a more recent example, Tobin (2004) discussed how reading is an emotional, contextual event, arguing that student papers are similar to other texts we incorporate into the classroom (articles, novels, poems, etc.) yet questioning why instructors resist reading student papers the same way they read these more scholarly articles and books. He asked several instructors from across the disciplines to read a complex student paper as they would a more scholarly paper. He discovered that these instructors produce elaborate, professional responses and finds that their insights led to a deeper and more beneficial understanding of the paper. As Tobin suggested, “by making the case for student writing as texts worthy of respect, study, interpretation, discussion, and debate, we make the case for our students as writers worth reading and for ourselves as scholars engaged in intellectually rigorous and valuable work” (p. 29). Huot (2002) lamented the fact that response research has remained at a practical level without any serious discussion of the theories that underlie the practice. He argued that this can be linked to the lack of discussion about how teachers read, offering the following “obvious point: to assess student writing we have to read it first” (p. 113)—an argument that Phelps (2000) also suggests. According to Huot, reading is an activity instructors use to make meaning of a text, and because instructors ask students to produce multiple types of papers, it makes sense that reading strategies may change from text to text, student to student, context to context. Huot urged the field to take more notice of how teachers read in order to make reading a more visible facet research and teacher preparation classrooms.

Finally, McCracken (1985) and Shiffman (1992) report on studies of teacher response with methods similar to the study reported here (including the use of protocol analysis and interviews). McCracken investigated four composition instructors with a focus on how they read and responded to student papers. She found that the instructors rarely read a paper without interruption, tended to act more as editors than collaborators, and often constructed unrealistic “general” reader personas, leading to “poor reading performance” (p. 276). Possible causes for these unproductive readings include poor student writing, “threadbare” topics, and emotional reactions to controversial or boring papers. Shiffman used protocols to analyze connections between teacher response and feminist pedagogy. Using case studies, Shiffman found that teachers experience problems in their dual roles as “teacher-as-nurturer” and “teacher-as-judge.” In speaking about one of her protocol subjects, Shiffman wrote that the teacher “characterized her conflicting roles this way: as a teacher concerned about the progress of her students as writers and as a teacher concerned about fulfilling the demands of her job” (p. 28). Shiffman advocated using more portfolio systems, outside graders, contract grading, and pass/fail options as a way of combating this conflict.

Although Sperling, Tobin, Huot, and others have presented substantial discussions about the value of understanding how teachers read student papers, others have offered additional justification. These include Anson’s (2000a) discussion of reflective reading, Zebroski’s (1989) search for the hero as he reads student texts,

Williams' (1981) eye-opening study on how instructors read (and mis-read) for error, and, as mentioned earlier, Phelps' (2000) acknowledgment that "response is most fundamentally reading, not writing" and that "reading entails internal response; you cannot read at all without engaging in thought, experiencing feelings, imaging, and voicing inner speech" (p. 93). Through these narratives, the time instructors spend reading student writing is beginning to achieve a more noticeable status in our research. What is needed now is more empirical evidence to support the argument that reading student papers is a complex, meaning-making activity. In the remainder of this article, I discuss one such study that begins to shed light on reading strategies instructors' use and how these strategies influence the written and oral comments offered to student texts.

The Study

During a recent fall semester, I conducted research that included eight instructors reading and responding to a series of student papers. There were four goals that drove this study:

1. To know more about if (and how) context affects teacher response.
2. To discover if (and how) teachers reflect on student writing during response.
3. To know more generally what teachers think about when reading and responding.
4. More specific to this article, to understand what strategies teachers used while reading student papers and how these strategies and other contextual factors influenced the comments written.

The study differed from previous empirical research on teacher response (Freedman, 1987; Straub, 1997) because it was designed to more fully address reading and context, whereas past empirical studies tended to focus more on the written comment. This study also differed from previous, more a-contextual studies of writing involving protocol analysis (Berkenkotter, 1983; Hayes & Daiker, 1984) because the eight instructors responded to student texts from their own classes and in contexts with which they were most accustomed (including time, place, methods, and processes they normally use to respond). In other words, unlike past studies that tend to create an artificial response environment for research, these instructors were reading papers from current students in their classes (papers written for assignments the instructors had created and assigned) while sitting in their own offices, homes, or other places in which they normally worked (as mentioned earlier, McCracken, 1985, and Shiffman, 1992, used similar methods while researching teacher response).

Methods

Each instructor was interviewed early in the semester (no interview took place after the second week of the semester). Most of the interviews took place inside of the instructor's school offices, although one interview (with Robert¹ occurred in a "common" area that was shared by many of the graduate instructors at my university). These interviews focused on their preparation, experiences, and current practices in relation to written response, as well as discussing specifics pertaining to the class they were teaching during the study (see Appendix A for a list of interview questions).

Each instructor then participated in a taperecorded session while responding to student texts from their classes. The protocols sessions occurred during Weeks 7, 8, and 9 of the fall semester, at a point when the instructors had already responded to other student texts and were developing an understanding of their students as writers. A taperecorder was set up in a designated area chosen by the instructor (office, home, etc.) and the instructors were advised to "talk-aloud" while responding to papers from their own classes. All but three of the sessions took place at the instructor's home; Jean, Betty, and Dan all responded inside of their school office. The protocols lasted an average of 60 minutes, with two sessions lasting longer than 90 minutes and one session lasting only 45 minutes. Overall, the instructors read and responded to 65 papers and made 1,052 verbal comments, adding up to more than 12 hours of recorded tape. Additionally, each instructor was given a sealed envelope with four questions to answer after they finished their protocol session (see Appendix A). The instructors read the questions and responded verbally while the taperecorder was recording.

After the sessions, I transcribed the audiotapes and then developed a coding system based on the transcriptions, interviews, and research questions going into the study. First, I coded each comment for what was influencing the verbal or written comment being offered in the protocols.² One specific influence that I coded for was "reading," referring to comments that I (and two additional coders³) felt were being influenced by how the instructor was reading the student text and/or how the comments the teacher was writing were influenced by his/her reading process.

After the initial coding, I discovered that several of the comments (nearly 54%) were entirely or partially influenced by how the instructor was reading the students' papers. With this information, I decided that a second set of codes focusing only on the reading comments was necessary. After spending time re-reading the comments while also studying textual and online research, I developed a list of reading strategies I noticed occurring in the transcripts. The identified strategies and subsequent second subcoding system are listed in Appendix B. Strategies occurred both in isolation and in combination with other strategies (e.g., re-stating often occurred before correction and teachers tended to re-read the text before clarifying, evaluating, or predicting).

Subjects

Table 1 outlines the demographic and educational backgrounds of each subject.

Table 1: Demographic and Educational Backgrounds

Name	Age	Race	Education	Teaching Experience
Betty	58	White	MA in humanities	Thirty plus years college experience in literature and composition; current position was a full-time lecturer in English
Jean	53	White	MA in Theology, PhD in Literary Studies	College experience; current position was a visiting professor in English
Robert	34	Asian	Second year Ph.D. student	Three years college composition; current position was a graduate teaching position
Michelle	34	African American	MA in English	Six years high school and 6 years - adjunct college (both were current positions)
Tim	27	White	MA in professional writing	Four years college experience (composition, literature, and professional writing); current position was a graduate teaching position
Dan	56	African -American	MA in English; Ph.D. candidate in rhet/comp	Fourteen years community college experience (current position was a full-time instructor at a local community college)
Cindy	51	White	MA in English, in rhet/comp	Thirteen years high school, 5 years PhD assistant principal, current position was an assistant professor in English
Donna	55	White	MA in linguistics, PhD in ESL	Elementary, secondary, GRE prep, ESL, and college (literature and composition); current position was an assistant professor in English

ESL, English as a second language.

In addition to these factors, the instructors were asked during the entrance interview about their background and preparation with response and their current response practices. The following are significant findings from these questions (see questions 6–25 in Appendix A for more information):

- The majority of the instructors responded at home, usually in the morning or after dinner for an average of about 2 to 3 hours. Most tended to use of mixture of marginal comments and written endnotes or typed letters, with one (Michelle) mentioning conferences as a response tool and another (Cindy) experimenting with tape-recording comments to student texts.
- When discussing their background, six of the eight instructors mentioned having a graduate course(s) in composition theory and practice. Some other preparation tools included professional development or workshops, peer advice, previous teachers and/or mentors, and experiences as a student receiving responses.
- Most mentioned being happy with their current ways of responding, although they identified challenges such as high paper loads, different writing abilities among students, trying to be fair and honest in responses, and trying to avoid falling back into “old ways” of responding (typically a more corrective, punitive method).
- Most of the instructors mentioned that they saw response as a form of communication or conversation, using their comments to assist students either in understanding their own writing processes or in revising papers.
- Very rarely did the instructors discuss how they read student texts, what strategies they used while reading, or about how context affects their reading and responses (outside of talking about concrete factors like when and where they respond). The one exception was Michelle. During her interview, Michelle stated that she needs to know about her students before responding, and that her own emotions and feelings often get in the way. She mentioned that “I don’t read when I’m in a bad mood or if I have just gotten done with teaching; I’ve noticed that I don’t read and respond as well during those times and may actually offer adverse or negative responses.” For the most part, however, these instructors offered little information on the processes they used while reading and responding to student texts.

In regard to their present course, four of the instructors were teaching first-year writing classes, one was teaching a second semester, first-year research writing class, one was teaching an honors first-year writing course, one was teaching a 300-level business writing class, and the final instructor was teaching a graduate-level English education seminar for future elementary and secondary school instructors. Of the four first-year writing courses, Betty planned to teach a course around the U.S. Constitution, whereas Dan, Michelle, and Robert mentioned the course would include “typical 101 assignments” but would not be built around any specific theme. Jean organized her second semester research writing course around the theme of the Great Depression, Cindy’s honors course was built around a popular culture theme, Tim planned to focus on technology and business writing (including web pages), and Donna’s course was a graduate-level teacher education class. Most planned to use a mixture of marginal comments and endnotes and all of the instructors planned to talk with their class about response (either through a discussion of criteria and/or good and bad points in their writing, or via peer review).

Because Donna’s course was for future teachers, her class devoted 2 weeks to reading and studying teacher response as a course topic. The assignments being responded to for each instructor during the protocol sessions are included here:

- Donna was reading literacy autobiographies from education students about a significant literacy event from their past. These were final drafts that Donna had previously read. Donna was grading each of these papers.
- Robert was reading first drafts of rhetorical analyses focusing on controversial advertisements. The drafts would later be placed into student portfolios.
- Tim was reading final drafts of recommendation letters written about another student in the class (i.e. students worked in pairs to write recommendation letters for each other for future employers). Tim was grading each of these papers.
- Dan was reading mid-semester portfolios containing writing he had previously read. Topics in the portfolio included working with technology and analysis of standardized testing. The portfolio would be revised and expanded and turned in at the end of the semester for a final grade.
- Betty was reading first drafts of argument papers concerning what role the government should have in today’s society. The drafts would later be placed into student portfolios.
- Cindy was reading final drafts of analyses on a specific cultural phenomenon, explaining the causes for and effects of the phenomenon. Cindy was grading each of these papers.
- Jean was reading first drafts of papers that compared/contrasted a movie or text from the 1930s to lifestyles of the 1930s. The drafts would later be placed into student portfolios.
- Michelle was reading first drafts of narratives discussing student individual cultural identity. The drafts would later be placed into student portfolios.

Findings

After the initial coding, 552 comments were placed into the general category of “Reading.” These comments were further coded based on the specific reading codes listed in Appendix B. Most comments received multiple secondary reading codes (e.g., one comment could have been coded for evaluating, questioning, restating, and prior knowledge). The overall frequencies for the different reading styles used by the instructors are listed in Table 2. Whereas four strategies stand out as most frequently used—evaluating (19.6%), clarifying (14.3%), questioning (12.8%), and inferring (9.3%)—one also sees that almost all of the strategies were used at one point or another (with no action and skimming/scanning strategies used relatively infrequently). To highlight how these strategies influenced the comments that were eventually written, I look closely at the four most frequently used strategies noted above.

Table 2. Finding os Reading Subcoding

Codes	Total No. of Comments	Percent of Overall Comments
Evaluating	228	19.6%
Clarifying	167	14.3%
Questioning	149	12.8%
Inferring	109	9.3%
Prior knowledge	81	6.9%
Correction	71	6.1%
Predicting	69	5.9%
Restating	68	5.8%
Summarizing	66	5.6%
Visualizing	62	5.3%
Re-reading	50	4.3%
No action	29	2.5%
Skimming or scanning	16	1.3%

Reading Strategy: Evaluating. Not surprisingly, the most frequent reading strategy was evaluating the students' texts while reading. These evaluations tended to take different forms and, interestingly, the evaluations being conducted were often more positive than negative. Of the comments 33% were coded as positively speaking about the students' texts, 21% were negative in nature, and 46% were coded as neutral (either not explicitly positive or negative or possibly a little of both). As I listened to the protocols and later read through the transcripts, I noted that the word "good" was used often, as in "that is a good example," "he has used a good choice of words here," "good—student rally is understanding the text," and just plain "good" in response to a specific section of the text or to the text holistically. Often, the instructors turned these verbal thoughts into written comments on the page, especially Jean, who wrote down "good" and/or "nice" on her students' papers frequently, and Dan, who spent a substantial portion of his response session singling out the strong points in a specific student's paper, concluding his protocol by discussing out loud that it was a paper like this that "made (him) want to continue teaching writing." In contrast, some of the more negative evaluative comments focused on textual problems, including larger content concerns such as faulty arguments, lack of evidence, or problematic organization, as well as lower level concerns of grammar, spelling, and mechanical problems. And, similar to the positive comments, these verbal negative comments often became written evaluative comments on the students' papers.

However, an interesting aspect of the evaluative reading comments is that negative comments often were influenced by the instructors' evaluations of the student writers. Robert talked about being disappointed with a specific paper, but added that it was not surprising because the student "wasn't the best student anyways." Both Dan and Donna talked about students "writing for the teacher" and how this had a negative effect on how they read and responded to those kinds of papers.

Cindy and Donna encountered a few disorganized texts in which students wrote about ideas or experiences that were not strongly connected together in the text. When this occurred, they most often combined their evaluation to another reading strategy: skimming or scanning, searching for main points and, in Cindy's words, "racing to finish" the paper before she became too bored or frustrated with it. Often, these two instructors connected the disorganization in the text to the disorganization in the student, noting that these were students who "were not doing well in the course" because of problems such as absenteeism, difficulty listening to instructions and following directions, and/or problems with completing assigned work on time. Additionally, knowledge of student writers often influenced instructors before they read the paper; there were a few times when an instructor read the student's name, sighed, and then spent a couple of moments talking about how this was a "problem" student or about how they "dreaded" having to read this text. Often, these introductory comments were accompanied by stories about the student writer, highlighting how past events in the class influenced the teachers' evaluations of these texts. For example, Cindy makes the following comment after reading the title of a student essay: "Cultural Phenomenon: The Internet"

Cindy's comment: Okay, I'm already worried about this because it's so broad. And, I'm looking, okay. I think I remember discussing focus in the first draft, so we'll see if he was able to focus more, even though the title may not suggest it. I'm always worried about this student; he doesn't always seem to get it in class and, I just have a feeling this student probably didn't do very well with this assignment. But, I'm going to go ahead and read it and see what happens.

During her exit interview, Cindy offered similar comments, stating that this was a student who is "not very audience-oriented" and has problems "engaging in ideas in more depth." These findings suggest that verbal evaluative comments often influenced what types of comments were written and that the instructor's knowledge of and feelings about student writers influenced how they read, reacted, and responded to the texts.

Reading Strategy: Clarifying: The second most frequent reading strategy was seeking ways to clarify confusing or illogical portions of the text. For the instructors, clarifying usually took two forms. The first, a more evaluative type, were verbal statements about how issues in the text (such as arguments and examples) needed to be clearer and more understandable for readers. Often, instructors would combine this particular strategy with others, like re-reading the statement to better understand it, inferring what the meaning is supposed to be, questioning how the text can be clearer, or evaluating the text based on the lack of clarity. The two excerpts that follow highlight how Cindy and Donna experienced difficulty understanding student word choice and thought aloud about the need for more clarity (again note how these reading strategies and verbal thoughts influence the written comments). Cindy was reading a freshman essay about the phenomenon of body piercing and Donna was reading a literacy autobiography from a graduate student:

Student text: They are considered no different than the traditional ear piercing . . .

Cindy's comment: They? Okay . . . um . . . [re-reads] . . . See, I was thinking she was talking about the people, but now it looks like it's piercings. She is going to need to be clearer about this. [writes "who is they? People? Piercings?"]⁴

Student text: During my early days as a student I was rarely presented opportunities that allowed me to be an expressive writer. I wrote essays, reports, and biographies but very few expressive and genuine pieces.

Donna's comment: Hmm . . . I wonder what you mean by genuine? [underlines and writes "good word?" beside it]. Makes some sense about how we view writing, but not always sure what it means. You might want to reconsider if you want to use that word or not or you will need to be clearer about how you are using that word.

The second form of clarifying were comments where the instructor, after initially being confused about the text, suddenly came to some clarity about what the student writer was attempting to say, usually based on the time the instructor spent reflecting on the student text. An example of this was the fourth literacy autobiography that Donna read during her protocol session. Initially, Donna expressed some confusion and frustration with the paper, remarking that Sarah was having problems explaining her thesis and ideas and that she didn't understand where Sarah was "going with this" and wanted her to "get to it." As she read the first few pages, there was a noticeable agitation in her voice and she often paused and sighed. Moments later, however, the student writes about being brutally attacked on the school bus while attending public school. Donna's reaction and tone of voice changed from frustration to empathy, and the student's purpose became clearer:

Student text: He forcefully moved me to the inside of the seat and shoved me up against the wall. At first I fought back: kicking, punching, biting, and yelling for help from the bus driver, and then from anyone. But it did me no good and I got tired. I put my head down, closed my eyes, covered myself with my arms and accepted the beating.

Donna's comment: What a horrible thing for a child . . . [writes "what a horrible thing for a child to endure"] And I finally see where this is going. This is leading to the decision to home school Sarah, I believe. How sad.

This moment of confusion becoming clarity was not uncommon in the instructors' protocols. Betty initially talked about how a specific sentence was a "mess," but after re-reading it, realized that the statement was not as unclear as she thought and mentioned that "it helps if the teacher reads the sentence right." Cindy initially approached a paper on horse training and the drug Lasix with trepidation and confusion and talked about how she may need to write a comment to the student about how the paper "wasn't making any sense." However, she decided instead to continue reading and, after a few more paragraphs, developed a stronger understanding of the text and was able to offer more effective feedback. Tim, while reading business letters, often decided to take "no action" when reading, preferring to finish the whole letter before writing any elaborate comments. These examples illustrate the importance of reading (and re-reading) during response and how some of

these instructors developed stronger responses by focusing more on how they were reading (and possibly mis-reading) instead of focusing on what they were going to write. It also points to how some of these instructors evaluated themselves and their reading strategies as they were reading student papers, adding a possible reflective element to the way composition teachers read student texts.

Reading Strategy: Questioning. Questioning usually occurred during moments when teachers encountered sections of a student's paper that were confusing, vague, or contained logical errors and began to verbally ask questions about the text, using these thoughts to either think through their difficulties while reading or to write down similar questions on the student's paper. Often, it appeared that the teacher was creating a fictional one-on-one conference, acting as if the student was in the room with the instructor at that time, often addressing comments to a fictional "you." Robert was an instructor who frequently used questioning as he read texts written on the topic of how advertisements affect American society. In the following example, after reading the student's conclusion, Robert reacts to the confusing and vague nature of it:

Student text: The excuse that advertisements cause smoking and drinking is an easy way out for someone to explain why they are now addicted. More jobs are created then the economy does better, the general public is happy. Even those who complain about the advertisements benefit from them when companies increase jobs due to these advertisements. When sales increase, so does the money that the government receives from taxes. Theses taxes lead to increased funding for schools, roads, social security, and more importantly national defense. So the bottom line is that advertisements lead to a better economy and, and before one criticizes the advertisements one should also think about the benefits that even they are reaping.

Robert's comment: Okay, here's the conclusion, but what are you trying to say here? What about his criticism of the media mentioned on page one? He needs to talk about that. [writes "Is this the conclusion of what went before?" What about your own implied criticism on p. 1?"]. Right now, this conclusion really doesn't tell me anything . . . you need to spend more time answering some of your own questions in the paper.

Here, we find Robert using questioning as a way to help the student create a more elaborate and productive conclusion while also pushing Robert to connect the conclusion to earlier portions of the text as a way of evaluating the total quality of the work. Jean was another instructor who relied on questioning as she read. Often, her questions would lead to written comments asking for more detail or clarification, and she tended to write questions similar to how she would ask them, in a more informal, often lively tone. While reading a paper analyzing gender relations in the movie *It Happened One Night* and comparing this to lifestyle in the 1930s, she offered the following:

Student text: She [Ellie] was going to have to learn how to make and save money on her own. So, I think Peter noticed this and began to help here out because she wasn't used to being on her own just yet. Since Peter was the person who knew more about budgeting money, it kind of puts him as knowing more and being more intel-

ligent, while putting Ellie as being a “helpless woman” who can’t take care of herself. This shows that the men in the thirties were more dominant than the women, unlike in today’s society where men and women are pretty much equal.

Jean’s comment: Okay, that’s good. I wonder if she will say anything more about that, the helpless women thing? Because it is absolutely...yes [writes “yes—and Peter really treats her that way, doesn’t he? Maybe you could offer more about this as you revise”].

The instructors offered various types of questions throughout the protocols, including considering ways to elaborate on the text, offering questions to help clarify arguments, directly challenging something in the student’s paper (often something the instructor felt was missing), or even offering more negative questions that appeared to mock or use a sarcastic tone (such as Cindy’s comment of “Hello, but is this an explanation essay? We’re more than halfway through the paper and we have a definition essay”). At times, these negative reactions would come through in the written comments as well; after making the verbal statement above, Cindy wrote “Try writing an explanation essay next time!” on the student’s paper.

Additionally, questioning was often used in conjunction with other reading strategies as a way of producing more productive responses for students. For example, a teacher may question his or her reading of the text and then either re-read in order to clarify what was being written, predict where he or she thought the text was going, or visualize what the text needed to look like as a way of helping the instructor understand what comment needed to be written to the student. For example, after reading half of a student’s paper on reality television as a cultural phenomenon, Cindy questioned, then predicted, and eventually visualized a future text: “Okay, I’m not sure what you are trying to do here. What is the point of this paper so far? This is, well, a little confusing and really frustrating. I . . . I think that this student is going to be talking about the popularity of reality television, but he is making me do too much work here. I’m going to keep reading, but he will definitely need to revise these introductory paragraphs so that the popularity issue is more evident.”

Finally, there was an off-the-paper context that was created when instructors began to ask questions; it was during these questioning moments that the instructors took the idea that response should be a conversation (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Straub, 1997) and literally made it into one. Although no one else was in the room (other than the taperecorder), the instructors created conversational situations to help them in their reading and responses. Consider Donna’s statements as she encountered a problematic literacy autobiography that she felt had not been fully revised based on previous comments she had offered to the student writer:

Donna’s comment: Okay, as I’m reading I’m still thinking . . . I mean . . . have you done any revision here? So far, it’s just recounting a little bit at a time without drawing any particular conclusions about what I think is her thesis so far. Where is this paper going, Jane? What are you trying to do here? I know we talked about these issues before, but . . . well . . . so, I’m continuing to read.

Initially, I thought the taperecorder may account for these moments but, in follow-up interviews, all but two of the instructors stated that they had forgotten the recorder was there after a few minutes of reading student papers (and the other two mentioned forgetting about the recorder later in the response session). As I looked over the texts, I found that creating a conversational tone in their verbal statements as they read led the instructors to create more conversational comments on students' papers. These questions helped the instructors address the larger issues in the text and became a way for them to verbally think through their comments before placing them upon the students' papers.

Reading Strategy: Inferring. Comments coded as inferring, like the one that follows found the instructor pondering over confusing or problematic sections of the paper and then, using strategies such as clarification, predicting, re-reading, or restating, the instructor speculated about what he or she thought the student was trying to say (or, attempted to infer the meaning of the text based upon the writing and evidence presented). At times, the instructor came to a better understanding of the meaning. More often, however, the inferring process did not lead to new understanding, but helped the instructor in composing and writing a response to the student.

Student's Text: A constitutional amendment that had been enacted to protect the newly freed slaves was ignored for this purpose but was used instead to protect fictitious corporations—business corporations. We value corporations and our money over the perseverance of humankind.

Robert's comment: Okay . . . um . . . do you mean by we that is all Americans? Or is this the law or administration or authorities? [writes "All Americans (or the law/the administration/the authorities)?"] I think he means all Americans, but I want him to be clearer about that.

Inferring comments were directed at both the content of the student paper and the more stylistic, grammatical aspects of the text. Sometimes, the instructor encountered a confusing section of the text (often a section that was not clear or not detailed enough) and inferred about the intended meaning. The following two examples highlight these types of inferences:

Student text: I applied for the Governor's Scholar program that year as well. I had no intentions of going, but my Biology teacher and friend convinced me to apply to show that I was capable of it and to give me more time to make a decision on whether or not I would go. I managed to get accepted and the [sic] turned down the offer after I gave it more thought. It wasn't something that I really wanted to spend the summer before my senior year doing. . . . With the Governor's Scholar acceptance, I should have taken the chance when I had it to get a better feel of what college would be like. I would have had the chance to make new friends and tour some of the college campuses in the state.

Donna's comment: And, I'm wondering [writes "I'm wondering what held you back?"] She doesn't say specifically why she made the decisions she made [writes "Why did you make these decisions?"] It seems to me that it could just be that she

was maturing and becoming older; I'm not sure if she sees it that way [writes "Normal maturation? Not really understanding the benefits?"]

Student text: So, when a pet and it's [sic] owners go to obedience school. . .

Tim's comment: So there's an obedience school for both owners and pets . . . hmm? I'm sure that's not right, so he is going to need to change that.

At other times, the instructor attempted to infer about more organizational, mechanical, or grammatical portions of the text. The following three examples highlight these types of inferences:

Student text: Everywhere you look you see people with multiple piercings, but these extra piercings aren't just a second ear piercing. People are piercing their eyebrows, nose, lip, and navel. What is the reason for this new fashion trend? Why is it so popular?

One possible reason for its popularity is rebellion.

Cindy's comment: Okay, that's not indented, so I don't know if that was a new paragraph, but I think it's supposed to be her first developed paragraph on reasons.

Student text: The teacher hoped me . . .

Jean's Comment: Hoped? Um . . . I think she means helped me here [writes "helped?"]

Betty's comment: [after reading a particularly long paragraph] Um . . . I think there may need to be a new paragraph here. I'm going to mark a new one in this place [writes "can a new paragraph be started here?"].

Overall, inferring became a valuable strategy for these instructors, helping them to come to a greater understanding of these students' papers. These comments helped the instructors connect together the pieces of students' texts and constructed, for them, a context that assisted them in reading the paper. Even when this context proved false, instructors could look back on their inferences to help them comprehend the new context that emerged from their reading.

Conclusions

Expand on these findings by introducing two larger conceptual arguments here. First, these findings offer empirical evidence to justify the argument that reading and responding to student writing is not just a textual act; it is a contextual act. As these data show, personal beliefs and values, classroom experiences, relationships with students, and other contextual factors influence instructors. Reading student texts was a highly valued, emotional activity, and the instructors often called on different reading strategies (such as re-reading, skimming, and questioning) to assist them in understanding the student's text, ideas, and arguments. The instructors tended to point out both what they liked and did not like in student writing, and were often emotionally moved by events discussed in the texts, student language use, and student progress. In other words, these data show that response is not an isolated activity that takes place inside the confines of an instructor's office.

It is not only the act of putting pen to paper. It is a multidimensional activity that begins on the first day one walks into a classroom and continues throughout all of the discussions instructors have with students, throughout all the experiences instructors have both within and outside of the classroom, and throughout all the experiences instructors have while reading and responding to past, present, and future texts. As instructors, we all must begin to understand these issues and how the response context can be used to make us more effective responders.

Second, I believe these findings emphasize that response is as much an act of reading as it is an act of writing. As Phelps and Huot pointed out, the literature on response has focused mainly on the written comment, neglecting any extensive discussion on the role of reading student texts. Although Huot's argument that one needs to read a text in order to respond to it is, in his eyes, a rather "simple idea," the field still needs to devote more time and research to studying how teachers read and how this reading process may or may not influence the comments teachers write. As shown in this study, the instructors utilized several different strategies when reading student texts, including evaluating, clarifying, questioning, and inferring, and often transferred these verbal questions into written responses. For these instructors, reading became a guide for how to approach student texts, influencing what criteria they chose to focus on and what issues were going to be most important to them. What needs to be understood, then, is that response is both an act of writing *and* reading. How one chooses to read a text and the emotional responses he or she has while reading can be seen as an influence on what comments will eventually be written on that text. And, the type of text that is read—whether it is a business letter, a personal narrative, a Website, or a portfolio of student writing—has a significant effect on how we read and respond to that document.

What do the findings of this study have to offer composition programs and teachers? For one, I argue that more time should be spent in teacher preparation courses and in teacher education practicum classes reading, talking, and reflecting about how teachers read student texts. Of the eight instructors in this study, six mentioned that graduate courses in composition instruction were most beneficial to them in becoming better responders, although none of the six mentioned time spent on discussing how teachers read student texts. Huot (2002) and Tobin (2004) offered valuable ways of approaching discussions about teacher reading processes and strategies and the work of Pat Carini (2001) on holistic reading sessions can also be beneficial in this area. The overall focus, however, needs to be on giving new instructors time to read student papers and then discuss their reactions, including what influenced them as they read, what image of the writer appeared during their reading, and how their reading may influence written comments. These conversations would work best if held in an atmosphere when written response has not yet fully entered the conversation, and new instructors should be encouraged to read student papers in different ways, including reading to achieve understanding of a student text, reading for the enjoyment of the student text, reading the student text as a piece of scholarship, reading to evaluate the text, and possibly even requiring them to read without a pen in hand, as I have done in past teacher preparation classes.

A second idea is to encourage both new and experienced teachers to maintain a journal while they are reading and subsequently writing comments on student

papers. The idea is to keep a journal nearby one reads and responds and, at various intervals, take time to write an entry that discusses one's reactions, feelings, observations, and dilemmas during this process. I use a journal to record not only my own successes and failures as a responder, along with my reflections on these entries, but I also take note of problems I am noticing in the students' papers that can be addressed in classroom conversations, interesting and entertaining prose that students write, possible revisions to assignments or the course syllabus, and my own personal observations on individual student writing development. Although many would argue that the journal is just one more writing task in an already busy response process, I believe that taking time to visually record these thoughts and reactions will help instructors become more active and supportive readers while also assisting them in composing more successful comments on student papers.

Finally, although I cannot fully elaborate on this argument in the space here, educators need to begin to change the way response is viewed in their field, moving away from just referring to "teacher response" and toward discussions of "teacher reading and response." The change may seem minimal, but adding this layer to research and narratives endorses the fact that response really is a time when instructors carefully read student papers and then offer comments to help students rethink and revise that text. Written accounts of how instructors read student papers along with more empirical and teacher-based studies on how instructors read (and the problems they encounter) should become a more visible aspect of composition research. Other research possibilities includes case studies of the teacher as reader/responder, ethnographic research on the different reading strategies used by teachers and students and how this influences the assessment process, and research on the potentials and problems of students reading as teachers in such settings as peer review and in-class workshops. Only by expanding on their views to include the act of reading, can teachers begin to approach student texts in a way that will be meaningful for both their students and themselves.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.
2. Other influences that were coded included content (comments that were influenced by the content-matter of the paper), style (comments that were influenced by lower level style concerns), classroom (comments that were influenced by events that had occurred in the classroom), response (comments that were influenced by the immediate response environment), relationship (comments that were influenced by the teacher's relationship with the student), reflection (comments that were influenced by how the instructor was reflecting on the text, comment, or student), and public (comments that were influenced by events outside of the current classroom environment, including politics, media, social issues, etc.).
3. Approximately 20% of the transcripts were coded by a second and third reader based on aforementioned coding systems. Interrater reliability for the first coder was 74%; reliability with the second coder (after some minor revision of the coding scales) was 82%.

4. The instructors were asked to verbally state when they were reading comments on student papers. Most instructors did this. When this did not occur, I took long pauses at points in the paper where there were written comments to be times when comments were being written.

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