“Awesome, Dude!”
Responding Helpfully to Peer Writing

Joyce Browne stands outside her classroom door, watching students pass between periods. Fellow English teacher Amy Lindgren approaches, her head shaking slightly from side to side, lips pursed.

“You look upset,” Joyce observes as Amy takes a place next to her.

“Who wouldn’t be?” Amy exclaims. “In second hour, I have some of the best seniors—talented writers, all of them going off to college next year. But after three months of writing workshop, they still don’t know how to respond in peer groups! I’m always after them to focus on content, but if I’m not right on them with the response guide, all they do is praise one another, no matter the actual quality of the writing. You know, ‘This is awesome, Dude!’ and ‘Great writing!’ or they just circle mistakes and misspellings, pick away at errors.”

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“Those are honors students, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, and that’s what makes it so strange. These kids have had workshop with me since September, and I’ve constantly told them to look at much more than editing problems, to look at the content. I know they’re smart enough, but

unless I’m constantly on them, they just seem to praise and pick. Frustrating!”

The last few students trickle into classrooms as Joyce turns toward Amy. “I don’t know,” she says, “you’d think honors students would be better responders. I might expect kids in the regular classes to be like that, not those with such talent. I wish I knew what to tell you . . . .”

Amy sighs, mutters “Thanks,” and walks down the hall toward her classroom, resigned to giving her students the same old lecture tomorrow about content first, mechanics last.

Faulty Assumptions

In this scenario, we see three questionable assumptions. First, both Amy and Joyce assume that just because the students are considered advanced, they should naturally have the strategies and interpersonal skills to give genuinely helpful feedback to other writers. The ability to give appropriate and helpful feedback to their peers on their writing is a mistaken assumption. The presumed correlation between a student’s ability to write and to critique is a dubious one. The ability to give appropriate and helpful feedback to other writers is a learned set of strategies and skills that all developing writers must be taught. Amy cannot presume that students’ literacy skills, while perhaps more sophisticated than others at the school, include some naturally occurring responding skills. Second, Amy assumes that just because she tells students to focus on content, they will. Yet she is determined to try again, believing that simply providing the occasion for responding and exhorting students to focus on content will make a difference. Her decision to lecture on how to respond ignores the necessary experiences of a collaborative writing workshop: Her students need to experience quality ways of responding firsthand, not just be told about them.

Third, Amy assumes that three months of writing workshop is enough time for students to become good responders to one another’s drafts. Yet I know of no standard time frame in which students become better responders. In addition to having many experiences with directly taught ways of responding, students need much more time than a mere three months, more even than a full year, if they are to develop the skills and dispositions to interact wisely with other writers.
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a mere three months, more even than a full year, if they are to de-
velop the skills and dispositions to interact wisely with other writers. Responding well calls for not only identifiable skills but also intra- and interpersonal skills, along with such crucial emotional and cognitive dispositions as empathy and reader-based anticipation.

High School Students Responding

These assumptions underlie Jay Simmons’s research on students-as-
responders in high school writing classes. It is valuable research, for it gives insight into how students actually respond to one another in writing groups, and it also provides useful strategies to help teachers prepare students to become better responders. Simmons’s work also shows how direct instruction in response methods positively impacts student achievement. This research alerts us to our responsibilities as teachers to define for students and ourselves just what we mean by re-
sponse, and it urges us to look closely at what we do to prepare students to become good responders.

Simmons investigated the responses made by high school stu-
dents during peer reviewing. Students at four schools in the northeast United States were involved—two classes at a selective urban high school (Cityside 1 and Cityside 2) and two at rural high schools (Holly and Adams). (All school names are fictitious.) Students at Cityside 1 and Cityside 2 were more “academ-
ically able,” and Cityside 2 students had more experience responding to peer writing (47% reported having three years of experience) than did Cityside 1 (29%). On the other hand, rural students at Adams did have prior school experience in writing workshops (71%) and many of their teachers had published work on reading and writing; Holly students had fewer experience with writing workshops (22%; 685). Thus, academic ability and experience with peer-response methods within the total population varied.

The high school students were paired with college students and asked to complete two common writing assignments, respond to the students’ writing from their partner school, and share their writing with their classmates. The researchers analyzed the written peer responses and grouped them into seven broad categories. The table from Simmons shows the types of responses, defines each, and gives representative comments (see fig. 1).

FIGURE 1. Types of Peer Response Observed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF RESPONSE</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global praise</td>
<td>Intended to make the writer feel good about his or her work.</td>
<td>“Great paper” (no reasons given).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal response</td>
<td>Focuses on the psychological involvement of the writer as a person, not as a writer.</td>
<td>“You sound like a depressed kid.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text playback</td>
<td>Focuses on the ideas or organization of the text.</td>
<td>“I think you have an excellent conclusion—it shows how you’ve changed and grown from your experiences.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence edits</td>
<td>Focuses on one or more sentences or grammar.</td>
<td>“Run-on sentence.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word edits</td>
<td>Focuses on the use of words or spelling.</td>
<td>“You seem to repeat ‘family institution.’ Maybe you should try an alternative phrase.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader’s needs</td>
<td>Focuses on the needs or the reactions of the reader.</td>
<td>“This confuses the reader a little bit. At first glance I think that you are black, experiencing racism in that way.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer’s strategies</td>
<td>Focuses on facilitating the writer’s work by discussing the techniques that were used or could be used by the writer.</td>
<td>“In the fourth paragraph you get into the ‘meat’ of the experience. You might be able to increase the impact of this section by not using chronological order. (Maybe start with him getting fired, then tell the circumstances leading up to it.)”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 from Simmons, J. (May 2003). Responders Are Taught, Not Born. Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 46 (8), 684–693. Reprinted with permission of Jay Simmons and the International Reading Association.
While all such responses may be considered helpful for certain writers at a particular point in the evolution of a piece of writing, some are more helpful than others. Global praise, for example, may be useful for an apprehensive writer, but since it does not heed quality, the praise may well be empty. The same may be said for sentence and word edits, unless the needed response is for editing. On the other hand, reader needs combined with writer needs and text playback provide more helpful substantive feedback to writers. It is interesting to compare the patterns of response between those students who had many experiences with writing workshop and those who had not. Adams students, who had the most experience with responding, “devoted 54% . . . of their comments to strategies of readers and writers,” while also commenting on problems at the idea, word, and sentence levels (12%). Holly students had similar though slightly lower results—47% in reader and writer and 4% in sentence and word. By contrast, 60% of comments by students at Cityside 2 fell into the sentence and word categories, with only 13% falling into the reader and writer categories; the results for Cityside 1 students showed a greater number of reader comments (16%) but none for writer and only 12% for sentence and word levels (687).

We see in these statistics an indication that students respond based on the working definition of response that they carry from their previous experiences with writing workshops. Those for whom responding has meant primarily editing will respond far more at the word and sentence levels (e.g., Cityside 2 at 60%) than at the levels of ideas, organization, and strategies (Cityside 2 at 13%). As Simmons states, “It is clear that these students learned to edit as a response to text” (688), whereas the Adams students, like those at Holly, considered responding to mean commenting primarily on reader-writer connections. Students who have more direct instruction and experiences responding to peer writing in writing workshop develop into more helpful responders if those experiences focus on more than word- and sentence-level matters.

Further, “academic ability does not ensure that seniors will know how to read like writers” (689), as the contrasting results for Cityside 2 and Adams students indicate. What is needed is direct instruction in ways of responding, as opposed to just expecting effective responses: “The results of our survey indicate that students must be taught to respond helpfully to the writing of their peers” (689). Simmons cites the students at Adams, who “had the most workshop experience and wrote the sort of comments writers need: insight about what readers are thinking, suggestions of steps that other writers might take, engagement with the ideas of the piece, and moderate help with mechanics as needed” (692).

Teaching Higher-Level Response

How do we teach higher-level response? Simmons offers some help. First, he provides a useful chart that lists techniques for teaching students ways of responding to one another as readers and writers themselves (see fig. 2). Second, Simmons creates three profiles of teachers whose pedagogy deliberately addresses the “habits of mind” that exceed “something other than getting the words right” (689). Jane Nyman, who teaches at East High School in Denver, Colorado, mentors her students into higher-level responding by modeling her own processes of writing and revising.

and brings the revision back to them to show “her readers how their comments helped shape her revision” (689). Through this approach, Nyman helps students “see the reason why she asked them to respond in the first place—she was going to use their insights, questions, and impressions to take the next steps in her writing” (690). For her students, who “had received only grades . . . in response to their writing” from previous teachers, “this was a new experience” (690; italics in original). In the second profile, teachers Jennie Marshall, University of New Hampshire, and Terry Moher, Exeter, New Hampshire, help their students understand the distinctions between evaluating and responding:

In class Jennie and Terry discussed the difference between evaluation and response, emphasizing that a response should assure the writer of what to do next. In evaluation, the students realized, writing is frozen, finished, and rated as a product. During response the work is still fluid, and the writer can actually take part in the conversation. (691)

Like Nyman, Marshall and Moher acted as writing and responding models for their students,

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emphasizing that responding should be positive:

Jennie and Terry brought their own writing to class and modeled readers who encourage themselves by not by [sic] asking "What is wrong with this piece?" but rather "What more do I want to say?" The teachers also examined their own teaching practices to be sure they were not modeling evaluation when response was in order. (691)

In the third profile, Tim McLaughlin, Bunker Hill Community College, Massachusetts, teaches response directly in a multilayered instructional model that includes

> practicing on one another in class;

> discussing sample responses (models);

> having the whole class respond using one or more pieces written by classmates and then with outside partners;

> teacher previewing of draft responses before sending; and

> teacher discussing responses with students. (691)

Similar to Marshall and Moher, McLaughlin emphasizes that "responses should be personable, positive, and helpful" (691). Higher-level response impacts achievement. In Simmons's study, writers who had used peer feedback improved the quality of their writing more than those who had not. Students reported that because they made use of peer feedback, they felt they had become better writers, and the results of the portfolio assessment portion of this study corroborated their self-evaluation: "If the 293 portfolios collected, more than two thirds (205) of the writers used peer feedback, and they averaged more than 6 on the 2–8 grading scale. The 88 students who used only teacher comments scored lower, averaging 5.67" (692). For those of us who look for support for peer-response methods of instruction, Simmons offers these data from these students: "They had improved responding to others and had improved their own writing by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TECHNIQUE</th>
<th>WHAT THE TEACHER DOES</th>
<th>WHAT STUDENTS DO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing your writing</td>
<td>Shares a piece of writing and asks for response Shares rewrites tied to class response</td>
<td>Offer comments on the teacher’s writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying evaluation versus response</td>
<td>Shows evaluation is of product Response is to writer</td>
<td>Understand that response is personable and helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling specific praise</td>
<td>Shows how to tell what you like as a reader</td>
<td>Understand that cheerleading is too general to be helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling understanding</td>
<td>Shows how to tell what you understood the piece to be about</td>
<td>Understand that reflecting back the piece to the writer is helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling questions</td>
<td>Shows how to ask questions about what you didn’t understand</td>
<td>Understand that questions related to the writer’s purpose are helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling suggestions</td>
<td>Shows how to suggest writing techniques</td>
<td>Understand that a responder leaves the writer knowing what to do next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole-class response</td>
<td>Moderates response by class to one classmate’s piece</td>
<td>Offer response听到 the response of others Hear what the writer finds helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner response</td>
<td>Pairs up students in class to respond to pieces</td>
<td>Practice response learned in whole-class session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment review</td>
<td>Reads the comments of peers to writers Suggests better techniques Devises minilessons</td>
<td>Get teacher feedback on comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response conference</td>
<td>Speaks individually with students responding inappropriately</td>
<td>Have techniques reinforced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 from Simmons, J. (May 2003). Responders Are Taught, Not Born. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 46 (8), 684–693. Reprinted with permission of Jay Simmons and the International Reading Association.
focusing on the needs of readers and writers, not simply the features of text” (692).

Challenges to Teaching Higher-Level Response

There are many reasons that more students do not become better peer responders. The first is systemic. When districts lack a systemwide K–12 writing policy that includes direct instruction in a developmental model of response, the likely result is either a total lack of such instruction or, at best, unpredictable, spotty instruction from some teachers. Second, though many resources exist that would help them develop instruction in responding, not all teachers are familiar with ways of promoting higher-level response. Third, many ingrained curricular values and mandates work against higher-level response and the time it takes to teach (and learn) it well. For example, in high-stakes testing, the emphasis on mechanics and forms often reduces the teaching of writing to those things that can be atomized (e.g., parts of speech) or formulated (e.g., hamburger paragraphs) and “covered” as a “unit” in the curriculum. Higher-level response, on the other hand, does not easily fit into units but rather becomes an integrated part of curriculum throughout the grades—a constant. Fourth, because students develop quality ways of responding over long stretches of time, teachers may abandon writing workshops because they do not see the results they expect in one or two semesters. Finally, when teachers expect bright or advanced students to have acquired higher-level response habits of mind because they are advanced, an unreasonable expectation based on a false assumption results; all students, regardless of ability, must be taught how to respond well.

In the opening scenario, Amy’s problem reflects this last reason, for she assumes that she needs only to orchestrate the occasion for peer responding and her honors seniors will naturally rise to that occasion in a short time. While senior year may be too late for students to develop the response habits of mind one would most desire, some significant progress can still be made. If Amy were to act on Simmons’s research findings and recommendations, she would change her expectations and her instructional practices. She could start by acknowledging the folly of “covering peer responding” in two days and, instead, envision how she could give thoughtful visibility to higher-level peer responding throughout the rest of the year. Like the other teachers profiled in Simmons’s work, she could regularly model the reciprocal writing-responding-revising process described above, and she could begin integrated, direct instruction.

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NCTE invites proposals for its High School Literature series. Grounded in theory, each volume focuses on a single author, providing background and classroom activities. The books include reprinted primary-source material and original student work to enhance the classroom scenarios that teachers can adapt. Books published so far in the series focus on Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, and Sandra Cisneros. We welcome proposals on teaching other authors frequently studied in the secondary classroom. The average length of the final manuscript should be approximately 125 double-spaced pages. For detailed submission guidelines, please visit the NCTE Web site at http://www.ncte.org/pubs/publish/books/107577.htm. Please send your proposals to Zarina Hock, Director of Book Publications & Senior Editor, or Kurt Austin, Acquisitions Editor, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; email: zhock@ncte.org or kaustin@ncte.org.

Work Cited


Note

1. See, for example, Nancie Atwell, In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning, 2nd ed. (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1998); Karen Spear et al., Peer Response Groups in Action: Writing Together in Secondary Schools (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1993); Steven Zemelman and Harvey Daniels, A Community of Writers: Teaching Writing in the Junior and Senior High School (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1988); Motivating Writing in Middle School, Standards Consensus Series (Urbana: NCTE, 1996).