Breaking the Cycle: Using Reflective Activities to Transform Teacher Response

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This article explores the problems associated with a pedagogy of severity, which influences how teachers read and respond to student papers, and suggests that reflection, especially *reflection-in-action,* can be useful to writing instructors as they respond to their students' texts. Reflection-in-action, or the reflection that occurs while one is still in the process of completing a task, offers teachers and students the opportunity to reflect on the value of written comments while still possessing the chance to create effective and informative student texts and teacher comments. After exploring how reflection can benefit response, experiences with two reflective activities are given as examples of how reflection-in-action can be introduced into a teacher's response practices.

Keywords: reflection, written response, journals

Kevin Porter (2001) in "A Pedagogy of Charity: Donald Davidson and the Student-Negotiated Composition Classroom," argued that some teachers approach writing instruction from a pedagogy of severity, searching for the negative in student writing and often believing that "a blank page with no comments" is the only positive comment a student needs (p. 581). Porter saw this approach as problematic for both the student and the teacher—he theorized that students often model their commenting and revision practices after their classroom experiences, as well as how teachers have responded to their texts. In studying his own students' peer review activities, he found that most students approached response as an activity of error-hunting and correction, searching for faults and problems while rarely attending to learning and development (p. 578). He asked, "If not from past teachers or writing textbooks, where are these 'rules of thumb' coming from?" (p. 581).

One could further ask why these rules of thumb—this pedagogy of severity—continue to exist, replicated year in and year out in writing courses. While dozens of studies on teacher response speak to the value of written and oral commentary, we continue to find narratives, both in writing and in our hallways and classrooms, that speak to the problems students encounter when a teacher puts pen to paper (Connors & Lundford, 1986; Fassler, 1978; Freedman, 1987; Harvey, 2003). Over the past few years, I have explored this issue with students in my classes, ranging from first-year composition to graduate-level courses in writing theory and practice. I ask each group the same question: What have been your experiences with teacher response, including written comments, conferencing, electronic communication, or other methods? With each passing course, the consistency in the students' responses is amazing, regardless of whether it is a class of freshmen or graduate students. While students at times discuss positive experiences with teacher response (these usually come from my more successful student writers), the conversation overwhelmingly moves into tales in which a pedagogy of severity emerged. Among the stories are ones that detail (a) the lack of response offered from instructors, (b) responses that focused exclusively on what the student had done wrong in the paper, (c) responses that contradicted earlier teacher comments, (d) stereotypical comments, and

(e) responses in which instructors raised questions about the student's mental or emotional ability to do college-level work.

In this article, I will explore Porter's discussion of the pedagogy of severity and how it has negatively influenced teacher response. I will then consider how incorporating more teacher reflection into our response habits may downplay or even eradicate the pedagogy of severity from our responses specifically and our classrooms in general. Finally, I will offer two potential reflective methods that, if incorporated into a writing classroom, can help instructors better understand how the pedagogy of severity may be a part of their pedagogy while also seeing how these methods can help teachers produce more effective written responses to student papers.

Pedagogy of Severity in Response to Student Writing

According to Porter (2001), the pedagogy of severity has become a noticeable aspect of composition classrooms, which are composed of "countless instances of failures to continue communication" (p. 576). Students witness the pedagogy of severity through "the shutting down of dialogic possibilities" and through teachers "assigning labels and making corrections instead of asking questions and searching for new answers," all leading to "the perpetuation of damaging attitudes about what education is, how teachers should respond to students' work, and how students should respond to their own work as well" (p. 576). As an example of how this pedagogy influences classrooms, Porter discussed how students responded to each other during a peer review session. While students stated beforehand that they hoped to receive "substantive responses" and to have their writing "treated respectfully" by others, these same students offered mostly grammatical and lower-order feedback, and the discussion "mainly centered around faults and problems—trademarks of the pedagogy of severity" (p. 578). Porter argued that students learn this pedagogy of severity from teachers and the larger field, pointing to harmful written comments from teachers that often focus on corrections and mistakes, the use of "corrections charts" in various handbooks and rhetorics, and lore that has been passed down about the stress and labor associated with response. The connection between teacher and researcher voices and student written responses is clear to Porter; he wrote:

My students' attitudes toward responding to writing in a classroom didn't just emerge from a vacuum. Their willingness to defend their assessments—some quite sarcastic—as "natural" (i.e., "how else could writing be evaluated?") or "common-sensical" revealed how well the students had internalized their experiences with writing over the years. . . . When asked to grapple with rough drafts instead of finished, published pieces, my students found themselves, not surprisingly, with few strategies other than those that had been used to evaluate their own unpublished writing; and unfortunately, those strategies frequently belonged to a pedagogy of severity that limited the way students read and responded to the writing of others and, presumably, their own writing. (p. 584)

I agree with Porter that the pedagogy of severity has persisted in our classrooms and in our research about teacher response for several decades. Response continues to be depicted as a mundane and time-consuming task that must often be completed in an isolated, acontextual environment, such as a teacher's office, away from the eyes of students, peers, and administrators. To add to the dismay, instructors often believe that these responses will be discarded (both physically and mentally) by the students almost immediately after they are created and subsequently read, perhaps only later reflected upon by the instructor or someone else (such as an administrator during program review or a researcher for a response-based study). With these views in mind, it should come as no surprise to hear about the physical and mental exhaustion that can occur with response. Harvey's (2003) reflections on response are indicative of the views of many writing instructors:

When one is reading each paper in a batch with close attention to ideas and expression and morale and future papers the student may write and must get the whole import into a concise, usable response, the first ten or so papers can be kind of fun; the next ten and beyond will be increasingly less so, to the point where one flags, delays and avoids, feeds the dog, cleans the bathroom, makes more coffee, eventually forces oneself to the bitter end. (p. 48)

In some ways, Harvey is right; the process of responding to student writing is exhausting—physically, emotionally, and mentally. Yet I would argue that the pedagogy of severity is one of the noticeable causes of this tremendous harm. Response is the one area in which we make the strongest connections with our students, and if not done effectively, it can cause great damage to not only their writing identities and abilities but also to how we as teachers view students, their writing, and our own pedagogy. For example, past studies have shown that when teachers approach response from a perspective similar to the pedagogy of severity, the responses produced tend to convey negativity and lead to both less development in student writing ability and lower self-esteem among student writers (Connors & Lunsford, 1986; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981; Mallonee & Breihan, 1985; Sommers, 1982; Straub, 1997).

How do we move beyond this pedagogy of severity? One idea is to encourage instructors to spend more time thinking and reflecting on their responses; they can then use these reflections to form and transform their pedagogy. Referring to previous research on response, Phelps (2000) wrote:

> Classroom ethnographies and case studies hold promise for insight. But the most achievable and profound type of empirical inquiry into student learning lies in teachers' own reflections on their practical experience. . . . Examining the results of responses as an experiment . . . is exactly what reflective practice means. (pp. 96–97)

It is especially important for teachers to incorporate this reflection into their actual response time because it allows them to think about their comments when they still have the opportunity to help student writers.

I want to now take up Phelps's argument and discuss the importance of reflecting upon the response methods we use and the feedback we offer to students. To emphasize this, I will focus on practical methods I have incorporated into my writing courses to help me reflect upon my responses during the most critical point: the process of responding. These methods foster more *reflection-in-action* during teacher response, the type of reflection that occurs during the act of response itself.

Current View of Reflection in Response Literature

While the value of reflection has been discussed in relation to different areas of writing pedagogy (Bishop, 1999; Brookfield, 1995; Hillocks, 1995; Yancey, 1998), the same cannot be said for literature about reflection in relation to responding to student writing. For the most part, reflection connected to response has continually been depicted as an activity useful to students but not to teachers. For example, one can find numerous articles on how students can be more reflective when reading and revising their own texts or the texts of others. Such tools as writers' memos and reflective letters are frequently discussed in composition literature (Berzynski, 2001; Yancey, 1998), and it is now common for students to write reflective documents as part of the drafting and revision process at different times in a writing course as well as when submitting their writing or portfolio for a final grade.

However, while narratives on students' reflection are common, research and narratives on teachers' reflection on response are rare. Only a few articles have appeared that connect teacher response directly to theories of reflection. One article is Straub's (2000) "The Student, the Text, and the Classroom Context: A Case Study of Teacher Response." Straub wrote that one of his goals was to "reflect upon my own responding practices [used during a 1993 class] in light of my teaching and to model such acts of teacher reflection." He later argued that he hoped to "suggest how other teachers might go about reflecting on their ways of responding in light of their own assignments, instruction, and goals and usefully integrate contemporary response theory into their classroom practice" (pp. 24–25). Straub believed certain principles of response have been and should continue to be guiding principles for the field of composition. These principles were ones he followed in his 1993 course:

1. "Turn your comments into a conversation" (p. 28).
2. "Do not take control over the student's text" (p. 31).
3. "Give priority to global concerns of content, context, organization, and purpose before getting (overly) involved with style and correctness" (p. 34).
4. "Limit the scope of your comments and the number of comments you present" (p. 40).

5. "Select your focus of comments according to the stage of drafting and relative maturity of the text" (p. 42).
6. "Gear your comments to the individual student" (p. 42).
7. "Make frequent use of praise" (p. 46).

After providing examples of how his responses fit into the seven principles, Straub conducted a short reflection; he mentioned that he "wrote a lot of comments" on the papers during that class and that, while he was happy with the amount of praise offered, he would then offer "if not more, then at least better, use of praise" (pp. 50–51). This is the extent of the reflection Straub offered in his article.

In her response to Straub's article, Murphy (2000) pointed out that Straub created a very prescriptive environment by introducing current discussions in the field as "principles." Murphy argued:

> The thing about principles (or standards)—especially when they are presented as rules—is that there are always exceptions. The danger is that they are likely to be interpreted as recipes to be followed, regardless of the context in which they are to be used or applied. (p. 84)

Murphy further criticized Straub because student voices are missing from his analysis. She stated, "What counts as knowledge is socially constructed by teachers *and* students, not by teachers alone. To put it another way, we need to see the other side of the conversation" (p. 86, emphasis in original).

In addition to Murphy's arguments, I am underwhelmed by Straub's "reflective" nature. Straub's amount of reflection is very limited and does not encompass the various dimensions that reflection can take. One could argue that the type of reflection Straub advocated is Donald Schon's (1982) reflection-on-action, or "thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome" (p. 26). This view of reflection has been the prevailing one in our field; research and narratives usually discuss reflection as an activity taking place after an extended period of time has elapsed, critiquing one's actions in light of current theory and then evaluating the success or failure of the activity along with possible changes for future

use. In regard to teacher response, the literature encourages instructors to reflect during a time when it can be useful to instructors and to the comments they are writing, but this really holds little value for the student writers who receive the initial comments.

Seeing how Straub's seven principles could be used *during an actual class* and not in retrospect may hold more value. While reflecting on past responses is useful, it appears to be the second step in becoming more reflective responders. The first step—the one that has rarely been discussed in relation to teacher response—is reflection-in-action, or reflecting on the immediate thoughts and reactions that a person has while performing an act. It is the time "during which we can still make a difference to the situation at hand—our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it" (Schon, 1982, p. 26). Suddenly, the question is not "How successful or unsuccessful *were* my responses to an earlier class?" but rather "How successful or unsuccessful *are* my responses *to this current class*?" As Bardine, Bardine, and Deegan (2000) wrote, "Assessing student writing goes beyond merely grading papers. Teachers need to first understand their role as responder and make it an integral part of writing instruction" (p. 95). My argument here is not that teachers do not already reflect while responding—most teachers find themselves reflecting on how to make response more productive. What I am arguing is that many teachers do not have a systematic way of managing and strategically using these reflections in order to become better responders specifically and better teachers in general.[1] In this article, I will explore further the possibilities of systematically using reflections in order to become stronger readers and responders to student writing. Specifically, I will offer teachers two useful methods for making reflection-in-action more productive when responding to student texts: response journals and audiorecorded comments.

Response Journals

Before promoting the benefits of response journals, I should come clean and state that I am not a "journal person." As a student, journaling

1. Kathleen Blake Yancey's method of highlighting student texts to illustrate how she reads the paper is one exception. For more information, see Chapter 5 (1998, pp. 110–112).

was something I always saw as a waste of time; when asked to write an entry, I was the one who would spend a few minutes doodling and then either write down a jumbled one-paragraph answer to the prompt or develop an outline of main points. The move to the opposite side of the desk did not spark any new interest in the activity: while my colleagues would rave about their students' journals and what they were learning from the entries, I continued to resist, arguing that it was too time consuming or did not fit into my current pedagogical beliefs or curriculum.

Thus, it was not surprising that the idea of keeping a response journal happened quite by accident. The focus of my dissertation was on studying how writing instructors responded to student writing, with an emphasis on how context influenced their written comments (see Edgington, 2004, for more information). The research caused me to reflect more on my own response methods and led to an interesting observation: while responding, whenever a perplexing idea, paragraph, or sentence emerged, I would stop responding and start talking. Maybe I was talking to the voices in the text (Zebroski, 1989); maybe my audience was my "other" self (Murray, 1982). Regardless, the pattern was consistent: get stuck responding, start talking.

Then, one day, rather than talking, I began to write. It occurred while responding to a series of rough drafts from a second-semester composition class concentrating on research writing and organized around a community project. Early in the semester, each student sent me a short memo that answered a few questions about their chosen community. Many students experienced difficulty aligning themselves with a community, while others chose communities too large to handle for this particular assignment. These issues were addressed in class, and the students set out writing the first paper for the course, a three- to four-page proposal that explained the community and the project in more detail. Reading and responding to these initial proposals, I quickly noticed that my comments were similar to the comments offered earlier on the memos. After responding to a few proposals, my verbal conversation with my fictitious audience began. Why could these students not understand the concept

behind the paper? We had spent time in class discussing different types of communities, right? Since the whole class was developed around this theme, was I facing the possibility of a semester full of problems?

Then, quite out of the ordinary, I grabbed a pen and began to write. While initially this started out as a note to myself for future reference, the direction and content of the writing gradually changed. What follows is part of the initial entry that later became my response journal:

> What am I going to do? These proposals just aren't going the way that I hoped they would. Expectations just a little too high? But, I don't see this as a difficult project. I mean, how hard is it to see the communities we belong to? I belong to a number of communities: the university, my family, the church my wife and I attend, my fantasy football league, various graduate student groups that meet for different purposes. And, I could probably name a whole slew of problems that affect these communities. I mean, I wish I could get the people in my fantasy football league to use the website I made for them. I would like to get fellow graduate students to become more active in the graduate student organization. I would love to get my wife's father and stepfather together just one time so that our families could have a holiday meal.

After stopping and looking over what I had written, I skipped a few lines and wrote the following:

> On Monday, start class by talking about the different communities I belong to and how these communities experience problems I would like to have solved. Maybe spend time discussing as a larger group how to solve these problems, what kinds of research would have to be done, etc. Or, choose a community the students would be familiar with and use it to show them how to start the project.

After this experience, the response journal became a more prominent tool for me, especially when I encountered problems while responding to student texts. This is not to say that I am continually writing in the

journal; there have been various times when there has not been a need to rely upon it. However, the journal is still a part of my teaching, becoming a place for me to reflect upon my feelings about student writing, methods of response, and pedagogy.

Because of the value this practice has brought to my teaching, I have introduced the concept to our graduate teaching instructors. I experimented with having a group of teaching assistants (TAs) keep a response journal over the course of their first semester. The TAs were told that there was no requirement for how many times they had to write in the journal, just that they should try to use it at least once during the semester to help them when they encountered problematic student texts or faced a perplexing problem. Of the 12 TAs, nine remarked that the journal became an important tool for them—one in which they were able to think through complex problems and issues (for some, not just related to response but to other classroom issues as well). One TA remarked:

> The journal became a place for me to rant a little bit about what I was reading, which is better than having those thoughts show up in my comments. But, by ranting, I also recognized where [*sic*] I could do better in helping my students.

Another stated:

> The response journal helped me see that some of my comments were vague and did a poor job of explaining my suggestions to students. By using the journal to try out different phrases and ideas, I was able to come up with some stronger comments.

While the journal was useful to most of the TAs, three felt this activity did not work for them. One of these students said:

> The journal felt unnecessary for me. Yes, I did run into some problematic papers, but talking with other TAs or the lecturer I worked with [during the previous semester] was more useful to me. Honestly, the journal was something I wrote in after the fact.

In my opinion, comments like this one serve as a reminder that not all reflective activities work equally well for all teachers. What the response journal does, in short, is make reflection-in-action (along with reflection-on-action) a visible part of the responding process.

Audio-Recorded Responses

The concept of tape-recording (or audio-recording) one's comments on a student text has long been a recognized strategy in composition. Sommers (2002) wrote, "Listening to the instructor's response on a tape cassette requires students to take an active interpretative role by taking notes on their own drafts of what they understand the instructor to be saying" (p. 266). Anson (1997) studied recorded commentary over the past 20 years and found that teachers who use recorded comments are more comfortable in their role as a responder and have less dread in responding to student texts.

More recently, researchers in writing studies have explored current technologies and how these can be useful tools for instructors responding to student papers. Following up on his earlier work with tape-recorded responses, Anson (2016) explored how screencasts can be used for recording both audio and visual responses. His research found that "the screencast technology appears to have created an evaluative space in which students could interact with their teacher in ways they saw as productive to the learning environment," leading to students feeling more "involved and respected" (pp. 399–400). Grigoryan (2017) reported on instructors using Jing, a screen-capture software, in an online classroom and found that "survey and interview results indicate that students who received AV (audio visual comments through Jing) + T (text-based comments) rated their interaction with the instructor as more personal than those who received only T (text-based comments)" (p. 104). Ahern-Dodson and Reisinger (2017) studied the use of audio comments created as MP3 files in L2 writing classes; they found that teacher engagement with the student texts rose when using audio comments, shifting the teacher's role from "graders" of student essays to "readers" of student essays. Cox, Black, Henley, and Keith (2015) found that audio and screencast commentary can be especially valuable in an online writing classroom setting. We have even begun to see audio commentary used in

classrooms beyond composition, such as mathematics (Weld, 2014) and sociology (Heimbürger, 2018).

The research on audio-recorded response has consistently focused on it as a response method, used by teachers to provide feedback to students. However, can audio-recorded responses also provide a way for teachers to reflect upon their own pedagogy? As previously mentioned, my dissertation (Edgington, 2004) focused on how the context surrounding a response situation affected teachers' written comments. Eight college writing instructors were asked to "think-aloud" while reading and responding to student texts. The goal was to better understand what thought processes occur while teachers are reading and commenting on student drafts, including what influences their reading and responding strategies and what effect these thoughts have on the written comments offered to students.

After the think-alouds, each instructor participated in an interview about the experience. During these interviews, when asked to elaborate on the experience, three instructors mentioned that they took time to listen to the response session and that this experience convinced them of the possible benefits of this method, including a better understanding of their different strengths and weaknesses as responders. One instructor mentioned that she was surprised at how quickly she read some of her students' papers and expressed concern that she was "skimming" too much. Another talked about how much she enjoyed reading the papers and noted that she used the word "good" often, something that surprised her, since she often felt like she was too critical in her comments.

Audio-recording oneself while reading and responding may be an additional method for instructors who want to reflect on how they are responding. Audio-recording comments allows an instructor to understand his or her own successes and problems that occur during response. There could also be ways of organizing the think-aloud to focus on a particular problem. For example, if instructors note that they have difficulty reading and responding to students with various grammatical problems, audio-recording themselves while reading and responding to those papers could be enlightening. Teachers could decide to audio-record themselves while responding to a specific assignment, when reading papers from a new genre, or when dealing with a difficult topic. While these

recordings could be shared with students, the goal here is to give teachers a chance to review their own response practices, identifying and reflecting upon any issues that emerge from those recordings. This, in turn, will allow them to become better responders, leading to students becoming stronger writers.

Conclusion

While these two methods can assist instructors in becoming stronger responders, I also realize not all instructors find themselves in a situation in which these can easily be incorporated. Higher teaching loads, courses at multiple universities or colleges, and research-heavy tenure requirements present significant obstacles that impinge upon the time that could be devoted to reflective activities. Yet, even with these restrictions, it is still important to find time to reflect upon how we respond. While constraints may lead to shorter reflections or reflections that occur less often during a semester, there are still reasons to encourage faculty to conduct reflections-in-action. Reflection does not have to occur for every paper read, nor does it have to occur every time one responds. For those instructors who face time constraints, one may choose, for example, to write in a response journal (a) only when necessary, (b) when presented with specific types of problematic essays, or (c) after all of the responses have occurred. An instructor may choose to tape-record only problematic texts (and then listen to those recordings at a later time or immediately after responding to note any trends or problems that occur). In other words, these methods can be revised to fit into anyone's schedule, needs, and situations.

It is true that many instructors already do some form of reflection while responding. Many of us may stop to think about our comments, step away from the desk for a few moments to collect our thoughts, or reflect back on past responses after we have finished or before we have handed back papers to students. However, few instructors have a systematic way of recording and *using* these reflections. Methods like response journals and tape-recorded responses become ways to record our reflections and thoughts that may become useful in the immediate moment. In the past, when responding to second and third drafts of student

papers, I often spent time thinking about the previous drafts and reflecting on earlier comments, on the experience of reading and responding to the paper, and on any other conversations that occurred with the student during the time between the drafts. Now, I often refer to previous entries in my response journal in order to help me remember these past experiences, and I write new information that will help me when reading future drafts of the paper. Instructors could also listen to previously recorded comments on earlier student drafts before reading new revisions of those papers (something that could be less time-consuming than other methods). Thus, reflective methods can assist instructors who use multiple-draft systems in their classrooms by offering another (and more systematic) way of reflecting on previous drafts of student texts.

Finally, teachers in all teaching situations should be encouraged to reflect because it is an important strategy to use; why else would we routinely require our students to do it? Yet there has been little research and literature that focuses on how teachers reflect upon their own writing inside the classroom. There is something unethical about asking students to consistently reflect upon what they are producing, yet failing to take the time ourselves to do the same for our writing in the classroom. In other words, are we having students write in a genre of reflection (letters, memos, etc.) that we are not as knowledgeable about because we do not reflect? As Porter (2001) discussed, many of our classrooms are fueled by a pedagogy of severity, where both students and teachers focus more on errors and correction than on student learning. Would this pedagogy still be apparent if students *and* teachers began to become more reflective writers and responders? Since the majority of our classroom writing tends to be in the form of comments to students, we must take the time to reflect on written responses. Yes, reflecting on responses adds another element to an already laborious activity; yes, teachers will need to spend additional time during response (although I do not think the amount of labor and time will significantly increase). However, by reflecting on their comments—especially while responding—teachers will become stronger responders and better instructors, highlighting how important reflection truly is for novice and expert writers. Rather than shying away from the reflecting we do, we need to develop strategies for better understanding

how reflection affects the ways in which we respond. This in turn could lead to more reflection in other areas of our teaching, encouraging all of us to rethink about how reflection can, and should, be a greater practice in our own pedagogy.

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