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Review of *Responding to Student Writers* by Nancy Sommers

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Nancy Sommers's *Responding to Student Writers* is a self-proclaimed "modest book" (vii) with an important goal: discussing best practices in responding to student writing. Published by Bedford St. Martin's, the book aims to address teachers at the college-level who may find themselves struggling with increasing enrollment and a practice that "takes more time, thought, empathy, and energy than any other aspect of teaching writing" (x). At approximately 50 pages, Sommers's slim book is both conversational and easy to digest, a text that could easily be slipped in a carry-on bag for a trip to a conference or read quickly between classes. Though the retail price for students is \$18.99, teachers can request a desk copy for free through Bedford. The majority of the volume is organized into an introduction and six main sections; however, an index, brief bibliography, and summary of best practices are also provided.

The first section, "Setting the Scene for Responding," stresses the importance of purpose and a positive tone in comments, as well as the hazards of overcommenting. It also discusses how written comments can be more useful when they are connected to classroom practice by using terms and descriptions from lessons. The next section, "Engaging Students in a Dialogue about Their Writing," expands on the role of conversation through commentary and includes a manifesto written by students describing the importance of specificity, student agency, and the marking of themes and patterns. According to Sommers, "Questions alone may not

engage students, but questions anchored in the specifics of a student text and phrased in the common language of the classroom are much more likely to create a role for students in the exchange” (20). As illustrated by the quote, connections between different types of responses and student authority are stressed throughout the text.

The next two sections, “Writing Marginal Comments” and “Writing End Comments,” address marginal notes and end notes respectively and continue to emphasize engagement. For example, Sommers suggests having students write “Dear Reader” letters that then guide teacher comments. The fifth section provides instructions for managing paper load, including focusing on global issues first, designing class handouts for common problems, and thinking about alternative ways to provide comments, and the final section, “A Case Study: One Reader Reading,” gives an example of comments Sommers provides on a particular student’s draft. Sommers ends the handbook with a two page spread of best practices, including brief lists of bullet points for preparing, responding to rough drafts, promoting revision, and responding to final drafts.

Responding to Student Writers is far from Sommers’s only work on student writing or instructor feedback; she has published numerous scholarly articles, including the influential texts “Responding to Student Writing” and “Revision Strategies of Student and Experienced Writers.” She has also co-authored many Hacker handbooks such as *A Writer’s Reference and Rules for Writers*. Much of the material for the current text comes from her longitudinal study performed at Harvard University, a four-year foray into the role of writing in undergraduate education. Her work builds on “Responding to Student Writing” by including some of the same criticism in the first section—that teachers tend to over-comment and provide vague, contradictory feedback—but also providing advice that will help teachers meet her challenge of offering students comments that encourage revision and development.

One of the strengths of the book is that it provides actual responses and guidelines provided by students. Much of the advice given here should be familiar to those well-versed in the literature concerning responding to student work; however, Sommers’s suggestion that teachers should give students the chance to define what effective comments are does not seem widespread in theory or practice. Along with the manifesto and other

quotes from students at Harvard, she offers a sample of recommendations for the teacher from students at Bunker Hill Community College, including “Write comments that begin conversations, not end them” (34) and “Provoke us. Help us think for ourselves” (34). Another strength of the book is that it provides several case studies and specific guidelines for giving effective feedback. For example, it offers a series of questions to ask students when crafting “Dear Reader” letters and a sequence to consider when responding. Sommers emphasizes that responding to students should not be formulaic, but these examples present a place to start.

Because the book tends to stress the same habits and practices across chapters, tools and innovative ways to respond to student writing, such as rubrics, podcasts, and oral feedback, are merely touched upon, and instructors with a background in the literature will find few surprises. In addition, those interested in discipline-specific methodologies or writing in an ESL context will need to read further. However, the goal of the text is to provide less familiar teachers with an easy guide to thinking about their responses and how they affect students, and it accomplishes this with gusto. After all, responding to student comments is “serious business” (x).

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