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For decades, researchers and teachers in composition have wrestled with how to respond to student writing. Part of this discussion has focused on what role teachers should assume when reading and responding to texts. From these discussions, different roles have emerged, including the gatekeeper, the critic, the facilitator, the coach, and the judge, among others. While some have argued that the use of response identities helps teachers focus their responses while offering students an audience for their texts, others are more wary of what influence these roles may have on the student-teacher relationship and teacher comments. This article explores the history of response identities, including research on both the positive and negative outcomes from their use. It then offers a new perspective of response as an intellectual endeavor, emphasizing both the labor that goes into response and the rewards that both students and teachers can receive from the process. Ideas of how to move toward this view of response are offered.

Keywords: response, identity, labor, student writing, reading

Sitting in my office, I hear a faint knock on my door. Tim, a graduate student instructor who is about ten weeks into teaching his first composition course, enters, asking for a few moments to discuss a student matter. Opening up a folder filled with random notes and papers, he slowly pulls a student text out from the pile, sighing noticeably as he does so. After offering some background on the student, his writing, and his participation (or often lack thereof) in the course, Tim proceeds to list the issues he is having with this particular text: the lack of a definitive thesis, a breakdown in overall organization, the use of subpar research sources, and a list of grammatical and mechanical concerns. As Tim concludes, he asks the question I have now grown accustomed to hearing from new teachers (and even a few experienced ones) in my program: "How am I supposed to respond to this?"

What I've learned from over a decade of administering composition programs is there is more, so much more, to that question. Sometimes, the instructor is searching for that perfect response method; in other moments, the question comes from instructors who are asking for the best place to start, searching for a way in to a problematic paper. But, most often, I've found that the question is actually a way to introduce new, often more complex questions. Instead of searching for a perfect method or a starting point, new instructors are often asking, What stance or position should I take in responding to this student paper? or put more simply, Who am I supposed to <u>be</u> for this student? Both experienced and novice teachers alike often walk into my office confused by what role to take for a particular student at a particular time for a particular paper.

In this article, I would like to discuss ways to help new instructors better understand and use different response identities and masks when responding to student writing. First, I summarize important scholarship on response identity over the past three decades, focusing on both the positive and negative aspects recognized in these works. Next, I reflect upon past methods I have used in my graduate level ENGL 6010 Teaching College Composition course to help new TAs better understand response identity. Then, based upon my reflections on these past experiences, I set forth a plan for envisioning student response as an act of intellectual endeavor, arguing that this perspective allows new instructors to use response identities in a

more productive way. Finally, I offer various practices to assist these new instructors in adopting a view of response as intellectual endeavor in order to help both experienced and new instructors produce stronger and more focused responses to student writing.

Discussions about possible identities used during response sessions have been a visible topic in composition research over the last three decades. Since the publication of Alan Purves' text *The Teacher as Reader: An Anatomy* (1984), in which Purves identifies the "role or roles a teacher may adopt as a reader regardless of the implied role in the student text" (p. 259)—including roles such as gatekeeper, critic, reviewer, and therapist, among others—the fascination with reading and response identities has grown in composition narratives and scholarship. For instance, John Bean (1996) suggests that when writers are drafting a paper, teachers should assume a coach identity, offering encouragement and support; when the final copy is submitted, instructors should be transformed into judges, offering final evaluation. Richard Haswell (2006) acknowledges several constant and emerging identities in composition literature, including rhetorician, coach, persuasive motivator, lawgiver, expert reader, editor, and diagnostician. In her study, Elizabeth Hodges (1992) found that teachers used many voices in debate with each other, including social scientist, cultural anthropologist, counselor, critic, teacher, historian, person. Richard Straub (1996), one of the most well-known researchers on teacher response during the 1990s, argued that

> A teacher who responds as a facilitator . . . can respond as a teacher, reader, a guide, a friendly advisor, a diagnostician, a coach, a motivator, a collaborator, a fellow explorer, an inquirer, a confidant, a questioning reader, a representative reader, a common reader (or average reader or real reader), a sounding board, a subjective reader, an idiosyncratic reader, a sympathetic reader, a trusted adult, and a friend. (p. 225)

It's clear that assuming specific personas or identities while responding to student writing has become an accepted practice in both response research and pedagogy. And, for most, this has led to favorable outcomes. Purves (1984) argues that the use of multiple roles or identities can be a

benefit to students, stating that "the student as writer must learn to deal with all these kinds of readers [and learn] that the text is read variously not only by different people for different purposes, but also variously by the same reader" (p. 265). Straub (1996) insists that through the use of multiple response personas, a teacher can "support, advise, explore, engage, question, motivate, encourage, nurture, receive, interpret, and provide reader reactions," all of which "share the basic trait of somehow engaging students in an exchange about their writing . . . each [persona] functioning in more or less the same way as the others" (p. 225).

However, other researchers acknowledge a need to question and reflect upon the effects response personas can have on both teachers and students. As Straub (1996) further argues, the field of composition has "come to pack an expanding number of roles…into our concept of facilitative response, without adequately defining these methods or mapping the relationships among them" (p. 225). Muriel Harris (1986) claims similar problems, arguing that "the teacher who over-grades leaps from suggestion to correction to criticism, from being an editor to a coach to a reader. In noting many things, the instructor emphasizes nothing, and many students, lost in the welter of messages, retreat" (p. 92). Finally, David Fuller (1987) offers a somewhat dismal picture in relation to research on response personas and roles:

> The responder dons many masks, poses, and stances, all of which fall under the larger role of "teacher." But few students are capable of understanding and applying the many and various reactions and directions. Many learn how to "play the game," but others become confused and alienated when they receive responses that come from a variety of roles. (p. 312)

Three years ago, during a graduate-level course focused on preparing new teaching assistants for the classroom, I posed the question of whether any past teachers, composition or otherwise, discussed the role(s) they chose to use when responding to student papers. None of the students mentioned a conversation related to this in a past class, and most of the teaching assistants were surprised that teachers actually chose different roles when responding. With this experience fresh in my mind, I asked a

group of full-time composition lecturers the same question, modifying it to ask if they had ever spoken about this with their previous students. Silence and quizzical expressions followed; while most agreed that they frequently assume different identities when responding, some saw it as almost silly to discuss response roles with their classes, while others worried about possible problems that could emerge with opening up this hornet's nest. While only informal, these observations do imply that for some teachers, the thought of making response roles and identities a visible and discussed part of the composition classroom is a rare occurrence.

Thus, questions remain: How does assuming multiple identities when responding influence how students view teachers and their written and oral comments? How do we explain to students that, for one paper, we may act as a coach but on another we will assume a more authoritative, employer- or judge-like position? Do we explain this to students? And, what effect does this have on how students write their texts, especially if, as Straub (1997) argues, "during the time the student reads a set of comments, the image of the teacher that comes off the page becomes the teacher for that student and has an immediate impact on what those comments come to mean" (p. 100)? What image are we projecting to our students through our written comments?

Changing Identities: New Teachers and Response Personas

For the past decade, I have frequently taught sections of our graduate-level ENGL 6010 Teaching College Composition class. Required for all incoming graduate students who hold a teaching assistantship, the class introduces students to both composition theory and practice through readings, discussions, and activities. Nearly three weeks of the course focuses on reading and responding to student writing, through discussions on teacher reading strategies, response best practices, peer review, and student-teacher conferencing. An often-used activity during the course is a full-class reading and response session on sample student texts from previous first-year writing courses. Each response activity will ask the graduate students to focus on a different strategy or aspect of the text (e.g. responding in only positive comments, offering both facilitative and

directive feedback; envisioning how to discuss the paper with the student during a conference setting). Most students remark in end-of-the-year surveys and evaluations that they find this sequence of the course as the most beneficial for them as future teachers.

During these discussions, I always try to incorporate the idea of response identity into the conversation. Sometimes, I do this very clearly, like assigning students to read one of the aforementioned articles and having a class discussion on the topic. At other times, I will have students approach the topic from a slightly different perspective, coercing them to take on a certain identity during a response session. For example, borrowing from an activity mentioned by Brian Huot in his book *(Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* (2002), I have students read, respond, and evaluate a student paper from different personas, including the classroom teacher, a placement reader, an administrator granting rising junior status, an employer, etc. The class discusses both their responses and evaluation along with their reflections on the different personas after the activity.

Yet, regardless of the activity, each time I ask the teaching assistants to take on an authoritative role with the text, and rarely, if ever, I offer them the chance to take on the role of an interested reader or peer. Part of the problem resided in how I may have arranged the activity, but part of the issue also seemed to be rooted in the teaching assistants' resistance towards seeing a student text as anything other than a student text. In my observations of the activity, mentioning the word "student" at any point in the discussion affected how the paper would be read, usually in a more negative way.

So, a few semesters ago, I modified the activity. I made copies of a strong student-writing sample from a past class but took off any markers that it was a student paper. I again asked the class to read the paper from different perspectives, but for one group, I gave them the following prompt: "Read the following published narrative and offer your response to it. Then, decide on if your group would have published the text." Technically, I was only stretching the truth here; the text was a narrative and it had been published, albeit to an online class website. Most importantly, I made sure that the word student did not show up at any point in the prompt.

The discussion that followed began with a similar path. The groups who had the more traditional personas of teacher, gatekeeper, editor, and employer went through and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the essays, ways to improve the text, and the overall evaluation they would offer. But I watched the new group, the published narrative readers, and noticed that they often read and discussed with a different view of the text. When it came their time to share, they started to focus more on their emotional connection to the text, talking about the "reading experience" and how this greatly assisted them in offering responses to the writer. It should be noted that, while the other three groups used the word *student* frequently (even though student markers had been removed), this final group used the word *writer* to refer to the author almost exclusively. And, the responses they offered were seen by the full class as more detailed and focused than what had been offered in the other groups.

As I left class that day, I wondered more about the experience and what it may mean to read student papers from this type of a perspective. Over the last few years, I have continued to reflect upon and discuss this experience with other teaching assistants and lecturers, and it has led me to offer a new perspective from which to view teacher response and identity. Now I encourage my teaching assistants to see response more as an intellectual endeavour.

Response Revisited: Response as Intellectual Endeavour

What does it mean to see response as an intellectual endeavor? The concept stresses what I believe are the two most important aspects of response. First, the act of reading students' papers and offering constructive criticism and suggestions needs to be viewed as an intellectual activity, one on par with other writing and reading we do in our scholarly and teaching lives. Teachers often resist reading student writing from this perspective, focusing instead on a cursory or stylistic reading; as Joseph Williams (1981) and others have pointed out, instructors, especially those new to teaching, rely on a mixture of stylistic commenting and error-hunting when responding to student papers, engaging with the content of the text on only a surface level. I believe that for most of my teaching assistants

in the above example, this was the view I was asking them to take. Yet, as we read student texts, we discover more about not only our students as writers, but also about the new and familiar topics that are the content of their papers, the success or failure of our assignments, who we are as readers and teachers, our pedagogical practices and theories, and the social and cultural issues and problems that are affecting our students today; all experiences that also occur when we read books, articles, and other forms of scholarship, all experiences that we see as a part of our intellectual lives.

But, while reading and responding to student texts can be enlightening, invigorating, and yes, even fun, it is strenuous work. Peggy O'Neill, Ellen Schendel, Michael Williamson, and Brian Huot (2007) write that "no matter how you approach it, reading, responding to drafts, conferencing, and grading final drafts and portfolios, requires time and effort. Most writing instructors enjoy teaching writing, but the complaints about the time and effort devoted to the work of assessment is universal" (p. 77). Haswell (2007) further points out that both the page length and time responding per page has increased substantially over the past 100 years and estimates

> At a conservative 4 pages per essay, 7 minutes per page, and 25 students, the English or rhetoric department composition teacher is spending between eleven to twelve hours—pure labor, no breaks—bent over an initial response to just one set of papers. That leaves out of the total the time devoted to second and third drafts (para. 24).

And while teachers, researchers, and commercial companies continually offer new methods that will "dramatically reduce our response time," most of these have had little positive effect or have promoted a view of response that goes radically against most instructors in the field (such as using computer-generated responses that focus more on grammar and mechanics than content). Response is and will continue to be a significant—and laborious—part of our teaching. With this in mind, the idea of an endeavor both acknowledges the hard work that often must be done—since endeavors are rarely easy—but also points to the rewards that will emerge after the journey is over. Endeavor acknowledges that the task

at hand is one that will take strenuous effort, concentration, and time. It involves a level of attainment that is acquired through the completion of a process or task; for a writing teacher, this attainment can become new insights, increased understanding, satisfaction in student achievement, or simple completion of the task. And, as I will argue, we can take these new insights and use them as we revise and reconstruct our future curriculum, syllabi, assignments, and even scholarly pursuits.

Intellectual Endeavour as Practice

How then do we, as instructors and as a field, begin to help new instructors, like my teaching assistants, understand the concept of intellectual endeavor? First, teachers must begin to place increased value on arguably the most important act that occurs during teacher response: the time spent reading and reflecting on a student text. As Louise Wetherbee Phelps (1998) and Brian Huot (2002) have both pointed out, in order to respond to a text, instructors have to read it first. Richard Haswell (2007), while contending that reading is a complex act, states that "there is no discursive practice that more distinguishes the activity of teaching writing" than reading a student text (para. 33). How instructors choose to read a text and what influences them as they read will impact the responses offered to student writers. So, I work with new instructors on reading actively, not simply with some transitory identity in mind, but with the goal of enjoying and analyzing the text similar to how they enjoy and analyze published articles and novels. As they read, these instructors must search for ways to engage not only the paper's content but also the writer, offering advice that will produce sound revisions and stronger writing.

In his book *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants*, Lad Tobin (2004) offers a method that moves instructors towards a picture of reading as intellectual endeavor. Tobin recounts receiving a problematic student essay (entitled "The Googu Manifesto") during an in-class writing workshop. The paper, written by a student Sandeep, offered what Tobin saw as an offensive view of the Gutraty[1] people, inhabitants of

1 Represents student spelling; as Tobin writes "actually, I discovered later, the region he was referring to was not Gutrat, but Gujarat" (pg. 20).

the Gutrat region of India, depicting them as cheap, seeking "everything for free or at a discount" (p. 19). Tobin acknowledges that his first response to the paper is one typical of some writing instructors, stating that "my first assumption was that all of the problems were in his writing and not in my reading. Our assumption is that if we have to work too hard as a reader, then the student has failed as a writer" (p. 20). Yet, Tobin points out that teachers rarely take this stance when confronted with a problematic published text, instead believing that "we need to educate ourselves in order to read it effectively" (p. 20). Thus, Tobin argues that a teacher needs to expand upon his or her knowledge of a problematic paper's content and to inquire about how others may read the text. First, Tobin discussed the text with Sandeep during a weekly conference; learning more about the paper's content allowed Tobin to rethink some of his earlier reflections; as he states, "the more I talked about this essay, the more interested I became in it and the more I wondered how other readers with different perspectives and areas of expertise would see it" (p. 23). With this new information, Tobin sought assistance from colleagues across the disciplines, asking them to read the student paper as a scholarly reader. Responses from African-American studies, Irish studies, performance theory, anthropology, creative writing, and other disciplines followed; the readers encouraged Tobin to note the writer's complex subject position, the tension the writer feels in his own identity, and the use of self-parody in the essay. From the various responses he received (responses that, at times, spoke in support and resistance of each other), Tobin grew in his understanding of both the paper and the writer; he later finds that "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).

While Tobin's method for reading and response is noteworthy, it is also time and labor intensive and cannot be accomplished for every student paper. However, over the last few years I have introduced the practice to new teaching assistants as one to consider when focusing on more problematic or confusing texts. During our practicum course, new teaching assistants read Tobin's chapter, then we look at a past problematic essay from one of

my first-year writing classes. In groups, the teaching assistants read the essay using their own undergraduate backgrounds as a guide; while many of the assistants come from English literature backgrounds, the program also recruits students from creative writing, communication, the fine arts, and even one student with an increased knowledge in engineering. As a class, we talk about the essay from different backgrounds and then discuss how we can use both our own experiences to read and respond to student papers while also encouraging the assistants to consider "reading groups" made up of teaching assistants from various backgrounds to routinely read over more difficult student texts.

In addition, I have begun more strongly to encourage teaching assistants to consider conferencing with students as a method of reading and responding to student texts. Conferencing with students to gain further insights into their ideas and writing processes is a useful beginning step for an instructor trying to find the right way into a problematic paper. Instructors can become more knowledgeable about student topics (especially new or confusing ones) by doing some basic online research prior to reading. As mentioned, as teachers we often approach student texts from an authoritative identity, believing that not only do we hold power in the area of writing, but often in the area of the content of the paper. But, is this always so? A few years ago, one of my students wrote a paper about the new sport of disc golf, a merger of the sports of Frisbee and golf. When I first read the paper, I realized that my stance as content expert would not work for this paper; I was unaware of the sport and had a hard time finding a way into the paper. After conducting some basic research, watching a few online videos, and reading some posts to a disc golf discussion board, I felt better prepared to engage the topic. These are all steps we sometimes take when confronted with a new novel or work of non-fiction, but rarely take for a student paper. After watching a favorite television show, many of us spend time online reading analyses about the episode in order to further our knowledge of it. How much better would our responses be to student texts if we took only 10 to 15 minutes to brush up on the topics of their papers? These are just a few ways that an instructor can increase her knowledge on a paper topic while encouraging a more intellectual reading of the student paper.

Yet, can there be ways of moving towards a response process that places more value on the act of student reading that are also less time and labor intensive than Tobin's (2004) method? One possibility occurred quite by accident during a summer second-semester research writing course. Co-teaching with a fellow instructor, she and I speculated on ways to make peer review a more substantial part of the class. We created a process where students would participate in peer-review sessions with detailed question sheets and would submit both the paper and the peer-review sheet to one of us at the end of each peer-review session (a practice similar to how both of us had conducted peer review in the past, and I believe similar to how composition teachers in general conduct peer review). The change to our practice occurred with our process for reading and responding to the text; instead of reading the peer-review sheet and then reading and responding to the paper, we first read the student paper without making any comments on the draft. We then looked at the peer-review sheet and focused our responses on the comments peers offered. Instead of simply rewriting the comment again as a marginal note or asking students to "look at the peer comments" during an endnote, we instead created a dialogue between the writer, the peer, and the teacher by placing our comments alongside what peers had written, writing statements such as "I agree with your peer reviewer here" or "Your peer reviewer offers good advice; I would add the following to it . . ."

What we discovered was twofold. First, as the semester progressed, students began to put considerably more time and energy into peer-review sessions, recognizing the importance of their peers' comments. Much like in Tobin's (2004) experience, we witnessed writers more willing to ask for advice or clarification from peers, and peers who were all too eager to offer this assistance. Students also began to "talk our language," framing comments in ways that were more productive and informative for their fellow classmates. Second, my co-instructor and I discovered that we had more time to focus on larger issues and content concerns with student papers, reading them less like novice texts and devoting more of our energy towards learning about the paper topics and our students as writers. We spent a few moments pointing out where we agreed with peer comments and devoted most of our time to those few areas that peers did

not comment on or where we needed to offer a different perspective on a peer comment. Thus, finding ways to increase productivity during peer-review sessions can enact a change in how instructors read while allowing more time for this reading to occur.

While acknowledging that theoretical and intellectual ways of reading student papers provides a starting point for changing our field's view of response and response identities, we must also begin to envision response as an activity that will lead to positive outcomes for not only our students but also for teachers. Shifting the focus from labor to endeavor acknowledges that the exertion and effort needed to respond to student papers is a purposeful activity with a tangible and important end goal. Endeavor encourages composition teachers to focus more on the purpose for responding to students' papers and the achievements or gains students—and teachers—receive through this interaction.

In order to promote a view of response as endeavor, teachers and researchers need to emphasize the ways that response can influence our classroom teaching so that instructors begin to notice the multiple ways that responding to student texts can lead to tangible positive results in all aspects of our teaching. For example, I have grown to respect the importance of the student-teacher conference after using it as a tool for responding to student papers. I write of a study (2004), conducted in one of my past first year writing classrooms, on student reactions to different response methods, including marginal comments, response letters, and conferencing. The findings of the study point to the value students discovered from having the chance to work one-on-one with an instructor on their writing during student-teacher conferences. By taking time to approach response from this scholarly perspective, I learned that conferencing was a response method that worked for both students and for myself. Since the publication of this article, students have continued to mention how valuable it is to talk with me about their papers, to seek clarification and elaboration on their ideas and, at times, to be offered the chance to challenge my thoughts on their texts. For my part, conferencing allows me to focus more specifically on particular aspects of the paper while granting the time to recognize how students understand the comments offered to them. And, perhaps as important, conferencing gives me a chance to talk with students about

various classroom practices, including small group discussion, peer review, and assignment sheets; conferencing has provided me with reflections that have allowed for different revisions to these classroom practices, something that has actually saved time and energy in later classes.

In addition, instructors must not only acknowledge how their pedagogical theories influence their response to student writing but also how their response influences their theories. Most instructors recognize individuals who have transformed the ways they respond to student papers; for example, I have been strongly influenced by Richard Straub's (1996; 1997) research on writing comments, Brian Huot (2002) and Lad Tobin's (2004) work on reading student papers, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps' (1998) focus on the surprises that occur when responding. In addition, policy statements and assessment documents have made an impression; for instance, the WPA Outcomes—and my own program's objectives created from them—have had an influence on how I read and respond to student texts. But, focusing only on how these theories, theorists, and statements have influenced our response creates a fragmented picture; we also need to consider how our individual response experiences have influenced the theories that guide our work. While the theorists mentioned above had a tremendous impact on my early response practices, it was my early experiences with reading student papers that most influenced how I respond today. And, it's not just my response theories that are influenced by reading and writing comments on student papers; these experiences have similarly affected my theories and practices in such areas as curriculum design, assignment creation, plagiarism, and grading, in addition to my relationships with students. There have been several instances when I've revised specific information or objectives for an assignment (almost always for the better) after reading a set of papers created from that assignment. Each time I encounter a plagiarized text, it influences not only how I respond to that particular student, but it also causes me to rethink plagiarism as an action and my theory towards it. Most instructors would probably agree that reading and responding to student papers has had, if not the most significant impact, one of the most significant on our relationships with students. Yet, we rarely hear in our literature about how reading and response influence other areas of our teaching lives; instead,

we hear only about response as an isolated, labor-intensive activity. As a field, more discussion in journals and at conferences needs to take place that acknowledges the impact reading and responding to student papers has on the revision of our classrooms and the makeup of our field.

The image of the teacher-responder sitting at a desk amid stacks of papers, hand arched in the ready to write a comment, with an exhausted look on his or her face while he or she contemplates which persona to take on for this particular paper has become etched into our composition history. It is an image many of us understand but do not need to accept as the sole truth. Response to student writing can and must become an intellectual endeavor, one that places emphasis on not only the work we do, but on the benefits we gain as we engage students in a dialogue about the one thing we all continually believe in: writing.

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