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JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

Compassionate Writing Response: Using Dialogic Feedback to Encourage Student Voice in the First-Year Composition Classroom

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In addition to other unfortunate circumstances, teacher response that comes in the form of negative, generic, and unintelligible commentary causes students to become alienated from writing. This problematic response often results from the lack of supportive student-centered response pedagogies within the first-year composition classroom. In an attempt to prevent additional writerly estrangement and to undo students' isolation from the writing process, this article explores Marshall Rosenberg's nonviolent communication theory as a potential framework for a dialogic, compassionate writing response pedagogy.

Keywords: response, assessment, compassion, pedagogy, dialogue

Introduction

“One does not have to watch freshmen at work to know that writing is an emotional as well as a cognitive activity” (Mcleod, 1987, p. 426), and that it can be terrifying, rewarding, confusing, exhausting, and time and thought consuming—often all at the same time. Writing is invigorating and productive for some writers, but for many first-year composition (FYC) students, this process is agonizing. Such discomfort may be attributed to the “negative, anxious feelings (about oneself as a writer, one’s writing situation, or one’s writing task) that disrupt some part of the writing process” (Mcleod, 1987, p. 427) or it may be caused by “past failure or a perception of past failure” (Daiker, 1989, p. 106) in writing that often stems from students’ lifelong negative experiences with writing and writing courses.

It would be unfair to simply dismiss these students as unprepared or deficient, since much of their writing difficulty is the result of their having become affectively estranged from writing through a number of unfortunate circumstances. Most unfortunate, however, is when teacher response alienates students both from the value of writing and from the value of the students’ own writerly personas. This alienation all too often occurs when teachers provide unhelpful and unkind feedback to developing writers, resulting in writing-estranged students: students who find themselves at odds with writing, unable or unwilling to develop a writerly voice.

Whether as a result of (understandable) grading fatigue or myriad other pedagogical factors, ineffective response practices often result in incomprehensible, impersonal, or insensitive comments. Incomprehensible “haphazard doodles—circles, straight underlines, squiggly underlines, hatch marks—scattered hither and yon in student texts” (Johnson-Shull & Rysdam, 2012, p. 235) are difficult, if not impossible for students to understand. Likewise, confusing shorthand remarks like the infamous “AWK” and proofreading symbols typically used only by professional writers further alienate students who already struggle with the writing process, making it nearly impossible for them to participate in a conversation that they cannot understand or even decipher.

Equally damaging are comments of the impersonal, generic, rubber-stamped variety that Nancy Sommers cautions against. These general comments “are not anchored in the particulars of the students’ texts, but rather are a series of vague directives that are not text-specific” (Sommers, 1982, p. 291). Not only are these imprecise comments highly confusing, but they also give students the impression that their writing is undeserving of student-specific attention.

Highly negative, insensitive, and occasionally even cruel commentary that sometimes finds its way into response is also detrimental to writing-estranged students. Research indicates that frustrations with student writing are sometimes reflected in hateful, unhelpful comments. Connors and Lunsford (1993) found that many “critical comments ranged from savagely indignant to sadly resigned” (p. 210). If students’ attempts to improve their writing are met with hostility, then students’ motivation to write understandably wanes.

Finally, the appropriation of student texts by writing teachers also further prevents students from actively participating in classroom conversation. “The teacher appropriates the text from the student by confusing the student’s purpose in writing the text with her own purpose in commenting” (Sommers, 1982, p. 288), and as a result, students tend to revise their work by focusing primarily on what they imagine their teacher wants them to say. In a sense, students abandon their own voices in an attempt to mimic what their teacher says, thus further silencing the individuality of all students and alienating writing-estranged students from the classroom dialogue.

Teachers’ best intentions are ultimately undone by comments that reflect authoritarian, judgmental values. It’s not that teachers necessarily go out of their way to malign students or their work, but without a supportive student-centered response pedagogy actively in place, it happens just the same. In an attempt to prevent additional writerly estrangement and, hopefully, to undo students’ alienation from the writing process, I propose a pedagogy of compassionate writing response (CWR) that is suitable for most any writing classroom but created with FYC in mind. I begin this article by defining and providing a theoretical framework to facilitate

CWR and its practical application through discussing my own use of this pedagogy in FYC courses. Finally, at the end of the article, I discuss the application of CWR and the benefits of this pedagogy.

Creating the CWR Framework

My argument operates under the assumption that readers view commentary as a useful method of communicating teacher views of and suggestions for essays, and that “response is integral to the teaching of writing and to improvement in writing” (Straub, 2000, p. 5). This argument is also framed by the notion that “writers write, plan, revise, anticipate, and review throughout the writing process” (Hairston, 1982, p. 85) and that commentary is used to facilitate such revision. As such, I aim to align CWR with the decades of research that have resulted in the best practices of commentary where it is recommended that teachers:

Turn your comments into a conversation ... do not take control over the student's text... give priority to global concerns of content, context, organization, and purpose before getting (overly) involved with style and correctness ... limit the scope of your comments and the number of comments you present...select your focus of comments according to the stage of drafting and relative maturity of the text...gear your comments to the individual student...[and] make frequent use of praise. (Straub, 2000, pp. 28–48)

Marshall Rosenberg's (2003) *Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life*, provides just such a framework for developing a cooperative, dialogic response pedagogy that compels writing students to actively participate in all stages of response and revision. Rosenberg advocates for nonviolent, compassionate communication where, “instead of habitual, automatic reactions, our words become conscious responses based firmly on awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling, and wanting. We are led to express ourselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying others a respectful and empathetic attention” (p. 3), thus actively avoiding the elements of problematic response.

Through this focus on respect and clarity, Rosenberg defines four steps of compassionate communication. The first, *observation*, requires

communicators to “observe what is actually happening in a situation... without introducing any judgment or evaluation” (p. 6). The second step, *feeling*, requires that communicators “state how we feel when we observe this action” (p. 6). *Need*, the third step, requires communicators to “say what needs of ours are connected to the feelings we have identified” (p. 6). Finally, the *request* step, “addresses what we are wanting from the other person that would enrich our lives” (p. 6) in order to “establish relationships based on honesty and empathy that will eventually fulfill everyone’s needs” (p. 85). For Rosenberg, compassionate communication is essential for meaningful exchange, something that Richie Neil Hao (2011) adapted to create his critical compassionate pedagogy (CCP) as a “pedagogical commitment that allows educators to...be self-reflexive of their actions through compassion as a daily commitment” (p. 92).

Enacting the CWR Framework

The following section uses the steps of Rosenberg’s (2003) model as a framework for detailing a pedagogy that “[replaces] our old patterns of defending, withdrawing, or attacking in the face of judgment and criticism” (p. 3), and Hao’s (2011) CCP informs this discussion by providing pedagogical support. Within each subsection, I will provide examples of how I use CWR pedagogy in my FYC courses. These are face-to-face courses within a delayed grading portfolio system where students have nearly unlimited opportunities to revise the writing they include in the end of the semester writing portfolio.

Observation

Many students (but especially writing-estranged students) do not partake in class discussions, let alone in discussions with their teachers. The risks associated with breaking this silence and entering into a dialogue with a teacher authority figure may prove insurmountable for many students if they are not slowly and genuinely invited into the class conversation. Simply observing students as they interact with other students, with teachers, and with various types of writing provides teachers with clues to how teachers should invite students into course dialogues. Likewise, encouraging students to observe their own interactions to these points of

communication creates meta-awareness within students as they begin to notice their own relationships with writing.

Understanding the best practices of response pedagogy provides teachers with a starting point for better understanding the needs and views of students in general. But, while incorporating these best practices is certainly essential to response pedagogy, local observations of students are equally as important. A logical first step in the observation stage is to ask students to consider their own learning styles, personal and professional goals and concerns, preferences for and concerns about teacher response, and learning accommodations. These perceptions are discerned relatively easily through a variety of means including surveys, conferences, and prompted writing assignments. Additionally, observing and noting students' patterns of error in their writing early in the semester—even in informal writing—sets the stage for effective response to their writing, since “instead of being overwhelmed by 50 individual errors, students can more effectively deal with five or six ‘pattern problems’ to correct” (Stern & Solomon, 2006, p. 26), thus preventing a dialogic shutdown before the conversation even begins.

In my own classes, I prepare for this dialogue early in the semester by observing student writing and taking brief notes to establish patterns of error. I begin the dialogue through a series of very informal writing tasks where I ask students about their concerns and expectations for writing, response, and the class in general. I am careful to respond to these tasks in a sensitive and interested manner to set the tone for the rest of the semester and to develop an ongoing, respectful dialogue between the students and myself. Hao (2011) argues that “such class discussion allows us to frankly talk about what I can do as a teacher to help them learn” (p. 94), but this discussion also allows students a glimpse into the values and perceptions of their writing teacher, thereby encouraging inclusivity within a student-centered classroom.

| Communication Step | Timeframe | Activities | Outcomes |
|----------------------------|--|--|--|
| <i>Step 1: Observation</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on this step early in the developing dialogue with students (typically in the beginning of the semester) • Continually observe students throughout the semester | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with opportunities to express their learning styles, goals, concerns, and accommodations • Read student writing to establish patterns of error (take notes) • Begin dialogues with students about expectations of writing, response, the class, and the teacher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers should have a sense of students' views and expectations of the course and with writing • Students should begin to dialogue with each other and with the teacher • Teachers should have an initial sense of what kinds of feedback students will need based on patterns of error • Teachers should note these observations in preparation for the next step |

Figure 1. Application of Observation in the FYC classroom.

Feeling

Student-teacher dialogues should continue by discussing students' feelings about teacher response to their writing. Do students feel stimulated or puzzled by their teachers' responses? Are they excited or pessimistic? Better understanding students' feelings about response allows teachers to address negative feelings head on and, hopefully, assuage student concerns. This understanding also affords teachers the ability to adjust their commentary to address student concerns. Such a simple dialogue gives students agency in the response process (especially when teachers adjust their commentary as the course progresses), and it encourages students to feel more connected to the classroom community.

In my own class, I engage students in dialogues through class discussions and writing prompts. Students also complete a multimodal assignment where they are given a number of art supplies to draw their relationship with writing at the beginning of the semester. The resulting drawings often depict dark, sad, and even grotesque images of death,

chains, blood, and tears, thus illustrating the bleak mindset with which students often enter composition classrooms. This assignment enables me to spot writing-estranged students. I take note of these compositions as I interact with students for the rest of the semester, being especially careful to encourage them in their development as writers.

| Communication Step | Timeframe | Activities | Outcomes |
|------------------------|--|--|---|
| <i>Step 2: Feeling</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on this step early in the developing dialogue with students (typically in the beginning of the semester) Continually observe students' feelings throughout the semester | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin this step with an assignment that asks students to reflect on their relationship with writing Take note of students' responses as a means of identifying those students who are writing-estranged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers should have a sense of students' feelings about writing and response Teachers should note these feelings in preparation for the next step Students should also have a sense of their own feelings about writing and response |

Figure 2. Application of *Feeling* in the FYC classroom.

Needs

Once teachers have a handle on students' feelings about response, they can begin to ask what they need from their students to create an inclusive pedagogy (Hao, 2011, p. 95) that will assist students in reaching their academic goals. Response scholarship indicates that students' response needs tend to be wide-ranging. Some students need praise-rich comments (Beach, 1989; Daiker & Hayes, 1984; Gee, 1972; Land & Evans, 1987; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Straub, 1997b), while others may not necessarily need praise (Burkland & Grimm, 1986; Daiker & Hayes, 1984; Lynch & Klemans, 1978; Reed & Burton, 1986). Some students need local comments (Straub, 1997b), while others need commentary on global issues like development and organization (Burkland & Grimm, 1986; Dohrer, 1991). In fact, the only consistently reported student need is for feedback that does not rely heavily on editing-type comments and symbols (Daiker & Hayes, 1984; Dohrer, 1991; Land & Evans, 1987; Lynch & Klemans, 1978;

Reed & Burton, 1986). Clearly, there is little agreement amongst individual students regarding their writerly needs. This scholarship represents the diverse and rarely consistent student populations in FYC classes, thereby necessitating local assessment of student needs in each class section. Just as teachers should observe their students to better understand their views on writing response, so too should they make use of various dialogic tools (surveys, interviews, etc.) to best understand and potentially accommodate individual student needs as much as possible.

In my own class, I engage students in class discussions of what my needs are as a teacher and how the institution informs them. These conversations allow us to discuss my needs and goals as a responder (time, formative assessment, etc.) and the students' needs as receivers of this response. The dialogic work in the observation and feelings stages typically make this an open and fruitful discussion.

Once I begin responding to students' formal work (see the next section on *Request*), I also frequently make use of brief writing prompts and surveys to gauge students' needs and how well I am meeting them. I specifically require students to write a brief summary of elements of my response that are troubling or confusing for each major essay. I also provide students with anonymous in-class surveys that ask students to indicate response practices that are especially beneficial or unhelpful.

I address these surveys by aggregating the results and discussing general trends with the class as a whole where I encourage students to ask for additional clarification. For students who have more specific concerns, I typically provide them with a brief written explanation and an invitation to meet with me in person. I also adjust my response practices as necessary to better meet the needs of the class as a whole. For example, nearly all students in one class expressed discontent with receiving my feedback over the weekend. They explained that it made them anxious and they felt compelled to begin revising right away. To meet their needs, I simply waited until Monday morning to return their essays in the course management system. The students expressed their gratitude and the course flowed much more smoothly after that small adjustment.

| Communication Step | Timeframe | Activities | Outcomes |
|---------------------|---|--|---|
| <i>Step 3: Need</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on this step after establishing students' feelings about writing (typically early to mid-semester) • Continually gauge students' needs throughout the semester | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create opportunities for students to express their needs as learners, readers, writers, and people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers should have a sense of students' needs both as a class and as individuals • Teachers should note these needs in preparation for the next step |

Figure 3. Application of *Need* in the FYC classroom.

Request

Finally, after carefully completing the first three steps of CWR, the process of responding to formal student writing (typically essays) may begin. The type of response I discuss in this section details the familiar process of teachers providing feedback on complete student essays to facilitate potential revision. This response process is typically monologic and directive, but the CCR scaffolding facilitates dialogic, request-based feedback that encourages students' agency while meeting the needs of teacher pedagogy.

The dialogic request phase is twofold, since both students and teachers make requests. First, students must be given the opportunity and afforded the respect to request that their response needs be met in a safe, risk-free environment. Hao (2011) points out that students "are too afraid to ask for help because they think that teachers may perceive them as unprepared for college" (p. 96), so teachers must strive to establish and maintain these open lines of communication. If the types of response that students receive from teachers do not meet their needs, students should be encouraged to request reasonable accommodations.

For example, visual learners in my classes are encouraged to speak up since I primarily use audio feedback, and this medium may exclude students who perform better by reading teacher comments. This may sound time consuming, but students who do not choose audio response simply submit their assignments to a different digital drop box in the course management software than their audio-preferring counterparts. I

typically provide commentary to one drop box at a time so as to avoid any confusion as to who receives what type of feedback. This simple act of meeting students' needs adds only a few minutes of additional time to my regular response routine (perhaps 30 seconds per essay).

The second phase of request considers the practice of response itself as a request from reader to writer, where "questions are preferable to imperatives, as they are less directive and promote student autonomy" (Ferris, 2014, p. 8). Rather than employ didactic response that reduces student engagement and success, teachers should consider comments "as multidimensional social acts in their own right" (Sperling, 1994, p. 202) that resist demanding change in writing. "Teachers might begin responding to student writing not as evaluators and judges but as interested adults who would react to such writing" (Ziv, 1984, p. 2), where they "toss the responsibility for making decisions back to the writer, and offer possibilities for a potentially better text" (Anson, 1989, p. 353).

I make every effort to see myself as a partner with students and to establish an environment where we work together to develop individuals' writing. My response typically takes the form of questions that challenge students to consider ways in which they might strengthen their writing. This feedback not only invites all students to ask questions about responses to their writing, but it also encourages them to disagree with my judgments and assumptions as a teacher-reader, since "students who get to raise issues for responders to address will likely see the comments as less controlling than comments that are initiated solely by the teacher... They might even feel encouraged to take a more active role in their work as writers" (Straub, 1997a, p. 282). Not only does such disagreement empower students to actively engage in their own writing goals, but it also encourages teachers to focus on the students' needs, potentially avoiding accidental appropriation of students' texts.

Furthermore, I attempt to model CWR in the request phase by engaging in fully dialogic responses. For each major assignment in the class, the students and I engage in the following process, a microcosm of the larger CWR framework:

- The student begins the response process by submitting a cover letter that details her achievements and troubles with the writing

in addition to areas that she would like me to address in my own commentary. In this step, I encourage students to describe their feelings and needs toward the particular piece of writing as well as to the writing process in general.

- After reading and observing the student's cover letter and her assignment, I acknowledge and address the elements of the letter in addition to providing my own commentary, hopefully avoiding the elements of problematic response mentioned earlier. At this stage, I request that the student revise her assignment to better meet my needs as a reader.
- The student then receives my response and is given the opportunity to address and question my commentary as she ventures into the revision stage of the writing process. Questions that arise in this stage are addressed either in writing or in a short conference, which provides the student with yet another opportunity to state her feelings and needs.
- This process may be repeated as often as the student likes during the revision stage of her work, but to manage my own busy schedule, I require that additional dialogues beyond these three initial steps take place in person during office hours.

Certainly, this dialogic feedback requires that I adapt my courses to include fewer, more deliberately explored assignments. I have reduced my major assignments from four to three during the semester, which has allowed for spending more quality time on student response overall.

When viewed as a cooperative endeavor where teachers and students make requests of each other rather than demands, writing response becomes a dialogic process wherein all stakeholders work together to meet the needs of others and to improve each student's writing. The focus of response becomes less about teachers "fixing" student writing and more about teachers and students working together to create meaning, thereby minimizing the risk of teacher appropriation of student texts. This is especially important for writing-estranged students who have previously felt controlled or stifled in their writing classes where they were not encouraged to join the larger classroom writing discussion.

| Communication Step | Timeframe | Activities | Outcomes |
|------------------------|--|---|---|
| <i>Step 4: Request</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on this step only after the first three steps have been completed (typically at the end of each major assignment and at the end of the semester) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create opportunities for students to request reasonable accommodations of teacher response Accommodate students' requests as much as possible Model compassionate response through dialogic feedback Provide response as a request from a reader to a writer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students will receive feedback that is most beneficial to them Students and teachers will dialogue to improve the piece of writing |

Figure 4. Application of *Request* in the FYC classroom.

Using the Entire Framework

The steps of CWR should not be seen as discrete but as cyclical, repeating themselves throughout the course. Even teachers employing dialogic feedback grounded in response best practices may find that “requests may sound like demands when unaccompanied by the [teacher’s] feelings and needs” (Rosenberg, 2003, p. 73), or they may find themselves talking “to others or at them without knowing how to engage in a dialogue with them” (Rosenberg, 2003, p. 73) without the full complement of CWR pedagogy.

Discussion

Application

This article is written with relatively traditional FYC students in mind, since they tend to constitute the majority of students I teach. That said, CWR would be equally applicable to nearly every writing student population. The primary function of this framework is to facilitate dialogue and mutual respect to better understand what students need and how they feel about writing before requesting that they revise their work. This allows teachers to tailor their response to a variety of student populations, even within the same course.

I use CWR to meet students' response needs at a variety of levels. I observe students' feelings and needs and aggregate these results to inform class discussions on response, which have proved invaluable since many students report that my class is the first time they've had such a conversation. These results also facilitate specific types of response to groups such as ESL students, who prefer more exact and directive commentary. My non-ESL-specific courses often include L2 students who prefer prescriptive commentary. CWR allows me to recognize these groups of students and respond to their writing in ways that meet their specific needs, perhaps even by adjusting my commentary to be a bit more directive than usual. Finally, CWR gives me insight into individual students that I typically miss without this pedagogy. For example, students who tell me that they're "terrified of the red pen" receive more gentle guidance whereas students who prefer that I "tell it like it is" receive more direct and constructive commentary.

Benefits of CWR

CWR has proven successful in my writing courses. Students report that they enjoy learning about response and receiving teacher commentary that is meaningful and useful to them. But perhaps the largest benefit of CWR is the change in the way I view responding to student writing and my students in general. The dialogic nature of this pedagogy encourages me to think of students as human beings rather than as writing artifacts that demand response. When I am focusing on meeting the needs of individual students, response becomes less drudgery and more an investment in a person. Additionally, because CWR is dialogic, I feel less alone in my response since students are active participants in the response process.

For me, CWR pedagogy is not simply a feel-good pedagogy. This pedagogy can and probably should make teachers and students feel better about their interactions, but this student-teacher bonding produces more than just good feelings. CWR attempts to reconnect all students, especially writing-estranged students, to academic writing by inviting them into the conversation of writing response. Many of these students have been affectively estranged from the value of writing and from their own values as writers, but when teachers' efforts "coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization" (Freire,

2000, p. 75), then we can begin to develop students as academics and as writers.

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