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*Richard Straub*

## The Concept of Control in Teacher Response: Defining the Varieties of “Directive” and “Facilitative” Commentary

In two pioneering articles in 1982, “Responding to Student Writing” and “On Students’ Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response,” Nancy Sommers, and Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch gave shape to a set of principles that brought process theory and poststructural concepts of knowledge and authority to bear on the ways teachers respond to student writing. Beyond calling on us to write out our comments in full statements, make them “text-specific,” and focus on different concerns at different stages of drafting, they urged us to be careful about the amount of control we exert over students when we read and comment on their writing. We should not impose our “idealized texts” on students’ writing. We should not “appropriate” student texts by overlooking their purposes for writing and emphasizing our purposes for commenting. Instead of being “directive,” we should be “facilitative,” providing feedback and support but not dictating the path of revision.

Fourteen years later, our professional talk about teacher response is still dominated by the concept of control—largely, I think, because it goes to the heart of our teaching and our identity as teachers: How much are we to assert our vision of what makes writing good and direct students’ work as writers? How much are we to allow students to find their own ways as learning writers? How much do we teach to the written product? How much do we try to help students develop their attitudes toward writing, their composing processes, and their understanding of writing as a social action? With a remarkable consistency, the recent scholarship on response has urged us to reject styles that take control over student texts and encouraged us instead to adopt styles that allow students to retain greater responsibility over their writing.

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Yet even as we have expanded the scope of our inquiry and deepened our discussion, we have continued to look at response in dualistic ways. Teacher commentary is either directive or facilitative, authoritative or collaborative, teacher-based or student-based. One is encouraging and good, the other critical and bad. Jeffrey Sommers asserts that teachers must become “collaborators rather than judges” (177). Robert Probst calls on teachers to take on the role of “common reader” and abandon the roles of “hostile reader,” “proofreader,” “gatekeeper,” and “authority figure” (73). He advises us to write comments that place responsibility on the student instead of making “pronouncements from on high” that “encourage submission and discipleship” (76). Joseph Moxley advises teachers to “avoid ‘appropriating’ students’ texts and simplifying students’ roles to that of army privates following orders.” The teacher’s proper role, he explains, “is not to tell the student explicitly what to do but rather to serve as a sounding board enabling the writer to see confusions in the text and encouraging the writer to explore alternatives that he or she may not have considered” (3). Similarly, Elizabeth Flynn sets a “feminine” style of response against the traditional directive style, which she sees as “masculine.” A masculine style puts the teacher in the role of an evaluator, a “judge”; a feminine style, by contrast, creates the teacher as “a sympathetic reader” and “a friendly adviser” (50–51). In her review of literature on response, Brooke Horvath notes how scholars have come to eschew the “negative, excessively judgmental response” of the “critic” and to extol commentary written by teachers in the role of “motivator” or “friend” (212). David Fuller explains how he has moved from commenting as a “detached critic” to commenting as an “interested reader”:

I have reconsidered my role as a responder and no longer approach a paper as a “teller” but as a “shower.” I show by reacting as a reader to the writing—asking questions, reacting to the “student purpose,” agreeing, disagreeing, noting my problems understanding. I do not, now, tell the student “what to do”; I let the student see the effect the text had on me and make decisions based on that. (314)

And Rebecca Rule, explaining her rationale for making responses that keep control in the hands of the student, notes:

As [a] teacher, I must be careful not to take over—because the minute I do, the success (if there is one) becomes mine, not his—and the learning is diminished. I can contribute; I can guide; I can brainstorm with him; I can suggest exercises; I can offer models; I can tell him where the comma goes; I can support him wholeheartedly. But I must not take over. (50)

All of these authors echo Sommers and Brannon and Knoblauch in calling on teachers—rightly, I believe—to resist taking over student texts and in-

stead to make comments that share responsibility with the writer.<sup>1</sup> But they also reinforce the dichotomy between directive and facilitative response and perpetuate, however unintentionally, the notion that some comments control student writing and others do not and the notion that there is a particular level of control—and a particular style—that is optimal in teacher response.

Although the issue of control in teacher commentary is still very much alive and well, it remains curiously undefined and is not well understood. We have come to see directive, teacher-based response, monolithically and simplistically, as authoritarian response. And we have come to pack an expanding number of roles and strategies into our concept of facilitative response, without adequately defining these methods or mapping the relationships among them. A teacher who responds as a facilitator, we are told, can respond as a teacher reader, a guide, a friendly adviser, 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. She can support, advise, explore, engage, question, motivate, encourage, nurture, receive, interpret, and provide reader reactions—and so on. All these forms of response share the basic trait of somehow engaging students in an exchange about their writing, but they remain undifferentiated, each one presumably functioning in more or less the same way as the others. Following the lead of Brannon and Knoblauch, we have turned away from trying to define various types of commentary in terms of specific textual features and have discussed them instead more figuratively in terms of general attitudes, responding roles, and social action.<sup>2</sup> Such diverse, undifferentiated ways of talking about response, not surprisingly, have created a tangle of issues, misunderstandings, and questions about authority and control in teacher response: How do different kinds of response create different images of the responder and establish various relationships with the student? What kinds of comments distinguish a directive responder from a facilitative one? What specific strategies mark the commentary of an editor? A critic? Or a gatekeeper? What strategies distinguish a “reader” from a “guide”? A “coach” from a “fellow explorer”? A “common reader” from a “trusted adult reader”? How do different comments exert control over the writer’s choices? Is there a way for a teacher to offer help or guidance—or even play back his reading of a text—and *not* assume control over student writing? If we are to build on the recent study of teacher response and turn this theory more productively into practice, we need a way to distinguish the varieties of directive and facilitative response, tie different types of commentary to specific textual strategies, examine their likely effects, and consider how these response styles fit in

with different teaching approaches and classroom goals. As Charles Bazerman puts it: "When I know what I want to do, I know how to read, whether with a proofreader's eye, a textual analyst's structural vision, an editor's helpful hand, a professorial challenge, a marker's red bludgeon, or a companionly ease. Each of these stances invokes separate reading processes. In each way of reading I look for and respond to different things" (144). The question is, how can we link various types of commentary to different stances or roles—and thereby gain greater control over our ways of responding to student writing? By examining several sets of teacher comments, I hope to demonstrate the difficulties we have run into by talking about teacher commentary in terms of the broad categories of directive and facilitative response and point to a more productive way to describe various types of commentary.

Directive commentary—the commentary of the critic and the judge—is identified easily enough. It is highly critical and sets out for the student in no uncertain terms what is not working in the paper and what needs to be done, as in the following comments, made in response to a rough draft written by a college freshman in the middle of the semester.<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 1 on pages 227–228.)

Clearly, these comments are highly controlling. The teacher, like an editor, freely marks up the writing—circling errors, underlining problem areas, and inserting corrections on the student's text. She concentrates on formal propriety, using terse, sometimes elliptical, comments that tell the student, Nancy, in no uncertain terms what is wrong and what must be changed. She even makes a smattering of editorial changes herself. She has a definite and rather narrow agenda for the writing, and she clearly imposes this agenda on the student writer. She does this in spite of the fact—or because of the fact—that she gives little attention to the content of the writing. Her goal is not untypical of many another writing teacher: to get the student to produce clean, formally correct prose. It is a clear instance of a teacher's imposing an idealized text on the student, her own model of what counts in a piece of writing and how that writing ought to appear, especially formally and structurally, without any real concern for the writer's purposes and meanings.

But what about the following sets of comments, written on the same piece of student writing and using the same hypothetical context as the first responder. Are they directive? (See Figure 2 on pages 229–230 and Figure 3 on pages 231–232.)

These two sets of comments were made by Edward White and Jane Peterson, respectively, as part of a recent study of the ways that well-recognized teachers respond to student writing.<sup>4</sup>

## What If Drugs Were Legal?

What if drugs were legal? <sup>Can</sup> ~~Could~~ you imagine what it would do to our society? ~~Well according to~~ John E. LeMoult, a lawyer with <sup>20</sup> ~~twenty~~ years of experience on the subject, feels we should at least consider (it). I would like to comment on his article "Legalize Drugs" in the June 15, 1984, issue of the New York Times. I disagree with LeMoult's idea of legalizing drugs to cut the cost of crime.

*what?**keep yourself in the background just state your position.*

*condense* { LeMoult's article <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ <sup>diché</sup> short and sweet. He gives the background of the legalization of drugs. For example, the first antidrug laws of the United States were passed in 1914. ~~The laws were put in effect~~ because of the threat of the Chinese immigrants. In addition, he explains how women were the first to use laudanun, an over-the-counter drug, as a substitute for drinking <sup>because</sup> it was unacceptable for women to drink. By explaining this he made the reader feel that society was the cause of women <sup>using</sup> the substitute, laudanun, for drinking. LeMoult

*wordy**good material needs to be tightened up.*

proceeded <sup>to</sup> (to) from there to explain how the money to buy drugs comes from us as a society. Since drug addicts turn to crime <sup>for</sup> to ~~get~~ money, we become a corrupt society. Due to this we spend unnecessary money protecting innocent citizens by means of law enforcement, jails, and ect. <sup>No!!</sup> LeMoult says that if we legalize drugs ~~that~~ "overnight the cost of law enforcement, courts, judges, jails and convict rehabilitation would be cut in half. The savings in tax would be more than \$50 billion a year."

Figure 1: Directive Response

LeMoult might be correct by saying that our cost of living in society would be cut in half if drugs were legalized. Q however, he is justifying a wrong to save money. ~~In my opinion~~ legalizing drugs is the easy man's way out. Just ?  
 because crime is high due to the fact that the cost of drugs is unbelievable Q it doesn't make legalizing them right. We all know drugs are dangerous to the body and society without any explanation, therefore, you shouldn't legalize something that is dangerous. NO!!

awk S

awk

My only and most important argument to LeMoult is the physical harm it would bring by legalizing drugs. People abuse their right to use alcoholic beverages because they re legal. For example, LeMoult himself says the amount of drug addicts is small compared to alcoholics. Why?—of course it is because of the legalization of alcohol. When you make something legal it can and will be done with little hassel. Why allow something to be done with ease when it is wrong? LeMoult's points are good and true Q but I believe he is approaching the subject in the wrong manner. Drugs are wrong, therefore, should not be legal!

Stay out of it—make it 3rd person

diction too low

Have you proved the "wrongness" of drugs just by saying that they are? Is alcohol also "wrong"?

Your general organization is fine, but you need to tighten up your thinking as well as your expression.

You can make it much more powerful by attention to above suggestions,

Figure 1: Continued

## What If Drugs Were Legal?

What if drugs were legal? Could you imagine what it would do to our society? Well according to John E. LeMoult, a lawyer with twenty years of experience on the subject, feels we should at least consider it. I would like to comment on his article "Legalize Drugs" in the June 15, 1984, issue of the New York Times. I disagree with LeMoult's idea of legalizing drugs to cut the cost of crime.

LeMoult's article was short and sweet. He gives the background of the legalization of drugs. For example, the first antidrug laws of the United States were passed in 1914. The laws were put in effect because of the threat of the Chinese immigrants. In addition, he explains how women were the first to use laudanum, an over the counter drug, as a substitute for drinking; it was unacceptable for women to drink. By explaining this he made the reader feel that society was the cause of women using the substitute, laudanum, for drinking. LeMoult proceeded from there to explain how the money to buy drugs comes from us as a society. Since drug addicts turn to crime to get money we become a corrupt society. Due to this we spend unnecessary money protecting innocent citizen by means of law enforcement, jails, and ect. LeMoult says that if we legalize drugs that "Overnight the cost of law enforcement, courts, judges, jails and convict rehabilitation would be cut in half. The savings in tax would be more than \$50 billion a year."

*Now that you are clear on what you have to say (see your last ¶) revise the opening to begin your argument.*

*Select the parts of LeMoult's article that are appropriate for your paper and omit the rest. Be sure to quote accurately.*

Figure 2: Edward White's Comments

*Your first argument here: the financial reasons are not good enough for legalization. Focus this ¶ on this argument and develop your case.*

LeMoult might be correct by saying that our cost of living in society would be cut in half if drugs were legalized, however, he is justifying a wrong to save money. In my opinion legalizing drugs is the easy man's way out. Just because crime is high due to the fact that the cost of drugs is unbelievable it doesn't make legalizing them right. We all know drugs are dangerous to the body and society without any explanation, therefore, you shouldn't legalize something that is dangerous.

*Not so. Look at the previous ¶*

My only and most important argument to

LeMoult is the physical harm it would bring by legalizing drugs. People abuse their right to use alcoholic beverages because they re legal. For example, LeMoult himself says the amount of drug addicts is small compared to alcoholics.

*Second argument. Now develop this one.*

Why?—of course it is because of the legalization of alcohol. When you make something legal it can and will be done with little hassel. Why allow something to be done with ease when it is wrong? LeMoult's points are good and true but I believe he is approaching the subject in the wrong manner. Drugs are wrong, therefore, should not be legal!

*Make this into a full closing ¶.*

*The paper is a good discovery draft that could become a good paper. As you revise, be sure you focus each ¶ on its central idea. I enjoy the energy of your style.*

Figure 2: Continued

## What If Drugs Were Legal?

What if drugs were legal? Could you imagine what it would do to our society? Well according to John E. LeMoult, a lawyer with twenty years of experience on the subject, feels we should at least consider it. I would like to comment on his article "Legalize Drugs" in the June 15, 1984, issue of the New York Times. I disagree with LeMoult's idea of legalizing drugs to cut the cost of crime.

*This is in his 4th ¶ what's he doing in the first 3 ¶s?*

LeMoult's article was short and sweet. He gives the background of the legalization of drugs. For example, the first antidrug laws of the United States were passed in 1914. The laws were put in effect because of the threat of the Chinese imagrants. In addition, he explains how women were the first to use laudanun, an over the counter drug, as a substitute for drinking, it was unacceptable for women to drink. By explaining this he made the reader feel that society was the cause of women using the substitute, laudanun, for drinking. LeMoult proceeded from there to explain how the money to buy drugs comes from us as a society. Since drug addicts turn to crime to get money we become a corrupt society. Due to this we spend unnecessary money protecting inocent citizen by means of law enforcement, jails, and ect.

*I think you've fallen into the interesting detail trap here*

*? crime-filled?*

LeMoult says that if we legalize drugs that

*good use of quote*

"Overnight the cost of law enforcement, courts, judges, jails and convict rehabilitation would be cut in half. The savings in tax would be more than \$50 billion a year."

Figure 3: Jane Peterson's Comments

LeMoult might be correct by saying that our cost of living in society would be cut in half if drugs were legalized, however, he is justifying a wrong to save money. In my opinion legalizing drugs is the easy man's way out. Just because crime is high due to the fact that the cost of drugs is unbelievable it doesn't make legalizing them right. We all know drugs are do we? dangerous to the body and society without any all drugs? explanation, therefore, you shouldn't legalize something that is dangerous.

*whose bodies?*  
*cigarettes?*  
*alcohol?*  
*car racing?*

*how?*  
*legal or illegal?*

*all people?*  
*this would mean everyone is an alcoholic because alcohol is legal*

My only and most important argument to LeMoult is the physical harm it would bring by to whom? legalizing drugs. People abuse their right to use alcoholic beverages because they re legal. For example, LeMoult himself says the amount of drug addicts is small compared to alcoholics. Why?—of course it is because of the legalization of alcohol. When you make something legal it can and will be done with little hassel. Why allow something to be done with ease when it is wrong? *do you mean morally wrong or dangerous?* LeMoult's points are good and true but I believe he is approaching the subject in the wrong manner. Drugs are wrong, therefore, should not be legal!

*Nancy, your first draft is a good starting point—you clearly understand the structure expected (opening with source info. summarizing the article, responding with your view). Before beginning a second draft, I suggest you do a bare bones outline of the article (you're missing a couple of LeMoult's points) and then do one on your response (you seem to have at least 2 objections instead of one).*

Figure 3: Continued

If these comments are directive, what makes them directive? Are they directive in the same way as the first set of comments presented above? Are they directive but in different ways? Is one set more or less directive than the other? Can either set of comments be seen as facilitative? How can we tell? The current scholarship might lead us to form one impression or another, but it doesn't provide a way of making such distinctions. In order to address these questions and get a better way of describing response styles, we need to look beyond the general labels of "directive" and "facilitative" and look more carefully at the specific comments these teachers make.

### A Method for Analyzing Teacher Comments

The most effective way to take up an examination of teacher response is to study individual comments, in detail, and describe the *focuses* and *modes* of these comments. What areas of writing do the comments focus on? Do they deal with local concerns—matters of wording, sentence structure, and correctness? Do they deal with global matters of content, focus, and organization? With the larger contexts of writing instruction—for instance, the rhetorical situation, the assignment, the student's composing processes, or the student's ongoing work as a writer? How are the comments presented? How do the structure, voice, and content of the comments affect the way they create the teacher as a responder on the page? Is a given comment presented as a criticism of the writing? Is it a command? A piece of advice? A question? By charting a teacher's predominant focuses and modes of commentary—in a set of comments or, better yet, across a series of responses—we can get a good impression of his or her responding style.

In the following analyses, I will look at each set of comments, individually and collectively, and identify the focuses and modes of those comments. I will study comments as they appear on the page, independent of the larger classroom setting but seen amid the conventions that typically go along with such teacher-student interactions. I will try to determine how the comments themselves create an image of the teacher on the page, implicitly establish some relationship with the student, and exert varying degrees of control over the student's writing choices.

Generally speaking, the more comments a teacher makes on a piece of writing, the more controlling he or she will likely be. The more a teacher attends to the text, especially local matters, and tries to lead the student to produce a more complete written product, the more likely he is to point to specific changes and thus to exert more control over the student's writing. The more a teacher attends to the student's writing processes and the larg-

er contexts of writing, and gears his comments to the student behind the text and her ongoing work as a writer, the less likely he is to point to specific changes or to assume control over the student's writing. The following comments, for example, all offer advice to the student, but they deal with different focuses and assume varying degrees of control:

- Try to rearrange these sentences. (local structure)
- Try to explain how these drugs are dangerous. (development)
- Try to go back and do some brainstorming about the threat that illegal drugs pose to society. (student's writing processes)

Thus, a teacher who does a lot of work with sentence structure and correctness will tend to be more directive than, say, a teacher who frequently asks the student to consider the rhetorical situation or to try some technique of revision.

The extent to which a teacher assumes control over student writing is also determined to a great extent by the way he frames his comments—by the *modes* of commentary he employs. Comments framed as corrections, for instance, tend to exert greater control over the student than criticisms of the writing or than calls for revision that are stated as commands. Criticisms and commands, in turn, assume greater control than qualified evaluations or advice. Praise is a special case. Praise comments are less controlling than criticism or commands because they place the teacher in the role of an appreciative reader or satisfied critic and obviate the need for revision. Nevertheless, they underscore the teacher's values and agendas and exert a certain degree of control over the way the student views the text before her and the way she likely looks at subsequent writing.

These authoritative modes of commentary, to varying degrees, are more controlling than questions and nonevaluative statements—or what might be called interactive comments, because they tend to initiate a more active response from the student and place greater responsibility on her to come up with her own ideas and revisions. Some interactive comments, of course, assume greater control than others. Closed questions, for instance, usually imply an evaluation or indirectly call on the student to add certain information or consider certain text-based revisions, while more open questions allow the student more room to figure out things on her own. The least controlling types of commentary are reflective comments, which provide lessons, offer explanations of other comments, present reader responses, or simply make interpretations of the writing. Used as a predominant strategy in a set of comments, different modes of response enact different roles for the teacher and exert different degrees of control over the student's writing. As Margie Krest notes, "The way we phrase our responses to students is just as important as what we actually tell them" (27).

I am assuming, of course, that the way comments are framed has a direct influence on the meaning of the comments. I am assuming, further, that the words written on a student's paper inscribe certain social relationships between the teacher and the student and that these words come with their own adequate context. My goal is not to determine how the teacher actually intends a given comment or to predict how the student would likely understand it. As Knoblauch and Brannon point out, such determinations cannot reliably be made without access to the actual context in which the comment was made:

A single comment on a single essay is too local and contingent a phenomenon to yield general conclusions about the quality of the conversation of which it is a part. Any remark on a student essay, whatever its form, finally owes its meaning and impact to the governing dialogue that influences some student's reaction to it. Remarks taken out of this context can appear more restrictive or open-ended, more facilitative or judgmental, than they really are in light of a teacher's overall communicative habits. ("Teacher Commentary" 2)

But although the meaning of a set of comments is no doubt influenced by the teacher's actual persona and the larger classroom setting, it is no less the case that this meaning is largely determined by the way the comments are presented on the page. In fact, it is arguable that, 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 how those comments come to mean. Instead of the actual or intended meaning, I am attempting to interpret the immediate sense of the comment—the conventional meaning derivable from the words on the page—and define the typical ways that teacher comments inscribe certain implicit relationships with students.<sup>5</sup> Having outlined this method of analyzing teacher comments, I'd like to return to White's and Peterson's comments, analyze their focuses and modes of commentary, and describe the images they create and the kind of control they exert over Nancy's writing.

### Using the Focuses and Modes of Commentary to Analyze Teacher Responses

Let's begin by taking a closer look at White's commentary, considering first the case that his comments are directive. White seems clearly to assume a rather authoritative stance about this student's revision. He has certain ideas about what needs to be done to the draft to make it into a "good paper." He knows where its main idea lies, and he does not hesitate to tell the student precisely where she should develop her arguments. Many of his comments

are presented in the form of imperatives and tell the student what to do by way of revision, creating him in the image of an editor or critic:

[R]evise the opening to begin your argument.

Select the parts of LeMoult's article that are appropriate for *your* paper and omit the rest.

Focus this prgh on this argument and develop your case.

Now develop this one.

Make this into a full closing prgh.

[Be] sure you focus each prgh on its central idea.

His comments assert his authority over the student. In this sense, he is directive.

Yet on several counts White's comments are clearly different from the first set of responses presented above. First of all, White does not cover the page with markings about surface features. Almost all of his comments focus on large conceptual matters of content and organization. He is also careful to communicate his ideas clearly to the student, writing his comments out in full statements, not in terse, editorial marks and phrases. Although he lays out ways the writing can be improved, he works with the student's ideas and intentions and even offers some comments that play back his understanding of the text:

Now that you are clear on what *you* have to say. . . .

Your first argument here: the financial reasons are not good enough for legalization.

Second argument.

If White appropriates the student's choices here and there by deciding where she should make changes, he does not emphasize his own agenda so much that he takes control out of the student's hands. If he doesn't hesitate to tell the student what the writing needs, he does not tell her how the writing 'ought to look,' as the first responder does when, for example, she dictates surface changes in the first two paragraphs, telling Nancy to delete the opening phrase of sentence 2, to condense the first three sentences of paragraph 2, and to tighten up the rest of the paragraph. He also imposes no particular content on the student's writing. Instead, he works with the student's ideas, trying to lead her to develop and organize her arguments against legalizing drugs. Even if he makes certain choices for the student, it can hardly be said that he is trying, in Brannon and Knoblauch's words, to "define restrictively what a student would (or will) have to do in order to perfect it in the teacher's eyes" (*Rhetorical Traditions* 123). He is trying to lead the student to make certain gains in the next

draft, not dictate how the writing should look. If White's comments are authoritative, they are not authoritarian.

Looked at against the first two sets of responses, Peterson's comments seem more student-friendly and less directive. But are they directive or facilitative? How much control do they assert over the writer? By examining her comments in terms of their focuses and modes, we can see the ways in which Peterson assumes a definite control over the student's writing even as she encourages Nancy's own work at revision. The dominant strategy in Peterson's response is the spattering of questions she presents in her marginal comments. The questions indicate areas where she is unsure about what the writer is getting at and look to prompt Nancy to consider how she might make changes in the text so that her audience will better understand what she has to say. Notably, they deal with specific content concerns that come up moment-by-moment as she reads the text. Nine of the ten questions are closed. Two ask the writer to add information to clarify a point:

Whose bodies?  
To whom?

Seven of them prompt the writer to reconsider specific statements:

Crime-filled?  
Do we?  
All drugs?  
Cigarettes? alcohol? car racing?  
Legal or illegal?  
All people?  
Do you mean morally wrong or dangerous?

These short, staccato-like comments create Peterson in the role of a questioning and somewhat demanding reader who dramatizes the difficulties she has with the text and who is willing to call for what she needs to know. They are designed to elicit particular changes in the text, but they do so in a way that looks to allow the student to retain a certain amount of control over the writing—but only a certain amount. Although they are not as controlling as criticism or commands ("This is an overstatement," "Explain how drugs are dangerous to society"), these closed questions regulate what the student attends to in her revision and assert a rather firm control over her choices as a writer.

In her end note, Peterson takes on a more open and encouraging posture and deals with the larger content of the writing. She praises the writer's efforts and then suggests, in two open-ended advisory comments, in a general way, how Nancy might go about her revision:

Before beginning a second draft, I suggest you do a barebones outline on the article (you're missing a couple of LeMoult's points) and then do one on your response (you seem to have at least 2 objections instead of one).

She presents two criticisms of the draft here, but tellingly they are embedded as asides within her suggestions, keeping her tone positive, keeping her emphasis on what is working and what could be made to work better. Notably, her advice does not call for specific revisions of the text, but suggests how Nancy might go about taking up the task of revision. If Peterson's questions and criticism create her as an interested and even an expectant reader, her praise and advice create her as a collaborator or supportive guide. Her comments both direct Nancy to make particular changes in the text and look to engage her in her own choices and revisions as a writer. She employs the strategies, one might say, of both directive and facilitative response. Ultimately, her response style, as I read it, lies somewhere between White's moderately directive style and the following responses by Anne Gere, which are clearly facilitative. (See Figure 4 on pages 239–240.)

Like Peterson, Gere establishes a positive, easygoing atmosphere and creates herself as a supportive teacher-reader. Yet there is a clear difference between her comments and Peterson's. Gere makes only a few marginal comments, all of them dealing with matters of content that go beyond the level of the sentence. The comments take the form of questions and are designed to lead the student to consider reshaping and developing what she has said. They allow her to decide on what specific changes she makes and how she makes those changes. Rather than telling Nancy to cut the first three sentences of the introduction, she suggests it through a question: "What about starting with this point?" Rather than telling her authoritatively to develop the argument in her last paragraph in a command, she frames the comment as a question and only indirectly suggests such a change: "Can you develop this argument?" Both comments refrain from directly telling Nancy what to do. Her other questions are more open-ended. One poses a problem for her to consider: "How does this advance LeMoult's argument for legalizing drugs?" Another challenges her with a question, "How can you be sure we all know 'without any explanation'?" Both questions, especially the first, are to be distinguished from the type of questions Peterson presents in her comments. Peterson's questions present a series of prompts intended to lead the writer to make specific changes in the text. They provide a clear direction for the writer's revision and are somewhat controlling. Gere's questions call on the writer to reexamine a position she has taken, but do not indicate any particular revision. They

## What If Drugs Were Legal?

What if drugs were legal? Could you imagine what it would do to our society? Well according to John E. LeMoult, a lawyer with twenty years of experience on the subject, feels we should at least consider it. I would like to comment on his article "Legalize Drugs" in the June 15, 1984, issue of the New York Times. I disagree with LeMoult's idea of legalizing drugs to cut the cost of crime.

LeMoult's article was short and sweet. He gives the background of the legalization of drugs. For example, the first antidrug laws of the United States were passed in 1914. The laws were put in effect because of the threat of the Chinese imagrants. In addition, he explains how women were the first to use laudanun, an over the counter drug, as a substitute for drinking; it was unacceptable for women to drink. By explaining this he made the reader feel that society was the cause of women using the substitute, laudanun, for drinking. LeMoult proceeded from there to explain how the money to buy drugs comes from us as a society. Since drug addicts turn to crime to get money we become a corrupt society. Due to this we spend unnecessary money protecting inocent citizen by means of law enforcement, jails, and ect. LeMoult says that if we legalize drugs that "Overnight the cost of law enforcement, courts, judges, jails and convict rehabilitation would be cut in half. The savings in tax would be more than \$50 billion a year."

*What about starting with this point?*

*How does this advance LeMoult's argument for legalizing drugs?*

**Figure 4: Anne Gere's Comments**

LeMoult might be correct by saying that our cost of living in society would be cut in half if drugs were legalized, however, he is justifying a wrong to save money. In my opinion legalizing drugs is the easy man's way out. Just because crime is high due to the fact that the cost of drugs is unbelievable it doesn't make legalizing them right. We all know drugs are dangerous to the body and society without any explanation, therefore, you shouldn't legalize something that is dangerous.

*How can you be sure we all know "without any explanation"?*

My only and most important argument to LeMoult is the physical harm it would bring by legalizing drugs. People abuse their right to use alcoholic beverages because they're legal. For example, LeMoult himself says the amount of drug addicts is small compared to alcoholics. Why?—of course it is because of the legalization of alcohol. When you make something legal it can and will be done with little hassle. Why allow something to be done with ease when it is wrong? LeMoult's points are good and true but I believe he is approaching the subject in the wrong manner. Drugs are wrong, therefore, should not be legal!

*Can you develop this argument?*

*Nancy—*

*You have done a good job of summarizing much of LeMoult's article. I think you have overlooked a couple of important points, however. Reread the section where he traces the history of drugs in this country, and look again at his distinction between drugs and alcohol.*

*I find your argument against legalizing drugs the most convincing when you compare the number of alcoholics with the number of drug addicts. Perhaps you can develop this idea further. In contrast, I find the statements that we all know drugs are wrong less than convincing. Just exactly why is legalizing drugs the easy way out? If danger is the issue, how do you respond to the idea that cars are dangerous. (Think about how many people are killed and maimed in automobile accidents every year.) In your next draft try to focus on developing more convincing arguments against legalized drugs.*

*When you have completed your next draft, try reading it aloud before you turn it in. I think you will find a number of places where your ears will help you express your ideas more effectively.*

**Figure 4: Continued**

provide less overt help and direction, and give Nancy greater control over her writing choices.

Gere's end comments adopt a mixture of authoritative and interactive postures. While some of her comments present judgments about the writing and indicate what the writer would do well to work on by way of revision, others go back over this ground and help the writer better understand the issues at stake and how to address them in the next draft. The foundation of Gere's end note is built on evaluative comments. Four of her 13 comments are presented as evaluations of the writing—two positive, two critical. Notably, both of the critical comments are framed as qualified evaluations. She doesn't say, "You have overlooked a number of crucial points"; she says, "*I think* you have overlooked *a couple* of important points." She doesn't say, "Your argument that drugs are wrong is ineffective"; she underscores the subjective nature of her evaluation and tempers the weight of the judgment by saying: "*I find* the statements that we all know drugs are wrong *less than convincing*" (emphasis mine). Moreover, rather than presenting her evaluations by themselves or adding other authoritative comments after them, Gere follows each of these evaluations with more moderate forms of response—advice and questions—that offer additional guidance and information that the student would likely see as help:

I think you have overlooked a couple of important points, however. Reread the section where he traces the history of drugs in this country, and look again at his distinction between drugs and alcohol.

I find your argument against legalizing drugs the most convincing when you compare the number of alcoholics with the number of drug addicts. Perhaps you can develop this idea further.

The kinds of advice Gere offers also affect her control as a responder. Some of her advisory comments suggest particular changes in the text.

Perhaps you can develop this idea further.

In your next draft try to focus on developing more convincing arguments against legalized drugs

Others offer advice about taking up certain reading and writing activities:

Reread the section where he traces the history of drugs in this country, and look again at his distinction between drugs and alcohol.

When you have completed your next draft, try reading it aloud before you turn it in.

These process-based advisory comments provide a direction for the writer, but they do not specify particular textual changes. They leave the student room to make her own decisions and place greater responsibility on her as a writer than text-based advice.

Gere's response alternately shifts, then, from comments that point to concerns, to comments that indicate possible ways of addressing those concerns, to comments that try to help the writer better understand the issues at stake. By juggling these various strategies of response and generally making use of moderate modes, she offers some, but not much, direction to the student. Her comments look to guide the student to come up with a better written product, but they also help her get more practice in her writing processes and more comfortable making decisions as a writer. Ultimately, she is a fairly nondirective responder.

Gere's style of response, however, is only one of the many ways that a teacher can be "facilitative." Consider, as a final example, the following set of responses, which are also clearly facilitative but employ strategies and offer a style that is facilitative in a very different way. The comments, written by Peter Elbow, are not presented on the student's text but in a separate letter to the student.

Dear Nancy,

It's fine not to worry about mechanics or correctness or nice sentences on a rough draft (I don't either): a way to put all attention on your train of thought; but remember that you'll need to get mechanics up to snuff for the final draft.

Seems like you've tried to build yourself a good framework and foundation—to build on for future drafts. You do an ok job of introducing the article. You don't give a full summary, but weren't asked to. And it strikes me that you move fairly quickly to one of your best arguments: alcohol. The widespread abuse is so undeniable.

My reactions. I don't disagree with your *position*, but somehow I find myself fighting you as I read. I'm trying to figure out why. I don't want to legalize drugs, but somehow I want to *listen* more to that writer. After all, he has a delicate thesis: not that we should do it but think about doing it. There's nothing wrong with you picking on part of his argument (legalizing) and ignoring the other part ("let's just think about it")—but the effect is somehow to make it seem as though you are having a closed mind and saying "Let's not even think about it." I guess I feel that the drug situation is so terrible that we have to let ourselves think about more things; I'm feeling stuck. So I think (self-centeredly) that the question for your next draft is this: what can

you do to get a reader like me not to fight you so much? Try thinking about that; see what you can come up with.

I'd be happy to talk more about this in a conference.

Best,

Peter

Elbow offers some instruction, advice, and praise at the beginning and end of his response, but for the most part he acts as a sounding board for the writing. He describes how he experiences the words on the page and offers his reactions to what he reads, leaving it up to the writer, given this reading, to decide on a course for revision. Instead of prompting the student to address certain areas of the text, like White and Peterson, he gives his reading of the overall content of the writing and notes the effect it has on him. Instead of asking a series of focused questions or presenting direct evaluations of the writing, like Peterson and Gere, he writes most of his comments as reader responses, or what he himself might call "movies of the reader's mind" (*Sharing and Responding* 43–52). Significantly, these reader responses take two forms. In one, Elbow plays back his reading of the text or offers his own views on the subject without making overt evaluations. In the other, he plays back his reading of the text and indirectly presents in this reading his moment-to-moment judgments about the writing. The two forms of reader response are played off each other throughout the heart of his response in paragraph three—his interpretations and remarks (in regular type) leading into, and preparing the ground for, his more judgmental reader reactions (in italics):

My reactions. I don't disagree with your *position*, but somehow I find myself fighting you as I read. I'm trying to figure out why. I don't want to legalize drugs, but somehow I want to *listen* more to that writer. . . . [There's nothing wrong with you picking on part of his argument (legalizing) and ignoring the other part ("let's just think about it")]*—but the effect is somehow to make it seem as though you are having a closed mind and saying "Let's not even think about it."* I guess I feel that the drug situation is so terrible that we have to let ourselves think about more things; *I'm feeling stuck.* (emphasis mine)

Half of these comments give a kind of summary transcript of Elbow's reading of the writing as an everyday reader, one who is reading for the meaning and interest it holds for him. They are among the least controlling modes of response since they do little more than dramatize how the words are being understood by an individual reader, not by someone in charge of judging, criticizing, or improving the writing. The other half of the comments move beyond this function of a reader playing back the text and inject some evaluation into the reading. These reader reactions mute the

sharpness of conventional evaluations and temper the authority of the responder. In fact, Elbow goes out of his way to qualify his judgments. Instead of saying "I am fighting you as I read," he says: "*somehow I find myself fighting you as I read.*" Instead of saying "you come across as being closed minded," he says, "*the effect is somehow to make it seem as though you are having a closed mind and saying 'Let's not even think about it.'*" Nevertheless, these reader reactions present certain judgments about the writing and, however indirectly, invoke a certain degree of control over the writer's way of looking back on the text. Significantly, they also provide some direction for the student's revision.

Although Elbow makes no overt evaluations about what is wrong with the writing and no calls for specific changes, he still provides the dissonance that is necessary to initiate revision. He is not a critic. He is a guide only in a very general sense of the term. And he is not a common reader who reads the writing almost exclusively for its content and information without making judgments about how it can be improved; his reader-response comments frequently go beyond simply playing back the text and offer critical judgments about the writing. He is a sounding board with a teacher's purpose, reading first for the meaning and interest the writing holds for him and then, along the way, inserting his teacherly sense of what he likes and what rubs him the wrong way. His comments do not direct or even overtly guide the writer about changes to be made in the writing. But they do provide some implicit direction for the writer's subsequent work. Elbow is content to allow the student to infer, on the basis of his reading, what might be done by way of revision.

If Elbow provides little direct assistance for making specific changes in the next draft and assumes only modest control over the writer's choices, it may be because he is as concerned with encouraging students to engage in the practice of revision as he is with leading them to produce a better subsequent draft. He lets Nancy know through his reading that he is not persuaded by her argument, but he does not, on the basis of this reading, lead her to make any specific changes that might make the writing more persuasive. He leaves it up to the student to decide what to do, perhaps because he thinks there is more to be gained from allowing the student to come up with her own changes. It would make sense then that his responses do not offer as much direction—or exert as much control—over the student's writing. If White and Peterson provide more direction and are more controlling in their responses, it may be because they are intent on helping Nancy revise her text into a better written product and because they see such work with completed texts as central to the student's development as a writer.

In the analyses above, I have been distinguishing among different styles of commentary by describing, individually and collectively, five teacher's predominant methods of commentary. I have been looking beyond general attitudes and styles and into the particular language and strategies these teachers adopt, examining what they say to the student and how they say it. In effect, I have been employing a grammar of teacher control, looking to determine the implicit control that teachers establish through how many comments they make, what they focus on, and how they frame their comments. Through these analyses, we can see how, while White and Peterson look to offer direct assistance with the revision of the text, they employ different strategies in offering this help and direction, with slightly different goals. White is more willing to tell the student what she would do best to work on, through directive comments. Peterson is more willing to prompt the student through pointed questions. White takes on the role of an editor who has definite views about how the writing would best be revised. Peterson takes on the role of a trouble-shooting reader who looks to help the writer see the need for revision. We can also see that Gere is reluctant to provide specific ways of revision. She offers more explicit criticism and advice than Peterson, but she refrains from prompting the writer to make specific changes in the writing, preferring instead to offer broad advice and open-ended questions. Gere takes on the role of a helpful mentor, pointing to areas to consider and more quietly guiding the writer to take up revision activities. She provides some direction for revision, but seems more intent on leading the student to take up issues on her own and gain experience in making her own choices as a learning writer. Elbow's style is the least controlling of the group—and provides the least direct guidance for revision—largely because his reader-response comments do not point directly to particular changes to be made in the writing. More than anything else, he tries to be a sounding board for the writing, one who plays back his reading of the text and subtly injects his evaluations and advice for revision within these reader responses. Whatever questions or advice he provides is minimal, since his main purpose as a responder seems to be to show the writer how the writing acted on him as an individual reader and provide only enough ideas to think about that will nudge the writer to initiate certain lines of revision on her own. To a large extent, his comments are geared to the student behind the text. They are designed to engage her in making her own writing choices and developing her experiences as a writer.

None of the last four responders is directive in the authoritarian sense that Brannon and Knoblauch have in mind—that is, in the sense that most of the scholarship has in mind when they talk about “directive” responses. They all resist taking over the text or dictating particular changes, and they try to engage the student in looking back on her writing and allow her to

maintain control over her own writing choices. Significantly, all four responders also make some use of directive strategies of response—comments that point to some problems or concerns in the writing or that call on the writer to take up certain tasks or revisions. But they all enact different strategies, construct different roles, assume different degrees of control, and offer different kinds of help to the student.

White's responses are clearly directive, but they are not so directive as to usurp the student's control over the writing. Both Elbow's and Gere's responses are clearly facilitative, but each of them emphasizes rather different facilitative strategies, invokes different degrees of control over the student's text, and enacts a distinctive style of commentary. Peterson's responses lie somewhere in between, leaning at times toward a more directive stance, at times toward a more facilitative one. How effective each response style will be depends in part on the larger goals of the class, the teacher's style, and the individual student. But each, it seems to me, is made effective first of all by the way the teacher constructs his or her comments on the page, opening a line of communication with the student, offering text-specific responses, and providing direction to the student even as they leave the real work of revision up to her.

## Conclusion

More than the general principles we voice or the theoretical approach we take into class, it is what we value in student writing, how we communicate those values, and what we say individually on student texts that carry the most weight in writing instruction. It is how we receive and respond to the words students put on the page that speaks loudest in our teaching. Yet although we have given a good deal of thought to our relationship to our students, we have not, as Charles Bazerman points out, "confronted this relationship in its most central form in the writing classroom—what transpires between teacher and student across the written page" (141). So it is important, as he goes on to say, "to consider how we construct ourselves as readers, what influences that construction, and how that construction acts as a variable in student writing" (143).

This study works against the rather established idea that there are essentially only two ways of commenting on student writing—one helpful, encouraging, and effective, the other controlling and ineffective. It suggests that we should not reject all directive styles of response any more than we should all adopt some standard facilitative style. Instead, the study offers a more detailed and open-ended way of analyzing teacher commentary, one that is based on a close reading of comments as they appear on the page. By understanding the great variety of ways teachers can

create themselves in their comments—the many ways teachers may be directive and facilitative—we will be more able to describe, reflect on, and develop our own responding practices and shape our comments to better fit our teaching styles, our classroom goals, and the needs of our individual students.

The main question of teacher response, this study suggests, is not a question of whether or not to impose our views on students and somehow control their writing choices. Given the power relations that adhere in the classroom, all teacher comments in some way are evaluative and directive. In all comments, a teacher intervenes in the writing and, however directly or indirectly, indicates that something needs to be attended to. The critical questions have to do with when and to what extent we as individual teachers exert control over student writing through our comments: How much should I make decisions for the writer? How much should I leave the student to figure out on his own? How much can I productively allow the student to explore his own writing choices? What is the best style for me, given my propensities as a teacher, given what I have to accomplish in the class, given what I think is going to help students learn to write better? What kind of comments will be best for this student, with this paper, at this time?

Of course, the optimum style of response for any teacher is going to be a function of her personality and teaching style. Some teachers will be inclined to be more directive in their teaching and responding. Others will be more open and interactive. Others still will seek some middle ground. The more a teacher's comments tap into her strengths as a teacher and the more they become an extension of herself, the better those comments will be. Different teachers, tapping on different strengths, will make vastly different strategies work—and work well. We need to respect these differences and even celebrate them, since successful response, like successful teaching, seems so much a matter of individual work between teacher and student.

This is not to say, however, that one style of response is as good as another or that any style of response that fits the teacher's demeanor and classroom style is effective. Not at all. Even if there is not one right way to respond to student writing, even if successful response is a matter of individual style, surely there are better and worse ways to respond—and even wrong ways to respond. At one extreme, some comments are overly harsh or disrespectful, and usurp control over student writing, making sweeping editorial changes and dictating what should be said or how it should be presented from top to bottom. At the other extreme, some teacher comments are so minimal and generic that they become detached and offer no help, no real response. Both extremes ought to be avoided. Students must

be allowed to develop their own ideas and encouraged to take responsibility for their writing; they must be allowed to make their own writing decisions and learn to make better choices. Comments that recognize the integrity of the student as a learning writer and that look to engage him in substantive revision are better than those that do not.

If we are going to make sure our comments are working as well as they can, we need to look at what we are doing with the way we present our comments on the page. When all is said and done, our response styles are not determined by our personality. They are not determined by our institutional setting. They do not follow automatically from our attitudes or intentions. They are not inseparable from our classroom context. And they are not set in stone. We create our styles by the choices we make on the page, in the ways we present our comments. We have an opportunity to recreate, modify, or refine this style every time we write a new set of comments, by attending to what we comment on, how much we address, and how we present our comments. All of us, it seems to me, would do well, then, to take a close, hard look at the comments we make, consider whether they are doing the kind of work we want them to do, and make whatever changes we can to make them work better. From time to time, we would do well to ask our students to respond to our responses and see how they understand, react to, and make use of different kinds of comments—and then find ways to make our comments more productive. We would also do well to develop a repertoire of responses—and learn to use different strategies for different students and different classroom situations.

The best responding styles will not feature certain focuses and modes of commentary and exclude certain others. The best responding styles will create us on the page in ways that fit in with our classroom purposes, allow us to take advantage of our strengths as teachers, and enable us to interact as productively as we can with our students. Ultimately, they will allow us to make comments that are ways of teaching.

*Acknowledgments:* I'd like to thank Mara Holt and Chris Anson for their careful, thoughtful comments. They helped make a difference.

## Notes

1. The list can easily be lengthened. Richard Beach, for example, says that, instead of telling students what their problems are and how to remedy them, teachers would do well to provide "more indirect methods of evaluation, responding as in a dialogue, as a reader" (127). Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater favors comments that "offer support" over comments that are "evaluative" (182). Nina Ziv sets comments that present the teacher in the role of "an interested adult reader" against those that present the teacher as "a judge who grades students' papers and writes comments suggesting how the students can 'fix

up' their essays" (362). M. Francine Danis says she would rather think of herself "as a collaborator—a midwife, a coach—than a ruthless judge" (19). Speaking of students' reactions to different types of teacher comments, Jill Burkland and Nancy Grimm distinguish between comments that "take over" student writing and those that enact the teacher "as a writing facilitator with some expertise" who "recognizes the student as primary creator of the text" (246). While a few authors avoid the polemical language that has come to be associated with this debate and point to the need for staking out a middle ground between the two styles, their talk is still influenced by the familiar dichotomy and governed by the metaphor of control. For example, Thomas Newkirk says that teachers must balance two opposing mandates: (1) to evaluate and suggest revision, and (2) to encourage the student to take initiative, to take control of the paper (317). He questions the sharp distinctions between teacher-based comments and student-based comments—especially when they are made in the name of preserving the student writer's "ownership" over the writing. Writing is not "owned" by the teacher or by the student, he says. It is a shared transaction, and as such resists the proprietary metaphor: writers do not control the meaning of texts in the ways that individuals can possess property. Chris Anson distinguishes between the two extremes of teacher response—dualistic response and relativistic response—and goes on to define a third, mediating style of commentary: reflective response. His talk is tinged with the language of authority, responsibility, and control. Dualistic responders focus on surface features of student texts and write comments that are "teacher-based and egocentric" (356). Relativistic responders make few comments on student writing and seem "entirely unconcerned with giving students anything more than a casual reaction" (349). Reflective responses provide options for revision but are "never put dictatorially or appropriatively" (351). Similarly, Lad Tobin identifies a middle style between two poles of response: one that "directs student revision" and another that "withholds direction, ideas, information." In this middle style, Tobin says, he finds himself "asking questions in which I was truly interested but trusting [the writer] to find her own meaning" (49). Tita French Baumlin and James Baumlin begin to stake

out the goals of a middle-ground response style. They say that we must go beyond our established ways of responding (either in a directive style or in a hands-off style) and look "to discover . . . a truly collaborative, *negotiative* rhetoric of response, one that presents the critical judgments of a reader without assuming an authoritative voice, without undermining the student's own authority" (180). But they do not define the qualities or strategies that would make up such commentary.

2. In many ways, the social turn in composition has fueled our resistance to defining different types of commentary in terms of specific textual strategies. Influenced by post-structural theory, we have moved away from a close scrutiny of the written text and focused increasingly on the social conditions and practices that inform writing. According to Brannon and Knoblauch, the main difference between directive and facilitative response does not lie in the outward appearance of the comments, but in the teacher's attitude, in what the teacher generally strives to do in his comments: to direct students to make changes or allow them to retain control over the writing: "The essential difference between the two commenting styles is the degree of control over choices that the writer or the teacher retains. In directive commentary, the teacher says or implies, 'Don't do it your way; do it *this* way.' In facilitative commentary, the teacher says or implies, 'Here's what your choices have caused me to think you're saying—if my response differs from your intent, how can you help me to see what you mean?' The essential difference . . . lies more in attitude and outlook than in perceivable changes of technique" (129). Noting that the full meaning of a comment depends on the larger classroom context, they forego the analysis of individual comments based on how they appear on the page. As a consequence, they do not adequately define their styles of commentary. They seem to assume that if a teacher takes on a given attitude or posture, her responses will naturally reflect the purpose she has in mind. A teacher looking to change her response style need look only to the posture behind her comments, to see whether it is generally directive or facilitative. Changes in the form of individual comments will follow.

3. This commentary is taken from a study Ronald F. Lunsford and I have conducted of

the ways that a diverse group of English teachers—literature faculty, instructors, and graduate students—responded to a sampling of first-year college writing. This teacher is on the faculty of a small liberal arts college in the Midwest and has taught writing and literature for over 20 years. In the background information for this essay, the readers were told that it was a first rough draft of an argumentative essay, written half way through a first-year college course. The assignment asked students to select a recent article from a newspaper or magazine that presented a view they disagreed with or had some questions about and to write a response to the article. This essay was written in response to an article by New York Times writer John LeMoult, in which he argued that the United States should consider legalizing drugs like marijuana and cocaine. The student Nancy, they were told, “sees herself as a ‘good writer’” and has been confused and even put off by the evaluations of her earlier writing in the course. She has been “somewhat resistant to changing her style and process of writing, and has not been very responsive to your comments on the four previous course papers.” The paper is to be taken through two more drafts.

4. The book-length study is entitled *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing*. Co-authored by Ronald F. Lunsford and me, it attempts to define the state of the

art of teacher response by examining how 12 teacher-scholars—Chris Anson, Peter Elbow, Anne Gere, Glynda Hull, Richard Larson, Ben McClelland, Frank O’Hare, Jane Peterson, Donald Stewart, Patricia Stock, Tilly Warnock, and Edward White—comment on a sampling of 15 student essays. The essays were all written for first-year college writing courses and were accompanied by hypothetical background information about the assignment, the stage of drafting, the course work, and the student writer. The comments, I should note, were written some six or seven years ago: it is likely that some of these teachers have since taken on different strategies and approaches to commenting on student writing.

5. I realize that the issue of just how much we can make such determinations from the text itself is problematic. This study does not deny the ways that the meanings of a teacher’s comments in an actual classroom setting are influenced by the context of the class and the social relations established there. It claims that there is something to be gained by a close examination of the ways teachers create themselves in their comments. I do not see this clinical, textual study as necessarily preferable to ethnographic study of response in the complex social setting of an actual classroom. It is preliminary to such study.

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