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# All I Did Was Ask: Communicating With Students about Their Writing

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## Wake-up Call #1

Tom had used up half of the time allotted for the poetry anthology, finding ten of the twenty poems that I had required. Which was great, except that finding the poems was step one out of twelve. So rather casually, I told Tom that he was really, really behind on his poetry anthology and that I was very worried about him. I know I wasn't harsh. I may even have thought that I was being gentle. But the more I talked, the darker the expression on his face grew.

Shocked and angry, he finally exploded at me. I hadn't recognized what he had accomplished, he said. He was so defensive and so hurt that he was unable to hear anything else I had to say. The conversation became a child's yes/no argument rather than a back-and-forth discussion about what we each thought.

## Wake-up Call #2

School had only been in session for a few weeks, but it was already clear that Anne was a talented writer. So I was surprised when I read the rough draft of her memoir. It was really bad. It didn't look like a week's worth of her writing: it was disorganized and incomplete. Thinking about my experience with Tom, I spent a solid thirty minutes pondering her paper and carefully writing a page-long response. I was up very late that night.

When I got to class the next day, I watched her as she read through my comments and then began rummaging through her backpack. She hurried over to me, appearing simultaneously embarrassed and pleased. "I'm sorry, Ms. Gedeon, but I was really

busy over the weekend, so I just turned in my notes so I wouldn't lose too many points. I wrote my real rough draft last night—I'm pretty sure I already fixed everything you talked about in your note."

## Questioning My Responses to Students

These two vignettes capture a few of the complexities inherent in responding to student writing. Each presented a different challenge, and these are only two of the many classroom experiences I have had that made me question how I was responding to students and their writing. Some piece of grace was missing from my response to Tom's work. Peter Elbow writes that criticism can be damaging to students and their writing, and at minimum, we should "at least do no harm" (359). I didn't manage even that with Tom, and our student-to-teacher relationship never regained its balance.

With Anne, I didn't hurt her feelings, but I did waste an enormous amount of time and energy worrying about a student who clearly didn't need me to worry. My classroom practices had changed over the years, particularly after participating in a summer institute of the National Writing Project. Although I thought I had tried many different kinds of responses to student writing, my response style unfortunately had varied only a little. My responses continued to be grade- and product-oriented instead of student- and process-oriented.

I needed to re-think my responses to students' writing. How could I tailor responses to students' needs? What kinds of comments should I write on student papers? What were my options for responding? What did my students need from me? What did the research say about how to write responses to student writing? What kinds of responses actually resulted in better writing? How could I balance responding well to students and their writing and still have time for a life? Ultimately, two questions kept nudging me: *How should I respond to student writing? Why should I respond that way?*

## Becoming a Teacher-Researcher

As a teacher, I am quick to turn to professional literature

and to fellow teachers for ideas. Books and co-workers are great resources, and I drew on them as I began to consider changing this aspect of my teaching practice. As I began reading more about teacher-research, I realized that I hadn't been tapping into the most powerful resources available to me: careful observation and analysis of my students and of myself in our classroom. It was important to me that I listened to what students had to say about the changes I was making in my response style. Teacher-researchers should "design a classroom curriculum that allows them to check out their interpretations with students," according to MacLean and Mohr, who also say that students should be included "as participants in the process through which they and their teacher learn about learning" (x-xi).

My first step was to incorporate systematic and intentional teacher-research in my classroom. I talked with students about why changing my response style was important to me (and for them) and to explain the teacher-research process. Of the forty-four students in my two sections of English 9, nineteen agreed to participate in my teacher-research project. Those nineteen students responded to surveys and agreed to let me make copies of their writing, their cover sheets, and my written responses to them. Three brave students volunteered to allow me to interview them at the end of the project. Lastly, I kept field notes and a research journal, documenting what I noticed happening in my classroom and reflecting on my teacher-research process.

### **Reading and Responding Deliberately**

Part of me desperately wanted to find the answer to all of my questions—to find that one way to respond to all students in all situations that would always work. I decided to focus on my written responses to student writing and look at the professional literature to find that one magical response style. However, as Crone-Blevens writes, it is a teacher's attitude towards students and their writing that is truly important. She states that when teachers respond to student writing, it isn't "the specific words [teachers] utter, but rather their underlying attitude and philosophy... which imbues writers with a sense of worth and takes them seriously, regardless of the quality of their work" (97). Beyond that, I wanted to

become more intentional about how I *read* student work.

Brian Huot argues that a teacher's attitude determines what he or she sees in a student text. Huot even goes a step further when he states, "it's fairly clear that the type of reading given by an individual reader actually controls what the reader can observe within the text" (115). I was aware that the attitude I bring to the text affects how I see it; however, I was surprised to discover that the attitude I bring affects what I *can* see.

### **Shifting from Grade-Focused to Student-Focused Responses**

Before I started this study, I was very grade-focused when I read student writing. All I could see was what was wrong and what needed to be "fixed" in order to improve students' grades. Notice I said their grade, not their writing. I knew I needed to break my habit of looking for what was wrong. I realized that I wanted my students to have control as writers to make their own choices. I wanted to focus on what was done well and show them how much I enjoyed reading what they wrote. I knew that I needed a structure to help me develop better habits as a reader and responder.

Renee Callies suggests a specific structure for responses, stating that a teacher's response to student writing should begin with praise, then ask specific questions, and end with general observations about the whole piece ("When Grammar Matters"). I adapted this structure for my classroom. I decided I would make sure I commented on what was done well; stay focused on the content; ask questions; and carefully couch suggestions as suggestions, not as orders or a list of things to fix. I was surprised at how much practice it took before it felt natural enough to write a response without constantly referring to a "cheat sheet" outlining this strategy.

One of the methods I used to adjust to this new response strategy was based on an idea from Peter Elbow, who writes, "I can comment *far* more easily and effectively if I force myself to read the whole piece before making any comments" (358). I adapted his strategy so that I actually read the entire set of papers before I commented on any of them. It gave me a chance to reflect on students' writing before writing responses; it gave me a chance to let the possibilities simmer without pressure.

I wanted to become more intentional about the content of my responses, tailoring them to each individual's needs. I needed to find a way to figure out what, exactly, my students were thinking about. Elbow suggests asking students to write a short cover letter when they turn in a piece of writing which addresses the following issues: "what they see as their main points, how they went about writing and what happened, which parts they are most and least satisfied with, and what questions they have for me as a reader" (358). I've spent thousands of frustrating hours over the years staring at students' writing trying to figure out what they were thinking about before I wrote a response to them. Elbow's cover letter idea seemed like the beginning of a solution to that problem.

The problems I had responding to Tom and Anne weren't related to how well I knew my students or how carefully I read their writing. My problems were related to not understanding their perceptions of their own work. For each particular piece of writing, I needed to know the answers to some basic questions before I responded. Was I speaking to confidence or vulnerability? Were they stuck or did they already have a revision plan? Did they have a sense of what was working well and what needed work?

Based on Elbow's idea of a cover letter, I decided to create a handout which I asked students to fill out and staple to the top of each rough draft. I adjusted Elbow's

cover letter ideas for my classroom and came up with four questions: What do you like about your writing? What needs work? How does the draft fit with the other writing in your multigenre research project? What kind of response would you like from me?

### **What I Learned**

The results of my teacher-research study were both surprising and satisfying. I knew I was on the right track with my attitude changes when I started looking forward to reading papers at night, and I knew I had turned a corner when I told my husband I was going upstairs to respond to papers—not to grade them. I had hoped that looking for what was good in my students' writing would make a difference, and my students agreed with both the premise and the results. My students' initial impressions of my responses included comments on the positive feedback I'd given, and one student wrote, "When I read what you wrote I really got the impression that you really read what I wrote and kind of enjoyed it!"

Other results were more surprising. I had no idea how useful the cover sheet would be. Having information about students' perceptions of their writing let me stop agonizing over what to say to each draft. It was easier to choose my tone; I knew which students needed a push and which needed encouragement. I no longer felt like I had to write down every revision idea I had since students had

often thought of better ideas themselves.

Moreover, before I began the teacher-research study, some of my beliefs about what made a good response were deeply buried, and I was unable to articulate them, even to myself. It turned out that many of these assumptions about what made a good response were reflective more of what I'd had done to me than what

**Figure 1: Design of the Teacher-Research Study**

<p><b>Reading and Responding Deliberately</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Change my attitude: I moved from looking for what's wrong in a piece of writing to looking for what's good in it.</li><li>2. Structure my responses to: comment on what's good; stay focused on content; ask specific questions; and make suggestions, not give orders.</li><li>3. Read an entire set of student writing before commenting on any.</li><li>4. Ask students to fill out a cover sheet and staple it to the top of each rough draft during the multigenre research project unit.</li></ol> <p><b>Collecting Data</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Of the 44 students in my two sections of English 9, nineteen agreed to take surveys about my responses.</li><li>2. Those same nineteen students allowed me to make copies of their drafts, cover letters, and my responses to their writing.</li><li>3. Three students agreed to let me interview them.</li><li>4. I documented my observations in field notes and a research journal.</li></ol>
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my students actually needed. I didn't see that until I started analyzing the data I was getting through surveys, interviews, student work, and my field notes (see Figure 1). One of my students, Liz, offers an example of the new process I implemented.

### All I Did Was Ask

My response to Liz's writing was much more focused and on track because of the responses on her cover sheet. Her topic for her multigenre research project was teen alcohol abuse, and she wrote the poem in Figure 2 as one of her genres. Her cover sheet (see Figure 3) made it clear that she felt insecure about her writing, so I knew to be encouraging in my response (see Figure

4). Although she didn't come out and ask for help with unity, her answer to question three on the cover sheet made it clear that she didn't understand the concept. She didn't have a sense that she needed something other than a common topic to hold her genres together—so I offered a suggestion that showed her another way to connect her genres. Quoting a specific line from her poem showed her I read her work carefully and pointed to a specific quality that made her work shine. Refusing to answer the question she had about rhyme scheme showed her that I trusted her as the writer to make her own decisions. She gained the confidence she needed and got the information about the concept of unity that she needed in order to go on to complete an impressive project.

**Figure 2: Rough Draft of Liz's Poem**

[Untitled]  
Every night it's the same thing  
You stay out all night  
You drink and drink  
You make yourself look like a fool  
I try and act like it doesn't bother me  
But deep down inside it's killing me to  
    Watch you throw away you're life like this  
I love you more than anything  
But I don't want to see you get hurt  
I want to say something to you  
But gosh I just don't know how to put it...

**Figure 3: Liz's Cover Sheet (her answers are italicized)**

Rough Draft Cover Sheet	Name: Liz
Genre: Poem (#2)	Title: no title

1. What do you like about your draft?  
*That it's a poem, I'm really not sure I like it.*
2. What do you think you still need to work on to make this draft better?  
*Proably the wording, maybe get a little rhyme in there...*
3. Explain how this draft fits into your project as a whole.  
*It's about my topic.*
4. What kind of response would you like from me? How can I help you?  
*Maybe you could help me fix this poem, I'm really not sure if I like it, I don't think that it really works with the work I've done on my other genres. Tell me what you think. Should I re-do it?*

**Figure 4: My Response to Liz's Poem**

Liz-

*You've captured such emotion here – I especially love the lines “I try and act like it doesn't bother me / But deep down inside it's killing me...”*

*I don't think you need to add rhyme – unless you want to.*

*In terms of how it fits with the rest of your genres, I think it would be a great piece just before some kind of genre that talks about how to find help (or) how to talk to a friend with a drinking problem.*

-Ms. Gedeon

The first set of cover sheets helped me realize I needed to model what kinds of responses writers could ask for. At first, students were a bit confused by the assignment, and many of them answered the question “What kind of response would you like from me?” by writing “A good one.” My first attempts at modeling were limited to helping students focus on particular parts of their papers that needed help (like the beginning, middle, or end). Then I modeled asking for help with content versus asking for help with editing. In the years since this teacher research project, I have learned to model using a rubric to identify aspects of good writing and identify areas within a piece that need improvement. I've also found that modeling at different places in the writing process helps students see the connection between where they are in their processes and the kinds of responses that might be most useful at that time.

After we spent time discussing the possibilities, students were able to better use their cover sheets to ask for many different kinds of responses. Some students asked for “a response that gives me an idea if you understand it;” students asked if their genres had “enough information” and for “any ideas to make it sound better.” A few asked if their genres would “fit good [sic] with their topic.” Some students were very unsure about the quality of their rough drafts, writing, “I would like an okay response from you, because I know this piece isn't that good” or more simply, “What should I do?” Others knew exactly what they were trying to do, saying they wanted “to make it feel [like] you are there when it happened.”

In a later survey I asked, “Did I respond the way

you asked me to in your cover sheet?” Fourteen students said yes, two said both yes and no, and two said no. The cover sheets clarified my audience for me, helping me gauge students' goals and where they were in their writing process—both of which helped me judge how to best respond to their papers. It was amazing how much difference it made, not only in the quality of my responses, but in shortening the length of time it took me to write them. I didn't

have to agonize, wondering what students wanted from me or wonder about their perceptions. All I did was ask, and my students told me what I needed to know. Since I completed this project, I have continued to ask for cover sheets, although the questions have evolved over time. One of the questions I've added to almost every cover sheet asks students to specifically describe their writing process for that piece. My responses to student writing continue to improve as my students and I learn from one another. I've noticed that over the course of each year as students learn to reflect on their writing process, *they are more able to talk about their writing, more able to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and more able to ask for what they need as writers.*

### **Content is King**

One of the incorrect assumptions that I made after doing the book research for this project was that a “good response was a long response.” I had just read Tobin's *Reading Student Writing*, and I took it a little too much to heart when he said “the more time we spend on a student essay...the richer the text begins to appear and the more we come to appreciate what initially might seem superficial or naïve or even offensive in a student essay” (14). On one level, he's right: I want to appreciate my students' work; I want to see the depth and breadth of it; I want my students to see how much I care about them and their writing. But somehow in my first set of responses this translated into trying to write an entire page in response to each draft. While Tobin

wrote a book in response to just one of his student's essays, even he doesn't do that for every essay he reads. And for me writing forty-four pages of responses each night to students' rough drafts is not a possibility in my life, no matter how much I love my students.

When I surveyed students about the length of my responses, about half said that "longer is better." One student who liked a longer response said that it was a more "descriptive answer" and therefore more helpful. Another said, "a longer response tells me you liked it a lot but [I] have to fix a few things." A third appreciated the effort I put into the responses, writing, "I am glad you took the time to write so much." However, the other half of my students were more concerned about the content than the length. One student wrote, "Well it really doesn't matter how long the response is, it's what you say in the response that's important!" Another wrote, "I would rather have an honest response that can help me change things, the length doesn't matter." My students seemed to understand the complexity (or the simplicity) of this process better than I did: in other words, content is king. They wanted me to understand the content of their piece, to think about their writing; they expected my comments to help them proceed with their work.

They also didn't want me to take a year to get back to them with my response. When I surveyed them about the balance between length of a response versus amount of time it took me to respond, they were evenly split. Some were concerned about having time to revise, writing, "[A response] the next day is better so [I] can fix the mistakes right away then." Others were more concerned about the content, stating, "I don't know if it matters as long as they are good comments." I think what writers really want is the best of both worlds: a thoughtful and useful response by tomorrow.

### **Public Responses**

Another assumption I had when I began this project was that a good response was private; I assumed my audience was just one student at a time. However, one experience during my teacher-research study forced me to acknowledge the possibilities of public responses.

Amy was curious about a religion that she didn't

know much about, so when she wrote a bullet list of that religion's main beliefs I was impressed both with her choice of genre and with what she had learned. I composed what I thought was a useful response to her, but the next morning when I went to record credit for the draft in my gradebook something just niggled at my brain. One of the items on the list started with "we believe..." and since I knew it wasn't a personal belief, her use of the collective "we" caught my attention as a reader. I recorded all the grades but hers, and then, thinking I was overreacting, I Googled the first item on the list.

And there it was. The entire draft was plagiarized. Word for word, right down the list. The only thing she had changed was adding her name at the top of the page.

So I dug out my handouts on plagiarism, and we spent the entire class period that day talking about it. The students asked thoughtful questions and used examples from their writing. Amy, of course, was not the only person who was confused. I apologized to my students for putting off the discussion about plagiarism, and I explained how previous classes had sometimes felt that I was accusing them of something before there was evidence. However, in this one instance, my procrastination turned out to have an up side. In the past I had always lectured about plagiarism *before* we started writing. But waiting until students had written a genre or two meant that it was a discussion instead of a lecture. My students had real questions and were focused on understanding the answers.

My point isn't really about when and how I taught about plagiarism; rather, that a private response isn't always the most useful one. The public discussion about plagiarism helped everyone—it wasn't simply Amy's paper that improved. I intended my research to focus on private written responses, but in this case, the best response was a public, class-wide discussion.

### **Balancing Acts**

About halfway through my teacher-research project I realized that I thought that if I wrote better responses, it would directly and necessarily result in students using my ideas in their drafts. I was putting so much effort and time into writing responses, and my ego was demanding that students use my ideas. (Fortunately I managed to

avoid saying this out loud!) One of my stated goals was to help students learn to make more of the writerly decisions themselves, yet I realized I was expecting my ideas to show up in their writing and that I thought that this was evidence of a useful response on my part. This was one of my more annoying epiphanies.

This difficult moment forced me to reconsider my expectations. I know that I am a more experienced writer than my students. How do I make sure my ego isn't getting in the way? Where is the line between suggestion and command? And how do I know that my students and locate that line in the same place? After all, I grade their papers. Of course that factors into their decisions about how to revise. I was uncomfortable with the issues of power that this raised.

One of my survey questions betrayed my assumption that students should use my ideas. I asked, "Do you think my comments will be helpful when you revise?" Originally, I thought I received positive responses when fifteen students said yes, two said yes and no, and only one said no. However, their comments showed an interesting contradiction: three students made a direct connection between the usefulness of my response and improving their grades. One student said my comments would be useful because "you know how you want things." Another student answered, "it will be more how you want it so my grade will be better." A third student wrote, "Yes because [your comments] will help me get a better grade on the final." However, not all of my students felt this way.

I also asked students, "Did I leave the important decisions to you?" On that survey question, fourteen students said yes and only four responded no. One student wrote, "I asked for help and you gave me suggestions, not demands." Another said, "I felt like I was in control, and that's good." A third student wrote, "I picked my genres and how I wanted to do them. You made suggestions, but you left everything up to me." This is the result I was hoping for when I changed my response style. It was both frustrating and understandable to hear that some students were still so focused on their grades instead of their writing, but as a student myself, I can understand their focus. After all, I was the one who was so focused on grades before I decided to change my response style. Change doesn't come easily—for teachers or for students. I'll be spending more time talking with my students about improving writing than improving grades in the future.

When I realized that I expected students to use my comments, at first I thought I could just take a step back, force my ego out of the way, and let my students make all their own decisions as writers. But I had forgotten that my ego wasn't the only issue. During my interview with Anne, she reminded me that I had told her that she was "required, no arguments allowed," to change something in one of her genres. I was appalled at myself for a moment until I remembered what I had told her to change. Her research subject was teen drug abuse, and to illustrate the problems associated with that she had written a police report detailing a sexual assault at a party—using the real first and last names of her friends as the characters in the story. So yes, I demanded she change the names. I didn't feel guilty at the time, and I am still comfortable with that decision. Fortunately, Anne was quite willing to change the names. She even said in her interview that aside from that one problem, she didn't feel pushed, saying that as a teacher I let her "choose what [she] wanted to do."

But what if she hadn't been willing to make that change? What would I have done about the grade? What about publication? What about the other students' feelings? What about the implied threat of sexual assault? I am the teacher; I am the adult. I have both the power and the responsibility to demand that Anne's writing not harm or threaten other students and to explain to Anne why I made that demand. How do I balance that responsibility with the responsibility to teach students to make their own choices about their writing? And what if the issue wasn't an ethical one—what if it was something (somewhat) less emotionally charged, like proofreading?

I've gone back and forth on the pendulum: I want students to make all their own choices about their writing; and as the teacher and more experienced writer, I know I need to step in and make some demands as well. I'm hoping I land in a solid gray area soon. In the meantime, the first change I've made is to be more open with students about how and why I make the choices as a writer and as a teacher. My decision-making process should be a model, not a mystery.

### **Evolving Questions**

When I first surveyed students about what kind of response they wanted to their writing, many students said "a good



one.” My teacher-research study has opened my eyes to the importance of my attitude—both when I’m reading student writing and when I’m writing that “good” response. Ralph Fletcher writes, “We must speak to our students with an honesty tempered by compassion: Our words will literally define the ways they perceive themselves as writers” (19). The scary thing is that I think Fletcher is right. The only thing more terrifying than not believing that I can make a difference as a teacher is the truth Fletcher speaks: that what I say and do can make an indelible difference. Writing comes from such a personal place that my response to writing isn’t about responding to the writing, but responding to the student.

As I look back over the data I’ve collected, I see a common thread: the importance of both teacher-to-student and student-to-teacher communication. I need to spend more time asking my students what they need and explaining why I do what I do. The cover sheets asking my students about their writing and the surveys and interviews asking about my responses to their writing were a great beginning, but I’m already thinking about how to improve my teaching practice for next year. How can I continue to teach my students to recognize what they need as writers—and to ask for it? One of my first steps will be to talk more openly about my own experiences as a writer. Subsequently, I want to be sure to work more deliberately with my students to build a common language to talk about writing. Communication is such a simple yet such a complicated recipe for success in the classroom.

My response style and my teaching practice will continue to evolve, but I don’t think I’ll ever approach a problem in my classroom again without recognizing my students as one of my first sources for change. Tom and Anne started me on this journey. It’s fall, and school has started again. What will we learn together this year?

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### About the Author

**Kristin Kogel Gedeon** (kristin.gedeon@britton-macon.us) has taught high school English and social studies at Britton-Macon Area School for fourteen years. This article is the result of her first major teacher-research project, which she completed with the support of Professor Heidi Estrem. She continues to engage in teacher-research, and she loves the journey as well as the results.