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Exploring Four Modes of Responding to Undergraduate Writing

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This thesis submitted by Mary B. Gruis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts is hereby approved by the final evaluation

**EXPLORING FOUR MODES OF RESPONDING TO
UNDERGRADUATE WRITING**

by

Mary B. Gruis

B.A., Augsburg College, 2001

A Thesis

Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

St. Cloud, Minnesota

Dean

School of Graduate Studies

December, 2004

This thesis submitted by Mary B. Gruis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts is hereby approved by the final evaluation committee.

Mary B. Gruis

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For some TAs, we do not even begin to read or study rhetoric and pedagogy until after our composition classes begin. TAs wrestle with trying to teach what they understand implicitly, writing, yet they are not sure how to impart what they know in a manner that students will understand.

Although I have two years of teaching experience, I am unsure on whether I could be responding to my students' writing in a more effective way. Yet, what is the best way to respond to student writing, or what method of response would work best in my classroom?

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Mary B. Gruis

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Month Year

Approved by Research Committee

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Christie M. Gordon Chairperson

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A PROCESS

Background

In July of 2001 I received a letter congratulating me on my acceptance into Bemidji State University's Graduate Studies program; I was overjoyed. I had always dreamed of working towards a Master's Degree in English. It was not until the second letter came that I became a bit anxious. The second letter informed me that I had received a Graduate Teaching Assistant position and would be teaching a section of English Composition during the fall semester.

The second letter struck fear into my heart. I knew that I could read and write, but now I was going to teach others to write well. Write well? How does one do this, teach students to write well? I had never before taught composition, or English, for that matter. I spent the next four weeks trying to remember how I learned to write.

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The week before school arrived, the new assistants gathered together for an intensive orientation program. The first morning we were ushered into a small classroom, and we began to hash out various styles of teaching, the

writing of syllabi, the course objectives and grading. We discussed briefly how to engage our students in discussion, how to work with peer response groups and how to hold conferences. As the first day of school approached, I was feeling more confident and believing that Bemidji had made a fine decision honoring me with an assistantship. I would prove to the faculty and myself that I was an excellent teacher and student. I would portray myself as a professional, and I would fashion my teaching around those who had written about and taught composition—people like Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, Donald Murray, Richard Straub, Nancy Sommers, and Jeff Sommers.

The Teaching Assistant orientation at Bemidji State University was much like the orientation course I would later attend at St. Cloud State University, we spent a great deal of time going over how we would be responding to student essays. We received sample essays, and were asked to read them and comment as we would on a real student's essay. Immediately we focused in on the grammatical and mechanical flaws. Those were the easiest problems to target. We soon learned that these should be targets for later drafts. We took some time to read essays by Peter Elbow and Nancy Sommers. These authors both seemed to have a common philosophy when it came to looking at student writing. Although they also had some stylistic differences, their process of working through student drafts and their philosophies were quite similar. Both of these authors looked first at the global issues that a student had trouble with, leaving the mechanics and grammar for later drafts. Their philosophies focused mainly on the premise that if you mark

all the errors on a text on the first draft, the student will focus on fixing the errors. Whereas, if the reader focuses his or her comments on the organization, the content, now the essay fits the assignment, and some of the more global issues, then the student will have a better opportunity to understand and utilize the writing process.

After orientation I spent a few days reviewing *The New St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*, and I felt as though I had the ideas of response under control. The philosophy of writing as a process and getting rid of the evil red ink was ingrained in my mind. Yet, as the first day approached, I wondered if I would be able to set aside my editorial predilections, and let the global issues take precedence. It would be much too easy to focus on the comma splices and the run-ons. My biggest fear walking into class was that I wouldn't even be able to address these more global issues. What if I lead students down the wrong path?

The first day of class arrived, and I was awash with excitement, anxiety and fear. Deadly fear. I walked into my first English Composition class feeling as though I was missing something; it wasn't anything tangible, nothing I could place my finger on. As I entered the classroom, I felt as though what I was missing was just beyond my grasp. Could Bemidji State have made a mistake? A mistake that could ruin the hopes and dreams of these twenty-five fresh faces staring back at me? Who was I kidding? I still was struggling with the definition of rhetoric, still struggling with comma splices, and I was going to teach twenty-five freshmen to write proficiently?

The first two weeks of class were wonderful. We talked about writing; we started to become more comfortable with one another. As my students readied themselves to hand in their first writing assignment, my feelings of anxiety resurfaced. When they handed in their first assignment I felt alone, set adrift on a sea of white sheets of paper. How was I going to help them? I knew from our orientation session and my past writing history that I didn't want to use a red pen, but suddenly I felt that was the only real knowledge I had. I knew that for me, the red pen had always conjured up feelings of anxiety and absolute failure. I thought back to those names, those instructors who I was trying to fashion my teaching after and yet, I felt utterly alone, lost. How do I give guidance? How do I respond to these twenty-five essays, these seventy-five pieces of paper?

It was not until I was wandering through the Fine Arts faculty lounge one afternoon that I began to feel I was not alone. As I sat down on one of the large overstuffed chairs, my eyes surveyed the English bookshelf and came to rest on an intriguing title, *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teach Writing*, edited by Tina Lavonne Good and Leanne B. Warshauer. I picked up the slim text and for the next few hours became completely engrossed in the narratives of other TAs discussing their teaching experiences. Why hadn't this book been a part of the summer reading list? Why wasn't it a part of the pedagogy class? It was as though these TAs were talking directly to me. They understood my anxiety and my fear of failing these twenty-five freshmen.

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A Response to my Fears

As a TA coming into the graduate program, I had no formal classroom teaching experience to look back on and draw from. I had only the week-long orientation session and an internship in Developmental Writing that I participated in as an undergrad. To realize that there were other TAs who struggled with responding to student essays was a relief. The idea of being *the one* these students looked to for guidance was daunting. How best could I help them? What were my options when it came to responding to their essays? This small collection of writings helped me to realize I was not alone with these uncertainties; there were others facing the same problems.

As I continued to read, one essay in particular struck me; it was an essay by Robert E. Cummings titled, "Student-Teacher Conferencing and the Graduate Instructor: Searching for Balance and Style in Conferencing Pedagogy." Cummings eloquently states, "With no prior teaching experience of any kind, my fears of public speaking, of revealing my ignorance, of taciturn and menacing students, and so on were only accelerated by the normal apprehensions that an experienced instructor may have had about learning the particulars of our program" (212). I felt an immediate bond. He had reiterated my fears exactly. I understood that many TAs arrive at graduate programs with little to no teaching history. Yet, even though we have no history, we are expected to adequately respond to our students' writing.

For some TAs, we do not even begin to read or study rhetoric and pedagogy until after our composition classes begin. TAs wrestle with trying to

teach what they understand implicitly, writing, yet not sure how to impart what they know. After teaching for a year at Bemidji State, I moved on to St. Cloud State University to continue my graduate work. Even as a veteran TA, and now an instructor at a community college, I still feel frustrated when I look at the stack of my students' rhetorical analyses, or their contrastive analyses and know that my feedback can either push them to revise, or pull them towards the wastebasket to throw their papers away. Sure, they'll revise for the portfolio, but how do I ensure that I am not directing them to revise only surface level mistakes? Although I have two years of teaching experience, I still question whether I could be responding to my students' writing in a more effective way. Better yet, what is the best way to respond to students writing, or what method of response would work best in my classroom? I knew at this point that I needed to work with this idea of response, look at different modes, implement them and learn how I can best use them to help my students become better writers.

Since beginning this research project, I have spent two years teaching in the community college setting and have continued to experiment with these modes and refine how they best work for not only myself but my students.

While I understand that I cannot speak for the teaching community at large, I am aware that this project has helped me to become a better instructor. I have also noticed that I always keep an eye on how my students will react to my responses and how I can make them clearer and more helpful.

An Introduction to the Modes

Even though response is addressed, discussed and experimented with during most TA orientation programs, inevitably something gets left out.

Response seems to be learned by trial and error. For graduate students, who are just beginning their educating experience, the terror of learning by trial and error could be relieved a bit by having a handbook that discusses in-depth a few of the methods. Since I began teaching and studying composition and rhetoric, I have gained a better understanding of response and a desire to try different methods of response to see what works best for my classrooms. I have since thought back to the list of names of the professionals that I was hoping to fashion my teaching after and realized they may be the key to responding to student papers in a helpful manner. I decided to find out more of what these instructors and professionals thought about response and to practice their methods during the course of two semesters.

I began my research thinking about response in general, and how we are taught to respond to student writings. I quickly realized that it could be very easy to choose a method, stick to it and proclaim it is the best way to give feedback on students' writings. Instead of looking only at one method of response, I have chosen to look at four methods (written response on the text, written response not on the text, recorded response, and conference) and to practice them in my own classrooms and see what works best for me. This project is not meant to decide for others what method will work best, or if one is better than another. We all have different teaching styles, and all the research

points to the idea that response is needed, but we must decide for ourselves what works best for us. My goal is for this project to help push other TAs to implement various styles into their classrooms early. This may help them keep from staying with one mode of response simply because it was the first one they learned.

Written Response on the Text

The first method of response that I chose to integrate into my classroom was written response on the text. I wanted to work with this method first because I thought it was the easiest and best means of giving feedback when I first began teaching. Outside of conferencing, written response on the text was the only method of responding to student writing that we discussed in our orientation program. This method seemed the easiest because we teachers would always have the students' texts in hand and a writing utensil as well. I know now that I had a long way to travel before I even really understood the many different ways to comment on student papers by responding on the text. When I refer to response on the text, I mean to comment either as a summative end paragraph, to write within the lines of the text, to write along the margins of the text, or to combine these three styles into one's own personal means of responding on the text.

Many academicians have tackled written response on the text: Chris Anson, Peter Elbow, Nancy Sommers, Brooke K Horvath, and Edward White are just a few. In her text, *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers*

in *All Disciplines*, Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord states, "written comments have the advantage of requiring only a teacher and a colored pen" (141). As Walvoord suggests, many of us grab onto written response because it seems the most natural way to respond to our students' texts; all we truly need is the text and a pen or pencil. Yet, written response is difficult because students can walk away with their text in hand, read the comments written by the instructor, and take away an entirely different meaning than what the instructor intended. On the other hand, written response is a wonderful tool because the students have a hard copy of the instructor's thoughts, questions and concerns regarding their drafts.

As I think over the texts I have read regarding written response, Brooke K. Horvath's essay "The Components of Written Response: A Practical Synthesis of Current Views," seems to truly encompass what we try to accomplish when we respond to student texts. She explains that an "evaluator's task, then, is to respond neither too vaguely nor too narrowly, to provide comments [...] keeping in mind the essay's full rhetorical situation and attempting to respond to it as an integrated work intent on accomplishing a certain aim—the student's intended aim—in the world" (Horvath 246). Horvath's plan may seem a daunting task for a new TA with no background teaching experience. The easy items are making sure that our students are using topic sentences, or that they stay within one verb tense, and we can easily address the comma splices and fragment sentences. However, we need to address these surface items *after* we ensure that the students are

addressing their audience, that they are fully grasping the situation within which they are writing and that the students are aware of their organization, their tone and least of all their purpose for writing. For as easy as written response on the text seems when we begin teaching, it can quickly prove to be overwhelming.

Written Response not on the Text

After looking at written response on the text, I decided to move into another area of response. Many instructors use a second mode of giving feedback by asking their students to include a cover letter with their drafts. These cover letters address strengths the student sees in the assignment, problems that have come up along the way, how they are trying to remedy these problems and what they would like the instructor to look at specifically. Many of us do not realize that we could easily give feedback to our students in the same manner. Written response not on the text is essentially responding to the students by way of summative memos back to the students, or a letter addressing the instructors concerns and praises, or these responses could come in the form of an email.

In his essay "The Writer's Memo: Collaboration, Response, and Development," Jeffrey Sommers explains that the memo can "change not only the student but also the teacher, freeing both from their academic roles and encouraging both to assume the more productive roles of writer and reader" (184). Sommers's idea allows for instructors to step away from being editors,

and take steps toward becoming true readers. We ask our students to write, and we should read, not as judges but as guides. As instructors, we need to focus our energy on helping the student to understand what we read in the piece, not putting our own voice into the piece. In his essay he addresses exactly what I feared as I began to respond to my students' writing and what I also feared as I began to experiment with alternative forms of response. He encourages teachers to "begin collaborating with student writers instead of merely judging them" (177). Sommers is helping us to realize that we can't possibly judge a student's text, when they have the authority over it. We cannot own their text, so we cannot completely take the text over. When we write responses in a memo or letter form, separate from the text, whether it is typed, handwritten or in email, we show the student author that we respect their work, and we begin to try and engage them in an ongoing dialogue about the work. But not only does he focus on response not on the text, but he also writes a great deal on a third mode, recorded response.

Recorded Response

As I began reading about recorded response my first thought was, how does an instructor use taped response with students who may not even remember what a cassette tape looks like? Well, for those who do not remember, or choose not to use tapes, compact discs work just as well. When I first started researching this recorded response, I was surprised at how many academicians have used this mode. I went into this area thinking that only one

or two would have written on this method. What surprised me most during my research was how many academicians had written on responding to the text, had also written pieces looking at the use of tape-recorded response in the classroom.

As I began reading about recorded response, one of the first names I came across was Chris M. Anson. He has edited and written numerous articles on different methods of response, and one that grabbed my attention was anthologized in Richard Straub's text, *A Sourcebook for Responding to Student Writing*. Anson's article, titled, "Talking About Text: The Use of Recorded Commentary in Response to Student Writing," discusses the use of tape-recorded feedback as viable method of responding to student writing. Anson writes about the positive effects that vocal inflections have on students' perception of revisionary comments. He also outlines how to integrate recorded response into the classroom. Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord also addresses recorded response in her text. She describes recorded response as "more personal, you can say more, and the student is more likely to understand you than if you wrote out your comments" (Walvoord 142).

Similarly, in his essay, "A Comprehensive Plan to Respond to Student Writing," Jeffrey Sommers explains that "listening to the instructor's response on a tape cassette requires students to take an active interpretative role by taking notes on their own drafts of what they understand the instructor to be saying" (266). This method seems to be extremely beneficial to the students, but how do we incorporate it into our own classrooms, and how much extra

time does it take to respond to student texts by recording our thoughts?

Sommers's essay explains the benefits of using recorded response.

Conferencing

The last style of response that I will be addressing is the art of conferencing. When I first began this project, I had already had many conferences with students. Many of them left me feeling as though nothing important had been accomplished. The students came into my office, and I tried to talk to them about their papers. After I would talk, the students would nod their heads, take their papers from me and leave. I could not understand how this was helpful to their writing, but I knew that all the other instructors were holding conferences and that I was supposed to do the same. What I didn't comprehend was that I was talking, the students were listening, then I would dismiss them with their texts to go away and rewrite. There was little to no dialogue between the students and myself. It was fifteen minutes of excruciating pain for these pupils. I must have come off as a long-winded drone.

When one begins to research and learn more about the student teacher conference as a mode of response, one name comes up above all others, Donald Murray. He has written extensively on the art of conferencing and has shown that this can be a most successful means of responding to a student or a group of students' writings. In his essay "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference," Donald Murray reflects on his experiences with

student conferences and how he uses them in his curriculum. Actually, Murray's writing curriculum seems to be the writing conference itself. He describes how he feels he has stopped teaching and that his students are learning more by holding writing conferences with him (68). He reflects, "I teach the student not the paper but this doesn't mean I'm a 'like wow' teacher. I am critical and I certainly can be directive but I listen before I speak" (68). Until I began writing and researching for this project, I was doing all the talking in my writing conferences. Now I have begun to experiment with the different styles of conferencing. Still, the hardest part of Murray's practice is the ability to keep from marking errors. Even though these modes originally seemed diverse, I became increasingly aware of common themes among all four.

The Common Bond

One theme that kept returning throughout each of these four modes of response is that response should begin or continue a dialogue with the students about their writing. As TA instructors we can benefit from the experience of others who have been practicing this art of dialogue over the last few decades. Richard Beach addresses responding to student writing in his article "Showing Students How to Assess: Demonstrative Techniques for Response in the Writing Conference." Beach writes:

One way of teaching students to assess their writing is simply to tell them what their problems are and how to remedy those problems. Of course, by mimicking our commands, students won't learn to assess on their own. They just learn to do as they are told. We opt, therefore, for more indirect methods of evaluation, responding as in a dialogue, as a reader. (127)

This idea of allowing students to assess their own writing is advantageous to all involved in the writing process. The student begins to understand how a reader sees their work. As new instructors, with little to no experience to guide us, how are we to understand that we are to help students work through the process of writing? Our goal is not to drag students through the process.

By utilizing the different modes discussed throughout this project, I hope that others will be able to discover a style of response that works best for them and their students. Be not afraid to try new ways of giving feedback and working through the writing process; be afraid of dictating the process to the students. As an instructor I have learned valuable lessons from the composition teachers who have tried these various modes, I have also learned a great deal about my own teaching style and how I can best use these methods to benefit my students.

discussion and the discipline's movement toward a more facilitative approach.

Sommers's essay provides a stimulating introduction.

As a way into the conversation, Chapter II

to show that while our comments or responses are meant with the greatest

A REVIEW OF THE MODES

intentions, they still might come across as arbitrary. She discusses in great

A History of the Theory

Response has been a topic of interest and discussion for decades.

Earlier modes of response tended to be more directive, meaning that instructors' tended to assume control of students' texts and inform the students of what to change and how to change the essay to make it fit the instructors' desired goals. In the last few decades, researchers and instructors have found that students excel in the writing classroom when the methods take a more facilitative approach. For example, instead of showing students where they have failed, and instructing them to "fix" the problem, facilitative theory suggests that the student retains the control over the text and the instructor works with the student to guide them through the rewriting process. While the discussion surrounding response predates her work, Nancy Sommers joined the conversation in 1982 with her essay "Responding to Student Writing." As way to understand why these four modes of response: written response on the text, written response not on the text, recorded response and conferencing are being explored throughout this project and how they fit into the larger

view these errors at this point in the process" (Sommers 109).

discussion and the discipline's movement toward a more facilitative approach, Sommers's essay provides a stimulating introduction.

As a way into the conversation surrounding response, Sommers helps to show that while our comments or responses are meant with the greatest intentions, they still might come across as arbitrary. She discusses in great depth the idea that when instructors write short fragmented ideas in the margins, the students may have a hard time deciphering meaning. And instead of coming to the instructor to ask for verification, the students will make revisions based on the editorial comments and hope for the best. As instructors, Sommers suggests that we must attempt to make the comments on the texts more meaningful, directed towards how we *read* the text, instead of directed at the correction of the piece. This places more responsibility and ownership of the piece squarely on the shoulders of the student author.

As instructors we must be mindful of the student's goals for the text. We must always be aware of the temptation to get caught up in the editorial problems that we see; Sommers calls it an "appropriation of the text" (109). This is pertinent to this project because as TAs we can easily find ourselves focusing on the smaller more manageable editorial issues because these are easily fixed. When we comment on both editorial issues and more global issues during the earlier writing stages we "give the student an impression of the importance of these errors that is all out of proportion to how they should view these errors at this point in the process" (Sommers 109).

Just as Nancy Sommers discussed the idea of control in her article, Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch continue this dialogue in their essay "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response." Brannon and Knoblauch were working on this project during the same period that Sommers was putting together her article. Both of these essays critique the way directive response can *take over* student texts; thereby making the students' writing become the end-product of what the instructor desires. This may push students to begin writing for the teacher versus writing for themselves. Brannon and Knoblauch explain the gap between facilitative and directive approaches to response as such:

The teacher's role, it is supposed, is to tell the writers how to do a better job than they could do alone, thereby in effect appropriating the writers' texts. In reading those texts and commenting on them, the teacher-evaluator "fixes" the writing in ways that appear to approximate the Platonic Discourse, the Ultimate Propriety, that any given student text may have suggested but not achieved. (118)

The directive approach asks us to *tell* the writer how to make it better; show them *exactly* what they can do to make the writing fit our ideal. While Brannon and Knoblauch clearly show that this hearkens all the way back to the Platonic notion that students cannot know what their ideal is, the authority (teacher) is the sole proprietor of this knowledge.

Unlike the directive approach, facilitative theory asks the instructors to guide the students to their ultimate goal. It suggests that the student *does* have the authority of the text, they *do* know what they want to say; we must try and find a way to work with them to see this achievement take place. Brannon

and Knoblauch admonish the idea of directive approach in this passage, "When we pay more attention to our Ideal Texts than to the writers' purposes and choices, we compromise both our ability to help student[s] say effectively what they truly want to say and our ability to recognize legitimately diverse ways of saying it" (119). While the focus should be on helping the student writer, we also need to be aware of some of the merits of directive theory.

After we spend the first drafts and revisions working on these global issues, we can put on our editorial hats during the later drafts and work on the smaller, more mechanical issues, directing the student to take these matters into account for readability and correctness. But even still, we must always keep in mind what the students' goals are and to teach or guide as we direct. We must resist telling students to "Do it this way," which reduces the writer's role to a trivial one of following directions" (Brannon and Knoblauch 124).

Richard Straub continues this conversation in his article "The Concept of Control in Teacher Response: Defining the Varieties of 'Directive' and 'Facilitative' Response." Throughout this article Straub refers to other instructors who agree with him that teachers of composition need to be guides or collaborators in the writing process with their students. When instructors provide written comments on the text they must be aware that "Criticisms and commands...assume greater control than **qualified evaluations** or **advice**, respectively" (135). An example Straub gives is "It seems to me you don't go far enough into this point" (135). This kind of qualified evaluation places the

student in a position to decide whether or not he or she needs to explain the position or point in greater detail in order to help the reader understand.

Straub also explains the benefits of using open questions versus closed questions when commenting on student texts. While closed questions are to the point and are very directive, open questions again allow for the students to put the pieces of the process together and make decisions about their essay on their own. The methods and theory behind facilitative response lends itself nicely to the four methods that will be covered in the remainder of this review.

Written Response on the Text

The easiest form of response for any TA to begin with is written response on the text. Student papers come in and all the instructors needs to begin making comments on them is a pen or pencil. Although there are others ways to comment on student essays, this is often the first because the technology is rudimentary. But because of the ease with which one can get caught up in the editorial problems an essay has, this is one of the most difficult forms of response to do well. Ronald Lunsford, in his article, "When Less Is More: Principles for Responding in the Disciplines," takes into consideration the ideas and goals that Brannon, Knoblauch, Sommers and Straub focus on as he explores how one may use written response on student texts.

Lunsford implies that we need to take into consideration how much we write in response. He also tackles the often asked question: what is the best

way to respond to student writing? He gives an overview of the study that he and Richard Straub conducted that culminated in the writing of *12 Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing*. Lunsford and Straub collected responses from twelve instructors on fifteen sample essays. They then looked at the comments and compiled a list of seven principles that responses should include:

1. Our readers write well-developed and text-specific comments.
2. They focus their comments on global, not local, concerns.
3. They frame more of their comments in nonauthoritative modes of commentary.
4. Their responses are carefully thought out and purposeful.
5. They are designed to help students approach writing as a process.
6. They are mindful of the rhetorical situation for the writing.
7. They are adapted to the student writer behind the text. (Lunsford 91)

While many of these enumerations are reiterations of what other instructors and researchers have covered, the list provides a clear outline for TAs to follow as they begin their instruction. Lunsford goes on to develop four categories that go hand-in-hand with these seven principles.

The first of these categories is "Development and Specificity" (92). Lunsford explains that our written comments should be fully developed thoughts and specific to the text we are reading. The response must also take into consideration the aims and goals of the student who is writing the text. As instructors we may have caught ourselves writing comments like vague, trite,

parallel, etc. But what do these mean to the student reading these comments? We need to account for the fact that the student is not privy to our thoughts, unless we share our thoughts completely.

"Purposeful Commenting" is the second category that Lunsford discusses in this text (92). Lunsford suggests that instead of marking every problem we come across in a student text, we make a mark next to two or three, and write a marginal comment that shows the student the problem and give an example of a possible remedy. This takes much less time and is more specific than just writing the word *vague* next to the text each time the student isn't exemplifying his or her position.

The third category is "Correctness" (93). Here Lunsford takes to task the theory that writing must always be correct. He implies that while we must encourage our students to take their writing seriously and strive to use grammatical and mechanical functions well, our first objective must be to ensure that our students know their subject matter and are making their purpose and goals clear to their readers.

Lastly, Lunsford explains the fourth category, "Extra-Textual Response" (94). These are comments that address the sixth and seventh principles listed above. They typically deal "with matters outside the narrow confines of the text" (94). These "matters" include: the writing process, student's personal experiences, rhetorical situation, classroom situation, and writing assignment. All of these matters can be addressed, yet we must address them keeping in mind the student writing the text. The underlying idea is that to help our

students achieve success in the writing classroom, we will need to eventually move beyond what is in the text and help them to see the larger scope surrounding their writing.

From Lunsford's essay we learn that our comment should present fully developed thoughts. As instructors we ought to concentrate on making sure that our students fully grasp what we intend in our marginal or end comment notes. Elizabeth Hodges takes Lunsford's lead and pushes even deeper in her essay, "Negotiating the Margins: Some Principles for Responding to Our Students' Writing, Some Strategies for Helping Students Read Our Comments." She lays out ways to help our students better understand the written comments we provide. She has researched how teachers respond to student texts and how students perceive these responses. In this research she asked the teachers to participate in "*response protocols*" (77). In essence, she asked the teachers to respond orally to the texts they were reading. The teachers recorded their thoughts and comments on audio tape and then turned these tapes over to her.

At the same time, she asked students to participate by using "*reading protocols*" (77). After the teacher had made written comments on the student texts, Hodges collected the texts and compared the written comments with the audio files. She then met with the students, returned their texts, and asked them to read the text aloud incorporating the teachers written commentary into the text. By doing this research, Hodges gained a clearer understanding of

how students read the commentary and how they perceived the messages their teachers were trying get across.

Hodges findings suggest that "[t]he margins of students' written work are the ideal site for teacher-student conversations about what and how students are thinking about their essay subjects, about how teachers respond to their thinking, and about the subjects themselves" (78). Commenting on the text is natural and many times we automatically have a writing utensil in hand as we begin to read a text, but are the margins be the ideal site for a conversation? In her essay, Hodges advises that when we write comments in the margins, we think about the comments as the beginning of a conversation with the student about the text.

Often, teacher's written comments are not holistic, that is they do not encompass whole ideas so that the students can easily understand the meaning. When Hodges compared the written responses to the audio files, she found teachers often were writing abbreviated messages that could easily be misunderstood. Not only that, but many times she sees teachers fail "to articulate what they observe in their students' work so that their students can understand and respond" (78). Hodges outlines a few strategies for making written response on the text successful.

Firstly, Hodges advocates that we model for the students how we read texts and explain what we mean in our written comments more fully. Instead of writing *Good*, we need to explain what is good about the text; let the student really feel that we are reading the text. Hodges states:

We need to write well in the margins and end comments, and by *well* I do not mean spelling and correctness. I mean clear, connected, useful, respectful comments that guide students to see their written representations of their thinking so that they can become both better thinkers and writers in all areas of the work and study. (81)

We must use full and complete thoughts, as though we were speaking to the student. This will help them to feel the instructor has taken time with the text and really tried to follow the student's plan.

The second suggestion Hodges makes is to write our central theme for our responses at the beginning of the student's text. She explains that many times there is an overall theme in our responses and students should see that theme up front. This will help them to understand the open-ended questions and comments that follow in the margins of the text. The theme doesn't need to necessarily come at the beginning of the text, but it should either start the end comment or the first marginal comment made. Hodges also reiterates that modeling, or giving the student an option for revision would help to make the entire comment more coherent.

In the end, Hodges is asking us to write complete ideas in the margins and summative notes on our students' texts. While this may take more time than abbreviated messages, both teachers and students will benefit from the students' clearer understanding of our response to their writing. Not only do our comments need to be clear and concise, but there must be a clear link between the marginal comments and the end comments. Students will see the comments as a whole if they understand that all the comments work together

to help them revise. She finishes by stating, "When comments don't make these connections, we give students no directions to go in" (Hodges 86).

Echoing both Lunsford and Hodges' work, Horvath states that we must always be cautious of writing "generic responses, against responding outside the assignment's context, against looking for things not asked for, against approaching texts with preconceptions regarding what and how they should be" (247). Meaning that, while an instructor's comments on and within the text itself are specific and allow students to see problem areas and notice where revision is needed, we should be prepared against the "rubber stamping" (to use Sommers's term) that we can easily fall prey to. It is difficult to remember that simply "stamping" *be specific* or *trite* on a student paper doesn't mean that the student will understand where or what these "stamps" are referring to. Horvath discusses at great length that she is more interested in focusing on the "formative evaluation" of student texts rather than the "summative" (244).

Ultimately, this means that we should be focusing our responses to help the student work through the writing process. We should be looking at a series of issues as we work at utilizing formative responding modes in and on the written text. Horvath uses Elaine O. Lees's seven steps for formative response on the text to help explain her idea:

- (1) *correct*, supplying factual information but risking an undue, perhaps stifling emphasis on "the importance of editorial tidiness"; (2) *emote*, implying shared humanity but shifting the focus of attention from text to teacher, inviting the view that teacher responses are the irrelevant "crackpot reactions" of one reader; (3) *describe* textural features—how the paper is behaving—thus keeping attention focused on the text while supplying students with a set of critical terms, yet perhaps failing to help

writers "produce a paper that may be described differently"; (4) *suggest* where changes might be made thereby addressing the writer's needs more directly than description alone permits, yet running the similar risk of providing comments too text-bound to prove generally useful; (5) *question*, forcing students to rethink material, thus encouraging further discover; (6) *remind*, relating the text to class discussions so that comments and classwork reinforce each other; and (7) *assign*, creating a new writing task, "using what has been said already to discover how to say something new," thereby setting goals and emphasizing both writing and writing improvement as developmental processes. (244)

Of these seven steps, Lees explains that the first three steps tend to be the responsibility of the instructor, while the last four steps move the responsibility back to the student. For a TA, these seven steps work as a rubric to follow as one begins to tackle first student essays. While Horvath explores these steps in detail, she also suggests agreement with Lees feeling that the seventh step is the most important. As instructors, we need to make sure our students understand that more writing is a natural part of the drafting process. This idea of more writing is crucial to the revision process, and to the students' process of writing. To leave out this step, we would fall back and students would begin to feel as though our suggestions are arbitrary or rubber stamped on each paper.

Lastly, Horvath intimates that instructors should act more as guides in the writing process, as this "affords the opportunity of offering advice, of suggesting options the student *might* have used and the effects on tone, effectiveness, content, and so forth" (249). Our comments written within the text of the students' should be seen by the students as helpful. We should guide students to push deeper into their own thoughts or feelings on the

subjects they are addressing, not simply show them that they have a comma splice in the second paragraph on page three.

While written response on the text has proven to be the most difficult form of response to outline, these authors have given strong examples of how best to utilize this natural form of response. This seems to be, typically, the first form of response TAs use in their own teaching, while at the same time it is the hardest form to master. Yet, the most interesting point is that while there is no clear guide for how to use written response on the text, the ideas and theories discussed in this section are echoed throughout the other three forms of response.

Written Response not on the Text

While there are many different ways to respond to student texts, written response not on the text provides a way to begin a dialogue with the students regarding their work. While some instructors may choose to still respond a bit on the text itself, this method allows for the instructor and student to exchange ideas either through email, letters, or memos that go back and forth with each draft. Researchers and instructors alike exclaim the benefits of implementing this form of response in writing classrooms. The students can become active participants in the revision process, and they begin to comment on their own work and understand how we read it.

Jeff Sommers begins the conversation by writing about ways to engage students' 'other selves' in the revising process. He reflects on the writings on

Knoblauch and Brannon and their presentation that more emphasis must be placed on students' rights to their own texts. Not only does he agree with Knoblauch and Brannon, but in his essay "The Writer's Memo: Collaboration, Response, and Development" he explores how to best go about doing this.

Sommers describes how he uses writing memos in his classroom, helping the students to think about the writing process and their writing as a reader would.

For example, when Sommers hands out the memo assignment, it is in conjunction with the writing assignment. The questions on the memo assignment not only ask the student how they feel about their writing and the assignment, but they are also asked how they came up with this topic, the examples they used, how the examples directly relate to supporting their topic, etc. This helps the students to reflect on how their readers perceive their writing. Sommers asserts:

Some questions deal with the students' composing choices; for instance, one might ask students to explain which other organizational patterns for their ideas they considered before make the final decisions about the structure of their writing. Other questions compel students to evaluate their own work by asking them to point out and explain their essay's greatest strength—students can be asked to select their single best sentence or paragraph or transition, which can have the further benefit of bolstering students' confidence, simply by helping them to locate parts of their writing worth praising, even while the draft is still quite rough. (175-6)

This reflects directly on the guide outlined in Lunsford's essay discussed earlier. The comments should benefit the students' writing process, and bolstering their self-confidence as writers will help them to take necessary risks needed to become better writers. Better yet, having the students point out

where their strengths are allows the students to tell us where they are succeeding and pat themselves on the back.

Sommers explains that the questions need to be varied throughout the course of the semester so that the memo doesn't become a chore instead of the dialogue it's designed to be. He points out that the memo is extremely effective in finding out why the students made changes in between drafts or why they chose to leave certain areas of the paper unchanged. It allows for the creation of a discussion to begin and continue while the revision process is ongoing. The memo can help an instructor to foster the role of guide or mentor in the classroom, versus the students overwhelming notion of instructor as judge.

Echoing Sommers work, Carl Gerriets and Jennifer Lowe co-wrote the article "Building Relationships through Written Dialogue" describing how Gerriets approaches written response not on the text and how his students, Jennifer Lowe in particular, feel about his approach. Originally, this article began as an on-going dialogue between Lowe and Gerriets. Early in the piece, Gerriets explains that his format for response takes places in letters that go back and forth between the students and himself. The students must submit cover letters discussing their thoughts and ideas about their drafts and what they're planning to do next. Gerriets outlines how this form of response works in his classroom in detail:

Every draft a student gives me for comment must be accompanied by a cover letter. These cover letters [...] are informal notes to the reader explaining what the writer thinks about the draft. My comments on the

draft then take the form of a letter of reply, which almost always begins by responding to the comments made in the student's cover letter. I keep a copy of all my responses in the student's file so that I can refer back to them in the future to watch for progress and build on what has gone before. (255)

Gerriets clarifies that he does not hand write each response letter to his students, he types them. This method saves him time and allows him to write more and save copies of his responses so that he can reflect on those as the students progress through their drafts.

When using this kind of response method, Gerriets claims the most amazing thing begins to occur, he begins to build a relationship with the students. Additionally, he offers that the cover letters give more insight into the students' writing process and therefore he feels that he can address issues in the writing without feeling as though the students may misunderstand his comments, like what sometimes happens in written response on the text. He states, "Because the cover letters and responses work together as part of an ongoing dialogue, I seldom worry that a student won't understand my comments or that the student and I won't see the paper in the same light" (258). Continuing this thought he understands that if he and a student are having differing ideas about what is going on in the text, then they need to get together and have a discussion regarding the assignment. Gerriets believes that this sort of response method allows for his students to be more reflective about their own writing, therefore becoming more observant of their audience and learning more at the same time.

grade While Sommers and Gerriets focus on creating a dialogue with their students, Toby Fulwiler introduces another context within this category of responding to student writing. In his essay "Writing Back and Forth," Fulwiler enters into a dialogue with his writing students by engaging in letter writing. His students begin by writing short letters, and Fulwiler then answers the letters. The interesting point made in this essay is that Fulwiler answers the letters and then allows other students to become a part of these letters. He does this by publishing his responses to the letters in the class, and by addressing concerns publicly within the letters. This allows for the students to see that he not only is Fulwiler *reading* their letters, but he is also *acknowledging* their concerns and trying to address them as best he can. He encourages workshopping discussion to come from the letters written back and forth. The other reason for this method is that students often have similar concerns, and if one has asked about a problem, chances are that others are thinking about the same thing, or that someone else has tried to resolve this issue on his or her own.

Fulwiler suggests that letter writing allows the whole class to become a community, and when the community is formed, they begin to rely on one another's opinion regarding their writing. This idea echoes Brannon and Knoblauch's theory of authority. By relying on one another, the students may realize their authority over the text, and comments made about their texts may be taken more seriously, not just seen as arbitrary comments handed down by *the grader*. He states that, "[w]hen you write letters, you expect a reply—not a

grade, but an honest-to-goodness reply. You start a dialogue with no necessary right answer, conclusion, or end in sight" (21). This allows for students to experiment with their ideas about their writing. Or, conversely, it allows students the freedom to explain why they've written something the way they have, letting the instructor really see into their reasoning. When we have this unique opportunity to get insight into the thoughts and ideas of our students, we understand better what they're writing about and can better negotiate or collaborate with them to either help the piece mature, or move into a different direction. Even though Fulwiler's letters are typed and mailed to each student, he also addresses the use of e-mail letters. In letter writing, conventions and grammar often fall to the wayside, but this happens even more naturally in e-mail writing.

One example of responding to students writing via email is presented in Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran's essay "Responding to Writing On-line." Hawisher and Moran readily admit that one of the flaws of on-line response is the pretense that it saves time. On-line response, like any other form, will take time if it is done properly. The most obvious benefit of e-mail response is that it tends to be informal; experts tend to view e-mail as being closer to spoken word than typing or writing. However, students tend to assume that since the response is on-line, instructors are available twenty-four hours a day. Although this is an easy way to respond, limits must be set.

Hawisher and Moran investigate the idea of on-line or e-mail response tends to be more intimate:

This potential intimacy is a two-edged sword. For teachers with established authority—tenured professors, for example—the chance to chat with students, and have the students chat back, may be a welcome deflection of the teacher's institutional authority. For a brand-new young teacher, and even more so for a teaching assistant or a part-time lecturer with little institutional authority, this opportunity for informal discourse may not be welcome at all. (117)

Yet, while some TAs may not be prepared as Hawisher and Moran explain, they may be better understanding of the e-mail medium. First year TAs are sometimes so used to e-mailing their professors and classmates that this form may come more naturally. At the same time, all the instructor's ground rules should be laid down prior to beginning this form of written response not on the text. The authors reinforce the idea that e-mail and on-line discourse is of a public nature, so that students and instructors must both have this in mind as they write back and forth about the text. If they would not say it to the student one-on-one, do not write it in an e-mail message. While Hawisher and Moran do not address how the students know what to address in their e-mails, one could easily take the format of Sommers's memo and apply it to the electronic medium.

Recorded Response

Even though there has not been a great deal written on recorded response, it seems to be one of the best methods in terms of helping instructors respond holistically, or globally, to student writing. Commenting aloud takes away the desire to mark the grammatical issues during the early drafts. It seemed a logical way to approach student texts. Chris Anson has

both worked with this method and written about using it in his own classroom. In his essay "Talking About Text: The Use of Recorded Commentary in Response to Student Writing," Anson describes how this method has proven to be successful in his writing classroom. He started using this approach when a former student had surgery and was encouraged to rest her eyes. Anson had to figure out a way to keep the student on track with the rest of the class, while still respecting her injury. He decided to record his response on cassette tape and then hand it back to the student for her to listen to.

This proved to be an illuminating decision for Anson. By talking about the text he was freed of the confines of written comment, and realized he could say so much more about the writing and in a more complete manner. He describes his excitement, "I was literally *talking* to each student, I felt a social dimension to my commentary that had been less present in my short, often corrective written remarks" (166). Anson felt as though he was making an even greater connection to the student, because the student was hearing the comments with all the inflections and tones of real conversation. He explains, "In just a few minutes, I could offer advice or give readerly response that would have taken me a great deal of time to write out by hand" (167). Yet even so, there are still decisions to be made as to how one would implement this mode of response in a classroom.

One of the decisions that the instructor needs to make is whether to give either written comment on the text, editorial marks, and the recorded response, or to solely respond orally. Another decision that needs to be made

is how much time will be devoted to each recording. Anson suggests making brief notes while quickly reading through the essay, then place the notes next to the recorder, and only record for a specified amount of time. Even though instructors feel as though they could talk forever about the student's essay, Anson warns that long-winded comments can become overwhelming for the student.

In this essay, Anson explains that by using recorded response we are better able to explain the mechanical problems because we can actually read them back to the student. While he acknowledges that using recorded response makes it more difficult to mark the grammatical and more local issues that a paper has, he does state that an instructor can mark the text as well as use the recordings to create a more full and all-encompassing response to the writing.

We should also look at a second article written by Chris Anson. He has been the foremost spokesperson for integrating recorded response into our classrooms. In his article "In Our Own Voices: Using Recorded Commentary to Respond to Writing," Anson explores how this form of response has helped him to feel less like the judge and jury, and more like a cheerleader or guide for his students and their writing. He also explains how this method is put to use in his classroom:

The method itself is quite simple; it involves substituting or supplementing the usual written commentary we give to students (in the margins or at the end of their papers) with oral commentary given to them on cassette tapes. When students turn in a draft of final paper, they provide an inexpensive blank cassette tape, appropriately labeled,

which the teacher can put into a small carrying care or cassette storage box available at most discount stores. On the day the papers are returned, the students also get back their cassette tape with the teacher's commentary, which they can then listen to when they look over their work. (106)

Anson does not go into great detail about how the students should utilize this method, nor does he go in depth about how we should go about implementing this mode into our classrooms. Yet he does make it quite clear that this method of response has allowed him to feel like there is a great difference occurring between the drafts of student papers, where there wasn't much improvement before.

Anson also expresses that unlike written comments that can be misunderstood, or taken completely out of context by the students as they read through the returned texts, recorded response allows the teacher to really carry on a conversation about, or have a live read of the students' texts. The students can actually hear the inflection in the voice of the reader, listening to the way this voice is trying to read the text, understand it and to actively become a part of it.

Another researcher in this area of recorded response is Jeff Sommers. Although a great deal of his work in the area of response focuses on the writer's memo, he also has used recorded response and found it to be a beneficial tool in the composition classroom. In his article, "A Comprehensive Plan to Respond to Student Writing," Sommers's theme is that "*Students need to be active participants in their own learning*" (265). This suggests that by using the recorded response the students need to listen to the comments and

then make their own decisions on the revising process and how they are going to approach it. His procedure for using the tapes is quite simple and very similar to Anson's. The students submit a blank tape with their draft or revision. The instructor can either then read through the piece and comment aloud as they read, or he/she can read through the entire piece making notes recording their comments after the read. Sommers' again points out that the comments should run approximately five minutes. He also advises giving the students "a handout on tips for using tape-recorded comments when they get back their [draft]" (264).

In his article, Sommers includes an example of a handout that he has given to his students as they begin to use recorded response. These tips include some of the following:

How to Use Tape-Recorded Comments

1. Find a quiet place to listen without interruptions. Try to listen to the comments as soon as possible after receiving your folder back.
2. Listen to the tape straight through without pausing.
3. Listen again to the tape with your draft and memo in front of you. [...]
4. Pause the tape to write down notes of things you want to remember or discuss with me, either in my office or in your weekly letters. Jot your notes right on the draft, at the appropriate points in the text if possible.
5. Listen carefully for positive comment—they will be there! I hope you will feel good about your draft and want to revise it. (I always find more things to suggest, however!)
6. Think about the suggestions and questions you've heard. Freewrite for five minutes about your reactions—ideas that occur to you, questions you might have for me, plans for revision. These notes will be helpful when you do revise or when you come to see me. (270)

These instructions help the students take control of their writing and revising. This active learning ensures that the students are not only doing the revising, but they're also thinking about the rhetoric behind their writing. Sommers's article really allows for the instructors interested in using this mode of response to see how it is implemented into his classroom and gives an kind of outline to follow or springboard off for their own classroom use.

Where Sommers asks students to prepare a memo that goes along with the draft and he records his response to the memo and the draft, Anson goes a step further and asks his students to hand in the draft with their revision ideas, concerns, problems and goals for the draft recorded on the cassette. Before Anson even has a opportunity to read the text created, he first listens to the comments the student has recorded, getting their voice in his head, really allowing the author to speak to him about the text. So not only is Anson responding to the text and the writing process, but he is also responding to the students' needs.

Anson and Sommers have taken the idea of responding to student writing and created a more active learning atmosphere around the revision process. While recorded response is different from written response, it is closer in nature to conferencing with students about their text. Instead of the written dialogue either on or off the text, recorded response has audio value. Students and instructors hear each other's thoughts and the sincerity and concern imbedded within the comments. This may allow the students to truly feel respected and an integral part of the process.

Conferencing

While we know that some believe that conferencing should be an integral part of the writing classroom, exactly how to use conferences still confounds many of us. Experienced teachers may know how they best can utilize the one-on-one time with their students, but for many, conferences can turn into a short lecture period where the student is inundated with all the problems they **need to fix**. Conferencing does not need to be a painful experience for either the teacher or the student. Actually, conferencing, when used well, can be one of the best ways to respond to student texts. Donald Murray, for example, claims it is "the most effective—and the most practical method of teaching composition" (147). In his book, *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Murray spends an entire chapter dedicated to the art of conferencing.

While Murray readily admits that his methods of conferencing are different from his colleagues', he knows that there cannot be one set way to manage student conferencing. Like the concerns brought up by other theorists working with response, Murray fears that deductive or directive response to student texts in conferences will push the student to "become dependent on the teacher for identifying problems and developing solutions" (148). He believes that students must learn for themselves, through conferencing, how to read their own texts critically and learn to come up with their own solutions in regard to problem areas in their writing. What does this mean? It means that the students want to be responsible for their own writing. Just as Brannon and Knoblauch suggest giving students the rights to their own texts, now we must

try and guide them into looking critically at their own texts, troubleshooting areas of confusion and allowing for the student to come up with their own solutions. When explaining this method of response Murray points to Donald Graves model for conferences:

The student COMMENTS on the draft.
 The teacher READS or reviews the draft.
 The teacher RESPONDS to the student's comments.
 The student RESPONDS to the teacher's response. (148)

It sounds so easy. Yet conferencing can be one of the most problematic forms of response.

While it is easy for instructors to take the lead in conferences, Murray suggests letting the students run the conference. This form of response is designed to ignite dialogue about the text, yet teachers can easily lead the conversation and end up with more direction than response. Murray suggests:

The best way to encourage student response in the conference is to allow it. Shut up. Be quiet. Wait. When the student makes a comment, then you can pick up on that. At first the student's response may be noncommittal. "I dunno about this. I mean, like what do you think?" You have to throw it back into the student's court, urging the student to make some evaluation. (153)

This can prove to be very difficult. Students are not used to taking control of their learning. In fact, Murray suggests they will be suspicious of having control (153). In his book, Murray includes outlines for how to read the students' drafts in conferences, phrases to use and phrases to avoid when discussing the texts, different kinds of conferencing situations, and questions the students can be prompted with before they enter the conference.

One author, and instructor, that complements Donald Murray's idea of the writing conference is Thomas Newkirk. He agrees with Murray's theory, yet he also believes that setting an agenda for writing conferences is important. Newkirk's agenda is detailed in his article "The First Five Minutes: Setting the Agenda in a Writing Conference." Newkirk does not really outline an agenda per se, but he does discuss what the implications are if instructors come to conference with a hidden agenda. He suggests that there should be one goal for conferences: give the student the opportunity to express his or her ideas and goals for their text orally. Murray means that we need to allow for the students to expand upon their ideas and revise out loud in the conference. Often, as seen in Newkirk's transcripts, a student's response is cut off mid-sentence, just as they are about to voice their ideas for changes. Or, alternatively, the instructor agrees with the student's ideas, then proceeds to tell the student how they can fix the problem.

While his article doesn't detail how the agenda should look, or give examples of what should be included in the conference agenda, Newkirk does speak to the explicit agenda that must be set. This explicit agenda has two extremely strong points that must be acknowledged by all instructors:

These agendas should be limited to one or two major concerns. Conferences seem to break down when a discussion about a "high-level" concern like purpose veers abruptly to a discussion of sentence structure.

[And]

Potentially, student contributions to the agenda-setting process often are missed if the teacher has *fixed* on a problem early. It is particularly

easy for the teacher to fix on the agenda if he or she takes the papers home and marks them up before the conference. Furthermore, a marked-up paper indicates to the student that the agenda has *already* been set. (328)

The students' ideas must be included into the process of conferencing. Yet we try to save time by taking the text home and making small comments so that we have a basis to begin dialogue with the student. Newkirk is essentially asking, when will we have a better opportunity to read a text live? When the student comes into the conference, read the text together. By doing this we give the student an opportunity to read their own writing and comment on their ideas as they go. While Newkirk does not completely agree with Knoblauch and Brannon's definition of student's rights to their text, he does realize that students have the ownership more completely if they read their own writing. Then it cannot be appropriated, because not only have they written the text, but they are now the reader also.

Not unlike Newkirk, Dene Thomas and Gordon Thomas have written an article focusing on the use of conferences. In their article "The Use of Rogerian Reflection in Small-Group Writing Conferences," they do not focus on the agenda of the conference, but they do focus on using Carl Roger's idea of using both group conferencing and one-on-one conferences. This allows the student to feel more comfortable, among peers, yet see that his or her peers have valuable input about their writing. This will help them to feel more confident and to look critically at their own writing. Newkirk explains this

Rogers' idea in his text, while at the same time Thomas and Thomas credit Newkirk for integrating this line of thinking and conferencing into his agenda.

In their article, Thomas and Thomas suggest that "small-group conferences help some students overcome habits and attitudes they developed as solitary writers" (116). They can learn from those around them, picking up ideas and reaffirming themselves and their own process as writers, or conversely unlearning their poor writing habits and taking on the traits of stronger writers present in the group. The authors argue "Perhaps the most important advantage of small-group writing conferences is that they use conversation to teach anticipation of an audience's needs" (117). This frees the instructors from being the sole audience, as would appear in a one-on-one conference. If the students are more aware of the audience they are addressing, it would then follow that as instructors move from small groups to one-on-one the students will be more confident about who they are addressing and why they've written in a particular way.

Another benefit of the small-group conference is that the students are practicing what they already know. When students become withdrawn or quiet in a one-on-one conference it is as Brannon and Knoblauch suggested, because the instructor is viewed as the authority. In a small-group conference, on the other hand, the students are better positioned to feel as though they are on a more equal footing, in a physical sense, and are more comfortable stating their ideas and concerns. Students also will feel freer to explain themselves and their writing to a small group, rather than to an instructor. At the same

time they will be more open to receive information from their group of peers. All this, in turn, works together to reinforce the rhetorical situation (118). Yet, even Thomas and Thomas acknowledge that small-group conferences cannot cover everything. They must be coupled with one-on-one meetings with the instructor. But by opening the conferences with small group meetings, the students can build their confidence and reinforce their abilities as writers and their authority over their own texts.

Expounding on the theories of the preceding authors, Laurel Johnson Black has written a text dedicated to the writing conference. Her text, *Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference*, goes into great detail on the theory behind writing conferences and the practicality of what goes on in the conference. She suggests that Donald Murray is a student of the second generation conference (15). The discussion is "non-directive," the conference is "student-centered" and "active learning" is the primary goal (15). Black describes first generation conferencing as being directive: student sits quietly, listens to instructor's comments, nods occasionally; when instructor finishes speaking, student thanks the instructor, and leaves, presumably to go and make said changes. What we need to focus more on is putting the onus of the conference on the student, thus helping to put the responsibility of the writing on the shoulders of the student. This also helps us to remove that desire to appropriate the student texts, as we are always tempted to do.

In her text, Black includes transcriptions of actual conferences. These transcriptions help the readers understand the different ways conferencing can

work. Many times the conference needs to be turned over to the student, much like Murray suggested. She suggests letting the student do the talking, and the instructor listens, looking for insights and ways in to help guide the student or boost the students' own ideas. She also spends time discussing how different situations will affect the conference. Black addresses the issues of gender, control, and language. Each of these issues can lead to adjustments in the writing conference. She also takes a great deal of time discussing possibilities for making all writing conferences productive and enlightening for both the teacher and the student.

The Common Goal

Even with all the research being done on these four modes of response, it is clear that all these authors have one goal in common: to better the writing of their students and to help the students feel successful. They also commonly try and refrain from responding in ways that are directive; opting to facilitate response and help the students become more critical readers of their own texts. While every year, more and more will be written about these theories of responding to student writing, one thing is implicitly clear, for all these instructors, the students, and their writing, come first. All the texts echo the same thought: an instructor should be the guide or coach, not the judge and jury.

Chapter III

The Plan

Over the course of two METHODOLOGY English 191, I was able to

The Purpose

For the purpose of this qualitative research project, I decided to implement the various modes of response: written response on the text, written response not on the text, recorded response and conferencing into my own classrooms. The participants in this study were two classes of English 191, Introduction to Rhetorical and Analytical Writing, students, one class of first-year TAs, and myself on the campus of St. Cloud State University (SCSU) located in St. Cloud, Minnesota approximately 50 miles northwest of the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. The English department at SCSU caps English 191 at twenty-five students, and each Teaching Assistant teaches one course per semester. Teaching only one class offered me the time and luxury to work with my own students as I progressed through the study. Because all students at SCSU are required to take (only a few test out) English 191, there can be great diversity in each class. The diversity ranges from ethnic and economic backgrounds to learning styles and abilities. I wanted to work within my own classes because there is a comfort level built in the classroom, and I knew that

my own students would be more honest and realistic regarding their feelings about these methods of response.

The Plan

Over the course of two semesters in English 191, I was able to implement all of the modes (written response on the text, written response not on the text, recorded response and conferencing) presented in the literature review. During each semester I also integrated at least one of the alternative forms into the class. For example, after using each of the four modes generally during the first semester, I tried working in small group conferences during the second semester. The whole experiment with the modes of response took two semesters. However, during the second semester I tried some of the alternative modes, such as email response, small group conferences, letter writing and became more comfortable with them and felt they worked well for the students. For each method, students had the option to continue using the particular method until that text was graded.

During the last semester I put together a questionnaire that I handed out to first-year teaching assistants at St. Cloud State University regarding their thoughts on their own teaching styles and putting these methods into practice.

First Semester: Written Response on the Text

During the first semester, while using written response on the text, I worked primarily with Lunsford's theory and Hodges's theory regarding this

mode. Instead of writing "good" in areas where I thought the students were doing well, I pointed out exactly what they were doing well. I framed my thoughts as open-ended questions, allowing for the students to be the owners of their texts, and to push them to see their texts as other readers would see them. I also attempted to refrain from marking editorial problems during the early drafts and purposefully focused on the more global issues of content, organization and coherency. I also made sure that my comments were complete thoughts written out, not just fragmented ideas for the students to decipher. This method seemed to take a longer period of time to accomplish, yet I felt hopeful that the students were going to better understand my comments and concerns.

Written Response not on the Text

The second mode that I worked with during the first semester was written response not on the text. I based my response on Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran's essay discussed in the previous chapter. Working loosely within their parameters, I asked my students to email their drafts to me as attached documents. I read the drafts, taking careful notes on areas in their texts where I became confused, or specific areas where the students were making great progress. After reading each text through and taking notes, I emailed my comments to students. I took great care to make sure I was text specific when offering suggestions for clarification, further revision or congratulation on success. I did print out a few of the texts, and mark

comments on the texts as well as email my comments back to the students.

This last step I did only if the students were really struggling, meaning that I had a hard time following their main points. If the grammatical errors were so overwhelming that I had a hard time reading and understanding the main points of the text, I utilized this last step. For these students I emailed my comments and later handed back the printed version.

Recorded Response

The third method I worked with during the first semester was recorded response. Following Chris Anson's model closely, I had my students bring a cassette tape to class and hand it in with their drafts. I determined that I would only give myself five recording minutes for each paper. Any more time than that may become overwhelming to the students. Guided by Anson's description, I read through each essay making short notations on scratch paper as I read. In some areas I would make a small marking on the text, so that I could refer directly to this marking as I commented aloud. I made sure that I always started the recording with an overall reaction to the text, followed with specific comments. At times I would record the student text so that he/or she could hear what their writing sounded like, especially in areas where the content of the text was confusing. For most of the students, the recorded comments tended to be 3.5 to 4 minutes long. I tried not to tell the students what they needed to fix and where, but followed Anson's direction to talk about

the text. It proved to be extremely difficult to comment on the editorial issues when I could not write these comments on the paper.

One-on-One Conferencing

The last mode of response I worked with during the first semester was the one-on-one conference. Keeping in mind that I wanted to follow Donald Murray's example and let the students be in control of the conference, I had each student write up an agenda of items to cover during the meeting. The students signed up for twenty minute time slots. I greeted the students upon their arrival, but from then on, they were in charge. Instead of reading through their text prior to the meeting, I waited for the conference and read through the text with the student. I listened and commented as the student read. After the initial read-through, the students worked through their agendas, making sure we covered all the concerns and questions they had regarding their text. If they sat silently, I waited for them to speak again. By reading through the text with the student, the idea of becoming *fixed* on a problem prior to the conference (commented on by Newkirk), is alleviated. Before the student left the conference, we made sure that they had set goals to work on for the next draft. We also discussed whether they felt they were really a part of the process, and if they were really working through the revisions.

Second Semester: Written Response not on the Text

During the second semester I worked with written response not on the text, small group conferences, and one-on-one conferences. Even though I was using some of the same modes, I used alternative methods within each modes. For example, when I experimented with written response not on the text, instead of using email as a medium, I chose to follow Toby Fulwiler's example and write letters back and forth between each student. As far as conferencing, I used small group conferences twice throughout the semester, and I also encouraged students to come in and meet with me one-on-one in between the group conferences.

While using written response not on the text, I referred to Toby Fulwiler's essay discussed in the previous chapter. I followed his method loosely. Before I received the texts, I gave the students an assignment; they had to write a letter to me. The letter could be either typed or legibly handwritten. While giving the assignment we discussed, as a class, areas of concern they had about their texts, specific and general questions they wanted me to address, and areas where they felt they were succeeding. After we had this discussion, I informed the class that I would be responding to their letters in the form of a letter. If they did not give me guidance, then I would have nothing to address, so they needed to be specific and really put thought into their letters. Essays that didn't have cover letters were returned to students unread and unmarked. I asked the students if they wanted me to make any

marks on the texts, and they suggested making small marks in the margins of the essay, pointing out areas where I had questions or concerns so that the students could easily find these areas when I referred to them in the letter. We continued to exchange letters throughout all the projects, and students were encouraged to keep the letters so that both they and I could refer back to previous comment and concerns when we had questions. The letters became longer and more detailed as the semester went on, and I found myself writing more in response to the letters. Even though I was writing more, it did not seem to take as much time as written response on the text.

Small Group and One-on-One Conferences

Twice during the semester, once at midterm and once near the end of the semester, I asked the students to sign up for group conferences. The groups consisted of their peer response groups that they had been working in since the beginning of the semester. There were four or five students to a group. They were asked to write cover letters just as they had already been doing, but this time they needed to address the letters to the whole group not just me. So, if they knew someone in the group was really good at looking at organization, they could feel free to ask that person to please be closely looking at how the text was organized. The students did not have to single anyone out, but they had that option. When the students arrived at their conference they needed to have copies of their drafts for the whole group. Students read their texts aloud, and then, as a group, we discussed questions

and ideas we had about each text. We addressed the concerns that were outlined in the cover letter. I acted more as a mediator than a respondent, asking questions of other group members and bringing the discussion back to the task at hand if it began to wander. If there were items that the student wanted me to address specifically, then I would answer them.

At the end of the small group conferences, students were encouraged to sign up for one-on-one conferences if they felt it would benefit them, or to discuss concerns they had outside of the group discussion. Students were asked to take a week, revise using ideas from the small group conference, and then come in and meet with me. Before they came in, they were asked to bring with them the revised text, an earlier copy of the text, the comments the small group made, as well as a new cover letter. The student and I would then go over the text, and talk about the changes made and how the student felt about the small group. One question I always asked the students was: has the small group conference helped your paper? How?

TA Questionnaire

Outside of utilizing the various modes of response in class, I also put together a questionnaire that I wanted to hand out to first year TAs as they wrapped up their first semester of teaching. I worked closely with Dr. Cindy Moore, Director of Composition at St. Cloud State, when I developed the questions. The purpose of this questionnaire was to find out how first year TAs felt about different methods of response, which modes they utilized and

how they worked with them in their own classes. I wanted to see if the TAs understood the theory behind these various modes. I also was wondering if the teaching assistants knew the difference between facilitative approach and directive approach, and if so, which did they use.

After working with Dr. Moore to revise the questions, I put together an informed consent handout for the teaching assistants to read before filling out the questionnaire. (A copy of the questionnaire is available to view in Appendix A, and a copy of the informed consent is available in Appendix B.) Dr. Moore and I decided that it would be best if I came to one of the teaching assistants' mentoring classes, talked about my project, handed out the questionnaire and held an informal discussion on responding to student writing. During that particular semester, ten teaching assistants were enrolled in the mentoring class. All were present and filled out the questionnaire.

The questions were designed knowing that the respondents would be first-year TAs. The first few questions focused on what methods these TAs were using and how often they were using them. I wanted to find out what the TAs were comfortable using at this point in their teaching career. I also wanted to know how the methods worked for them in their classrooms, and how they implemented them, so I asked questions such as: which of these methods are you most comfortable using and why?

After finding out what methods the TAs were comfortable using, I focused on each of the methods covered in the project and asked the TAs how they implemented them, how they tailored them for their own classroom. If the

teaching assistant didn't use that method, they simply answered "not applicable", or "don't use it." I wanted to see if their responses were coming from a more directive or a more facilitative approach. Even though any of the methods covered could be utilized with either approach, it was interesting to see what theory they were working from.

The last questions asked the TAs to both give examples of typical comments they would write on student papers and explain their rationale for this type of response. I wanted to see if there were commonalities between the TAs responses, stemming from the theory they had been working with during their orientation and method classes. I ended the questionnaire asking for the TAs to provide examples of both a comment they would not use and one they would use on a student paper and explain their rationale. This again goes back to the finding what approach they were working from, and they understood the impact of their comments.

Written Response on the Text

The first method I worked with during the first semester was written response on the text. This was a natural and easy method. As an instructor, the method is extremely flexible. It allows the teacher to work on the student texts in any setting. Yet, it is easy to get caught up in making corrections versus responding to the written work as a whole. Before beginning to

Chapter IV

ANALYZING THE MODES

After I utilized written response on the text, written response not on the text, recorded response and conferencing in my English 191 class, I analyzed what I thought of these response modes, the theorists that wrote about them, and what my students thought of each mode. After I handed back each assignment, I gave the students a day to either listen, read over, or (in the case of conferences) digest the information and comments given regarding their texts. Then we returned to class and held an informal discussion about how they reacted to each mode, their likes, dislikes and reasons. In most cases the discussions were brief, but students had definite opinions about some of the modes.

Written Response on the Text

The first method I worked with during the first semester was written response on the text. This was a natural and easy method. As an instructor, the method is extremely flexible. It allows the teacher to work on the student texts in any setting. Yet, it is easy to get caught up in making corrections versus responding to the written work as a whole. Before beginning to

respond I reread Ronald Lunsford's article "When Less Is More: Principles for Responding in the Disciplines." I knew that I wanted to keep my comments text specific, but I also wanted to keep them short and not overwhelm the students by commenting on everything I noticed. Lunsford's text instructed users to focus the comments on global issues, so I knew I needed to refrain from picking out every comma splice and misspelled word in the first draft. After refreshing my memory, I began working through the student texts. I found that I needed to read through the entire text first, then go back and mark the global issues. Keeping in mind that I was trying to use a more facilitative approach, I offered suggestions for solving problems, sometimes multiple suggestions on the first draft, but I did not tell the students how to fix the problem.

It was extremely difficult to avoid marking the grammatical and mechanical errors in these texts. I kept reminding myself that if the students focused on mechanics only, no *real* change in the content would take place. I found it took a great deal of time to get through the twenty-five texts, and I found myself wanting to write a great deal more on each text, versus focusing on marginal comments. I was nervous that the students would not think I was being clear enough in my comments and suggestions, so I made sure to ask the students to let me know if something was confusing to them. When the first drafts were through, I had spent five hours writing comments in the margins, and I still did not feel completely comfortable that I was getting my ideas and concerns on the paper in a clear manner. So I went back through

each text, quickly scanned and then wrote a summative note at the end of each one, recapping the ideas I had written in the margins and describing how I felt the student had addressed the assignment as it was given. After doing this, I felt much better about utilizing this form of response. All-in-all, it had taken me seven hours to go through twenty-five texts. It seemed like a very long time, but it was still shorter than my very first semester of teaching.

After giving the students a day or two to read and think about the comments and suggestions made on their texts, we met in class and had an informal discussion regarding this mode of response. The students liked this method of response, but many still wanted me to tell them exactly what was *wrong* with the essay and tell them how to fix the problems. We talked about the objectives for the assignment, and some students started asking about possible solutions to specific problems they had in their papers. Most students seemed comfortable with this method of response and liked that I wrote both in the margins and at the end of each text.

Even now as I work through student texts, I often turn to Lunsford's seven principles and remind myself to keep my focus on the larger assignment and the more global issues. These principles have helped me to go back over a text that I had previously edited with a heavy hand, erase my comments and work back through it with my eye on the writing process and on the student's development as a writer, not the goal I assume the student has.

Written Response not on the Text (Email)

The second method I had worked with during the first semester was written response not on the text. During this semester I had chosen to work with this mode in the form of email response. I was excited to work with this method because it seemed as though it would cut down on response time because I can type much faster than I can handwrite. I was also excited because this would allow me to give my students instant feedback after reading through their texts. I reread "Responding to Writing On-line," the essay by Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran and felt ready to work with this mode. I was reminded immediately of my large misconception that I would be saving a large amount of time. I also remembered that I needed to draft the email responses in a authoritative tone because of the public nature of the course. What I didn't anticipate after rereading Hawisher and Moran's essay, was that the students expected instant response from me. This was probably a lack of clarity with my directions, and less with the mode of response in general. My students seemed to think that within an hour of emailing their text to me, I had it read and was responding to it. After a general class email, the problem was rectified, and I began working in earnest on the texts.

For the most part, I read the texts online, and made short notes as to where I had concerns with the text, or where I wanted to direct the student's attention. I then emailed the student my comments and thoughts regarding the essay. I tried not to print out the text, because then I would begin marking the

text itself, and I wanted to have the response strictly off the text. Yet, for some, there were major problems, and I felt they would benefit more if I printed the paper, marked the text as well as emailing my comments. My reasoning for this was to let the students begin revising on the global issues first, and possibly take care of the other issues addressed on the printed version before even getting the printed version back. I found that this method seemed cold and impersonal. I had a hard time feeling as though the students were connecting with my comments, or that I was really connecting with their writing. This method also took a great deal longer than written response on the text. I think it is because I took notes on the text, referred back to the text and the notes, then wrote a letter that was extremely detailed and specific so the students could pinpoint exactly what I was referring to in their text. Even I became confused a few times as I worked through this method.

I did not enjoy this mode and my students did not seem to like it either. Many expressed the desire to see what I was referring to in their essays. They wanted me to at least mark the area I was commenting on, versus reading a comment, then searching for that particular area in their paper. They felt they spent more time trying to put together the letter and their essay than they had with the previous form of response. My students and I were not happy working with this method. They had the option to keep working with this method throughout the revision process for this assignment; few did. Most of the class requested moving back to written response on the text.

While I understand that this method works well for some instructors, I had to agree with Hawisher and Moran that this mode is a "two-edged sword" (117). I felt as though I had cut a part of myself out of the process, that I was not completely engaged in this mode of response. I have since tried in other classes to put this method to use, and I found that if the students wrote a cover letter and included that as an attachment, then I could respond to the cover letter and they're writing. While I still do not feel at ease using this method, I am still trying to work with it in my classroom.

Recorded Response

The third method utilized during this semester was recorded response. I enjoyed working with this method because I found it much easier to talk about the text rather than writing on the text. I remembered that after I had read Chris Anson's article, "Talking About Text: The Use of Recorded Commentary in Response to Student Writing," I knew that this was a method I was going to employ. I was excited because I knew that I could more quickly get my thoughts across through verbal communication, rather than taking hours to write my comments on the text. I referred back to Anson's piece before I began, knowing that I needed to decide how exactly I was going to integrate this method. His article reminded me to make my comments more global, to really address the writing as a whole instead of getting stuck on the grammatical and mechanical issues. I found that I could read back sections to the student to point out areas of success or confusion, and was able to give commentary of the text at large. I do think, however, that while Anson has

more options for problem solving than I could using the other two methods. It seemed to take much less time than the other methods, and I concentrated on only recording five minutes per paper. I had taken notes while reading through each text, which helped me refer back to specific areas in each essay. It also allowed me to expand on concerns or issues.

Needless to say, the students disagreed with me entirely. They did not like having to listen to me commenting on their papers without having something concrete to look at or refer to. They claimed that I packed far too much information into the five minute recording, and they were all overwhelmed by this method. They also balked at having to *find* a tape player. I understood and realized my tragic mistake. Even though I felt my thoughts were organized and clear, I was speaking entirely too fast. Not a single student wanted to continue with this method of response. I feel this was my fault and not the method's failing. If I were to attempt using this method again, I would record onto CDs. I would also have the student record their concerns prior to handing in the papers, so that I would have direction from them as to what they want me to focus on. That would help me not to try and jam all comments into what one student called a five minute rant.

I do believe that this mode may work well for some, but what I should have realized early on is that I am a talkative person by nature. I probably wanted to follow Anson's guideline more stringently, making thorough notes about the text before I began taping, rather than recording a running commentary of the text at large. I do think, however, that while Anson has

excellent ideas and theories regarding this mode of response, students can often feel as though this is an arbitrary voice or a directive approach—telling them what to “fix” and “how to fix it. Instead of really feeling like a conversation, the way I believe Anson meant it to be, this mode turned more into taped directions.

Conferencing (One-on-One)

The last method I worked with during the semester was one-on-one conferencing. I really enjoyed this method and the students did too. Reading through the text together made the whole process of revision come alive for both the students and me. I would either make a small notation on my copy, or if something was really confusing, I would stop the student and ask them what they were *trying* to say. They would start explaining and realize that they had left out important pieces of information or that a particular passage was only tangentially related to their overall purpose. Realizing this, they would make notes and sketch a few words down (I would too) to help them remember their ideas when they left the conference. The amazing thing was that they did it on their own. When I would prompt them, they could acknowledge the problem, and find their own solutions verbally, then make notes to help them when they later reworked the paper. Part of me thinks that the reason the conferences went so well was because it was nearing the end of the semester and the students were feeling more confident in their abilities. At the same time, students who typically changed very little from draft to draft did exponentially

better on this assignment than on the others because they were making organizational changes, adding content, or focusing in on their main ideas, versus just changing a few words around to make it *sound* better. By talking *about* the text, the students seemed to be able to see the opportunity to change, clarify or renew their ideas.

I went back to Donald Murray's idea to have the students set the agenda for the meetings. He intimated that this helped them to take control and lead these conferences, and I found it did! I had a very difficult time staying quiet when there was a lull in the conversation, as he suggested, but overall, the students took charge and made these conferences a success. I wondered if it would make a difference in the quality of these meeting if they were held earlier in the course, so I planned to utilize them twice during the next semester. I was also extremely interested in small group conferences, and wanted to try integrating small group and individual conferences.

Conferencing (Small Group)

Twice during the next semester I worked with small group conferences. Before these conferences began, I reread Thomas and Thomas's article, "The Use of Rogerian Reflection in Small-Group Writing Conferences." I wanted to make sure that my students not only felt more comfortable but that they understood the importance of the peer response in helping them to read their own writing more critically. I carried this concept into the small group conferences. I found that the students tended to be much more comfortable

meeting with me early on in the semester, especially since their other group members were there as well. We discussed, before the conferences, that each student needed to bring extra drafts so all the group members could read along. The students also needed to write a cover letter to the group asking for specific advice or to give the group members direction. A cover letter served to inform the group members know where the students felt he or she "was" in the writing process, what obstacles he or she has come across, what seems to be working in this piece, what still does not feel right, what details are missing. At the second small group conference these cover letters were more specific and asked the readers to be very involved, give suggestions and become a part of the process.

After each small group conference, students had the option to sign up for one-on-one conferences to follow up on what went on at the small group meetings. This worked extremely well. I found that during the first semester students came into their one-on-one conferences a bit hesitant and fearful, whereas students who first participated in small group conferences were much more relaxed when they came into their one-on-one conferences. It may have been because the one-on-ones were not mandatory during this second semester. Yet the students stated that once I had been a part of the group process, they saw me more as a group member than as an instructor. They stopped seeing me as a critic and/or judge, but as someone there to help them get on paper what they really wanted to say. They asked me questions, about not only the content, but about the other rhetorical aspects. I was asked

questions about the tone of pieces. For instance, did I think that the audience was going to be turned off because of the sarcastic nature of the writing, or was that okay? The students were starting to see themselves as speakers of the text, trying to see that their words and phrases were going to either draw others in to read more, or their tone alone my turn readers away. The groups seemed to work differently after meeting together with me; they seemed to be more serious about the process, still having fun and getting off course sometimes, but working to help make each others papers successes.

I continue to use both these methods in my community college courses. I have found that after the small group conferences, students are more willing to seek me out in my office one-on-one and go over their writing in a more informal setting. So these small group conferences not only benefit the one-on-one conferences at the end of the semester, but they seem to give the students more license to seek me out to go over their writing on a regular basis. I also truly believe that coming with an agenda has helped the students to be more aware of the areas in their writing that they need to work on.

Murray, Thomas, and Thomas's mode of preference seems to be the most comfortable mode for both my students and me.

Written Response not on the

Text (Letter Writing)

During this second semester I also followed Toby Fulwiler's example of writing letters back and forth, a form of written response either in the margins, on the end, or completely removed from the text. However, I did combine

some marking on the text to help show students where I was confused or where I was praising their writing. I started with the students writing me a cover letter for their texts. This letter was meant to introduce me to the text, and bring up areas of concern that the student wanted me to be aware of. These letters started off short and very general, but as the semester went on, they became longer and more detailed. Before reading the text, I would read the letters and mark the things students wanted me to focus on. Then I would go through the draft, make some marks on the text for reference, and respond in the form of a letter attached to the back of the draft. The students seemed surprised at first, because I responded directly to what they asked me in their letters. But, they soon came to realize, that I was not going to mark everything. After each draft I would add something else to work on for the next draft, and then that would be addressed in their next cover letter. Halfway through the semester, most of my students were addressing where they wanted to go next with the draft, what problem they wanted to tackle.

The students started to become aware of their weaknesses and strengths as writers. They realized early on that it did not do any good for them to ask me to look at grammar and spelling, because large portions of their text might disappear before the next draft, or they may catch it themselves as they reorganize or add more information and background. I realized I had found the methods that worked best for me and my teaching style, and it had not been an awful experience. It had taken time, but I felt more confident that I was responding in a more facilitative style. I also felt as

though I had a firm grasp of the theory behind the methods I was using. I was giving students the authority over their own texts, just as Knoblauch and Brannon had suggested. The students were owning their texts, I was merely a guide to help them through the process. Because of the reading and experimenting I had done over those two semesters I understood that I could combine methods and make the most of differing styles of response. I also realized responding isn't something that an instructor can perfect over the course of a semester; it's a process of growth and learning.

This last mode, letter writing, has become my favorite to work with. I now begin the semester with the students writing me a letter letting me know how they feel about their writing, other writing classes they have taken, how often they communicate with others in the written form, etc. I go back to this letter throughout the semester to give them an idea of where I am seeing improvement in the writing and their confidence as communicators. I use Fulwiler's mode of cover letters no matter what other response mode I am also using. Whether students are sending me texts via email, or we will be meeting in small group conferences, student must come with a cover letter discussing their assignment, where they are at in the writing process and where they want to go with the text.

After completing those two semesters, I wanted to see where newer TAs saw themselves and their responding styles, so I worked with Dr. Cindy Moore, Composition Director, to develop a questionnaire for her mentoring class at St. Cloud State University (see Appendix A). One of the questions

asked the TAs which response methods they used and how often they used them. Of the ten teaching assistants that responded to the questionnaire, nine claimed to use written response on the text frequently, nine also used written response not on the text (though not as often as written response on the text). All of the TAs used conferencing methods, some more than other, and not a single assistant integrated recorded response into the classroom. This last fact did not surprise me because I had never considered recorded response until after I had come across it in my research for this project.

When asked the question, "which method are you most comfortable using and why?" the respondents all stated that they felt most comfortable with written response on the text, primarily because it was what they were most familiar with. I also asked what kind of comments TAs wrote on the student's text. When they responded to this question one TA stated, "I tend to ask a lot of questions. I also make suggestions as far as how something can be more detailed or credible. I try to write a lot of positive responses also." Another TA responded, "I ask a lot of leading questions as well as making reinforcing comments. I try to leave the mechanical/grammatical corrections until the final draft." This last statement reinforces what TAs learn in the orientation program at St. Cloud State University.

Out of all the responses to these questions, I found most interesting the answers to the question, "Do you write solely on the text, or do you include a summative end comment? How have your students responded? How much do you typically write?" One TA responded, "I never write on the text without a

summative end comment. My students pay a lot of attention to what I say unless it's a final piece of work. Then they really only care about the grade. I'm so glad I do portfolios!" This TA also mentioned that writing both marginal and end comments can sometimes run from 150 to 300 words, but that it is worth it when the student writing becomes better and better. Another TA responded similarly, "I use a summative comment at the end to give students a feel for what stage their paper is at (beginning, middle, end) and also to reinforce comments I have made throughout the text." Almost all of the responses on the questionnaires showed that the TAs at St. Cloud State University tend to follow a more facilitative approach to teaching writing and responding to student writing. Their responses were all student centered and focused on guiding the students versus directing the students. We do not own these texts, it is not our right to appropriate them, we are here to help students become stronger writers with clear voices and purposes. Nancy Sommers advocated these exact ideas along with Richard Straub, Lil Brannon, and C.H. Knoblauch. These veterans have been working not only to find a more facilitative way to respond to our students' texts but to ensure that we are responding in the manner best for both ourselves and our students. Even so, we each need to experiment with the different approaches and styles of responding to student writing to find what works best for us to help our students better achieve their goals.

One of the major issues that I have become aware of throughout working on the this project is the idea of TA orientation and how much time is

spent working with TAs regarding theory and practice before they walk into the classroom. After working with my own students and reading the feedback I received on the questionnaires I am more certain than ever that St. Cloud State University is working hard to ensure the not only the success of their graduate teaching assistants, but also the undergraduate students who are taking these TA taught classes.

I have also become aware of my own need to go through this research process. It helped me to become more thoughtful of how I work with student texts, and how I can better guide my students through the use of these different modes. I now know that working with these modes and experimenting with new modes of response does not end with this project. In order to be the best teacher I can, I must continue to work with new theories and implement them into my classroom in a way that both my students and I are comfortable with and in ways that benefit the writing of my students.

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APPENDICES

Questionnaire

1. Of the four methods listed below, which methods do you use to respond to your students' writing?

	Never	Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently
Written response on the text				
Written response not on the text				
Recorded Response				
Conferencing				

2. What led you to use these methods of response?

APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

3. How do these methods work for you? (in terms of time, efficiency, thoroughness)
4. Which method(s) are you most comfortable using? Why?
5. How do you use conferences in your writing class? Please describe how you integrate it and what happens in a typical conference.
6. If you use written response not on the text (i.e., letter writing, emailing comments, etc.), please describe the typical length of your response and what issues you are addressing.

1. Of the four methods listed below, which methods do you use to respond to your students' writing

	Never	Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently
Written response on the text				
Written response not on the text				
Recorded Response				
Conferencing				

2. What led you to use these methods of response?
3. How do these methods work for you? (In terms of time, efficiency, thoroughness)
4. Which method(s) are you most comfortable using? Why?
5. How do you use conferences in your writing class? Please describe how you integrate it and what happens in a typical conference.
6. If you use written response not on the text (i.e., letter writing, emailing comments, etc.), please describe the typical length of your response and what issues you are addressing.

7. If you use recorded response, how do you decide what your comments will focus on? How long are your recorded responses?
8. If you use written comments on the text, what kind of comments do you write?
9. Do you write solely on the text, or do you include a summative end comment? How have your students responded? How much do you typically write?

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

10. Please provide an example of a typical comment that you write on students' papers and explain your rationale for using that kind of comment.
11. Please provide an example of a comment you would probably not use on a students' paper and explain why.

Response: A Look at Four Modes Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study of how a Graduate Teaching Assistant used various modes of response, which involves at least one writing. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a teaching assistant working with student writing in the classroom.

This research project is being conducted by Mary Gura, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a Master's Degree in English at St. Cloud State University.

Background Information and Purpose

The purpose of this study is to look at four modes of response and to not only gain a better understanding of how these modes are used, but to also give future teaching assistants insight as to how they can use these modes in their own teachings.

Procedures

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to fill out a survey regarding how you use response in your classroom.

Risks

Nothing is risked by filling out this survey.

Benefits

By taking this survey you will benefit because your input will help other teaching assistants understand why we use certain modes of response more than others.

Confidentiality

Information obtained in connection with this study is confidential and will be reported as aggregated (group) results. No individual results or any information that can be identified with you will be revealed. All raw data and any identifying information will be stored in a secure location and will be destroyed when the study is complete.

Research Results

Upon completion, my results will be placed on file at St. Cloud State University's Learning Resources Center.

Contact Information

If you have questions right now, please ask. If you have additional questions later, you may contact me at 320-264-1560 or maryg@stcloudstate.edu. You

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

Response: A Look at Four Modes Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study of how a Graduate Teaching Assistant used various modes of response when looking at student writing. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a teaching assistant working with student writing in the classroom.

This research project is begin conducted by Mary Gruis to satisfy the requirements of a Master's Degree in English at St. Cloud State University.

Background Information and Purpose

The purpose of this student is to look at four modes of response and to not only gain a better understanding of how these modes are applied, but to also give future teaching assistants insight as to how they can use these modes in their own teachings.

Procedures

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to fill out a survey regarding how you use response in your classroom.

Risks

Nothing is risked by filling out this survey.

Benefits

By taking this survey you will benefit because your input will help other teaching assistants understand why we use certain modes of response more than others.

Confidentiality

Information obtained in connection with this study is confidential and will be reported as aggregated (group) results. No individual results or any information that can be identified with you will be revealed. All raw data and any identifying information will be stored in a secure location and will be destroyed when the study is complete.

Research Results

Upon completion, my thesis will be placed on file at St. Cloud State University's Learning Resources Center.

Contact Information

If you have questions right now, please ask. If you have additional question later, you may contact me at 320-264-1560 or maryg@ridgewater.edu. You

will be given a copy of this form for your records. You may also contact my adviser, Dr. Cindy Moore, at 320-654-5108.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University, the researcher, Dr. Moore or the English Department at St. Cloud State. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Completing and returning this survey-questionnaire indicates your implied consent.