

Writing Matters

Nov/Dec 2003

"It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech." Mark Twain

Responding Workshop Reflection

By Piper Murray

In an essay called "Reflective Reading: Developing Thoughtful Ways to Respond to Students' Writing," Chris Anson notes a curious phenomenon about our professional and intellectual development as writing instructors. For the most part, the teaching of writing is an overwhelmingly collaborative endeavor; not only do writing instructors work together to articulate common course goals and curricula, but we depend on one another for ideas and feedback on everything from our course syllabi and assignments to our Monday morning experiments. And yet: for all our collaboration, there is one aspect of our teaching which, as Anson points out, "remains curiously shielded from collective view": how we respond to student writing.

This "curious" phenomenon seems a lot less so when we consider the intimate nature of response; after all, where else are our personalities as teachers or our relationships with students more on display, and thus more vulnerable to critique, than in our responses to their writing? Still, considering what a central role response plays in our teaching, and considering how much we learn from one another when it comes to every other aspect of our teaching, it seems a shame for us to keep this one—the very one that arguably takes up more of our time and energy as teachers than any other—all to ourselves.

For just this reason, Anson recommends that we set aside a regular space and time, away from the immediacy of the stacks of papers waiting for us on our own desks, to workshop our responses to student writing—much as we would any other piece of writing that constitutes such a vital part of our course. Doing so, he argues, not only gives us a chance to get feedback on the effectiveness of our own response styles; but hearing other instructors talk about how they might respond differently to a particular problem or paper or paper also enables us to expand our own

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Faculty Meetings Calendar

Meeting Date

Nov. 5/6—Meeting with the Deans

Nov. 19/20—Jay Ellis "Drawing Structures"

Dec. 3/4—Textbook Committee

FTEP Calendar

January 22, 2003, 2:00-4:00 pm.,
Thursday, UMC 245

"Establishing a Teaching Portfolio for
Promotion & Tenure and for Developing
Teaching"

Professor Jim Symons

Symposium on Teaching and Learning

January 29, 2003, 2:00-3:30 pm.,
Thursday, UMC 245

"When Big Classes are Good, They are Very
Very Good but When They are Bad They are
Like a Train Wreck that goes On, and On,
and On..."

Professor Dennis VanGerven

Symposium on Teaching and Learning

WebCT Workshop

WHAT CAN WEBCT DO FOR ME? HOW DOES IT
WORK?

This hands-on workshop for CU educators includes an overview of the features of WebCT and strategies for adding WebCT components into your classroom experience. Note: you must have a course space on WebCT to attend this session. If you do not, please contact wctsupp@colorado.edu to request a registration form and be sure to send it in BEFORE this class. Register at <http://www.colorado.edu/its/workshops/> for November 18th from 9 to 11 am, or for later sessions. Contact: Judi Dressler at dressler@colorado.edu Additional information: <http://www.colorado.edu/its/workshops/>

Responding cont'

response repertoire, essentially giving us a bigger bag of tricks to choose from the next time we sit down to that next stack of student writing.

I have always agreed with Anson about the benefits that such workshops can bring to a writing program, but it wasn't until I conducted a workshop on "Responding to Student Writing" at two of the faculty meetings last month that it occurred to me just how perfectly poised PWR faculty are to do both of these things—that is, both to offer each other productive feedback on our own individual response styles and to help each another expand our response "repertoires." After all, much as it may sound like a line more fit for a program brochure than a newsletter, it nonetheless bears mentioning: PWR faculty literally bring hundreds of years of experience to bring to the table. Bring all those years of experience to bear on a single student paper, and they can't help but do what my Aunt Zodie used to call "some powerful good." (Of course, my aunt was more likely to be referring to rain during a dry spell, or Vic's Vapo-rub during a bout with bronchitis, than professional development, but *still*. . . .)

As part of the workshop, I asked faculty to read a student paper from my own first-year writing class, a paper in which the writer ranted and railed for five repetitive pages. Initial reactions to the essay varied; some found the student's cheekiness charming; others found it obnoxious. Some found the student's ranting refreshing, while others found it off-putting. And that wasn't all; much like two sections of the same writing course, the Wednesday and Thursday meetings definitely developed their own distinct personalities, each with its own characteristic momentum and energy—indeed, so much so that I worried that the responses within and between the two meetings would be too varied for us to come to any kind of understanding.

But I needn't have. For all the variation in initial reactions to the paper, when it came to discussing the kind of response this writer needed, faculty were very much on the same page. At both meetings, faculty pushed me to consider not only where this student

seemed to go wrong but why, pointing out parts of the initial assignment that might have sent the student mixed messages about what was expected. And, at both meetings, instructors also challenged me to reflect a bit more on what this student was doing well (something which, I admit, I was having a hard time doing) and to work from there. As a result, I walked away from the discussion with a much clearer sense of how else I might have responded to this paper, and also how I might respond to similar papers in the future.

I just hope that those who attended the workshop got as much out of it as my student and I did.

Calls for Papers

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/CFP/>

Rocky Mountain MLA is going to be in Boulder in 2004. <http://rmmla.wsu.edu/conferences/>

Editors seek essays for an anthology in Parlor Press's series on visual rhetoric. Proposals should address the pedagogical concerns of teachers of rhetoric, professional communication, composition, and/or cultural studies. The anthology will explore visual rhetoric as it influences the business, artistic, social, and political sectors of public and personal life and will offer teachers of composition specific means—for instance, through assignments and activities—of using visual texts in the teaching of culturally infused rhetoric. We consider the volume important because curricula in the humanities and social sciences have increased their emphasis on visual rhetoric and because many teachers are unfamiliar with pedagogical approaches constructed around visual images.

Essays on visuals in photography, both commercial and art; fine art, including painting and sculpture; architecture; graphic design; political campaigns; institutional documents; hypertext; and journalistic publications are welcome, as are papers addressing other relevant topics within a pedagogical framework. Deadline for 250-400 word abstracts: December 15, 2003. Completed essays due April 15, 2004. Please contact editors Carol David (cdavid@iastate.edu) or Anne Richards (arichard@iastate.edu) with proposals/queries.

Developed by Professional Development Committee
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