Responders are taught, not born

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Research in four high school writing classes demonstrated that these college-bound students need several years of experience to develop the ability to respond helpfully to peer writing.

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The most academically talented students don't necessarily make the best reviewers of their peers' writing. Students need to practice reading one another's work while giving and receiving feedback before they do more than edit or offer global praise. To have significant effect, students must practice the skills peer reviewing requires for much longer than the traditional semester or year-long writing course. It is important for students to learn these skills because they write better when using peer feedback and attending to the effects of their writing on readers and themselves.

These conclusions derive from three years' work with high school and college writing classes in the United States in a project designed to improve college composition—in part, by improving students' preparation in high school. The project was supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education. Writing teachers of college-bound high school seniors joined freshman composition teachers at community colleges and four-year universities to design writing assignments that all of their students could complete. They developed common standards for assessing the products of these assignments. They also read and scored the writing of students from a variety of high schools and colleges.

The project

Each high school class was paired with a college section and participants were asked to complete two common assignments each semester. They posted their work on a webpage and responded to the writing of students from partner classrooms. In addition, they shared their writing with their own classmates. We collected comments and portfolios from students who gave their informed consent.

During the fall of the third year, two classes (I'll call them Cityside 1 and Cityside 2) at a selective, magnet public high school in a northeastern U.S. city shared their work with college classes at two nearby universities. At the same time, classes from the general population of Adams and Holly, two smaller, more rural high schools in a nearby state, were also trading work with college partners. One class was paired with an urban community college group consisting of much older and more ethnically diverse students. Another high school class was partnered with a freshman composition section at the nearby state university. This article compares the responses made by the high school students during peer

reviewing and shows how we taught them to be better peer responders.

Although Cityside high school had the more academically able students, the students from smaller towns had more experience reading and responding to peers' work in actual writing workshops. Cityside students seldom took part in writing workshops in elementary, middle, or high school. During one class, I asked if any of the seniors had experience reading and responding to the work of other student writers. One of the 30 students present said he had done that a few times in his junior year. Most schools in the city used the John Collins (Chadwell, 1999) writing program, in which students are asked to read one another's work and comment on "focus correction areas." Although Collins does mention areas beyond word- and sentence-level mechanics, the term *correction* implies an editing process dedicated to looking for mistakes in the printed text.

On the other hand, one of the northern districts, Adams, has employed writing workshops from kindergarten onward for a number years in many classrooms. Several of the Adams teachers have published work about reading and writing workshops, and as early as 1977 the Adams high school required successful completion of a semester-long writing workshop for graduation. Although the Holly district has employed many teachers trained by the same experts at the local university, its elementary schools often centered instruction on basal readers, and fewer high school teachers taught writing workshops.

We polled student participants about their experience reading and responding to the work of their peers. Seventy-one percent of Adams students had responded to the work of others during three or more years of school prior to the project. Almost half of Cityside 2 students (47%) had three years' experience, but only 29% of Cityside 1 and 22% of Holly students reported three years' practice responding to the writing of peers.

Differences in peer response

We collected the comments of the high school students and categorized them based on the focus of the response: global praise, personal response, text playback (Straub, 1997), sentence and word edits, reader's needs, and writer's strategies. Table 1 shows the types of comments we found, defines them, and gives examples.

Global praise. When students "praise globally," as mentioned earlier, they cheerlead for the work of others regardless of its actual merit. Students rarely give reasons for their approval or examples of effective passages or strategies with global praise. Straub (1997) found that students wanted both global and local comments. They liked praise but resented sarcasm. Graves (1983) noted that one early sign of progress in writing workshops occurs when students begin to demand more from their peers than "I liked your story." Newkirk (1984) suggested that students may have different standards than adults, and Tobin (1993) conjectured an apparent conspiracy on the part of secondary and college students to make only positive comments about peers' work in front of the teacher.

Personal response. On occasion (but not more than 3% of the time in our sample, see Table 2), students will comment on the experience of reading rather than the paper. In early elementary writing, a student might say a piece about a family trip is good because he or she had fun at an amusement park (Graves, 1994). In adolescent and adult groups, students (and sometimes teachers) can begin to think of themselves as therapists, reacting to the writer's life, not the writing. Murray (1985) said that students who need therapy should get it, just not in writing class. Straub (1997) suggested the term *reader response*, for any personal response a reader might have to text. We found examples of such personal responses that focused on the psychological involvement of the writer as a person, not as a writer. One student, reading a peer's work, wrote "You sound like a depressed kid." We call these comments "personal

Table 1
Types of peer response observed

Type of response	Definition	Example
Global praise	Intended to make the writer feel good about his or her work.	"Great paper" (no reasons given).
Personal response	Focuses on the psychological involvement of the writer as a person, not as a writer.	"You sound like a depressed kid."
Text playback	Focuses on the ideas or organization of the text.	"I think you have an excellent conclusion—it shows how you've changed and grown from your experiences."
Sentence edits	Focuses on one or more sentences or grammar.	"Run-on sentence."
Word edits	Focuses on the use of words or spelling.	"You seem to repeat 'family institution.' Maybe you should try an alternative phrase."
Reader's needs	Focuses on the needs or the reactions of the reader.	"This confuses the reader a little bit. At first glance I think that you are black, experiencing racism in that way."
Writer's strategies	Focuses on facilitating the writer's work by discussing the techniques that were used or could be used by the writer.	"In the fourth paragraph you get into the 'meat' of the experience. You might be able to increase the impact of this section by not using chronological order. (Maybe start with him getting fired, then tell the circumstances leading up to it.)"

response" (to differentiate them from the reader response theory) and view them as concerned with the writer's feelings, as is global praise.

Text playback. Many readers, students or teachers, address the writer's ideas or the organization of them in their responses (Simmons, 1992). These comments are a playback of the text or a reaction to it as a whole rather than to the parts, such as sentence construction or word choice. When one Cityside student wrote to his college partner "Your essay was very interesting. It reflected how little people of different economic, racial, religions really differ, because we enjoy some of the same things," he was commenting on the ideas in the text as a whole.

Table 2
Percentage of comments by class

1	2 Global praise	3 Reader	4 Writer	5 Text	6 Sentence	7 Word	8 Personal response
Adams	10	38	16	20	5	7	3
Holly	32	38	9	15	2	2	3
Cityside 1	43	16	0	25	7	5	2
Cityside 2	13	11	2	11	22	38	2

Graves (1994) suggested that teachers of writing limit initial student peer writing responses to "remembers"—what listeners recall hearing as the writer shared the piece. This is another form of playback that all students can complete, even when they might be unable or afraid to say what they liked about a text. Moreover, writers know they have made an impact if the audience remembers their words.

Sentence and word edits. When peer readers edit sentences for tense faults, run-ons, or fragments, they are responding to text at the sentence level. Responses at the word level focus on spelling (e.g., *everyday* instead of *every day*) or repetitive and imprecise wording.

Reader's needs. Murray (1998) encouraged writers to satisfy the reader's desire for information. Flower (1979) called this "reader-based prose." This type of response indicates the reader's reactions or strategies while reading an essay or story. For example, one Cityside student wrote of an essay on the college application process, and another student responded "I am now going through it so I know exactly what you mean." In another example, a young woman from Holly wrote,

> I have been a cheerleader for our high school's basketball team for three years and followed them through many tough games. The way you describe the empty gym filling up with all you fans was really good. It can almost make you feel the adrenaline that fills the gym during a big game.

Writer's strategies. In the second sentence of the previous quote, the young woman from Holly began to focus on the strategies of the writer, although we can't tell for sure what part of the writer's description of the fans communicates the tension or excitement. Another college student wrote about a high school basketball experience from the point of view of a player:

> We walked into our locker room and changed into our uniforms and warm-ups. Our coach then told us that he was proud of every single player, and that we exceeded all his expectations he had for the season. He was proud of our accomplishments, and we were proud to have him as our coach. We heard the warm-up music, got into our team huddle to get ready for our game, and ran out of the locker room.

A Holly high school student responded, "I think this would make a wonderful lead, and I'm not sure that you need to tell us as readers about the first game. But keep the information about your school." This student combined insight about what the reader needs with how a writer might reorganize the text to meet those needs—truly a response from a writer's point of view.

Clear patterns of development

After reading the comments from all four of the high school classes, we labeled them based on their relationship to the text and tabulated the results (see Table 2). In the Cityside 2 class, 60% of

comments (cols. 6 & 7) noted sentence and word faults. It is clear that these students learned to edit as a response to text. I sat in on a class at this high school when they received hard copies of papers from their college partners—students at a competitive four-year school nearby. We sat in rows of desks fixed to the floor, silently reading and writing comments on the papers that we received. One first-year student had written this about arriving at college:

> "Can I bring your bags up to your room for you?" I stumbled out of the car, feeling drunk from sleeping the five hours from New York. I looked up slowly to see a particularly peppy blond girl with her hair in pigtails, wearing a big phony smile across her face.
>
> Quite the rude awakening, I must say. From a peaceful sleep world, where I decide how my dreams turn out...to a phony, "wannabe" welcoming, foreign place, with some strange girl taking all of my belongings up to "my room." I wanted to just scream at everyone. "This isn't *my* room! It's just where I'm going to sleep for the next few months...."

This is an engaging lead, depicting a scene a college-bound high school senior might expect to experience in the immediate future. The reader might have fantasized about similar fears or found the writer's attitude somewhat puerile and uncharitable. Unfortunately, we will never know the answer. The reader made 19 editing corrections to the text—15 sentence-level corrections and 4 word corrections, but otherwise wrote nothing about the piece. In this class only 1 student in 30 had any experience reading a peer's work, and that was the previous year in the class of the Cityside 1 teacher.

More experience, less editing

In the Cityside 1 class, only 12% of comments included word and sentence flaws (Table 2, cols. 6 & 7), while 59% (cols. 2 & 3) contained global praise or reader-based insight. Another 25% addressed the organization or ideas in the text (col. 5). It is clear that these students' experiences sharing work helped the move from editing to com-

menting on ideas as a coinquirer (Straub, 1997). The class also considered the writer and reader as persons more often—perhaps too often in the case of global praise, such as in the following comment from one high school reader: "This is an incredibly well written essay with a clear thought being expressed. My only concern is that you read the paper in order to check for missing words."

In this instance, the college writer had submitted an early draft of a piece about changes in the American family. In his introduction he had written, "How a group of people in a certain time frame experience and react to change is what gives their existence both location and portent on the map of history." It is clear that his reach exceeds his grasp of academic language, yet he tried to make an argument in educated terms. He would benefit by knowing what was understood by outside readers not far separated from himself regarding such language. What he got was global praise intended to make him feel good about his efforts and a general comment on his word-level editing.

In all, this college student received 10 comments on this paper, 6 were global praise and 3 related to word- or sentence-level editing. The other one was the response of an attentive reader: "I completely agree with you. The families of every generation have been different and the nineties is going through an incredible change with so much to deal with." This last comment told the writer what the reader thought of his argument and then it restated the topic to demonstrate comprehension.

More focus on readers and writers

Students at Holly high school also spent most of their time (79%) focusing on the writer and reader (Table 2, cols. 2, 3, & 4). They spent less time commenting on text (col. 5) but increased the number of responses (col. 3) from a reader's point of view more than did Cityside 1.

Finally, the Adams students, who had had the most exposure to workshop classrooms in previous years, offered global praise only 10% of the time—the least of all four groups. These experienced readers and writers devoted 54% (cols. 3 & 4) of their comments to strategies of readers and writers. It is interesting that they also noticed ideas, sentence problems, and wording weaknesses more often (cols. 5, 6, & 7) than did the students at Holly.

Among the nontraditional community college students who received comments from their Adams high school partners, one had recently arrived from Haiti and wrote about his experience coming to the United States against his will, but only in the most general terms. His high school reader responded with the following comments:

> I really like the idea behind this piece. But I would really like it if you expanded on some of your ideas. Perhaps it would help if you added more of your feelings. Try answering some of the following questions:
>
> 1. You say that the experience scared you; how did it scare you?
>
> 2. What is your relationship with your dad like?
>
> 3. Why is this experience so significant to your life?
>
> 4. What did this experience teach you?
>
> Also, after you expand on this piece...you may want to put a title—it will help the reader. I enjoyed reading this piece though, and I know that it will be great!

The high school senior ended with some global praise probably intended to offset the list of questions that might have seemed too negative to someone writing about a major life change. However, the high school student also told the writer what a reader needs to know that is not in the draft. The reader pointed out a strategy (writing a title) that a writer might use to help with comprehension and indicated when to employ the strategy ("after you expand on this piece").

Classroom response

Instruction, not just ability and time. The results of our survey indicate that students must be taught to respond helpfully to the writing of their peers. Simple academic ability does not ensure that seniors will know how to read like writers. The students in the Cityside 2 class simply edited work presented to them, as their teachers would undoubtedly do with their work, or as the Collins (Chadwell, 1999) program taught them. Even though nearly half of these students had engaged in peer response work for more than three years, for them that meant editing. Therefore, we must tailor instruction during writing workshops to focus on more than editing so that our students think of writing as something other than getting the words right.

Knowing that even with good teaching it would likely take longer than a class lasts for students to develop these habits of mind, we began to teach them to respond to one another as readers and writers themselves. We found the techniques in Table 3 useful.

Sharing your writing. Jane Nyman of East High School in Denver, Colorado, began by bringing in to class a draft of her own writing about being 50 years old and out of dreams. She read it to the class and asked the students to tell her what they thought it was about (see Table 3). "It's about your summer vacation camping in Maine," said one young woman, speaking for her classmates. It's true, Jane's story took place in Maine where she had gone to camp, but she had come to a shocking realization about her own life there. Jane thought the piece was about that realization, not the summer vacation. She knew she had work to do if a room of outsiders had missed the point.

Not long thereafter she brought in a revision of the piece and an overhead of the cutting and rearrangement she had done on it. She showed her readers how their comments helped shape her revision. Through this activity Jane established herself as one of the community of

Table 3
Techniques to teach response

Technique	What the teacher does	What students do
Sharing your writing	Shares a piece of writing and asks for response Shares rewrites tied to class response	Offer comments on the teacher's writing
Clarifying evaluation versus response	Shows evaluation is of product Response is to writer	Understand that response is personable and helpful
Modeling specific praise	Shows how to tell what you like as a reader	Understand that cheerleading is too general to be helpful
Modeling understanding	Shows how to tell what you understood the piece to be about	Understand that reflecting back the piece to the writer is helpful
Modeling questions	Shows how to ask questions about what you didn't understand	Understand that questions related to the writer's purpose are helpful
Modeling suggestions	Shows how to suggest writing techniques	Understand that a responder leaves the writer knowing what to do next
Whole-class response	Moderates response by class to one classmate's piece	Offer response Hear the response of others Hear what the writer finds helpful
Partner response	Pairs up students in class to respond to pieces	Practice response learned in whole-class session
Comment review	Reads the comments of peers to writers	Get teacher feedback on comments
	Suggests better techniques Devises minilessons	
Response conference	Speaks individually with students responding inappropriately	Have techniques reinforced

writers (Bomer, 1995), and she allowed them to see the reason why she asked them to respond in the first place—she was going to use their insights, questions, and impressions to take the next steps in her writing. For Jane's students this was a new experience; they had received only grades from the teacher in response to *their* writing in the past.

Responding is not evaluating. Jennie Marshall from the University of New Hampshire and Terry Moher at a high school in Exeter, New Hampshire, faced a problem as their paired classes exchanged papers. One of Jennie's students, Lisa, came to class quite miffed one day after reading what her high school partner had written about her cultural analysis essay. Lisa was upset

that Shelley, her partner, had called her writing "boring" and had said she couldn't remember much of it by the end.

Jennie understood Lisa's resentment. Together they decided that Lisa would wait to respond until Shelley had sent her paper for review. When that happened, Lisa noted the parts that worked well in Shelley's paper and then made some specific suggestions to clarify parts that were confusing. Finally, she wrote to Shelley about the comments that had hurt her feelings. She explained that in the future Shelley might want to consider the feelings of others, confine herself to saying what she understood, and offer only helpful suggestions.

The teachers, Jennie and Terry, immediately saw that both students had engaged in evaluation —even though Shelley had offered negative comments and Lisa gave positive ones. Lisa eventually focused on reader response at the end of Shelley's work, telling how she understood the piece and offering "readerly" advice (Calkins, 1994). In class Jennie and Terry discussed the difference between evaluation and response, emphasizing that a response should assure the writer of what to do next. In evaluation, the students realized, writing is frozen, finished, and rated as a product. During response the work is still fluid, and the writer can actually take part in the conversation. Jennie and Terry brought their own writing to class and modeled readers who encourage themselves by not by asking "What is wrong with this piece?" but rather "What more do I want to say?" The teachers also examined their own teaching practices to be sure they were not modeling evaluation when response was in order. They showed writers where they could explain their ideas more clearly, and they modeled understanding about the texts (see Table 3). Jennie and Terry realized that they were teaching students to be less critical of themselves in early drafts, thereby increasing the likelihood that later drafts would occur.

Teaching response in class. Tim McLaughlin, of Bunker Hill Community College in Massachusetts, found that he did have to teach re-

sponse directly. Developing from semester to semester, his eventual model for instruction involved the following:

- Practicing on one another in class;
- Discussing sample responses (models);
- Having the whole class respond using one or more pieces written by classmates and then with outside partners;
- Teacher previewing of draft responses before sending; and
- Teacher discussing responses with students.

Tim emphasized purpose and audience by explaining that a real writer would receive the response; therefore, responses should be personable, positive, and helpful.

Tim remembered discussing a draft of a personal piece with one class. "The writer was someone everyone had gotten to know and like. The discussion became a dialog in which people were asking the writer additional questions about the event that was the focus of the piece," he said. This discussion with a personal contact facilitated the transition to a discussion about a paper by someone who was not personally known to the class. "We could better understand that we were dealing with a *writer* and not just a piece of writing," Tim said. He resolved to preview all responses before they were sent off after one student told his partner that her paper was terrible. "Clearly this guy wasn't thinking about the person on the other end, nor was he thinking about his supposed objective—to be helpful," Tim explained. Tim found great unevenness in student responses. "However, I think most tried to be thoughtful and sincere," he said. When a student of his was at a loss for what to say, Tim modeled suggestions by discussing the piece with the student (see Table 3). "The student said she simply didn't understand the piece—which allowed me to say that I didn't either," he said. Tim's confirmation gave the student the courage to be honest with the writer.

Table 4
Effects of peer help on
portfolio pieces

Peer help	Portfolio score*
Peer help	
Mean	6.05
N	205
SD	1.5
No peer help	
Mean	5.67
N	88
SD	1.44
Total	
Mean	5.94
N	293
SD	1.49

Note. *p = .037

In class discussions, we try to have students ask questions of their partners: What was the purpose of this part? What were you trying to do here? Following Elbow's example (1973), we try to get them to say what they understood or to ask helpful questions, such as "Is this what you meant?" Because students have indicated they like specific praise, rather than general cheerleading, we asked them always to point out something positive.

Change over time

Instruction changes students' response habits. The teacher of the Cityside 1 class was part of our grant, and her students had more exposure to peer response than those in Cityside 2. This academically elite group no longer defined response as editing. But like Graves's first graders (1994), they often offered praise with little substance.

Students' response patterns continue to shift over time if students take part in actual workshops and not simply editing sessions. Holly students had more peer reviewing experience than

those at Cityside, and many of them gave their readers feedback about the reactions and needs of their readers. More important, though, were the writers at Adams. They had the most workshop experience and wrote the sort of comments writers need: insight about what readers are thinking, suggestions of steps that other writers might take, engagement with the ideas of the piece, and moderate help with mechanics as needed.

Our findings confirm the claims of Anson (1999), who said that there are four benefits of a varied readership: a sense of authorship, knowledge of effects on readers, development of an internal monitor, and the ability to evaluate one's own writing. Our students told outside evaluators that they had learned to be better evaluators of peer writing and, in the process, had improved as writers themselves. In fact, writers who used peer feedback earned higher scores on their writing (see Table 4). We scored three papers included in the students' portfolios on a four-point holistic scale and added the scores of two raters to yield a 2–8 scale. The portfolio score was the median of three papers in the portfolio. Column 2 of Table 4 indicates that of the 293 portfolios collected, more than two thirds (205) of the writers used peer feedback, and they averaged more than 6 on the 2–8 grading scale. The 88 students who used only teacher comments scored lower, averaging 5.67.

Those writers (see Table 5) who worked the hardest to solve problems involving the emotional content of texts (i.e., the effects on the readers and the author) received higher scores (6.11) than those who worked the hardest on language (5.21) or the ideas and organization (5.57). These results confirm what students told us in exit interviews. They had improved responding to others and had improved their own writing by focusing on the needs of readers and writers, not simply the features of text.

School reform officials in Cityside have begun requiring staff development trainers to attend a writing workshop institute. Afterward, these writing coaches mentor Cityside teachers (K–12) in the creation of writing workshops in

which teachers can model in-depth response. They have resisted the temptation to correct problems by adopting packages of "teacher-proof" materials. Instead, they have decided to teach mentors and teachers to write and respond as writers.

Such writers are not created in a year. No matter how well I run my own workshops, if I want the students in my school, my town, or my city to read, think, and respond like writers, I need to work with colleagues and administrators at all grade levels to foster workshops from the first day of kindergarten onward.

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Table 5
Comparison by problems solved in portfolios

Problems solved in the portfolio papers	Portfolio score*
Ideas, organization, language	
Mean	5.57
N	119
SD	1.45
Language and mechanics only	
Mean	5.21
N	14
SD	1.63
Includes emotion	
Mean	6.11
N	176
SD	1.47
Total	
Mean	5.86
N	309
SD	1.49

Note. *p = .000