Helping Students Respond Effectively to Each Other’s Writing

being part of the process, part of the community..

NCTE
Teacher Writing Workshop

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Peer Response vs. Peer Editing

**Peer Response**—is when students respond to the content of each other’s writing, to the ideas, challenging each other and raising questions about what has been written. Students respond to each other’s ideas as expressed in writing and help each other to think more deeply about their written work.

**Peer Editing**—refers to having students read each other’s drafts in order to comment on form. This type of response is more likely to lead to editing and proofreading than substantive revision.

Nancy Sommers did some work in the 1980s looking for a formula for creating a list of effective comments for teachers to make about student work. She found that the issue was more complicated than she imagined, and revised her work later (2006) to stress instructor’s response to ideas as key in welcoming students into an academic community.

Amy Lee, in her book, *Composing Critical Pedagogies: Teaching Writing as Revision*, describes a procedure for turning peer response into a “contact zone” (Anzaldua) where students explore ideas and point out logical inconsistencies in each other’s work.

Donald M. Murray stresses student ownership of the response process, encouraging student authors to ask for the response they need in workshop and cautioning teachers against taking away ownership of student work.

Murray also underscores the importance of response from real readers for writers who learn to respond critically to their own texts by internalizing the voices of readers. Student writers need to hear readers raise questions about their work in order to begin to raise such questions themselves. They need the perspective of a reader in order to be able to imagine a reader as they are composing and revising their work.
The Language of Response

Be a good listener—no talking or whispering. Listen fully and focus on what you are hearing; some people like to take notes to help them focus, others close their eyes and visualize what they are hearing. Notice what you like and what is vivid to you, and notice what confuses or trips you up. Be ready to explain—we all like to hear “I liked that,” but good responders need to say specifically what they liked and the effect it had on them as readers.

Giving responses—Be respectful, honest and specific. The “I like that” rule applies here too—it’s nice, but it isn’t going to push us towards knockout writing. Some helpful response phrases include:

- I noticed that
- I wonder about
- It really worked for me when
- I get lost when …
- I’d like to know more about …

Tips for responding to writing:

- Try to find the positive you can build on in the piece of writing you are responding to. This is considerably more difficult than finding fault with it. It is of much more use to the writer to help him or her identify the strengths in the piece that can be worked with rather than when isn’t working. You will need to listen hard to hear what the piece wants to say, where it wants to go… Some interesting questions to consider: Where do you feel energy in the piece? What is the gift of the piece? What does this piece bring to the world? Where is the pulse or the heartbeat of the piece? Where does the piece itself seem to want to go?

- Express any feedback or response that you give in terms of yourself the reader and the effect the piece had on you rather than making sweeping generalizations or judgments. Compare the effect of “The beginning of your paper has nothing to do with the rest of it.” to “I didn’t understand the connection between your introduction and the rest of your paper.”

- Be specific in your response—tell the reader exactly which lines or phrases affected you. Tell the reader what you remember of the piece—avoid general praise like “good paper”.

- Raise questions, rather than suggesting: How would it change the piece if you showed this scene? What scenes do you most want the reader to focus on? What is your hunch about how older readers might respond to this character?

- Respond. The worst response is no response. React to the piece as it’s being read. A laugh at a joke tells the writer more than volumes of written feedback.
Writing Workshop: Guidelines for response groups

Please read over the following guidelines and discuss them. Modify them in any way we need to in order to fit the needs of our group. Good response cannot happen without both parties, (those responding and those whose work is under discussion) playing their part well. It is as important to be good at receiving response well as it is to give it.

When your work is under discussion:

- Ask for the specific feedback you would like.

- Make notes on your copy as people talk--even if you don't immediately agree with what they have to say.

- Tell us what stage of the writing process you are in, but without saying how bad, trivial or unworthy your work is.

- Don't explain why you wrote it; this should become evident.

- Remain silent and listen as people respond to your work. Try to really hear what they are saying without defending your piece or trying to explain.

When responding to someone else's work:

- Try to see the potential of each piece. Try to build on what is working rather than pointing out what isn't-- this is much more useful for the writer, and more difficult to do.

- Express your response in terms of the piece's effect on you, the reader-- avoid sweeping judgments and generalizations.

- Articulate your response as clearly as you can. It is not enough to simply feel something. Good response depends on your making conscious and articulating your responses.

- Tell the writer what you remember most clearly.

- Tell the writer where you lost attention or were confused.

- Tell the writer what you liked, what moved you, what you can still see or feel-- be as specific as you can.
- Be respectful of the writer. Do not criticize in a belittling way.

- Keep the focus on the piece you are discussing. Avoid telling stories of your own experience. This is not about you.

- Refer to the "I" character as "the speaker" or "the narrator" rather than "you". Even though this may be personal writing, the writer has, in effect, presented him or herself as a character in the piece and should be referred to in this way. Also, we are here to discuss the writing and not the writer.

- Allow the writer to retain ownership. Do not try to make major changes or rewrite the piece for the author. Your job is not to impose your own view, but to help the writer convey his or her view more powerfully.

**Additional suggestions:**

Each group should have a time-keeper who gives a one-minute warning and tells the group when the time to discuss a particular piece has elapsed. This job should be rotated. Each group should also contain a facilitator who reminds group members of established rules, "Refer to 'I' as 'the narrator'." or "Keep the focus on the piece." At the beginning of each meeting, divide the time up realistically. If necessary, split into smaller groups so that everyone can get a response if they want or need it. Do not allow extra time. It may seem necessary, but most often it is not.

Go around the circle with each person speaking in turn. This is the best way to insure equal participation and to be sure to hear everyone's response. Do not repeat what has been said before, just express your agreement and pass. Allow everyone to speak before discussion ensues.

The writer should be allowed to not respond, but listen. In order to help this to happen, direct questions should not be addressed to the writer in this initial phase. He or she will learn more from listening to the rest of you discuss something you are not clear on than from clarifying it for you. The writer may respond briefly when the formal response is over.

Allow five minutes, or whatever seems necessary at the end of each session to evaluate it. Again, each person should speak in turn. Decide on the facilitator for the next meeting so that that person can take notes about what worked well and what needs to be improved.
Shimmering Moment Exercise

List ten moments in your life that you keep coming back to, that just won’t let you go. These do not have to be huge momentous turning points in your life. Actually, no moment is too small to be a subject for writing.

When you have your list, I would like you to eliminate five of these that you don’t want to write about today. You can place a small x by the side, so that you will have these in your notebook for later.

Now eliminate two more. Now eliminate two more, until you are left with the one that you will write about today. Remember, you can always come back to the others.

Now, before we begin to write about that moment, I would like you to engage in a few quick writes to get ready (explain quick writing if necessary).

First, I would like you to take five minutes to write only about the setting of the event. In as much detail as you can, describe the setting where the event took place.

Okay, now I would like you to take another five minutes describe the people involved in the event. Describe yourself as you were at that time, both physically and emotionally. Describe also any other people involved in the event.

Okay, now write about why this event is significant to you.

Now, we are at last going to start to tell the story of the event. Try to integrate some of the details from the free writes you have done. Give at least ten minutes for this writing.

Share drafts: Look for what story is trying to emerge, where the pulse of the piece is, what the gift of the piece is. What keeps you reading? Is there a through line? Revise or continue.

Allow for some of the participants to share their work.

Engage participants in a short reflection about what they noticed as they participated in the activity and what they think this might suggest for their classrooms.

Share these reflections and talk about what all of this implies for us as writing teachers, and the importance of developing our own writing as we work on our teaching of writing.
In telling the stories that must be told, storytellers inform themselves, and when the story is shared, their readers discover their own stories. As they read my story they hear their own, and as we share these stories we survive our lives. ~Donald M. Murray