

# Making the Most of Response: Reconciling Coaching and Evaluating Roles for Teachers across the Curriculum

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. . . [R]esponse to writing is often difficult and tense. For the teacher, it is the schizophrenia of roles--now the helpful facilitator, hovering next to the writer to lend guidance and support, and now the authority, passing critical judgment on the writer's work; at one moment the intellectual peer, giving "reader-based" feedback (Elbow 1981), and at the next the imposer of criteria, the gatekeeper of textual standards. (Anson 1989)

As writing teachers, the three of us (Phyllis, Elizabeth, and Duane) have found that recognizing the difference between our responses as teachers and the potential responses of "real" readers is helpful as we evaluate student writing. When we identify the "real" audience of a student essay as someone other than ourselves, we step out of the position of "judge" and into the position of "coach." That is, instead of responding to a text by saying, "This is how it's done; these are the rules," we can say, "Your writing will probably affect your reader in X way," and explain how the author might better reach that audience. We shift out of the role of "antagonist" and into the role of "supporter," a role we like. More important, we believe we are more effective teachers when we can support students' efforts to achieve that purpose for their readers. (Ryder, Lei, & Roen 1999)

These comments on response to student writing highlight a continuing and central concern in discussions of evaluating and grading student writing. Teachers across the curriculum juggle key roles whenever they sit down to respond to student writing. As Ryder, Lei, and Roen go on to say in "Audience Considerations for Evaluating Writing," even the "supporter" eventually has to evaluate papers (54). Teachers may adopt any of a range of strategies for responding--and we will discuss in some detail the combination of portfolios and electronic communication that we find particularly useful--but teachers finally must fill at least these two key roles for our students, and thus the schizophrenia Anson notes above.

For teachers across the curriculum who assign writing in their classes, the sense of schizophrenia is further heightened. Because these teachers do not typically claim expertise as writing teachers, they can be particularly uncomfortable about evaluating the overall effectiveness of final written products handed in by students. These teachers may also have had far fewer examples of "coaching" strategies that they can rely on when they approach their students' work. In this paper, we illustrate specific techniques to help teachers across the curriculum incorporate supportive responses into their repertoire of response strategies and then suggest how teachers can shift more comfortably from coaching into final evaluation of papers.

## Using Portfolios

Portfolio evaluation has become a widely accepted alternative to traditional grading of a single paper thanks to work by Belanoff and Dickson (1991), Bishop (1990), Burnham (1986), Herter (1991), Krest (1990), Wolf (1989), Yancey (1992a), and others. In brief, portfolios are collections of written work from various stages of the writing process. For example,

- teachers might give students two or three opportunities to start fresh on a particular writing task; students choose their best start to revise into a polished final paper,
- teachers assign several different writing tasks to give students practice with a range of formats and audiences; students choose from the pieces to revise the most successful one(s), or
- teachers assign several papers but give students eight, twelve, or fifteen weeks to work on the papers; as students complete early drafts for each task, they learn more about revising other papers so that the final collection shows what they can learn over the semester.

We would like to emphasize here, though, specifically how portfolios encourage the "supporter" role of the writing teacher.

First, and most important, because students share pieces of writing in various stages, portfolios allow teachers to postpone (for a while, at least) evaluating a deadline-imposed "final" product. When students generate both impromptu responses to writing prompts we pose at the beginning of most class sessions and drafts of pieces that might eventually be revised for a portfolio, we are able to take on the exclusive role of facilitator. We praise, for example, insights, creative approaches to tasks, clear organization, or decisive evidence. We can ask questions about how a piece might develop in a subsequent draft without students perceiving those questions as prescriptions for revision.

For example, at the end of a class work-session, a student in a junior-level Writing Arguments class sent a draft opening and outline of a problem/solution argument she was thinking about developing further. Before putting too much more time into researching the topic, she wanted some feedback on her topic and plans. Notice that she asks specific questions (in all capital letters) that she's looking for "coaching" help on as she continues thinking about the context and content of her draft:

Have you ever been woken up in the early hours of the morning by a garbage truck or nearby construction? Do you suffer from stress, sleep disruption, ulcers, or aggression? If you've ever experienced these situations then you have most likely experienced noise pollution. We are bombarded daily by the sounds of our society. We live in a fast paced society, where technology changes daily. The sounds of our lives and our lifestyle constantly surround us, but when do sounds become noise. When does "background noise" turn into simply "noise". Millions of people around the world today are experiencing the negative effects of noise pollution. These effects can include such symptoms as stress, stomach cramps, cold sweats, and diarrhea. There are many types and levels of noise pollution

which can cause these symptoms, but the most harmful and stressful noise pollutants are the ones we experience in the privacy of our own homes.

There are certain areas where you can expect to experience noise. The noise associated with airports and construction sites, are two areas in which people expect to experience noise. When people enter their homes though, this is supposed to be a stress free quiet haven for them to relax in. Noise pollutants such as barking dogs, crowing roosters, leave blowers, loud music, and large parties can disrupt a homeowners peace and quiet.

Experts recommend several techniques to reduce the impact of noise pollution.

1. Wearing earplugs - Although this won't completely block out any noise that you're experiencing, it will help to reduce the problem.
2. Exercise - Workouts help to relieve stress hormones and provide an outlet for frustration and anger.
3. Get enough sleep - Difficult to do if you're experiencing noise pollution at night, but necessary in reducing stress and anxiety.
4. Learn relaxation techniques - These methods will help you reduce stress, and they're offered by most school boards as evening classes.

DO YOU THINK I SHOULD EVEN INCLUDE THESE THINGS IN MY PAPER. I REALIZE THAT THIS IS A CONVINCING ESSAY ASSIGNMENT SO I FEEL LIKE THEY'RE NOT REALLY RELEVANT. I KNOW THIS PAPER IS COMPLETELY CHOPPY, I JUST WANTED TO GIVE YOU AN IDEA OF WHAT I'M LOOKING AT INCLUDING. I FOUND SEVERAL WEBSITES ON NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATIONS TO HELP REDUCE NOISE POLLUTION, DO YOU THINK I SHOULD USE THOSE. I'VE DECIDED TO FOCUS MY PAPER ON CONVINCING PEOPLE THAT RESIDENTIAL NOISE POLLUTION IS UNHEALTHY AND MORE DISTURBING AND SERIOUS THAN CITY GENERATED NOISE POLLUTION. (DO YOU KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT?) IS THAT TYPE OF FOCUS O.K? I'M SORTING THROUGH ALL OF MY SOURCES THIS WEEKEND AND CREATING MORE OF AN OUTLINE FOR MY PAPER. THIS IS SUCH A ROUGH DRAFT, SO THIS WEEKEND I'LL PULL TOGETHER A MUCH MORE THOROUGH PAPER.

In the response, Kate is working in the coaching model--praising what the student is doing well and suggesting directions the student might pursue to move the paper toward effective communication:

Carly,

I'm glad you recognized that much of the material in your rough draft is informative. Of course, we need to use information to back up arguments, but you see how you need to recast the information to make it convincing. I think the approach you outline in caps will work, but you could consider focusing your audience more carefully. "Homeowners" is a large category that can include farmers (who will have more "natural" noises at their homes), city dwellers, and suburbanites, at least. Among city dwellers, those in apartment houses or near college campuses are most likely to have more noise pollution than suburban folks in quiet neighborhoods. Do you see how targeting a particular audience will help you know what kinds of arguments you can use to convince readers to reduce the stress from noise? If you target a particular group, then you'll also be focusing on certain kinds of common noise! (Personally, I don't mind the sound of lawn mowers, but I hate air hammers used to repair streets and sidewalks in our neighborhood.)

Your specific techniques sound much more like solutions that might fit better into a persuading paper. That's the paper where you'll argue for readers to take action, and a set of possible actions is the list of ways to counteract the stress caused by noise.

Keep plugging away and let me see another draft soon to keep you headed in a good direction. Nice start.

Similarly, one of Jamie's students wanted to capture the gist of an article before responding to it through critical analysis. Jamie's comments in green show how coaching can quickly direct students' attention to serious, potential problems in their drafts:

Patricia Hynes, author of "Beyond Global Housekeeping," considers environmentalism and feminism as one united concern. She argues that the environmental movement rests strongly upon women, and unless women unite and progress in their own liberation movement, they will not be effective in the environmental movement. *Is this last clause accurate? Is Hynes concerned that women won't be effective, or is she concerned that the movement itself is unjust? I know her argument is confusing--but what does her idea of justice have to do with anything?* She argues that currently women are the activists of the environmental movement and warns them against becoming the "global housekeepers" for men. *Why is their activism considered housekeeping--or is it? I'm confused!* Hynes is concerned that women will continue to work to "clean up" environmental hazards while men "institutionalize environmental protection" and hence maintain the control and power behind a movement that women have played such an integral role in. If this is allowed to happen, she feels that they then "risk inheriting an environmental movement disconnected from and detrimental to our own liberation movement." *Why is she concerned that women hold more power--again, what does she say about justice?*

By spending just a few minutes to coach students through early steps in a larger writing process, a teacher in any discipline can encourage students not only to think and write critically but also to revise and refine an early draft for a more effective overall response to an assignment.

A second advantage of portfolios for coaching students as they learn writing skills involves the scope of the questions we can ask about papers as they develop. Coaching comments encourage students to stay focused on rhetorical concerns, especially audience and purpose, much longer into their writing process. (See Cooper, 1999, for an extended discussion of how genre can function as a key element shaping the context of assigning and responding to papers and Kiefer, 1999, on the key role of audience.) When students ask questions about "the big picture" for their papers, they learn more about making effective choices as writers. In the following example, edited for length, Monica's paper illustrates a common strategy many students adopt for their first drafts: "dump everything I know onto the page."

Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP), consisting of 265,727 acres, is one of the most spectacular and breathtaking areas in the country. The park is essentially divided into two halves. The east side, near Estes Park, is known for its high peaks and rocky terrain, while the west side, near Grand Lake, is better known for its more lush, heavily forested landscapes <http://www.cyberwest.com/v2adwst2.html>). A wide array of wildlife species depend upon the the varied

habitat types present in the park. Above tree-line in the alpine tundra, lives species such as ptarmigan, big horn sheep (Colorado's state mammal), and marmots. In the lower elevation subalpine forests of the park, bobcats, pine martens, and black bears are prevalent. In the lowest elevation, montane and wetland habitat, beaver, otters, moose, deer, and bobcats can be found (<http://estes.on-line.com/wildwatch/Wetland.html>).

The one thing that threatens the very existence of these species on RMNP is the elk population existing there. The elk population in Colorado is higher than it ever has been since European settlement (Alldridge, September 2, 1997; CSU-Wildlife Biologist). This is probably due in part to the artificial system man has created. Many of the natural predators of elk such as the grizzly bear, wolf, and mountain lion has either been removed from the park or greatly reduced in number. Currently 3,400 elk reside in RMNP which at carrying capacity has been estimated to be able to sustain a herd of between 700 to 900 elk (Alldridge, September 2, 1997; CSU-Wildlife Biologist). This is almost 5 times the upper limit of what the park can sustain without damage to its delicate ecosystem. Elk, which are primarily grazers eating grasses and wildflowers as well as woody plants, utilize all the different habitat types present at RMNP during different seasons of the year ([http://www.jacksonwy.com/n\\_parks/elkref2htm](http://www.jacksonwy.com/n_parks/elkref2htm)). Because of this they have an impact on almost all wildlife species occurring on the park. Due to their large numbers, overgrazing is occurring which has many harmful effects on important species ranging from lowlands all the way to the alpine tundras.

Overgrazing in sensitive riparian areas tends to reduce woody vegetation, degrade stream banks, and increase erosion and sediment loads deposited into the streams which combined, lead to a decrease in water quality and an increase in water temperatures. These effects have an impact on many wildlife species such as the federally endangered river otter which has been recently introduced into RMNP. The river otter depends upon the riparian areas for its main life requisites. With a diet mainly consisting of fish, the river otter will not be able to withstand a reduction in fish numbers due to elk overgrazing. Also the green-back cutthroat trout which is the Colorado state fish and is also listed as endangered in the state is not able to withstand high sediment loads and only spawns in cold mountain streams such as those at RMNP. Beaver (Alldridge, September 2, 1997; CSU-Wildlife Biologist). And ptarmigan have also been drastically impacted by the overpopulation of elk (Alldridge, September 2, 1997; CSU-Wildlife Biologist). Other ungulate species such as bighorn sheep and mule deer are in direct competition with elk for food. Overgrazing leads to poorer quality food as well as invasion by exotic non-palatable species of plant life (Trlica, date, range lecture series)....

Kate's response, based on a very quick reading of the draft, focuses on ways to help the student take better account of the readers she's hoping to reach:

You finally get to your thesis or claim at the end of this draft. That's fine so long as you think your target audience will be willing to read along so far without already knowing your main point. You might want to consider reorganizing your argument to put your claim up closer to the beginning of the essay, and then using your good details to support specific reasons for your claim (competition, degrading habitat, etc.) Do you see what I'm getting at?

Also, who is your target audience for this essay? If you are writing to a knowledgeable reader, your use of jargon will be fine. If you're writing to a less educated audience, you may want to rethink this strategy.

You've got a great start here, and you clearly have found useful sources. So now spend more time on audience and purpose questions to be sure you're coming across clearly to your target readers.

In coaching comments on very early drafts, we don't have to evaluate whether the evidence is effective or whether the focus and organization are clear. Rather, prompting students with questions about audience and purpose helps them consider choices they can make to communicate more effectively. When students concentrate on audience and purpose, they can often see for themselves what organizational issues are keeping the paper from communicating with a target audience. In short, supportive questioning helps students make their own choices about how best to move from one draft to the next.

Finally, because portfolios reinforce a "coaching" model in teacher responses, students retain authority over their writing. Four students' end-of-semester self-evaluations are all couched in terms of "I," showing that students maintained a sense of directing their own learning:

I met all of my goals for the semester. I think my writing has improved drastically from the beginning of the semester. I have learned to write more concisely and my organization has really improved. I have learned how to write with specific audiences in mind and the difference between persuading and convincing the audience. This class really helped me a lot.

Despite my own attempts to avoid personal growth and learning, I did learn more about writing, forming an argument, and using the internet for world domination.

I definitely improved my writing. I think I actually exceeded my goals for the course by improving my writing dramatically as well as learning a great deal about computers.

I feel really good about my writing. In fact for finals I had three papers due in a short time, and they all went really smooth. My third paper I sailed through. It is not taking me as long to get to an actual starting point to be able to revise and cut and paste. Thanks!

Contrast these positive self-reflections with Becca's attitude:

When I was in school writing wasn't my favorite subject. Most of the time we would have to write these long reports that need to have a lot of things in it that I wouldn't think was important enough to include. It was just easier to agree than to fight about it. If you can't beat them join them. So I write my papers to pass my class not because I necessarily share the views....

When students retain authority as writers, they are much more likely to learn not only about writing but also about the disciplinary knowledge teachers focus on.

Do we maintain, then, that using portfolios with "supporting" comments has removed all the roadblocks we used to face in writing classes? Of course not. Portfolios and coaching comments won't automatically turn every student into a paragon who takes three or four different approaches to each assignment; some students still do the minimal amount of work required to complete the minimum number of pages assigned. Some students keep looking for the magic format that will serve all their writing needs forever; others are so

concerned about surface correctness that they can't spare attention for rhetorical issues. Portfolios can't guarantee that all students learn more about writing, and we're still frustrated by students who have obvious potential to become better writers but who ignore suggestions and turn in minimally competent work. However, for most students, portfolios push editing firmly into the final proofreading stages so that students can concentrate on effective communication of ideas before they have to concern themselves with appearance on the page. And in place of editing, teachers and students can both concentrate instead on questions that improve the way ideas are shaped and presented for readers.

So, like McClelland (1991), we're less frustrated now because

portfolio evaluation encourages us, even forces us, to focus on texts and not on grades. This focus changes the whole learning and writing situation in my classes from an artificial one that demands a work be begun, finished, and evaluated in a week or two, to a real one that allows texts to grow and mature as writers create, explore, risk, fail, and succeed over the course of a term. (171)

The difference, for us, between comments written as a supporter and comments written as a gatekeeper can be captured as simply as this: Do my comments assess only how well students have met certain criteria? Or do my comments help students see how they might choose to revise in the next draft?

## Adding Electronic Communications

In addition to reinforcing the supporter role through in-progress comments on portfolio drafts, electronic mail and electronic bulletin boards also help us function as facilitators while students are developing their papers.

- When students send the impromptu writing they complete each day in class over email, we can respond more fully by typing comments and embedding questions in their texts than we can by writing on paper. Moreover, we try to schedule our work so that we can respond to email from students shortly after class. Students, then, can read responses much more quickly than they might otherwise see comments on paper.
- Students, being students, suddenly discover pressing problems at hours when we're not available. Students who find themselves in need of coaching can send an email at the time they are having the problem; they don't need to wait several hours or even days until they can speak to us in the office. When they explain the problem as it arises, students are often clearer about what help they need, and our responses can provide advice at a particularly "teachable moment."
- Because email doesn't have the look of a finished, perfect-looking paper, students see our comments in the supportive role of coach--**as they practice**, not after they've finished the process.
- Also because email doesn't have the look of a finished paper, students and teachers both are less likely to focus too early in the writing process on format

- concerns or mechanical correctness, cutting short the opportunity to engage fully with ideas and grapple with writing as a messy learning process.
- email also allows us to examine texts and to keep a record of the conversations we have about the text. Students no longer have to simultaneously take notes and listen to our comments, as they do in a conference. Rather, we can embed comments and questions into a draft-in-progress, and the student can return a message if suggestions are unclear or unhelpful. Through subsequent exchanges, we can work toward clarification that will be captured in text, not ephemeral conversation. Some students prefer to send shorter messages but to keep their texts cleaner by attaching them to email messages. In those instances, we typically use a comment feature in our word processing program to embed comments that students can open when they're ready to take account of our advice.
  - When students post their work-in-progress on our electronic bulletin board, they can read and comment on each other's work, also assuming the supportive role of reader helping to clarify meaning. Moreover, as we comment in the same ways, students come to see a teacher's voice as one among many providing advice, not authoritative prescription or evaluation at this point.

For example, Chris acknowledged a peer's helpful response to her draft in an email message to Jamie, but she went on to voice her concerns about the emerging draft. Jamie's response (again in green) also values the peer's contribution as it goes on to suggest other approaches Chris might take in the next draft:

Genevieve suggested I make my thesis clearer--state near the start what I want the reader to do and why. I want them to choose cloth diapers over disposables, and primarily because they'll save money and not exert any more energy than using disposables. Most claim they use disposables due to convenience and cloth are just as convenient. Genevieve suggested I separate out the last sentence on the second paragraph because my thesis is not they should use cloth only because they'll save money. I will attempt this. Jamie, again I feel this is unorganized. Am I being too informal in my language? Too personal? I didn't want it to be a real factual, boring essay because the reader wouldn't want to read the whole thing. Any ideas or suggestions????

I think her suggestions are good ones, and I also think your instincts about the draft are on track. I had a bit of trouble following you through the essay. I think you are trying to suggest that most people will use disposable diapers without even thinking about it--because we see the ads, because that's what our friends do, etc. Why not organize your reasons to reconsider disposables around concerns your audience will have--such as cost, convenience, what's better for the baby, what's better for the environment. Then you could address concerns that your audience might still have--are cloth diapers drippy? How do you use them, etc. As far as your informal approach goes, I think it works, but you may emphasize what **you** do too much. Instead of a "me" v. "you" approach, why not use a "we" approach....

In effect, Chris shows through her questions that she understands just how important readers are when they suggest useful revisions to improve a paper. And Jamie demonstrates through the advice she gives that supportive questions and advice will most help Chris revise to clarify her argumentative point.

The following email exchange with another student illustrates several of the advantages we see for combining portfolio and electronic communication strategies to emphasize "facilitator" comments while students are drafting and revising. When Marie became frustrated with her progress on a draft, she sent this email message. Her message precedes Kate's responses in green:

I have not been able to connect with my peer reviewer. I had my roommate who took CO300 last semester review my convincing essay. I need to add more evidence to support my reasons. The original draft was based primarily off of a fact sheet Weyerhaeuser policy, but to revise it I have now have articles from policies in Australia and British Columbia, Canada. I'm also planning to interview a professor in forestry and a professional of a private industry. I also need to combine some of my reasons. The first reason I had was that clearcutting allows industries to provide a product into the future. That can be combined with the reduction of the number of roads that need to be built because the less number of roads, the less soil erosion, the better the soil is to provide a surface to plant trees in. Also the fact that clearcutting plays a necessary part of the physiology of the tree could be combined in this reason. If the environment is tailored to the physiology of the tree, the better the tree will grow, the more product for fewer trees. I could use the interview with the professor to support that the physiology of some plants need for them to have direct sunlight and no competition. I will also add an additional reason that clearcutting is a legitimate forest management practice. There are laws that govern clearcutting as a practice making it safe for water, wildlife and soil. These are the primary revisions I will make to my paper.

Don't forget to find some sources that present opposition arguments. Even though you want to present a convincing case from your point of view, one thing you need to do to appear thorough is to take up and refute the main opposition points.

Who are you thinking of writing this argument to? Have you given some thought to specific audiences that you can convince and persuade?

Because Marie already had a plan in mind for her entire paper, she wanted a rationale before changing that plan. She retains control of the paper by asking for clarification of earlier advice. Kate's comments from the earlier message are still in green; Marie's questions about the advice are in green:

> Don't forget to find some sources that present opposition arguments. Even though you want to present a convincing case from your point of view, one thing you need to do to appear thorough is to take up and refute the main opposition points.

> who are you thinking of writing this argument to? Have you given some thought to specific audiences that you can convince and persuade?

Do we have to have opposing information? Since I'm writing about clearcutting I often show how partial cuts would have a greater affect on the environment. I'm not quite sure how to incorporate opposing viewpoints. Also some of the information I have gotten through personal experience working at Weyerhaeuser and taking classes here. How should that be documented or referred to?

I have given some thought to the audience, I forgot to write it to you. I was thinking that both audiences could be homeowners in the area. For the convincing paper, I would convince the homeowners that clearcutting from the already established company is not detrimental to their environment and for the

persuading, I thought I would persuade them to let a forest product company establish in the area. I think the persuading idea is a little sketchy, could you possibly suggest a better way to hone my ideas?

Marie's questions suggest not only that she felt comfortable rejecting coaching advice that seemed headed in the wrong direction for her but also that she was already thinking of ways her argument would anticipate and rebut potential opposition arguments. Also, knowing a target audience helped Kate to frame advice in terms of Marie's effectiveness with potential readers. Kate replied the next day with an email message that included her original comments, Marie's questions above, and Kate's latest responses. We have cut the repeated material here to save space and included only Kate's second round of response in green:

Almost every convincing argument is stronger if it takes account of the main opposition points. If you continue to write to homeowners about clearcutting, then you may need to consider some of the arguments they might have heard about the damage clearcutting causes in large forest areas--soil erosion, loss of habitat, mudslides, etc. You can probably explain the habitat issue without much detail, but if you are talking to an audience living downhill from an area to be clearcut, then the mudslide problem is one you must address.

You can document informal sources of communication by noting the class and prof for a lecture given at csu. Usually these start with the prof name, the class title, and the date. Then simply call the material "class lecture." On-the-job experiences can usually fit under the heading of personal communications. Try to remember who you learned something from; give that person's name and the approximate date.

Your audience plans could work if you define a very specific community and take into account their locale, attitudes, and values. Some folks move to wooded areas because they just like trees. Even if they can be convinced that there are no environmental consequences from clearcutting nearby, they may object because of aesthetic concerns. If you overlook this value they might hold dear, then you'll have a very hard time persuading this audience.

If you're writing to the fairly isolated homeowner living in a lodgepole stand, you might have a better chance of persuading that person to do some partial clearcutting because of the hazards associated with climax stands. I think I'm guessing too much about what you're planning to do in the paper. Why don't you let me see a draft and maybe I can come up with better options then.

We've quoted such a lengthy exchange to illustrate two points:

- how supportive responses can guide a student without undercutting her authority and control over her writing, and
- how email captures our conversations for each of us to review when we need reminders of specific details we covered.

Shortly after this exchange--about a week later--Marie raised a number of other points about the paper in progress, points she might not have made in such detail in a face-to-face meeting. Kate's responses are interwoven in green with Marie's message:

I have become very frustrated in the last couple of weeks working on these papers. Mostly it has to do with the fact that as midterms approached I have gotten extremely busy with my other classes. I have had a hard time finding time to make it to the lab around work and other classes assignments. I finally found some time and went to the library and spent four hours looking for things. I got help from the reference librarian and I looked at the abstracts and I thought I had a lot of info until I actually went to look for it. The library had hardly anything I had found. I ended up after four hours only having two new sources. I have found the internet to be the most useful because at least when I take the time to look things up they are actually there. Do you have any suggestions to making this process less frustrating?

Unfortunately, the research process is more often messy and frustrating than not. Especially right now with our library [after a flood destroyed major parts of the journal collection], frustration is the name of the game. Using the shuttle to work at another school might make life easier, but you'll want to be sure they have materials before you go there. If you find library sources, check on carl to see which libraries have the books or journals you need before you take a travel day.

Otherwise, the research part is just one of those elements of writing that can always be a problem. Give it as much time as you can, and then try again to find a local expert who might be able to help you shortcut some of the process. Have you tried calling around on campus to see who might be willing to let you interview them?

I have also had trouble making it in to the [computer] lab to get things worked on. And when I finally do it seems like I spend all of the time I have in the lab on dailys and have not been able to actually spend much time working on my essays. I'm hoping this will get better now that I am done with the majority of my midterms but do you have any ideas of how I could work around lab hours? I also am not sure I'm using the computer right because today it took me twenty minutes just to get into the class page. It seemed I would click on something and then have to wait five minutes before I could click anything else.---IS there something that I was doing wrong or was the system just being very slow?

Even our computers should not be responding so slowly, but monday was a particularly bad day in 227. Almost everything was broken. I know how inconvenient that can be (because it goofed up my schedule too). When you find yourself faced with a technical problem, ask if anyone else is having trouble. Sometimes it's a single machine, not the whole room.

The lab upstairs is open from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m every day (different weekend hours) and you can use that one just as if it were our classroom. Perhaps the extra hours will help a bit.

At this point, if the dailies are getting in the way, just skip them. You need to be concentrating on your papers, and the daily writing is just another way for me to help you think of revisions to your papers. But don't do them if they're just slowing you down.

I just wanted to let you know why I have not gotten a whole lot done on my paper and if you have any suggestions on how to make this a less frustrating experience I would really appreciate it.

I hope some of these suggestions help. If you continue to feel so frustrated, why don't you stop and let me see where you are so far. We can probably work out a plan to find the info you need and get the writing going if we look at it together.

Later the same afternoon, the student sent another email message, this time moving back into substantive issues about her draft. Kate's sent the embedded responses (in green) shortly after she received Marie's message:

If I limit my evidence to just the area specific to the Pacific northwest, I don't think I'll have enough to cover the length of paper you're looking for. I'm not suggesting that you not draw on other information, just that you tailor it for the local area. Focus on local species and conditions if you possibly can. Does that help?

Most of the information on the internet is Rainforest related, and all the books were washed away this summer. I'll keep looking. Let me know if focusing turns out to be a huge problem.

Also is it ok if I make up a company name for the second paper, or should

I just use Weyerhaeuser as a reference. Most of the info I have is based on my experience with them, but I wasn't necessarily writing the paper as Weyerhaeuser coming into the area. I know they continually publish articles on my subject because they continually have to reassure people that what they are doing is all right. Thanks for the review, it was very helpful in how to proceed on this paper and the next one. Just using weyerhauser seems fine to me. I'm glad the comments got you set in a good direction.

Such expressions of frustration are not a waste of time to you, the teacher. Serious writers need to learn to deal with frustration because it often precedes a breakthrough in understanding. In Marie's case, her frustration prompted questions that we could respond to. She was able to return to the substance of her paper with a renewed sense of purpose that, had she not gotten feedback via email, might have evaporated. Fundamentally, our ability to support students as writers learning a complex process is no longer limited to class or office hours, the occasional telephone conversation, or a draft-in-progress. With electronic communication, students can ask for help whenever they need it, and we can respond with detail that we know won't be lost through face-to-face conversation. Students can read and re-read our advice, and when they don't understand it, ask for clarification.

Finally, our support is not all that students receive when they engage in email exchanges like these about their writing. Equally important, students writing these message are reflecting on their writing processes and their texts, and this type of metacognitive reflection captured in writing is still relatively rare for many students in our classes. What they learn from articulating their questions about an emerging draft constitutes a key element of their progress as writers. As another student summed up in her end-of-semester comments:

The more writing I do the better I get at putting my thoughts down on paper. I think I expressed myself very well in my second portfolio and was able to get across what I wanted to say in an intelligent well-organized way.

We've focused on email through most of this section because our students find it the easiest way to communicate with us. But electronic communication can also include chat rooms and discussion forums (electronic bulletin boards). When students use these forms of electronic communication, they can engage peers as well as teachers in responding to

text. These shared forums also add some complexity for teachers because other students will read the teacher's comments on a paper-in-progress. For teachers, such open forums present an advantage: when an assignment needs to be clarified or when a teacher sees several students having similar problems with their texts, one comment can teach several students.

To sum up, portfolios encourage us to stay in a supporter or coaching role as long as possible. Electronic communication adds timeliness and "concreteness" by capturing our coaching and students' reflections in text. The combination of portfolios and electronic communications allows students the time they need to work toward their own solutions to writing problems and to ask for help along the way when they need it. As Yancey (1992) explains,

In a portfolio classroom, the teacher sets out quite explicitly to "create" the time necessary for writers to develop. In practice, what this means is that the piece initiated on Monday need not be submitted a week or two later for a final evaluation. Instead, it can be reseen and reshaped and revised in light of what is learned days or weeks or even a month or two later. (104-105).

## **Moving from "Supporter" to "Evaluator"**

Ultimately, though, writers want to know how well their writing communicates with its target readers. In our professional lives, for instance, we can judge the effectiveness of our writing by the responses we get to assignments we set up for classes, by the grant that is awarded based on our proposal, by the acceptance from a journal editor for a submission. Students, too, need and learn from these kinds of evaluations. Unfortunately, we cannot take the time to see if a student's proposal for elk population management is accepted by the U.S. Forest Service or if noise abatement programs are adopted in urban neighborhoods. And so as teachers we must step in to evaluate how successfully that student has marshalled her arguments. Evaluating, as best we can, how a piece of writing will fare in a real-world transaction with target readers is an essential part of our jobs as teachers who assign writing, in a composition class or in a disciplinary class.

We do not, however, need to abandon completely the role of coach or supporter when we evaluate the "final" products in portfolios. We can continue to praise the progress students have made as they revised, and we can invite them to continue the metacognitive reflection that helps them learn from each round of commentary they receive from peers and teachers from the beginning to the "end" of a paper. (See Sommers 1989, Mills-Courts & Amiran 1991, Ingalls 1993, and Camp 1992, on the role of student reflection in the portfolio process.) We include here the portfolio evaluation Kate wrote for Marie. In it, Kate praises strengths in Marie's work, particularly in those areas she has been concentrating on, and then points her toward ways to think about improving her revising strategies. Kate keeps the focus on larger rhetorical concerns and tries to help Marie look forward to upcoming work, in this course or in others:

Marie,

You've done a nice job with this portfolio, especially because you've been able to build from your personal experience toward detailed arguments. Having strong personal feelings on this topic seems to have helped you flesh out your arguments, and being from the area helped you identify with your target audiences.

First, a few comments about your persuasive paper. Most of my marginal notes, as you'll see, have to do with structure. You set up the overall plan of your paper in paragraph one, but that list of major points you'll cover doesn't prepare the reader for 3 1/2 pages on environmental concerns and one paragraph each on economic benefits and safety issues. A better strategy is to tell readers up front that you'll concentrate on environmental arguments and bring in the other two areas only briefly. Then you can go on to give readers a better notion of how you'll organize the long chunk on the environment. Basically, giving readers a better sense of your overall structure helps them concentrate on the quality of your arguments rather than spend energy figuring out how reasons relate to each other.

What you do quite well in this paper, though, is to appeal to the reader's love of the outdoors and concerns about the environment. You head off the aesthetic objection before readers really get a chance to raise it. (Did you consider using any of the pictures from your brochures? Sometimes a picture can be even more persuasive than words are, especially when trying to persuade a reader that the location will look unblemished.) Good work on these persuasive elements.

The convincing paper is stronger than the persuasive paper because you use your details to good advantage and the paper has a more overt structure. Headings worked well for you in this one. You do a nice job of setting up the background information and then moving into the key areas where readers might have concerns or raise objections. The wildlife paragraph is especially effective here because you include good, specific details.

As you think about the final portfolio, be sure to consider three key areas:

make the structure of the paper as clear as you can, particularly if you decide to do a complex or layered analysis with more than one feature; be specific by drawing on the text (don't hesitate to quote if that makes your point) or detailing your analysis in other ways; consider revising carefully for style to combine strings of sentences that fall into the same patterns; relatively short sentences that always follow the same pattern can begin to make the writing seem choppy or simplistic.

Good work here, especially in establishing and maintaining audience contact.

At the end of the portfolio process, we feel confident that our comments overall meet the three necessary conditions Freedman (1987) discovered in her detailed study of effective response strategies:

Regardless of teachers' philosophies, several necessary conditions underlie successful response. First, it leaves the ownership of the writing in the hands of the student writer. Successful teachers provide plentiful guidance but resist taking over the writing of their students. . . . Second, it communicates high expectations for all students. . . . Third, accompanying their high expectations, these teachers give students sufficient help during the writing process to allow them to write better. . . . Giving help . . . means allowing students time and providing support while they work to communicate their ideas. (160-1)

Let us include one final example to illustrate these points in action. Janice sent via email an overview of problems she was encountering in her early drafting. She takes control ("I need," "I want") and when Kate's advice (in uppercase letters) in paragraph 2 clearly contradicts Janice's plan of attack in paragraph 6, Kate backtracks to reinforce Janice's control over writing choices. But Janice knows she needs to focus (paragraph 1), and Kate reinforces that element of effective argumentation in paragraphs 2 and 7. Interestingly, this student interpreted the advice in paragraph 5 as both opening up options and setting standards, because her next draft recast the argument as a tri-fold brochure pressing for a new local ordinance in her hometown.

I need to narrow down my topic because it seems too general. I also need to organize the essay better because it seems to jump from idea to idea.

The transitions between my paragraphs need to be improved as they give no indication of where the essay is going between paragraphs.

Try taking these major revisions one at a time. You may not need to worry so much about transitions once you've focused and reorganized, so leave that one until a bit later.

I want my audience for my paper to be those who live in and visit Florida. Is that too broad of an audience? Florida is the only state in the U.S. who has a coral reef and I thought directing my paper to them would be good because they would be aware of the coral reefs and for them it would be a problem that was in their own backyard. Am i going about this wrong? How do I get that across in the paper who my audience is?

You don't need to work a statement of your audience into your paper itself, but sometimes that happens just by chance (e.g., because you live in Florida, you already know the beauty ....). I will have you jot down your target audience on the final draft you turn in for grading so that I know whom you're writing to.

One other way to think about your audience might be to consider possible venues for publication. A travel magazine, for instance, might reach visitors. A chamber of commerce publication might reach Floridians. You may find it easier to narrow your audience a bit. One student who wrote on this topic last year finally decided to target the business people who lived and worked right on the beachfront, and that allowed her to make very specific suggestions in her persuading essay. Another student wrote to scuba divers planning on traveling to Florida. Both focused audiences seemed to help the writers come up with good arguments for their papers.

I also don't raise many counter arguments in my paper and this li need to do more of because this will help improve my paper. I do think that once I get my essay organized that it will be easier to follow and I will have and easier time writing it. Right now I am having a lot of difficulty and I think that results from there being a lack of organization.

Ok, so maybe you do want to start here. But don't get committed to a particular organization until you're pretty sure your focus is narrow.

You sound as if you're off to a great start!

Janice spent the next three weeks--through her questions and self-reflection with Kate's support--refining the paper into an excellent argument.

Providing this kind of detailed support as students draft and revise papers may not eliminate the schizophrenia of serving as both coach and gatekeeper at different points in the teaching/evaluation process, but it can make stepping into the evaluator role a much more comfortable part of overall response.

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