

TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO STUDENT WRITING

Speakers: Chris Anson, *University of Minnesota*
Robert Probst, *Georgia State University*
Introducer/Recorder: Jean Dalton, *Campolindo High School, California*

Chris Anson described his work examining both student writing and teacher response to that writing. For his research, he examined samples of student writing as well as students' attitudes and approaches to writing in order to identify them as either "dualistic" or "relativistic." Dualism is indicated by an attitude in which the world is either good or bad, right or wrong—a world based upon absolute judgments in which multiplicity is not a choice. Relativism, on the other hand, reflects an attitude which supports constant evaluation and analysis.

Anson discovered these attitudes in student thinking as he examined students' writing and tapes of their discussion of writing at Indiana University. When the samples were then read and responded to by Indiana teachers, the responses themselves were often either dualistic (corrections pointing out error with the teacher as judge) or relativistic (offering options and emphasizing ideas rather than mechanics, with the teacher avoiding a judgment). When student and teacher differed in their approach, communication broke down. Anson offers the following implications:

1. Dualistic response models may entrench students in dualism.
2. Relativistic response models encourage students to question their own writing instead of expecting answers to it, but "purely" relativistic responses do not help students to *know* what effects their texts have on different readers.
3. Responses alone cannot help students to acquire more relativistic models of writing; the writing curriculum as a whole must encourage students to question their own writing and it must provide them with feedback.
4. Teachers must be sensitive to their students' models of writing and literacy, responding differently to students with different cognitive and learning styles. We must be cautious about restricting feedback to written comments—students need to *discuss* their writing, and we need to *discuss* it with them (peer-group conference, tape-response methodology, etc.).
5. We must be extremely cautious about pigeonholing students according to general taxonomies of cognitive style, especially if we do not have adequate knowledge of the students' work, attitudes, etc.

Robert Probst responded to the topic pointing out that we are basing our assessment of writing on the idea that there is a "right" and a "wrong" to judge by, and that assessment depends on a present rubric. Probst warned that this approach may be dangerous if used in the classroom, and that the teacher's role should not be one of judge but of "director of dialogue." The teacher should respond to student writing by stimulating dialogue and by exposing the student to the teacher's own broader experiential background. Probst referred often to Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory and to her idea that mean-

ing resides in the person, not only in the marks upon the page. Although we must all agree roughly on the meaning of words, each of us brings our own interpretation to that meaning colored by our experience and environment. Probst argued that writing or reading is an active partnership and that as the teacher is a reader of text, he or she will interpret out of his or her own experience and may misinterpret meaning because of his or her own bias. Often teachers encourage and reward only the kind of writing they themselves do. Probst sees the teacher as a collaborator, an audience to lead the student writer toward an understanding of a greater audience, but each writer must come to judge for himself or herself, to interpret self, to enlarge self through reading of his or her own text.

During the question/answer period, Probst allowed that there is both reader-based and writer-based writing but that perhaps both could exist, could merge, so that what mattered to the audience would also matter to the writer, and what mattered to the writer would also be of importance to the reader, at least to the reader-teacher.

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