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face-to-face contact, verbal and nonverbal cues. I can hear the boredom behind a half-hearted "I liked my topic" and address that. I can ask a pointed "Why should I be interested in reading this?" yet support the writer with my undivided attention. I can tell when my encouragement begins to cloy or when I've been too rough and need to ease off. What I may be too polite to say, I can groan.

I *avoid lonely late-night paper reading marathons*. I enjoy talking to students more than writing marginal notes. Except for 7 nights my first semester conferencing, I left my papers at school.

I enjoy *more immediate access to my students' composing processes*. Recently I asked "Why'd you use a comma here?" and discovered a rule distortion that corrected most of that writer's surface errors. I could but wouldn't have done the error analysis alone. Asking is easier and quicker.

I *return papers faster*. On each paper I write only an R (revision required) or a checkmark (revision optional). That doesn't take long, and if the student wants, I can mark text in conference. A week used to be the minimum time I kept papers; now it's maximum.

I *may be saving time*. I'm certainly giving *more and better feedback per unit of time*. I used to spend 10-20 minutes writing comments on a paper. Audiotaped critiques took less time, but I couldn't gauge writers' reactions, and they couldn't respond to my misreadings. Now students happily confront me with my misinterpretations, and I happily point out why the text induced such insanity.

The first term I used Responsive Teaching was the first semester in 13 years I turned grades in early. Last semester, needing more time for administrative duties and bowing to students' requests for written feedback, I began writing summary responses on all student papers *and* conferring with students who wanted conferences. Compared to semesters of all-conference feedback, last semester's students averaged fewer drafts per paper, fewer excellent papers at end of term, and more cancelled or no-show conferences. And I was late submitting final grades.

I'm returning to Responsive Teaching, but not just for those reasons. Responsive Teaching puts the primary responsibility for improving writing where it belongs—on the writers—and I like teaching that way.

Behind the Paper: Using the Student-Teacher Memo

Jeffrey Sommers, Miami University-Middletown

Freshman composition instructors teaching a process-oriented course rather than a product-oriented one face a number of problems. How can they effectively make students aware of how their own composing occurs? How can instructors respond in an informed way to students' developing drafts? How can instructors reduce students' anxiety sufficiently so that they can learn how to improve as writers? I would like to offer one classroom technique, the student-teacher memo, as at least a partial answer to these questions.

One of my students called the student-teacher memo an invaluable tool for going "behind the paper." That phrase, wonderfully concise, explains the purpose of the technique: it is intended to take both student and teacher behind the paper, into the composing process which produced the draft. Along with each writing assignment, my students receive a brief assignment sheet for the memo, consisting of several questions about their written drafts, some of which ask them to evaluate their text, and

some of which ask them to describe and comment on their composing processes. When the students hand in the draft for me to comment upon, they also hand in their completed memos, which I read before responding to their papers. Questions about pre-writing, organizing, and projected re-writing compel each student to explore her composing process, a new experience for many students. As we open a dialogue about their work, my students and I go "behind the paper" together and discuss what has been difficult and what has been easy, what is working and what is not working, without my making judgments, thus inevitably reducing their writing anxiety. And unlike a one-to-one conference which potentially affords similar benefits, the student-teacher memo produces a permanent record for future reference by both students and teacher.

Including the student-teacher memo in the writing class should commence on the very first day of class when the syllabus is distributed. By introducing the concept at the beginning of the course, teachers can avoid the problem of having students view the memos later as "additional work" suddenly and capriciously foisted upon them. In these opening day instructions I make sure to comment on the memos' two major functions: they focus my attention as a reader on the parts of the students' papers about which they feel the strongest need for response, and they also encourage students to think about what they have written and how they have gone about writing it. By being candid about the purposes of the memos, I can begin to present them for what they are: an opportunity for students to take advantage of, rather than another judgment tool for the teacher.

It is equally important to be candid when making the initial memo assignment during the semester, in order to reinforce the message given on the first day. For many students that first memo will establish a pattern for their memos for the remainder of the course, so it is important to encourage them to write honestly and in some detail. Here, for example, is how I worded the assignment for the first memo in a recent freshman composition course:

As I explained on the syllabus, each writing assignment this semester will also ask you to compose a memo to me in which you respond to several questions about the writing of the assignment itself. When you have completed your draft of the first assignment and feel ready to hand it in, you have one final task! You need to complete a memo for me. Remember—this memo will not be graded. You may choose to answer each question in separate paragraphs, or you may choose to write a comprehensive answer in the form of a single long paragraph. The choice is yours.

If you take these memos seriously and write honestly about what you have experienced in writing the assigned paper, you can help me to comment more usefully on your papers. I think you will also learn more about your own writing practices through writing me these memos (which is one reason why I'd like you to save them—so that you can look at them again as the semester progresses).

So—relax, your first draft is completed! Now, write me a memo in which you respond to the following questions.

Of course, the success of the student-teacher memo depends heavily on the questions to which the teacher seeks responses. Generally, each memo asks students to answer about four questions or question-clusters. The assignment already quoted above continued by posing these questions:

1. Is there any part of your essay which you can trace back to your journal? If so, which part(s)?

2. What part of this essay is the most successful or best part? Why?
3. Which part(s) do you think will need revision? What, in particular, do you want me to comment on?
4. Show me a passage which you would have written differently if you were writing an essay for a teacher instead of a personal letter to a friend [as assigned]. What would be different?

By asking such questions, teachers can consistently take students behind their papers. Questions can be used to reinforce ideas and techniques discussed in class; the value of keeping a journal, for example, may be demonstrated to students when they answer question 1 above. I also use these questions at times to *suggest* writing approaches; by asking “which part do you think will need revision?” I can suggest that most writing only becomes effective after the writer has rewritten it. When students are asked to identify the best part of their papers, they infer that there *is*, in fact, something good in the paper—a feeling that can lessen writing anxiety. Clearly, to make all of these points, as well as to keep the students’ interest in writing the memos high, teachers must vary the questions they ask from assignment to assignment. The best questions generally grow in some way out of the writing assignment itself. Most of the questions I have listed are useful for expository writing; for persuasive writing I can envision a series of additional questions about refutation techniques, audience awareness, and use of emotional and ethical appeals.

Explaining the function of the student-teacher memo, giving clear instructions on its use, and varying the questions asked will still not be enough alone to make the technique successful. Students also need to be stimulated to write the memos, or else those who do not enjoy writing nor think of themselves as adequate writers may become monosyllabic in their responses. Two approaches which can stimulate students to write memos of substance are to write your own sample memos and to share provocative student memos with the class.

In one composition class I wrote two drafts in response to the same assignment I had given students. After showing both drafts to the students, I gave them a memo in which I responded to the same questions I had asked them to answer. My purpose was to offer a model for their memos—a model in terms of length, depth, and honesty of response since I had confessed to doubts and difficulties in writing my two drafts.

Perhaps even more effective is to share with the class memos written by classmates. Here are excerpts from a student-teacher memo on an assignment which asked students to consider whether “special people deserve special treatment,” with specific reference to W. Somerset Maugham’s egomaniacal painter Charles Strickland (in *The Moon and Sixpence*). The detail and honesty of the memo served as a model for other students:

- Q: What is the logic behind the organization you have used in your paper?
- A: I wanted to explain special a little, then raise the question of special treatment. Then weigh the good with the bad. Then ask is special treatment necessary. Then use Strickland to explain how I feel on all of these questions. I wanted to use a little suspense in my answering of the question.
- Q: What materials did you consider using in the paper only to decide to omit? Do you think you will change your mind about this material when you revise?

A: I thought of using Dino Hall, running back for the Cleveland Browns, as another concrete example besides Strickland. But I found Strickland fit what I wanted to say more. I think I am through with that idea. I also thought of answering the special people/special treatment questions immediately, but I decided to throw it out. I may later change my mind and think that it may be more effective that way.

Q: What three questions would you like me to answer about your paper as I read and comment on it?

A: Do you think my hypothetical situation in the first two paragraphs is effective enough? Do you think I explained with my "two major factors" how I tell if a special person deserves all the special treatment they want? Do you think my holding back my answer was effective if indeed I held it back at all? Please one more. What do you think of my closing sentences? That is my favorite part of the paper. I need to know if it's that effective to other people, or should I change it?

The student-teacher memo can be applied in other ways. I find it useful to ask students handing in revisions of previously submitted papers to write a new memo answering the following three questions:

1. Which comments, suggestions, and observations of mine on your paper were useful to you in revising here? Can you be specific? Which comments were not useful? Why?
2. What have you changed in this version? Have you rewritten any of the paper (new ideas, new organization, etc.)? Have you revised any of it (style changes, word changes, etc.)? Have you edited any of it (corrected errors in spelling, usage, etc.)?
3. Which aspects of this revised version do you wish me to examine most carefully? (You can direct my attention to a specific page, paragraph, or line, or you can ask me to look at one of your more general concerns: organization, use of subordination, transitions, introduction, etc.)

The questions on these revision memos give students a chance to let me know how helpful—or unhelpful—I have been, what they have actually done in working further on their first drafts, and what still remains to be revised. I particularly like the third question because I think it implies that yet another revision may be needed, that "two drafts" is not the magic number for a finished piece of writing any more than "one draft" is.

Now that I have been using the student-teacher memo for some time, I find almost no drawbacks to them. They take very little time to read, partly because they are never much more than a page long, partly because the genuine voices in which they are written make them rather interesting reading. And writing up the assignments takes very little time because I have a backlog of useful questions to ask and because there are so many things I want to know about how my students have experienced their writing. My classes also seem to see the value of the memos and thus write them willingly for the most part. But, willingly or not, they do get in the habit of writing them, which means they also get in the habit of examining their own work closely, thinking about their composing processes, and addressing themselves to a reader about what they have written, all valuable activities for developing writers.