

Repetitive Strain: The Injuries of Responding to Student Writing

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Repeated motions doing damage to tendons, nerves, and other soft body tissues . . . [causing] tightness, discomfort, stiffness . . . coldness or numbness . . . clumsiness or loss of strength and coordination . . . pain that wakes you **up** at night. . . a need to massage. . . Another name for the condition is Cumulative Trauma Disorder.

—Paul Marxhausen

WHEN David Laurence asked if I would be on a panel about “problems and possibilities in responding to student writing,” I knew it was a bad idea. Not that there can be any doubt about the importance of responding. It’s where Teacher addresses Student personally as thinker—Student having finally done enough thinking on a subject, by dint of having had to write about it, to be so addressed. In a composition course, it’s where the items named in the intellectual, naming aspect of the course—the abstractions denoting essay features, criteria, moves, kinds—take on personal meaning for the student; and it’s where, in the emotional aspect of the course—the various feelings of validation, mortification, pride, frustration, ownership, puzzlement, excitement, dismay, desire—are released to do their work. It’s the single most important thing we do and the single important thing we do most of. It takes up more of our teaching lives than do reading and preparing classes; it sometimes takes up more of our home lives than do cooking, cleaning, and conversing. And it occupies an alarming portion of the collective educated mind: on a given weekday or Sunday evening between September and April, the number of people sitting down with coffee and a batch of student papers, or actively avoiding this, must be roughly the population of Cleveland.

As a general topic of discussion, however, responding to student writing has drawbacks, and one of them is that it’s so commonsensical. The basic laws and tricks of responding make themselves apparent, fairly quickly, to anyone who teaches writing for more than a

semester or two and has some basic interpersonal and survival instincts. A four-step recipe might go like this:

1. Look through your batch of papers before you start in, and through each paper before you mark it up—and through the reflective cover letter you have had each student write about his or her paper.
2. In the margins, acknowledge nice moments and derailing ones, casting some of your comments as questions and not fussing too much with details of expression (if you expect the draft to be seriously revised) and in any case not commenting on or repairing every instance of an error, but only a few examples.
3. In your end comment, start by saying something that shows you get the paper’s overall enterprise; then, working from the student’s comments in the cover letter, identify its strong moments and qualities (so you can ask students *to build on success* and hold their whole paper to the standard of their best moments); then make criticisms and suggestions only about the two or three most important problems, being careful not to take over the student’s essay or do the student’s work; and end on a generalizing note that looks forward to the student’s next effort.
4. Throughout, use the vocabulary of skills and criteria and pitfalls that you have given in your assignment and exemplified beforehand in your class—at the least by taking the class through a sample paper of the kind they are writing and describing your

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reactions and how you would come up with a grade and then letting the class itself assess a pair of papers.

That these practices are commonsensical doesn't mean that they shouldn't be written down, illustrated, argued for. Newcomers to the city of responders shouldn't have to learn the hard way. And evidently they don't: if you search "responding to student writing" on Google, you arrive, in 2.7 seconds, at the first of "about 230,000 entries" (you know you're in trouble when a machine can give you only a rough estimate). These entries are articles and books and abstracts, handouts and other training materials from writing centers and WAC programs, syllabi from graduate seminars on responding, sample responded-to papers, and even lists of phrases to use in responses—such as the one called "New Ways to Say 'Good,'" which I notice includes many exclamations that would work as well to say "Bad: 'I've never heard the word used that way before!'" or "You're kidding!" or "I'll have to read this again!" The 230,000 number is absurd, of course, since items appear countless times and endlessly refer to one another, making the information superhighway feel more like a knot of alleyways around a Turkish bazaar. But many of the pieces have come up independently with the same sound guidelines, whether they are cast as Four Things to Know about Responding, Six Keys to Responding, Eight Tips for Responding, or Ten Responses That Will Drive Your Man Wild. To think outside the box on this topic, one has to basically change boxes, as does one author (a professor of business writing) who, according to a straight-faced abstract,

describes a way to get around the problem of evaluating large numbers of student papers: hire paraprofessionals to evaluate the writing. Authors hired people with extensive editing experience to edit students' papers. Editors also conducted one-on-one tutorials with students. (Indiana)

It's an appealing idea—save ourselves from the work of responding by contracting it out—and it's fun to imagine the letter one might write to one's dean proposing it. But even so, the contract responders themselves would need to fall back on the four, *six*, or eight sound precepts.

One drawback of the topic responding to student writing, then, is that there aren't many possibilities. Another problem is that there are too many possibilities. If you're not following the four, *six*, or eight precepts, you're probably falling down somewhere; but if you are following them, you could very well be fall-

ing down anyway, since the act of responding is too situation-dependent to obey any laws beyond the most basic. The challenge of responding is the challenge of any communicating—saying the right thing at the right time; and this might make us recall that Swift's famous definition of good style, "proper words in proper places," is a wry response to the possibility of general rules and advice. Beyond the basic precepts, what you do in responding depends on your situation. You may be teaching two classes of fifteen students each, most of whom are fluent and grammatical writers, at ease in academic culture and highly motivated, who for each paper do some prewriting, which you respond to; then they write drafts that get discussed in workshops and individual conferences and that you respond to; and then they revise and get still more comments. Or you may be teaching three or four classes of twenty-five students, many of whom don't have basic fluency, aren't at ease in or motivated by academic culture, and who may not even get to write a draft. And in such different settings, there's a range of teaching styles: what works as an effective end comment for one teacher is a single-spaced page of typing; for another, it's five or *six* hand-written sentences. And there are different circumstances: the sound precept of not doing students' work for them can sometimes mean, "just tell them what's wrong," but other times means, "just tell them what's wrong and suggest how they might fix it" or "just tell them what's wrong and suggest how they might fix it, including what idea they should be demonstrating and what evidence they should be using."

And there are different stages of life. The most influential response I myself received on a college paper was in the margin, beside a purple piece of analysis of which I was particularly proud. It was a single question mark, in sharp pencil, without further comment. This mark had its meaning, and its mortifying corrective effect, because this teacher knew something about who I was (it was a small seminar), and I knew something about him (which he knew I knew): that he was someone whose mind and manner and standards I had fallen for and whose intellectual world I wanted to enter—even though a year earlier I had dropped his class in boredom, indeed dropped out of college altogether. Our responses to student writing have their meaning in the context of particular lives, only a little bit of which context we control.

And so, given the intractable difficulties of the topic, when David asked if I would be on a panel about responding to student writing, my response was to say,

“Well, sure.” And then to do what one does: come up with a place-holder proposal and a title that starts with a participle and alliterates on one of the currently approved abstractions, and *voilà* . . . my announced title (“Commenting in Context”). But why sign on at all? The immediate cause was probably David’s way of asking: I needed, he said, to write a “bookend to another talk, on assignments, that I had given a few years ago. In this homey, sneaky metaphor—implying that I had some kind of opus going, which I owed it to my reading public to complete and the work of which was already half done!—there is surely a lesson for how we might respond to student ideas. But what was really prompting me at that moment was a memory that attached to that first bookend, the paper on assignments, namely, the memory of getting a good many e-mails about it from strangers, four of whom thanked me especially for my account of responding to student writing. This gesture struck me, since that account of responding to writing came at a point early in the paper where I was entertaining the idea that writing assignments should be abolished. “Well,” I wrote,

why *not* abolish [them]? Most students hate doing them. . . and teachers hate grading them. Judged by any honest measure, most student essays to which we give Bs are vacuous, bored, and (read in quantity) soul-killing. Even as we jot our pert, fair-minded notations in the margin—“could be clearer here; develop”—we are really thinking, “What are you *talking* about? Why are you *doing* this to me?” When we come across a hint of a suggestion of an idea, we fall over ourselves to congratulate “a fine insight,” which insight we hungrily fill out and clarify even as we congratulate the student for having it. And student essays on literature are even more soul-killing than those on, say, psychology or political science, since the aesthetic distance between the language that students are writing about . . . the language that is the teacher’s joy and scholarly passion—and the language that students use to describe it is hugely great. . . . It’s only too easy to imagine how the authors we are teaching—say, Dickinson or Baldwin or Lawrence—would judge the whole hypocritical, mutually resentful interaction. (105–06)

From this point I went on in the paper to redeem, I thought persuasively, the mutually resentful interaction, and yet this little outburst of unredemption is what had stuck with my respondents. This memory connected in my mental underlife with an older memory: a movie I saw in grad school called *Butley*, in which Alan Bates plays a disaffected English professor, a master at avoiding responding to, or even encountering, his students. In one scene he listens, badly hungover, as an earnest tutee reads him her essay on *The Winter? Tale*, and the instant she leaves

he violently throws up into the trash can—which is what he is doing just as the student pops back in to ask him to clarify his response to her paper. The movie has a redemptive ending, I think, though I really remember only this one bit of low humor. And in fact most colleagues I encounter who remember the movie at all (or saw the play on which it was based) ask, “Isn’t that the one where he . . .?”

My surmise is that moments like these, like my satanic subcommentary and Butley’s office purgatorio, like the doubled-edged “Ways of Saying ‘Good,’” stick in the mind of teachers because they acknowledge injuries involved in responding that don’t often get acknowledged. The injuries tend to get subsumed in the more obvious injury of being overworked and underpaid and to be repressed by our can-do personalities and our liking for our students. They are also repressed, I think, by the very efforts that the composition world has made to dignify the work of responding to student writing, a key move in which dignifying has been the installation of the term *responding* itself—a less cerebral and mechanical, more personal, and generally more capacious alternative to “correcting” and “grading” and a term that elevates student writing to something worthy of an answer, not just a grade. This isn’t just sixties- and seventies-speak; the connotations of reciprocity and community invoked in this use of the word have deep roots in the language. The Anglo-Saxon word *spend* (L. *spendere*) means an offering, a promise, or a pledge and generates our *spouse*, *sponsor* (to promise or pledge something) and *responsible* (to hold to a pledge)—and also respond, to offer or pledge back in return. So strong are the dignified connotations that it *can* be jarring to encounter the word used in a less than dignified way, as in the unguarded opening statement that I remember once encountering, “Responding to student writing is an unavoidable part of teaching.” This just sounds wrong, even immoral. And yet there *is* something euphemistic and sentimental about the dignified connotations of *responding*, something that obscures (to the point where we need a carnivalesque purging) the stresses and contradictions of the work it denotes.

To the extent that *responding* suggests a unitary and directly personal gesture, in the first place, it obscures in the same way that the phrase “writing teacher” obscures, where a surface similarity to phrases like “piano teacher” and “chemistry teacher” hides from the outside world an awkward concatenation of roles. A title like “thinking teacher” might capture more of the

difficulty and awkwardness, but even that would fall short. A list of the roles we play in responding to student writing would include, in no particular order, *introducer* to the experience and expectations of college writing (many students will write their first college paper for us); *coach*, encouraging and exhorting, aware of where the essay has come from, how much effort the student has put in, what language is spoken in the student's home, and so on; *judge*, who sees only the essay itself in its essayness, as an effective or ineffective document in the public realm, and grades it as such; *fellow writer*, who faces the very same compositional challenges; *exemplar* (as the nearest instance available) of the life of the mind, of academic thinking, of excitement about a subject; *midwife-therapist*, who draws out raw feelings and reactions and hunches; *teacher-sage*, who puts *in* bits of wisdom: critical voice that students internalize; *collaborator* in brainstorming and planning essays; *representative of an institution*, its cheerleader, apologist, interpreter; *editor* and corrector of errors; *doctor*, who diagnoses, dispenses prescriptions and exercises; *trainer in manners*, socializing students into the tact and etiquette of responding to the work of others; *representative general reader*, unknowing, easily bored and confused; *representative academic reader*, who is knowing, needs no orienting summaries or clever hooks; *nonrepresentative teacher-redder*, aware of the assignment and its goals; *expert* in a particular content discipline, who has an advanced degree, who knows dates, background, debates; *expert in arguing and composing*, who knows all the tricks of, say, introductions and conclusions; *one? classroom persona*, the usefully nerdy caricature of ourselves that we create, who has pet peeves, and so on, and *one? actual self*, a person with kids or not, with a broken-down *car*, or marriage, or not, and always with other papers to get to.

Such a list—and it could be extended—makes us wish we were paid by the role rather than the course. Other jobs have some of this multiplicity, especially other teaching and helping jobs, but it's hard to think of another that has so many necessary selves. It's a matter not just of switching between these roles from time to time but often of playing several or all of them within the same short comment or conference. And it's a strain, this holding together, in an outwardly smooth and single self, so many activities that want to pull apart in different directions. It's a strain, and over time, with repetition, it inflicts damage on the nerves and soft tissue of our intellectual ideals and identity, of our intellectual best selves.

Take the strain of representing one's institution. The fact that liberal education is itself an unstable concatenation (e.g., is it useful, or an end in itself?) and that writing teachers are often in closer contact with student struggles with the relevance of liberal education, and at an earlier stage, than other teachers are, puts us on the front line of defense for certain concepts and assumptions that are tricky to defend on the fly. I mean questions like how writing these essays will help me later on, when I'm planning to be a vet; why interpretation isn't just subjective; why anyone should want, in writing, my ignorant opinions on questions that experts haven't been able to agree on. Such questions get asked directly, but also indirectly, by looks and silences and writing that clearly reflect doubt or confusion about them. They aren't unanswerable questions, but their proper answering requires experience and concepts that most students don't have. And this quandary, together with the harrying of our other agendas and papers to read, may make us feel like saying, "Just do it because I say so—you'll understand later." Which of course we never do say, because we need to keep the show on the road and because we aren't the kind of people who shy away from big questions or think it's OK to ask people to do something without understanding why. And, knowing as we do in our hearts that students learn from teachers, not courses, we hope that our responses to student writing can embody the values that can't be articulated for them, *can* be the example that makes the case.

And then there are the stresses of representing, as employees of particular institutions, particular intellectual concepts that, though central to our work as responders, may be hard to be utterly clear and firm about, even though being clear is what we're supposed to be modeling for students and indeed what our best selves want always to be. I have in mind not only the pedagogical premises and jargons of particular writing programs but also the concepts associated with college writing generally—such as, well, "collegewriting," which is what we are introducing students to as the kind of writing they need to do and which may be defined as, well, the kind of writing they need to do in college. Or the notion that students need to learn "academic discourse" because, although they wouldn't dream of becoming academics, they are joining "an academic community" or "an academic conversation," which they somehow weren't doing when they were taking courses in high school and which they're supposed to do now, even though they still don't have

expertise in any subject and even though the members of this community seem not to talk to most other members, let alone give drafts of their papers to students to respond to. Or the notion that good college writing is above all attentive to its audience, which in our students' case doesn't actually exist, although if they imagine their roommate and their high school English teacher as their audience, we (for whom they may seem to be writing but aren't really) will be able to imagine for them what their imaginary audience would think. I'm exaggerating a little—the concepts aren't all *that* muddled—but only to bring out how much of the burden to make them seem sweetness and light falls on individual teachers, especially on their responses to student writing.

Or take our role of writing pro and coach. Writing courses must teach writing: no matter what a student writes about or opines, in responding we need to address it as an argument, as skills to be learned so a case can be won—even though ideas are what interest us and what the student may most need to hear about. We can't say straight out what we think on the topic, as one would in a real conversation, and we must keep our politics out of it. Nor, since we must take as a given the structure and rationale of higher education—the disciplines, degrees, grades—can we engage in or invite meta-argumentative pondering of these matters, even if we feel such pondering to be at the heart of a liberal education. And students sometimes see and reflect back the oddness of our role: I once came upon, in a set of course-evaluation forms, the following explanation of why the student hadn't needed a writing course in the first place: "I already learned in high school the skill of making plausible arguments on subjects I don't really care about." (I've hung on to this particular form, presumably, for the same reason I hung on to the memory of Butley.) In practice, we usually do steal time to talk about ideas where we need to or to help the student find something she does care about or to bring the student diplomatically to see that his idea is offensive, but these efforts cost in other ways.

"Diplomatically" suggests another kind of eventually hurtful strain of responding, namely, that of maintaining the necessary tone of earnest optimism and encouraging appreciation, generally of *caring*, in our oral and written responses. The dishonesty intermittently involved in this—and here as elsewhere I'm speaking of courses involving academic texts and issues, not courses in business or technical or legal writ-

ing, where it's easier to be a hard-ass—is related to the dishonesty involved in guiding class discussions, in which we seem to let ideas emerge from the class but in fact have an agenda toward which we smilingly, and sometimes with enormous social effort, manipulate the discussion. We engage in this maneuvering in workshops on student drafts, of course, but it's worse, somehow, in one-on-one conferences and draft comments. Even when we respond as coolly and hardheadedly as we *can*, we find ourselves doling out "great!" like party mints and treating as exciting an idea that is a mere glimmer, as original what we ourselves had in mind all along, as interesting what we have been hearing about all day from every student, and as discussable what is downright lame. Everyone has to be a trimmer sometimes; but in responding to student writing, we may feel—we who chose academe because we didn't *want* to go into sales, didn't want to have to pretend to care—that we have become professional trimmers and are making unholy use of our gift for words.

It's just what works, of course, a means to an end. A good deal of writing is a confidence game, and part of our work in responding is to create the confidence in our students that they can be writers. If nothing else, it's practical to keep students emotionally receptive—or at least nonhostile—to what we have to say. But even so, and despite the satisfaction one gets when one's diplomacy pays off in a student's sudden growth, all that upbeat caring, year after year, can be numbing. And this may be the place to remember that another member in the family of *spond*, or offering, is *despond*—the state of not being able to offer up or offer back, the state of negative energy for offering.

And what, finally, of our role as fellow writer? We're usually most conscious, in responding to student writing, of not being able to be fellow writers, of not having time to do our own writing. But in another sense we are indeed fellow-writing all the time. With our attention and empathy focused on student writing, we may not realize what a huge amount of writing we are also doing ourselves, in the process. In our conferences and our comments on drafts, we think through and plan out a good many of our students' essays; we help grow them up. And with every end comment, we write a little essay ourselves, sometimes one that is much harder to write than its brevity and easy clarity would indicate. After we read a particularly weak or disaffected paper, it can take a major, coffee-fueled diagnostic effort to figure out what is

going on or what could be and to find the right emphasis and the right language for a response.

We seem driven to do this figuring out, despite knowing that the student may not appreciate or make use of it, because part of us deeply enjoys doing the work, enjoys the textual analyzing, enjoys the problem solving. And yet this isn't at all what our inner idealist thought that the contemplative life of writing and analysis would be. We imagined a larger audience (than one) for our efforts, and we didn't imagine that we would be always analyzing under pressure. We didn't imagine the pressure of the clock and the next incoming batch, which makes us feel desperate to cut down the time we spend on each paper, so the whole set doesn't take until next Christmas, and which also makes us feel guilty about wanting to cut any more corners, since as it is we have to ignore or overlook in every paper many issues of thought and almost **all** fine points of expression. Nor did we imagine the pressure to get results, the pressure to make our writing measurably successful in its effect on its audience or maybe be out of a job. And certainly we didn't imagine how much repetitiveness the writing life would involve, how much repetition of idea, tone, and structure (e.g., the "Good . . . but" format that's one of the Four, Six, or Eight Precepts). Nor is this a situation in which we *can* play with these clichés, in which we *can* wittily wink at or redeem them, counting on our readers' knowledge of standard advice and responses. They simply aren't cliche to these readers, who haven't read twenty similar papers in the preceding day and hundreds in the preceding years. Nor, to mention a final chafe of our inner writer, is the analysis we do in responding to student writing the kind of analysis whose delights drew us into this business in the first place, the capturing in words of a complex judgment of an elusive quality. Here our thesis is always blunt and quantitative—a letter grade. That at least is the thesis that most counts for the audience for whom we write. We can see what we're up against in the fact that the current exemplar of responding in our culture is Simon on *American Idol*, who just cuts to the grade, although I suspect that part of his appeal is also the way in which the ad hominem quality of his grading—either, "you're the real thing," or "you're the worst I've heard and always will be"—elides the fact that successful performing of any kind

takes not just talent but a lot of unglamorous hard work that we don't see.

And all these kinds of strain, these rubbings of what we do against who we are, or hope to be, happen again and again and again. When one is reading each paper in a batch with close attention to ideas and expression and morale and future papers the student may write and must get the whole import into a concise, usable response, the first ten or so papers can be kind of fun; the next ten and beyond will be increasingly less so, to the point where one flags, delays and avoids, feeds the dog, cleans the bathroom, makes more coffee, eventually forces oneself through to the bitter end. And writing teachers endure this forcing-through process more times each semester than other university teachers do, generally with fewer sabbaticals or other respites from burnout. So, although the repetitive strain injury (aka "cumulative trauma disorder") I've been describing may be hidden from the man in the street and the student in the class and although we may hide it from ourselves in the idealism of our latest teaching ideas and theories and conference papers, the phenomenon itself is obvious and unsurprising. The inner strains reflect outer strains that are historical and economic, are basically the strains of mass education. They are the strains of trying to convert to a systematic, rapid, and repeatable process an experience that is, and has been since Socrates and Phaedrus walked under the plane trees, impossible to convert and of asking people to accomplish the conversion whose instincts and aspirations make them particularly sensitive to the impossibility.

It's hard on the wrists, too.

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