This chapter suggests ways teachers can respond to what they observe in their students' writing so that students can understand, respond to, and learn from their teachers' written comments.

Negotiating the Margins: Some Principles for Responding to Our Students' Writing, Some Strategies for Helping Students Read Our Comments

Elizabeth Hodges

> *What I want most when a teacher responds to my writing is address the content. What do I present effectively or ineffectively. And why effective or ineffective. In order to help me I need any teacher to move beyond grammatical issues. To me it almost serves as a copout to only write comments on students' papers like tense problems, rough, awk. Well, what does that mean?*
> —Iris P. Bodiford

I have been collecting data on response for six years now in a series of projects using *talk-aloud protocols* as interview instruments (Hodges, 1992, 1994). From teachers who have worked with me, I have gathered *response protocols;* the teachers respond to their students' essays aloud as they generate their written responses in margins and end spaces, getting as much of what they are thinking on tape as possible. I get to hear their readings and rereadings of students' papers. I hear their conceptualizing and then their writing of comments. I hear their thoughts on students' abilities and performances. And almost always, I hear crucial conversations teachers try to have with their students, but more often than not, and most unnecessarily, these are conversations that their students never engage or become engaged in.

From their students, I have collected *reading protocols.* We meet. I return their essays. We talk some—about writing in general, about their class, about the

essay before us—and then the students read their essays aloud, incorporating and responding to teachers' comments as they go. I transcribe these tapes and make copies of the essays with teachers' written responses. Students who go on to rework essays bring me copies of their revisions. Thus I have been able to get a bit more than a glimpse of what goes on behind teachers' written commentary, that actual commentary that students see, as well as students' impressions of their essays and their teachers' written thoughts about the essays. To examine the data, I look at places where the teacher has initiated conversation in margins and end comments, and then I compare what's written to what teachers said on tape. These points of initiation I then pair with students' corresponding responses.

This strategy for analyzing the relationship of teachers' response to students' reception of that response has given me a rich sense of teachers' goals for the content and rhetoric of their responses. I have been able to see what does and does not make it into the margins and end comments, what correlations exist between the teachers' responses to individual writers and their essays' content and the teachers' abilities to develop clear goals for responding. I can see when teachers and students are having or not having the same conversations and can characterize the two sides of such conversations. I can identify patterns in both teachers' and students' modes of response.

This research has led me to some critical conclusions. The margins of students' written work are the ideal site for teacher-student conversations about what and how students are thinking about their essay subjects, about how teachers respond to their thinking, and about the subjects themselves. Regardless of which discipline we teach in, we can do some of our most successful teaching in the margins and end spaces of students' written work, perhaps more than we can in any other site. The margins allow us to work one-on-one with our students and to leave a record of what work we have done that students can return to repeatedly. However, what I see most often in the margins are conversations that misfire. I see teachers fail, in myriad ways, to articulate what they observe in their students' work so that their students can understand and respond. I see students ignore important messages in our feedback, sometimes because teachers have framed these messages so that they seem idiosyncratic, matters of personal choice. I have seen students get angry and shut down, not just in terms of particular essays but in terms of the entire semester's course.

In brief, written feedback fails more often than not, largely for reasons that are avoidable. In the first section of this chapter, I offer three teacher-student interactions that let us eavesdrop on the teachers' voices behind their written responses and on the students' voices negotiating these written responses. Each case suggests some principles for our own response practices, for successful response practices. Each case also emphasizes that though most teachers can improve on their practices, a key to making written commentary work is teaching our students how to make sense of what we say and then how to do what they need to do.

Case 1: Terry and Ms. Thorn

There is a world-weary, even cosmic shrug I have seen students give, many times, when I have prompted them to explore the relationship of their teachers' comments to grades or requests for revisions. The following is from a transcript of a conversation I had with one such student, a participant in a 1993 data collection:

"Terry, how do you go about fitting what Ms. Thorn has written in your margins into your own essay?" I ask.

"I'm not all that up on comments," he responds.

"What do you mean 'not all that up on comments?'"

"I mean they don't mean much to me most of the time. Sometimes I don't bother reading."

"Hmmm. Do you have any sense of what responses you want teachers to make to your writing?" I ask.

"I really don't because it just, it just baffles me anyway how I can write a paper on something I don't care about at the last possible minute and rush it in thinking it's trash and I get back 'Good' and a B or A. I mean why?"

"So you do have a sense of what you want. Explanation of what a grade or comment means, to begin with?"

"Yeah. I yeah. Explanation would help."

"How does the end comment explain your grade here?" I ask.

Terry turns to the end of his paper and laughs, a short bark of a laugh. "'Good' and C C is that a C minus?" I look and say yes. "She writes," he says, and then he reads, "'Good. Your paper is basically well written but I need you to further develop certain parts of it and I need one more text. See my notes and see me if you have questions. I'm looking forward to your revision.'" Terry laughs, "So do I. Look forward to my revision I mean."

I ask Terry what he is going to do now about making revisions. He shrugs and asks what I suggest. I suggest that he go back through the essay, reading it, and make note of where she asks for more information, "further development," I clarify. "That makes sense," Terry responds and writes down "where she asks for more," a note to himself. Then he asks what she means by "I need one more text." I know the answer; the assignment asked students to synthesize three texts from her list, and he used two from that list and another not on the list. But I think he needs to work this out with Ms. Thorn, so I suggest he first go back to the assignment and see if he missed something. If he still can't figure it out, I suggest he ask her. "That makes sense," he says again. Finally, I ask him how he might find out what Ms. Thorn means by "Good" in her end comment. He shrugs.

"Ask her, Terry. Ask her," I say. He is noncommittal. I wonder what, if any, of these commonsense strategies he will take up in an effort to understand his teacher's comments and improve his essay. I wonder if and when he will learn how to be an active participant in the conversations teachers have with him in the margins of his writing and in their end comments.

Beyond noncommunication, what else is wrong with this picture? My first thought when I look at the transcript excerpt is that Terry, though clearly intelligent and thoughtful, seems to have no clue as to how to find answers to his very reasonable questions about his teacher's comments. If, indeed, that is the case, Terry and his like need to learn to initiate these crucial interactions with us. They need to learn that they can seek us out to talk about their work, that we expect them to. So perhaps one of our tasks as responders to students' written work is to teach students to approach us and learn to ask questions about their work. That is one way to help them learn to learn actively. I think making clear to them that we are accessible involves relatively simple moves on our part. We can return their written work with time still left in class for them to read through our comments and ask questions then and there. We can teach them how to read our comments by modeling the different ways we might read a piece of their writing.

We can make sure, too, that they believe us when we invite them to come see us. Ms. Thorn's invitation, "See my notes and see me if you have questions," at first may seem a fair offer, but not when I have read it on a trillion other essays. I suspect that by the time our undergraduates are juniors and seniors, they have seen the same invitation a few times themselves. Such a comment appears near the end of almost every end note, and its very phrasing is distancing. "See my notes" comes before "see me," and the conditional "if" can really silence students who know they have questions but are not sure what those questions are and how to ask them.

Enter the cosmic shrug. We can, as responders to their writing, help students learn what the questions are simply by explaining our comments more—perhaps by offering models in our comments for how to structure statements, use certain terms, articulate certain kinds of concepts, order statements leading from cause to reaction. In their response protocols, I hear teachers often anticipate questions a comment might evoke. Those who are more successful in their responses are the teachers who anticipate and frame such a question here or there in the margins. For example, Ms. Thorn could have said, "I need you to use one more text. Why? Remember the list I gave the class? You only used two, not three, as I required." At that point, Terry might ask, "But Ms. Thorn, I used a third text which fit better with my discussion. Wasn't that text a good choice?" And if he takes that question to her, negotiation and conversation are alive and well.

My second thought when I look at the excerpt is that I know more about Ms. Thorn's responses than Terry does. Ms. Thorn has, as part of my study, responded to his essay aloud, taping her thinking and generating of comments as she goes. She tells me, *not* Terry, that he's "got a natural flair for using English. His papers start out with a lot of grammatical problems, but he's got a real ability to focus and a really dynamic way of structuring crucial sentences so that he really nails what he wants to say. He can catch most the problems if he proofreads." To Terry, she describes his paper as "basically well written." My immediate question is obvious: isn't it more important for Terry to hear these

positive responses than me? If he knew what she thinks about his writing, wouldn't he be able to move closer to some knowledge of himself as a writer, to ask her what she means by "a natural flair" and so on? Perhaps at some point she will voice her praise to him, but why didn't she do so in her end comment?

My third thought about the story of Terry and Ms. Thorn leads me into the grist of this chapter. When we respond in writing to what our students write in response to our assignments, we are responding to and conversing with individual learners. We can probably do more teaching in the margins and end comments of essays than we can in any lecture or conference. We can help students learn to think in our subject areas. Response is one-on-one. We can see which students need what kinds of help and either offer that help or guide them to it.

Responding to students' writing is itself an act of writing. As such, we who respond must be as concerned with issues of structure, clarity, focus, purpose, and voice as we want writers in any discipline to be. We need to write well in the margins and end comments, and by *well* I do not mean spelling and correctness. I mean clear, connected, useful, respectful comments that guide students to see their written representations of their thinking so that they can become both better thinkers and writers in all areas of the work and study.

Case 2: John and Ms. Byrd

In an essay on discrimination toward men, John wrote about images of men in home product commercials and movies that involved men in chores traditionally allotted to women. When he receives his essay from Ms. Byrd, he reads through the essay jerkily, pausing where Ms. Byrd has written comments, generally without making comments himself. Often when he reads Ms. Byrd's comments aloud, he misreads in some minor ways that in reality make a tremendous difference in meaning. For example, John reads his own sentence, "Besides the male being discriminated against, I feel that there is one additional party suffering. The manufacturers." Ms. Byrd has circled "suffering," which John takes to indicate a misspelling, but Ms. Byrd has written two questions in the margin, "So men are suffering because of commercials?" For her, this is a question. John reads it as a statement, ignoring the question mark, comments, "Yep," and goes on to read the second question, this time hearing the question mark. "Does this make sense?" he reads, voice rising at the end. "Nope," he answers, and goes on.

While generating this question during her reading of his essay, Ms. Byrd had said, "This is a good point, I think, but I need him to understand that he hasn't really explained this suffering, the way they are suffering." She then writes, "So men are suffering because of commercials? Does that make sense?" Ms. Byrd goes on to say that John needs to "focus on making the connection between commercials, society, and self-image." Knowing that this is her central response theme, I can read her margin and end space questions much more productively than can John. For me, these comments all ask this writer

to push further into his content and then to make and articulate necessary connections. For John, when he reads the questions as questions, each stands alone. In Ms. Byrd's end comment, he finds and responds to a series of questions with simple non- or going-nowhere responses. Ms. Byrd has written, "John, why did you want to write this paper?"

John does not respond.

She then asked, "Have you personally ever felt insulted or embarrassed by a TV commercial?"

John responds, "No."

Ms. Byrd continued, "Do you *really* think anyone pays attention to commercials?"

John responds, "Yeah yeah yeah I think people do pay attention to commercials."

She then asked, "If you do, why don't you write as much in your paper?"

John does not respond, and he offers no further response to the rest of the end comment until he realizes he's received a C. The C makes him angry, and he crumples his essay into a ball and says, "I thought a B would be more appropriate. I thought I did a pretty good job. That's my personal opinion."

The distance between John's reception of his teacher's responses and the goals of her responses is tremendous. In her reading protocol responding to his essay, her major comments focus admirably on a specific core goal with John as a writer. She wanted John to see the need to examine and articulate his premises and to make connections between his assertions and those premises. For John, because her responses are single moments, each response flying solo, teacher and student fail to connect. No progress is made.

Sadly, there existed a simple strategy for avoiding this problem. Happily, we can learn from this, their failure to communicate. We often have a major theme or so underlying our responses. We simply must make those themes overt. We can, with little effort and major payoffs, guide students in how to read our comments. For example, what if Ms. Byrd had written across the top of John's first page, "John—As you read through your essay, I want you to note that all of my questions are asking you to work on one important aspect of writing: make connections between your assertions about commercials and self-image and the relationship of that connection to societal values." Had Ms. Byrd announced her theme at some point in her comments—across the top of page one, at the start of the end comment, perhaps even in a response cover page returned with the essay—her questions and comments would have more easily cohered as a single, ongoing comment. And had she penned in one specific example, modeling for him how to make those connections, John might have come to a realization about a writing principle that he would carry with him into his other writing.[1]

Case 3: Rob and Ms. Elliott

Rob reacts at great length to two seemingly simple questions Ms. Elliott asks because he does not understand, as a writer, what she is asking about and why.

Her questions rely on a certain response from Rob; they assume that his linguistic awareness needs only a nudge to be in tune with hers. So twice she prompts him, rather than asking him directly and specifically, to write sentences that structurally complete two incomplete comparisons in his essay. Rob's essay tells of his surprise visit to a friend on St. Croix. His main point is that the openness and trusting nature of the people he met there led him to return to the States with a new way of approaching people. Relating an anecdote in which Rob and his friend knock on a stranger's door near midnight, in need of a hairbrush, Rob has written, "Jim [the stranger] seemed a little different to us at first, but he soon 'took the cake' when he invited us in for drinks." To this single sentence, Ms. Elliott has responded, "How different?" and "From whom?"[2]

During the response protocol she taped for me, Ms. Elliott talked about her primary goals with Rob as a writer—to help him strive for greater accuracy in his use of language and to help him recognize when he needs to expand on his ideas.

Frustrated because he thinks Ms. Elliott does not understand what he is saying, Rob wrestles with her seemingly simple questions for a little over ten minutes, coming up with quite a few ways to read and answer the questions "How different?" and "From whom?"[3] I finally stop Rob and explain that there is a writing principle she wants him to see. I expand her comment: "Who is Jim different from? In writing, we are supposed to name both parts of any comparison we make, so 'Jim was so different from any stranger I'd expect to answer his door near midnight in Richmond.'"

It takes only that much for Rob to understand *what* Ms. Elliott is asking for. He goes on to struggle with *why* she is asking, why that principle for writing. He points out, rightly, that the story comes after a lot of narrative that as far as Rob is concerned, clearly contextualizes Jim's response to their knock. He argues that his writing group understood without his stating his comparison overtly because they have the same urban background Rob brings to his St. Croix adventure. They understand about strangers knocking on doors for bizarre reasons late at night. I prompt him, "But what if they didn't share your knowledge and experience? How would that door be answered in Richmond?" Rob responds, "With a semiautomatic." We laugh, but when I say that he just answered the question, "How different?" Rob grows serious and launches into disparaging self-evaluations of his inabilities as a writer being products of his behaviors as a speaker. He says, "I think it's just one of those examples like you don't write the way you talk okay? That's a little thing I was told a long time ago. Maybe I just don't ah maybe I don't speak correctly."

In truth, I don't think of Rob as lacking oral fluency in the communities he has most travelled in, but I think he does nail the nature or realm of his writing problem exactly. In a nonacademic oral recounting of this incident, or even in a personal letter, an overt comparison would probably come across as superfluous, redundant, following as it would a sequence of briefer anecdotes that demonstrate a clear difference between the behavior of people Rob is meeting on St. Croix and that of people in his urban home. But as a developing

academic writer, he needs to obey rules of given/new information and make some statement to this effect: "Opening the door and greeting two strangers with a smile, Jim seemed a little different at first from what I would have expected back in Richmond. But the extent of that difference became clear when he invited us in for drinks."

Toward the end of his rereading of his essay and his teacher's comments, Rob returns to these two questions because Ms. Elliott's end comment has addressed Rob's need to see where he does and does not need to include explanation. As he talks to me, Rob begins looking for reliable rules for when and when not to expand: "So I mean for every fact do you have to have an explanation for it or just can't you take it for granted? I mean this [explanation] is something that maybe should have been and I'm not saying it can't be but in my paper I don't feel like I should've 'cause I did think about that about saying more about that and how well I thought I should explain and before she said that I had too much explanation 'cause I ran her through everything I did."

Rob's reading of his teacher's comments and his essay reveal much that could have helped Ms. Elliott understand more about his needs as a developing academic writer and thinker, his knowledge about using language, and his potential as a writer. Indeed, his responses remind us of the bridges many students need to span between their oral fluency and their academic writing.

Learning to Read Students and Teaching Students to Read Us

To students, our ways of reading their written work are mysterious. Students tend to attribute this mystery to subjectivity, and though they are occasionally right, though we must monitor our personal and idiosyncratic notions of what are reasonable and unreasonable responses, there are other more complex reasons for variances in our ways of reading. We vary in contexts so far as where we teach and the discursive practices of our disciplines. We vary in our backgrounds as writers and readers so far as how we *think* we were taught to write, how we actually *learned* to write, how extensively we have written, and how we feel about ourselves as writers. We vary in our own strengths as writers, in our abilities to make articulate and useful observations to students about their writing. We vary in our beliefs about what good writing is as well as in our beliefs about just where students should be in their literacy development when they reach us—as freshmen or seniors, majors in or electors of our courses. Our students feel our variances to be problematic. Our students are right. In many ways, it is fine, even important, for us to vary as audiences for their texts, but we must be willing to explain how we read our students' work and let our students help us become better readers of their work. We must learn to be candid about our practices, and we must develop practices that teach students how to engage in reading our responses. For example:

Demonstrate how we read students' work. One strategy I have found most successful in my own classes and in those taught by teachers and graduate students I work with is to model how we read a student's response to an assign-

ment by reading a text aloud and commenting as we go—pausing to answer questions we evoke, to explain comments our students don't understand.

Write with our students. When we give an assignment, we sometimes write our own responses and share our own struggles with our classes, letting them see us in action, drafting and revising—letting them respond to *our* writing.

Take time to hear students' responses to our comments. When we hand back writing we have responded to, we leave time in class for students to read through our comments with us there to help them, and we encourage students to write responses to our responses.

Take time to help students incorporate our responses. Sometimes we devote an entire class, even two, to students' work with our responses, with us moving from student to student as he or she reads, questions, responds to us, begins to revise.

In a very real sense, the best response always addresses content and presentation of content above all and always speaks to the writer in terms of revision. In my work with writers at any level, inexperienced to artisans, when we come to the end of a semester, we talk still of "what next?" During any semester, my students learn to write rich *writers' memos* (Sommers, 1989), cover letters for their essays in which they tell me about the piece they are handing in. At the end of a semester, they write a final letter in which they reflect on their work for the semester, commenting on the changes they see in themselves as writers as well as upon the growth they see in their written work. But most importantly, they talk about what they will continue to work on—not particular written work, but writing concepts they have yet to fully grasp. In my final letter to them, I similarly review their work and their growth, and I similarly talk to them about directions to go in, concepts to think about.

Our students usually enter our postsecondary classrooms fluent in their oral arenas, fluent readers of texts that reflect their interests, but more rarely fluent as writers. They need, simply, lots of practice writing (and reading and speaking) and a lot more practice than they have had, to this point, being read by real readers who are out to communicate, not correct (Geisler, 1994). We need to read their work as we would expect a colleague who is also an ally and a support to read our work—honest and critical, yes, but in terms of what works as much as what does not, and always in terms of that next draft.[4]

When we respond as real and complete readers, we engage students in written commentary that goes both ways. When we read students' work only as teachers, we tend to read it as in some other galaxy than our own and our colleagues' and thus are less likely to engage students in any sort of conversation—mostly, we will deliver monologues, soliloquies, sermons, lectures. Real readers engage in content, laugh, groan, and ideally do not start out looking for trouble. Really good readers are sensitive to writers' uses of language. We hear it; we can examine it and see how it works or does not work; we engage in conversations with writers that involve all facets of the writing. And if we take those skills and read our students' work as we would "real writing," then we have much more to say that helps our students grow as writers and learners. Writing is, after all, a rich mode of learning.

Principles into Strategies

In the context of response to individual pieces of writing, successful comments are both local (those comments that target a specific statement, passage, or point in a text) as well as global (those comments that give overviews of a text and that give cohesion to local comments). Academic writing is analytical. It is, from start to finish, a writer's thinking on paper, often thinking in action. It is a conversation between writer and reader. Thus, as readers, we must speak first and foremost to content—first offering our responses to the subject matter and the writer's ideas, then offering our responses to the writer's written representation of the subject matter and his or her ideas. General readers, those who are not responsible to the writer in any way, may not see or have a need to separate content and presentation thereof. They can read solely for information. If they dislike the subject or its presentation, they can turn the page. But as readers who are teachers, we have responsibilities to the writer and thus need to read more consciously and in a variety of roles (Straub, 1996). We must always invoke the general reader in us because that reader, be it an employer or an editor, in the end is the litmus test of a writer's success. But first, even foremost, we must read as teachers, guides, and coaches and read with an eye to how our students' presentations of their subjects aid or thwart their goals with potential readers.

Conclusion: Margin and End Comments Guide

A clear relationship between margin and end comments is crucial. Students need to be able to incorporate margin comments meaningfully as they read their returned essays. Margin comments need to lead like trail markers to the end comments. There may be several trails for a student to follow—say, one focusing on structure, a second on providing the thinking behind claims, a third addressing problems with word choice. But the student must be able to follow the comments and this means that what we put into the margins must be direct and complete. This means, too, that end comments, whether accompanied by grades or not, work best when they tell students the stories of how we read their essays, how we see the whole of a piece working, where reading is smoothest and why, where we run into trouble, get tripped up, and why, and finally what transformation(s) might move the piece closer to its goals. Margin and end comments connect our readings to students' texts, connect us to our students, and thus help students reconnect with what they have written so they can return to it with some distance. When comments don't make these connections, we give students no directions to go in.

Some of the best end comments tell the story of how we read our students' pieces of writing, with emphasis placed on the most important part(s) our stories. For example, the writer of the following end comment addressed two aspects of an essay that stood out as the points where the essay author, Charlene, might best reenter to revise. These problem spots were not the only

problem spots, but when Charlene addressed them successfully, other problems disappeared, distinguishing for the teacher where Charlene needed yet to focus.

> *Charlene—When I finished your three paragraphs, I felt like I was well into an essay focusing on your love of maps like the kind I keep in my glove compartment. I have a real attraction to those sorts of maps, myself, so I was probably disposed to seeing "maps" and making that connection. So I was surprised when your focus shifted, in paragraph four, to psychological maps. As I read further and understood that your initial discussion of maps intends to set up road maps as an analogy, I went back to the start to see if I got tripped up again. I did. You need to indicate, at least for this reader, earlier—perhaps in a paragraph you will add, perhaps in a title that says more than "Maps," the expanded definition of maps that you will be working with. In other words, there's a chasm between paragraphs three and four that you must bridge.*
>
> *Now, when I try to follow the argument you begin on page 3, I do fine until page 5, paragraph 2, when you propose "mapping" as a solution to family arguments. You don't show me how that would work, so as a reader, my immediate response is "interesting, but what do you mean in practice." But the idea intrigued me and I found myself puttering in the kitchen thinking about ways to use your concept of mapping to solve tensions in my household. So I am willing to believe you, but I think you need to give some examples. You refer earlier to a breech that has existed between your sister and the rest of the family. You generate a map of how you see her thinking to work. Could you generate a map, perhaps, of how you see the relationship among you, her and your mother to work and speculate as to how mapping that relationship might help solve some of its problems? You don't have to use that example, of course, but doing so would offer the reader a "tight package," a chance to travel through the same "territory" from different perspectives.*

I cannot offer a step-by-step guide for responding. In fact, such guides, examples—from our own experiences as students, from our colleagues' practices—however well-intentioned will probably fail us. We need to be the readers we are and respond with the principles I have addressed here in mind. Let me close with some thoughts from a few of the many who have taught me the most about responding to writing.

> *Sometimes I don't express designs [goals? intentions?] explicitly, and I just like to know what's going through your mind as you read or finish the piece. If anything strikes you—an aside, for instance—note it on the page. And anecdote, a reference. These kinds of immediate responses are not necessarily academic, but they give me clues as to how I am affecting my audience.*
>
> —Chris Kopczynski

> *Short of telling me what to say and exactly how to say it, responses should guide my work. I provide the ideas, sentence structure, grammatical choices, even many other choices. The teacher response then should, ideally, recognize or realize my goals and*

voice and assist me in bettering what is already written. I'm not saying a teacher isn't entitled to his or her opinions about my style, and I would want a teacher to make that clear, point that out. I always assume a teacher has more experience in the entire writing process than I, and I look for this experience-based wisdom to appear in comments on papers. I look for a fresh perspective in responses. Writing is overwhelming if I can't step away from it and see it. A teacher's responses can help me do that. I look for that.
—Carrie Beeton

I think that the teacher must remember that the student is a person and has feelings even if they have only basic skills, and that what the teacher says will be taken to heart—even by students who "don't care."
—Sheryl Hosey

Notes

1. When I write "come to a realization," I am actually thinking and wanting to write "had an epiphany" or a "bingo moment," as one of my students has called such moments of sudden clarity and understanding when knowledge, however tacit, becomes yours to control. Learning to write is mostly a matter of discovering and grasping concepts, not rules. We learn through practice, in leaps and bounds and stumbles, just like we learn, perhaps intuit or feel suddenly, the logic behind mathematical formulae or the physical principles for how to carry through with a racket or fully extend a swim stroke.
2. In her defense, I want to note that Ms. Elliott also commented on Rob's odd use of "took the cake," a problem that Rob identified as "hearing the term so much you don't think about what it means."
3. That Ms. Elliott *does* understand what Rob is saying is clear in her response protocol, but for whatever reasons, throughout her written comments, she does refrain from letting him know she understands. There are few easier ways to get students to stop listening.
4. I think in part I have learned to be a good responder to my students' work by suffering bad responses from readers I have sought out for my own work. My least favorite reader pounces on typos as errors and quibbles about insignificant problems, an awkward sentence, dust on top of a door, never talking to *me* about what *I* am saying and how I am saying it. My favorite readers assume typos are typos, perhaps mark them, which I appreciate, but they *engage* me in conversations about what I have said. We learn from each other about writing, about reading our own writing, about reading each other's writing. I am fortunate. Nowadays I have four good readers I can count on. My students and my readers' students are fortunate because we have learned to read them as we do each other.

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