Becoming Readers

Joseph Harris

Recommended Citation

Harris, Joseph (1984) "Becoming Readers," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1, Article 5.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1100

Becoming Readers

A review of *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences,*
by Thomas J. Reigstad and Donald A. McAndrew.
An NCTE Theory & Research Into Practice Monograph (urbana, IL:
ERIC and NCTE, 1984).

Joseph Harris

The half-formed and bastard language peculiar to the composition class has long been noted and lamented. Engfish, themewriting, crap. Each is a different name for the same thing: writing meant to say nothing, to be corrected rather than read.

Why? How is it that classes in writing tend to foster a kind of non-writing, a lifeless and empty prose? Much of the fault lies with the polite secrecy which shrouds so many classes in writing. Students labor alone in their homes or dorm rooms over assignments which they probably only partly understand and to which they are almost surely only half-committed. In class the next day, each of their essays is quietly slipped to the bottom of a pile that slowly makes its way towards the teacher, some perhaps with a title page or cover making even more sure that no one but him will ever glimpse the thoughts that lie exposed on the pages beneath. It is writing for the teacher alone; yet, most often, not even she is much interested in what is being said. The papers are retired to some corner of her desk, where they await scanning for faults of usage and lapses of mind. After these have been duly marked and castigated, the papers are returned once again to their authors—each essay now a private record of success or failure, a performance given its grade.

What is most disturbing is that, after a while, the oddness of this system begins to seem natural. The very reason we write in the first place—to say something to somebody—gets forgotten. In its place we find a confessional view of prose, in which students bare the inevitable errors of their writing to the eyes of the teacher alone, hoping for an easy penance—a few corrections here and there, maybe a worksheet even, but please god not a rewrite. No wonder, then, that by the time

Reviews 31

they reach college many students feel it unfair if their writing is asked to be interesting as well as merely competent. Indeed, it seems to come as a surprise to many that anything written for school *could* be interesting.

This is why the idea of reading their writing to their fellow students so appalls them. After all, the teacher is *paid* to read what they write, but why make others suffer? And who would want to read the glarp they're now churning out? To write for a new audience is to write in a new way. Why change from a game they know well to one whose rules are uncertain? Why risk taking seriously what has until now been a meaningless and easy exercise in decorum, a matter of making sure that all the commas and capitals are in the right places, all infinitives unsplit and modifiers unsquinting?

It's the reason too why so many of them don't want to read one another's writing. To start looking at not only their own work but that of other students as possible sources of learning can be an unsettling challenge to what many students think their education is all about. After all, it's clear in most of their classes that they're not there to have ideas but to get them. And who do you get ideas from but the teacher? Bad enough to have to start taking their own thinking seriously, but that of other students as well? That kind of stuff isn't going to get you anywhere on the GREs or LSATs, or so it is likely to seem. So long as a student views himself as the consumer ("I'm here to get as much out of this course as I can.") rather than the creator of his own education, then he is likely to see time spent reading his own or others' work as wasted. To begin to really talk about his writing, such a student must first learn to take his own thoughts seriously, to commit himself to an idea rather than to an authority—to some textbook or teacher.

And so what at first may seem yet one more academic gimmick—having students read and discuss each other's essays—can actually work to radically reshape how we teach writing, and how our students preceive their learning. For the bottom line in writing for a teacher—no matter how sincerely we protest otherwise—will always be correctness. Will he go for this idea or not? He said two pages—is this too long? Do I risk a frag here? What did he say in class about that essay? IF we are the sole readers of our students' texts, their focus of concern as they write is nearly fated to shift from *what they think* to *what they think we think*. There's no need to try to psych out your classmates in a similar way, since they're not grading you. But there is now a new and real pressure not to bore them to death. (It's ok to bore the teacher—it's all part of her job.) Writing for their fellow students

can thus help bring back just what writing for the teacher alone tends to discourage—a concern with having something to say as well as with knowing the right way to say it.

Yet simply grouping students into circles to discuss their papers is likely to do little but antagonize or bore them. Indeed, to watch students thrown untrained into such groups is to submit to an agony of forced smiles and aimless glances, to endless salvos of "I liked that a lot," "Your paper was really good," and "Very clear" to essays so vacant that no one, if they had any choice in the matter, would ever bother reading them at all. (Or, even worse, it is to listen to the nitpickings of amateur grammarians and the devotees of the five-paragraph theme, endlessly misadvising one another on "What you should really have said in this sentence was. . .") But what can we expect? Few of our students have had much experience in looking at their own writing critically, much less in trying to help others do so. If they're to get anything done in their groups they need first to learn *how to respond* to a piece of writing— more specifically, how to respond in ways that can help a writer make what he has said more forceful or clear.

Of course, how you do this is hardly obvious to any of us. Commenting on essays in the hope of somehow making them better is a good deal of what we as writing teachers do—most often with inconspicuous success. And the way in which writers cherish good editors suggests just how easily they can be found. What then do we have to tell our students about responding to writing?

Thomas Reigstad and Donald McAndrew give us some answers in *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences,* an NCTE Theory & Research Into Practice Monograph (Urbana, IL, 1984). The approach of *Training Tutors* is direct, its advice sound and common-sensical. There's little in the monograph that will strike most followers of modern composing theory as new, but it is useful to have what we do know presented in such compact and accessible form. The point of *Training Tutors* is to outline a model of responding to texts that we as teachers can use in helping our students learn to talk about their writing. The focus of the authors is on one-to-one conferencing in the context of a writing center, but the kinds of response they suggest seem appropriate for in-class and small-group discussions of writing too—or, even, as a model for teacher commentary on student essays. What Reigstad and McAndrew have to say about responding centers on four basic principles:

(1) *The tutor must first establish and maintain rapport with the writer:*The great advantage of a conference is that it brings

writer and reader face-to-face in real dialogue; a free and open exchange between the two is essential.

(2) *The writer, not the tutor, does the work:* The tutor is not an editor or ghost-writer; he is there to help the writer, not to take over his text.

(3) *High-order concerns come before low-order concersn:* Since the point of a conference is to help a writer improve his writing as much as he can in a limited amount of time, it is senseless to worry about nuances of form or mechanics before clearing up over-riding issues of meaning, intention and audience.

(4) *Tutors do not have to be experts:* The job of a tutor is to give an honest response to the writer's text, not to assume some pose of authority in order to judge or correct it.

None of these principles is specific to writing. Rather, the point of each is to open a dialogue of ideas, to suggest new ways for the writer to look at what he has said. What's really happening, then, is that the writer is for once being given a chance to see his thoughts being taken seriously by a reader. Many students have almost no sense of what's going on in the minds of their teachers as they read. For what clues have they ever been given? Most often, little more than a few scribbles in the margin, a summary comment or two, a grade. The writing conference allows the tutor to dramatize the act of reading, to show how he goes about making (or failing to make) sense of the writer's text. It also gives the author an opportunity to *talk out* what he has written—to stop worrying about the look of his paper and focus instead on what he wants to say, on the point he's trying to make.

Ideally, then, we can think of the conference as making writing seem more like speech—as moving the writer from the (seemingly) closed world of his text (with its fixed ideas and pet phrases) to the more open give-and-take of conversation. But for this to happen the writer must first feel sure that the tutor is there to work *with* him, not to judge or correct his writing in some way. The simplest and most certain way to destroy any such sense of ease is for the tutor to begin by taking on the low-order concerns of mechanics and usage. For such a move throws attention precisely where it least belongs: on the writer's text *as text* as something to be proofread for errors, rather than as the occasion of a dialogue between author and reader. Reigstad and McAndrew rightly insist that our first concern in training tutors is to alert them to the importance of meaning over form, to get them to read rather than to edit or correct the essays writers bring to them. To help their tutors to read

for meaning, they suggest the following priorities in response: *thesis, voice, organization, and development.* Only when these general concerns have been addressed (and when is this ever fully done?) are tutors encouraged to move on to specific points of sentence structure, punctuation, usage and spelling.

While it is never explicitly stated, the approach of *Training Tutors* clearly implies that the point of a writing conference is not remediation but response. Tutors are not therapists or coaches; they are most effective when they take on the role of a critical yet supportive reader, a peer of the writer, whose response to a text holds much the same weight as that of its author. Indeed, this is one reason why peer responses to their writings can often be far more genuinely useful to our students than are our own comments. For the teacher is always a teacher—at best, we can be sort of nice about it. But our responses will almost always carry a certain unearned significance, due not to any particular insight but simply to our role as classroom authority.

For a conference to work, then, it is vital that the tutor does not simply take on the authority of the absent teacher. Our goal in training tutors should not be to create little clones of ourselves, able to advise each other on ''what he's going to think about this''—indeed, most of our students probably know how to do *that* all too well by now. Rather, we need to show our students ways of developing their *own* styles of response, much as we also hope to suggest ways of discovering and forming a voice of their own as they write. But just as creating a voice as a writer involves more than formless and spontaneous attempts at sincerity, so evolving a style as a reader demands practice and observation. To help focus their students' attempts at forming such a style, Reigstad and McAndrews offer three models of response:

(1) *Student-centered option:* In such a conference the tutor serves largely as a responsive reader or listener. The writer does most of the talking; the tutor listens, asks a few open-ended questions, and may perhaps contribute some of his own thoughts or feelings about the subject at hand. To illustrate such a style in action, Reigstad and McAndrew cite a conference held by Don Murray at the University of New Hampshire in which Murray begins by simply asking, ''So?'' Such conferences allow the writer the greatest authority over his text; it is he, not the tutor, who decides what will be discussed and in what direction his paper will move. While useful at almost any point, the student-centered option is necessary when a writer comes to a tutor with little or no text in hand, or with his thought and writing on his subject blocked, at a

Reviews   35

halt. At such times, the tutor must be able to ask the sort of questions which can help the writer gather together what he knows or wants to say about his topic, to begin talking about the subject at hand until the block is broken or circumvented. Indeed, in my own work as a tutor, I've found it often appropriate to stop a conference midway through and say something like: "Look, I really like what you've just told me and I think it would make a great paper. Why don't you see if you can write some of this stuff down now, while I go get some coffee? Don't worry about spelling or anything. I'll be back in ten minutes and we can talk some more about what you've come up with." Some days I end up just drinking a lot of coffee; others some real writing seems to get done. But the purpose is much that of Murray's "So?"—to set up a situation in which the writer directs the growth of his paper as fully as possible.

(2) *The collaborative option:* Here the tutor takes on a more active role. While still not actually correcting or revising the writer's paper, in the collaborative mode the tutor often identifies what problems or issues need to be discussed, focuses the writer on specific points in his text. Often the tutor will attempt to get the writer to elaborate on particular moments or ideas in his text, and then suggest that this off-the-paper talk be used to revise or supplement what has already been written. As a tutor, I've found this option most useful in trying to open up writers who are reluctant to talk about their texts—as a sort of heuristic which can be dropped as soon as the writer feels confident enough to move on his own to points in his text which interest or worry him.

(3) The teacher-centered option: Somewhat begrudgingly, Reigstad and McAndrews admit there may be occasions when it is best for a tutor to direct what is done to a paper. A writer may come at the last minute, for instance, and ask that his paper be proofread; he may not know the correct form of a citation or note; or he may be unsure about the appropriateness of a certain phrase or usage. But such cases—in which the tutor merely serves as a kind of living handbook or style manual—tend to be both trivial and rare. While there's nothing demeaning about such a role, there's nothing in it of much interest to us as writers or readers either. As a style of response it is virtually no style at all. In training tutors, it is perhaps more safely ignored than elaborated.

Reigstad and McAndrews close with an outline of a fifteen week course in tutor training. Their course has students reflect on their composing processes, read some of the works of people like Peter Elbow and Walker Gibson, practice responding to one another's writing and

using the responses they get to help revise their own work. By the final weeks of the course they serve as apprentices under the supervision of their teacher in a writing center, tutoring students outside of the class. It seems a sound and well-considered course, as *Training Tutors* is a monograph. Even for those of us who may never teach such a course its pacing is illuminating. For it is not until the eigth week of the course that Reigstad and McAndrew's students begin to act as tutors for one another. While such a wait might prove impossibly long for the uses of most of us as teachers, the lesson is clear: There's *a lot* students need to know before they can begin to usefully respond to one another's writing. If we throw them into groups without first giving them a model of response the results will be futile, for all they can experience without training is awkwardness and frustration. As one of my own students recently put it: "You have to learn how to say something besides 'I like it.' "

   Once they do, though, the results can be exciting. Our students can be strikingly sensitive readers of their peers' work. And why not? They have far more to gain from reading one another's papers than we as teachers do—for in learning to sense the various weaknesses and strengths of others' papers, they can also create strategies for their own writing. And our students also have more time than we do. It's hard to look at a stack of sixty papers with much of anything but despair, and I am guiltily aware of how many of my own students' writings receive the most cursory scan of a bored and tired eye. (Indeed, I sometimes wonder how much of the notorious dullness of college themes actually derives from the situations in which they're *read*.)

   But it's not the same thing when you've got just one paper to respond to. Our students may not be professional readers, but they're not deadened or skeptical ones either. It wasn't until reading the comments of one of my students, for instance, that I realized that another paper which we had both read—and which I had roundly scolded for its inflated and jargony tone—was in fact a parody of the sort of Engfish I regularly preach against. Of course, I had a perfect defense of my misreading. Most of the other papers in the same pile were just as bilious, and none of *them* were in the least ironic. But that's the point. If I hadn't read the Engfish parody along with some thirty (mostly unmemorable) other essays, then I would have probably recognized it as satire. As it was, I misread it *because* I was reading it as a teacher, overworked (as always) and in a hurry.

   It can indeed be tempting to account for theories of composing in

terms of their effect on teacher workload. The countless calls for Clarity and Brevity which manuals of style used to (and often still do) repeat so tirelessly have always conjured up for me the image of some bedraggled yet stalwart teacher of freshman comp, her desk littered with scores of research papers on The Individual And Society, aching for just one of them to weigh in at under 30 pages. And, as I'm sure the readers of **The Writing Center Journal** are well aware, the opponents of using peer-response in the classroom often seem to regard it as little more than a technique for evading the responsibilities of teaching. I don't need to waste time arguing against such foolishness—anyone who's tried to do it can testify to how hard it is to help students respond to one another's writing—but, for the moment, let's assume such complaints were true. Because even if they were, using peer response would still be better than drilling our students yet again in Clarity, Concision and Accepted Usage. For to mandate a style is merely to give our students one more authority (or, more precisely, one more version of ourselves) to labor under. To teach them to write for and respond to one another is to. . .well, to do our jobs. And that's precisely what *Training Tutors* gives us a program for doing.

Joseph Harris is an Assistant Professor teaching in the Professional Writing Program, a writing concentration within the English major, at Elizabethtown College. Part of his teaching includes the training of undergraduates to serve as peer responders in the college writing center.