READING AND RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING: A HEURISTIC FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

In “Composition Theory in the Eighties: Axiological Consensus and Paradigmatic Diversity,” Richard Fulkerson laments the widespread fragmentation and confusion in contemporary composition theory. He is particularly troubled by the ways we have come to tangle our talk about the goals of teaching writing—what he calls our different “philosophies” or “axiologies”—and the various means we have devised to achieve them. By 1990, he claims, compositionists had come to some consensus about their commitment to a rhetorical emphasis in writing instruction. At the same time, however, he sees “a growing complexity and conflict over means of reaching it” (410). The field, Fulkerson suggests, is in a knot, the means and ends of composition caught in a giant snarl.

I believe, with Fulkerson, that compositionists have come to some general agreement about the importance of audience and, more broadly, to appreciate the perspectives afforded by a social view of writing. I agree that there is a deep confusion about means and ends in the teaching of writing, and I suspect the problem has gotten worse, not better, in the past ten years, as we have expanded the range of discourses we study, learned more about the ways that context and community bear on reading and writing, gotten more interested in looking at students individually, at work in particular settings, and (regrettably) given less and less attention in our scholarship to questions of classroom practice. But I’m not so sure that we have come to a consensus about the goals of writing instruction or about the nature of good writing. Having spent some time in the 1980s sorting through the evaluative criteria espoused by the teachers in William Coles and James Vopat’s What Makes Writing Good? for a dissertation and then studying the responding practices of recognized teachers for Twelve Readers Reading in the 1990s, I have come to see a great diversity both in our goals for teaching and in our views toward what makes writing good. In fact, I think a good bit of confusion has been caused by a general failure to define our values for writing and make them consistent with our goals, theories, and classroom practice.
In this essay I would like to help teachers clarify their values for student writing, get their assumptions and classroom methods in dialogue with their goals, and then suggest a way to deal with this disciplinary confusion. To do so, I will:

1. construct a protocol of a teacher reading and responding to a student essay, to show the complexity we run into as teacher-readers and all the things we have to sort through, focus on, and consider when we read and respond to student writing;

2. provide a map of the various concerns we can take up in our reading, and use it to examine reading and response in relation to the larger contexts of the writing class;

3. create and model a heuristic for us to reflect on our own reading and responding practices in light of our philosophy, assumptions, and practice.

Whereas Fulkerson takes up the problem of ends and means at the disciplinary level, as a problem for composition scholars, I am concerned first of all with the problem such theoretical conflicts have practically for individual teachers and actual classroom practice. Instead of looking to theory to address the problem from top down, I will approach the problem from bottom up by calling on teachers to work through the problem in terms of their own commitments and problems, with the help of theory.

**A Protocol of Teacher Response: The Scenario**

Imagine the following situation. It’s halfway through a first-year writing course at a large state university, in a writing program staffed mainly with graduate teaching assistants who teach two courses a semester. Writing program administrators favor a process-based expressivist approach to teaching writing, employing no standard textbook and requiring students to write six essays, most of which are based on personal experience, most of them to be taken through a series of drafts and revisions. Teachers are encouraged to privilege the writer’s individual voice, be liberal about the use of narrative, value details and examples from the student’s personal experience, and encourage experimentation with organization and style. They are urged to emphasize the development of the writer over the quality of the written product and to respect the needs of the individual student.

The teacher is an experienced teaching assistant who has taken the required training course for new teachers and, to satisfy an emerging interest in teaching, one other course in composition theory. She has found herself invigorated by the expressivist emphasis on personal voice and
writing that is close to the self, and she has gone into her teaching with genuine excitement. At the same time, she has developed a real commitment to the importance of writing for readers. She sees herself as a hands-off teacher intent on making the classroom student-centered. A fairly successful student with a history of doing well in her own writing, she does not underestimate the importance of clarity and focus, an authoritative stance, and tight organization in academic writing. In fact, she wonders if more attention shouldn’t be given to such concerns, as well as to grammar and mechanics, in first-year composition. Over the semester, she has tried, with less success than she had hoped for, to spend no more than 15-20 minutes reading and commenting on each student paper. Nevertheless, she plans on giving this batch of papers slightly fuller comments than previous papers because she sees it as a crucial point in the class, a culmination of their work to this point.

This student essay is the final draft of the fourth paper. The teacher has talked informally with students about their plans for the paper, and the students themselves, guided by a set of questions, have responded to earlier drafts of the paper. In class, students have been doing a lot of small-group workshops to help one another invent, draft, revise, and edit each of their papers, and once a week the teacher has selected a sample or two from the course reading anthology to analyze and discuss specific strategies of writing, for instance, how to recognize different voices, how to start a story or set up an introduction for an essay, and how to format and punctuate dialogue. Over the past two weeks, in anticipation of this latest paper, the class has been examining the ways writers like Toni Morrison and Annie Dillard use detail not only to describe something but also attach some value or emotional sense to the object. Here is the assignment students have been given:

Most of you are off at school and in a new place, away from the people and settings you have become accustomed to and attached to. Similarly, those of you who are from Tallahassee have likely not had the time or the opportunity to visit some of the old places that are special to you. Choose some place, atmosphere, or situation that you miss from home—or, if you are at home, that you have not had the chance to experience for some time, and miss. Depict this scene, mood, or setting in a way that will allow your reader—someone who does not know about it—to see the significance it has for you. Remember that since your aim is to give readers a sense of place, you will do well to use specific details.
Across the course students have been urged to look at the assignments as a rough guide for what they might do in their own writing; if they prefer to pursue a somewhat different focus than is presented in the assignment, they are encouraged to go their individual route so long as they find a way to deal with the same general subject. Although this is the final draft and students are not required to take this paper through another rewrite, they have the option of rewriting and submitting, for a change in grade, one or two of their course papers by the end of the term. The writer is a confident, perhaps even a cocky, student who comes across (in the view of the teacher) as someone who thinks he is a better writer than he is. However, his confidence is by no means groundless. The teacher has been both disappointed by and taken with aspects of his previous writings.

A Protocoll of Teacher Response: The Reading

The teacher picks up the first paper. David. "The Four Seasons." All right, she thinks, might as well plunge right in. Let's see if he walks the walk this time. Gets more than a few good lines in here and there. Lives up to his own billing. Okay, 20 minutes per paper. Don't comment on everything. Focus. She starts to read.¹

The Four Seasons

I like Tallahassee very much. The heat and sunshine almost everyday makes each day very pleasant. He actually, she thinks, likes this relentless heat? He obviously hasn't been here in the summer.

I intend to spend my next four and one half years here, but I miss my other home, Syracuse, New York. One thing that I truly miss about Syracuse is the four seasons. Each season is distinct and clear in its own way. I will do my best to describe each season to you, but remember that my description cannot compare to experiencing each season for itself.

An okay start, she thinks. A good thesis statement. But he's slow getting into what he has to say. Try to grab the reader's attention, she jots in the margin. And this escape hatch won't do. It's a cop out. Why the disclaimer? she writes, and reads on.

In the Spring the ground is soft from the melting snow. You can feel the moist ground wanting to seep into your shoes. Good, she thinks, a really nice image. Evocative. She puts a check next to the line in the margin and writes, Good detail. I can feel the squishing.
She’s about to underline the “you” and write, *Shift in point of view*, but she
doesn’t want to take away from the praise she’s just given—he needs the
applause—and decides for the moment to let it go. She wonders whether
to mark the capital S on Spring or tick-mark it and let him find it. She puts
a slash through the letter, and continues reading.

As the ground begins to dry, the trees begin to blossom and the
faint smell of pollen lingers in the air. The flowers work their
way out of the ground and bloom for another year.

Good, some more vivid description. She thinks of the cherry trees that
used to blossom each spring in her backyard. But it’s pretty generic: a
composite of a mythical spring day up north. He could get a lot more
specific. *Which trees? What kind of flowers?* she writes, then picks up with
her reading again.

The familiar sound of geese is heard overhead as you look into
the sky and see a “V” formation travelling north for the summer.
A long winter’s nap has ended for the bears, squirrels, rabbits
and other hibernating animals. After they awake, their
chattering conversations ramble through the forest.

She’s not sure she likes “‘V’ formation,” and she’s still not sure about this
use of “you.” Why doesn’t he use “I,” she wonders, or stick with the third
person? But she’s clearly troubled by the string of general language, the
stereotyped ideas: “The familiar sound of geese”? “A long winter’s nap”?
“Chattering conversations”? He’s just blowing through these descriptions,
not thinking about them. Coasting. She sharpens her pencil, drops her hand
to the page, and next to the last two sentences writes, *Really? Squirrels and
rabbits hibernating? Bears and rabbits chattering?* He’s getting careless
here, she thinks, relying far too much on cliches about spring. But she
catches herself. She wants to keep it constructive. She reads back over the
sentences. Maybe it’s just the way it sounds, a matter of voice or tone.
Maybe he’s thinking this is the way a description of spring is supposed to
be: nice and light and homey. Hold off, she tells herself. Let’s see what he
does next.

Not only do the animals come out of their shelter in the
springtime, but also people. Many people have a tendency to
“hole up” in the wintertime. All your neighbors, that you
thought had died, open up their houses to allow the spring
breeze to come along and carry away that musty air that built up
during winter. You can hear voices and lawnmowers
everywhere as people are outside doing their springtime yard
work. Wives are planting new flowers while husbands are raking and mowing the lawn. Spring is the season of awakening where everything becomes refreshing.

Following Spring is the season that most people look forward to, that is Summer. Summer is the time of the year when kids are everywhere, because school has been let out. You can hear their voices and giggles fill the atmosphere. People are always outside in the summertime because the sun beats down onto the earth and warms everything up. There are enormous amounts of families going to the beach for the weekend or going on vacation for a week. As you look down the road, you can see heat waves resting on the pavement. The foliage is green and spirits are high. There is a feeling of warmth amongst neighbors, friends, and family.

The wheels, she thinks, have started to spin. Where to start? What to take up? There are some good moments. Here at the end: The heat resting on the pavement. Good concrete detail, she writes next to it. It’s an image that will lead your readers to imagine how hot it gets in Syracuse. This is the kind of detail I’ve been looking for. And up here at the start of the paragraph: People holing up, hibernating. That’s different, she thinks. Something worth saying. Though the sentences are awkward. Good idea, she writes, but you can clean up the sentence structure. And the last two lines. The warmth outside connected with a warmth among neighbors. In contrast to the hibernating that he says people tend to do when it’s cold. Nice.

But she’s concerned about all these muddy generalizations. People air out their houses and do yard work. All of them are wives or husbands, and they plant or they rake and mow. Don’t, she finds herself writing in the margins, the women in your neighborhood ever cut the grass? Does Mr. Sworin ever plant the flowers? Spring, we find, is the season of awakening. Spring is followed by summer. Things warm up and people get back outside, go to the beach, and go on vacation. Not much here, she thinks. He’s not telling us anything we don’t already know. He’s got to get more focused, get more specific detail. What happened to all that work we did last week? So much for Annie Dillard. Where is he in all this description? What significance do the seasons in Syracuse have for him? Did he read the assignment? She goes to the paragraph and underlines, in successive sentences, “kids,” “voices,” “people,” “earth,” “everything,” “families,” and “foliage.” Don’t attack, she thinks. Keep it upbeat. She puts a line down the length of the paragraph and writes: These are all
general terms. Let's hear some details. He's done some sharp writing for short stretches in his earlier papers too, but he's not been able to sustain it. He can do better than this. She takes a breath, about to move on, but her eye is pulled back to the page. She writes Mechanical transition next to the first sentence of the paragraph about summer, squiggles a line under "enormous amounts of families," and puts her pencil down. He's stuck and time's flying. A quarter after. She's got to move on.

She goes through the rest of the paper, making sure to acknowledge other sharp descriptions, pointing out places where generalizations steer him away from making the descriptions his, quickly noting places where a sentence might be smoothed out, and snagging him at the end just as he is about to slip into the same escape hatch he devised in the introduction. This, she thinks, might be the one he goes back to for the last revision. She leans back and tries to settle on her overall sense of the paper. She gets something positive in mind for a start, and writes her end note to David: Pretty good, David. You have some fine descriptions of the four seasons in here. But I'm not sure how much you've experienced them or let us experience them as readers. You're relying too much on cliches: geese flying north in the spring, summers at the beach, raking leaves in the fall, and sitting by the fire with that special someone in the winter. They're descriptions that we're all familiar with and they don't give any insight into how the four seasons are unique to you. You seem more intent on capturing some homey images of spring than in sharing with us your own views of the seasons in Syracuse. (I wonder: Are you trying to take on too much here with all four seasons?) Try focusing on particular scenes and specific events you have seen or, better yet, that have happened to you. Maybe it'd help to sketch out lists of things that you associate personally with these seasons, select the ones that are most vivid and representative, and work those into your essay. This might be one you choose to revise.

She debates for a moment and writes "C" at the bottom of the page. Then she thinks of his sharp descriptions and, next to it, slashes a B. Nothing to write home about, but better than he's been doing. One down.

MAPPING THE CRITERIA FOR READING STUDENT WRITING

This is a full and fairly complex reading and response. The teacher seems intent not simply on looking at the writing summatively, to assess it, but using her response as an occasion for leading the writer back into
revision and teaching him about writing. It may not be adequately focused. It may not be as coherent as it could be. It may be too evaluative in its posture, putting too great an emphasis on the teacher’s role as critic and judge. And it may or may not be just what the student needs at this time. But it has a depth and ambitiousness that are worthy of praise. It is a rich pastiche of a reading, marked by a criss-cross of impulses and purposes that we routinely experience as we read student writing, and the comments do a fairly good job of expressing the teacher’s concerns to the student. In constructing this case, I want to suggest the rich and often bewildering complexity that is involved in reading, evaluating, and responding to student writing, and dramatize the need for finding some way to give order to the great variety of concerns we may take up as teachers of writing. I also want to capture something of the dynamic relationship between reading and response—that is, between reading and evaluating student texts, on the one hand, and communicating with the student about his writing, on the other. In doing so, I hope to explain why reading and response are so demanding and show how they might be made more manageable and used more effectively. I have selected this sample student writing, originally presented in Twelve Readers Reading, to tie this analysis to the ways that the well-recognized teacher-scholars featured in that study respond to student writing, extend the analysis Ronald Lunsford and I do there of the relationship between reading and response, and examine response more fully in relation to the larger classroom context and the teacher’s approach to composition. Although I might have highlighted a reading from any of a number of pedagogical perspectives—a rhetorical pedagogy, a social constructionist pedagogy, a post-process pedagogy, or some critical pedagogy—I have chosen an expressivist pedagogy because of its popularity in the classroom and its ability to accommodate a broad spectrum of features. In the section ahead, I’ll chart the various qualities we might look for when we read student texts. Instead of an exhaustive list or a survey, I’d like to provide a map and a compass for reading, evaluating, and responding to student writing: some instruments that might help us as teachers figure out where we are and make a plan for where we want to go.

TEXTUAL FEATURES

What, then, can we learn by looking back on this response to “The Four Seasons” as a case study—one instance of a teacher (in this case, a hypothetical teacher) caught in the act, as it were, of reading student writing? This teacher takes up a variety of issues at a variety of levels. She
looks at the text formally, in terms of what the writer has to say and how he presents it on the page. She gives a fair amount of attention to local matters such as correctness, usage, sentence structure, and grammatical point of view. But she does not emphasize these superficial textual matters over more substantial matters of content and form. She considers the focus, scope, and overall shape of the essay; she considers David's use (or lack) of specific detail; and she considers the quality and substance of his descriptions:

- An okay start, she thinks. A good thesis statement, but he's slow getting into what he has to say. Are you trying to take on too much here with all/our seasons?
- People holing up, hibernating. That's different, she thinks. Something worth saying.

But she's clearly troubled by the string of general language, the stereotyped ideas:

- "The familiar sound of geese?" "A long winter's nap?" "Chattering conversations?"

These are the kinds of concerns—matters of correctness, style, organization, and ideas—we usually talk about when we talk about qualities of student writing. They deal with the text and the immediate construction of that text from the words on the page. Although they do not "reside" in the text, we talk about them, for practical purposes, as formal concerns, as features based in, and recoverable from, the words on the page. They may be plotted out as features of the written text, the meeting ground where, as Wolfgang Iser notes, the implied author and implied reader come together, in a carefully negotiated process, to make meaning.
at exactly how we understand these terms. What constitutes “substantive content”? What do we mean when we say a paper is “well organized”? What makes for our sense of an “informal voice” or an “effective style”? The map lays out general categories for reading and evaluating writing; we have to give them local habitation, not just a name. For the protocol teacher, it is clear, for instance, that writing is not merely a matter of managing sentences and paragraphs or tending to the superficial properties of discourse; it’s a matter of getting and shaping something to say. Her reading and response suggest that it is the content of writing—and the forming of that content—that makes writing good or bad, makes it worth or not worth reading. Further, she clearly privileges (at least for this type of writing) a particular kind of content: original writing that grows out of and reflects the student’s own experience and perceptions.

**Contextual Concerns**

The close attention this teacher gives to the text, especially the emphasis she places on content, tells us something important about her values as a writing teacher. But it only begins to account for the depth of her reading and the range of concerns that we might address when we read student writing. In fact, for every time this teacher focuses on some isolated quality closely tied to the text, she also brings to her reading some concern that goes beyond the text, beyond the words on the page, and invests it with the meanings, values, and perspectives of some broader context. Consider the following instances:

- *Try to grab the reader’s attention.*
- Maybe he thinks this is the way a description of spring is supposed to be: nice and light and homely.
- What happened to all that work we did last week? So much for Annie Dillard.
- *Really? Squirrels and rabbits hibernating? Bears and rabbits chattering?*
- Where is he in all this description? What significance do the seasons in Syracuse have for him?
- He’s just blowing through these descriptions, not thinking about them. Coasting.

In each of these comments the teacher expands her orientation from the text to some larger context of the writing. The first response looks at the organization of the writing in terms of the rhetorical situation. The second considers the assumptions about genre that the student may be bringing to this kind of writing. The third looks at the text in relation to the work in
class. The fourth looks at the writer’s statements explicitly in terms of their accuracy against a larger social reality. The fifth and sixth view the writing in terms of the student behind the text, his experience and involvement. All of these contexts are brought into play in her reading. These “texts” that go with the text, these contexts, inform and influence how she views the paper, but they also mark the various areas of writing that she attends to in her reading and response. “Context” in this sense is not only a necessary condition for language and meaning, as Deborah Brandt argues; it is also a mental construct, a set of expectations that we use to interpret writing, analyze its strengths and weaknesses, and talk about how texts work. We “bring” certain sets of concerns—what Kenneth Burke would call certain “terministic screens”—to our reading even as the text elicits other sets of concerns, other contexts, as we read. By sorting out the various qualities and contexts brought into play in the protocol teacher’s reading of “The Four Seasons” and charting them on a map, we might get a clearer feel for the geography of reading and the concerns that figure into our own ways of reading, evaluating, and responding to student writing.

The Rhetorical Context

The “text” beyond the text that has come to draw most of our attention is the rhetorical context—the circle of concerns that unites writer, text, and reader in some common purpose, in response to some situation or need. A student writes a paper, it is presumed, with some rhetorical purpose: to inform, explain, entertain, persuade, or generally achieve some effect on readers. The teacher is then called to read the paper in terms of how the text may affect readers and how well it achieves the writer’s intentions. Teachers who attend to the rhetorical context most obviously focus on the way the text meets the demands of an audience. How well does David describe the seasons of Syracuse for those who are unfamiliar with them? What does he do to engage readers in his discussion? They also focus on the purpose of the writing and assess how well the text is working to realize the writer’s intentions. Does David want to show his audience how the seasons in Tallahassee are no match for the seasons in Syracuse? Will his descriptions enable readers to see the significance the seasons have for him? Some teachers, looking to get a firmer grasp of what the student is trying to accomplish in a piece of writing, have come to call on the writer to identify his own intentions. In statements that accompany the paper, they have students define their aims, assess their progress, and raise questions for readers to consider. Such “process memos” (J. Sommers) or “reflective cover letters” (Yancey)
provide an additional resource for reading student writing—and an additional set of concerns to address in our reading and response. Teachers read in terms of the rhetorical context, in addition, when they address the tone of the writing and the writer’s voice, persona, and ethos—all of which deal somehow with the ways authors construct themselves as speakers and establish certain relationships with prospective readers.

The protocol teacher actively invokes the rhetorical context in her reading of “The Four Seasons,” viewing the writing as an instance of someone saying something to someone else, a writer addressing a reader for some purpose:

- You have some fine descriptions of the four seasons in here. But I’m not sure how much you’ve experienced them or let us experience them as readers.
- It’s an image that will lead your readers to imagine how hot it gets in Syracuse.
- Not much here, she thinks. He’s not telling us anything we don’t already know.
- You seem more intent on capturing some homey images of spring than in sharing with us your own views of the seasons in Syracuse.
- And this escape hatch won’t do. It’s a cop out.

In the first three instances, the teacher considers the writing in terms of the audience, in the last two, in terms of the writer’s intentions and persona.

The rhetorical context, then, may be plotted as a dynamic set of concerns encircling and interacting with the text.

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Diagram Two: The Rhetorical Context
When we view student writing as a rhetorical activity, a meaningful act of communication, we read in a way that, according to Fulkerson, has come to dominate contemporary composition studies. We look to help the writer see where the writing achieves and does not yet achieve what he (presumably) set out to accomplish and thereby dramatize the need for revision. As Nancy Sommers notes, "As writers we need and want thoughtful commentary to show us when we have communicated our ideas and when not, raising questions from a reader’s point of view that may not have occurred to us as writers. We want to know if our writing has communicated our intended meaning and, if not, what questions or discrepancies our reader sees that we, as writers, are blind to" (148).

The Classroom Context

When we read student writing, we are not, to be sure, just readers reading a piece of writing. We are teachers who read. We’ve decided on the kinds of writing that students are to do. To a large extent, we’ve determined the qualities that are to be valued in their writing. We may not warm up to the ubiquitous “What do you want?” but no question that students in a writing course ask makes more sense. In any class, even when we allow them to choose their own topics and genres, students are somehow left to give us what we call for. They are not writers so much as they are writers in apprenticeship: students. And as students they are imbricated in a set of power relations that always gives someone else a great deal of control over their writing. So when it comes time to read student writing, we invariably approach it as more than just readers. In addition to processing the text we also have to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of the writing, evaluate the student’s performance in terms of the work of the class, and use the writing to teach the student how to write better. As Patricia Murray writes, “We need to recognize that we bring with us to a reading of student texts an inevitable evaluation that stems from a discourse community that more often than not is different from that of the students. We need to look at how our responses as teachers of composition affect what we advise our students …” (84). If we are readers, we are always, to one extent or another, teacher-readers, reading student writing in terms of the assignment, the genre of writing, the work of the course, and our teacherly expectations.

The Assignment and Genre of the Writing

Much of what we value in student writing is determined by what we ask students to do in the assignment and, by extension, by the kind of
writing we’ve assigned. Assignments, in effect, perform the function of designating, among other things, the genre of writing to be pursued and the features of writing to be highlighted. They link the writing to a set of established forms and practices. Different assignments and different genres, of course, impose different demands on writers and elicit different expectations from readers. A personal narrative will lead us to look for different things than an informative report or an argumentative essay. A memoir will lead us to expect something different than a parable or a historical narrative. Assigning writing that is meant simply to display knowledge will lead us to look for something different than if we assigned writing to learn (Larson). Assigning freewriting exercises or other kinds of "low stakes assignments" will likely lead us to engage student writing differently than "high stakes assignments" (Elbow "High Stakes"). Holding students firmly to the demands of the assignment or, alternately, allowing them the freedom to depart from the assignment will establish different reading postures and lead us to look for different features when we read (Jolliffe). In the sample case, the writing assignment and the genre constraints of the personal descriptive essay clearly affect the protocol teacher’s way of reading “The Four Seasons.” She expects the writing to have an abundance of concrete detail that will enable readers to picture what the seasons are like in Syracuse and, further, that reflect the special meaning these seasons have for the writer. She also expects the writing not just to rehash general descriptions but to tell readers something they probably do not know about the seasons in this northeastern city:

- Spring, we find, is the season of awakening. Spring is followed by summer. Things warm up and people get back outside, go to the beach, and go on vacation. Not much here, she thinks. He’s not telling us anything we don’t already know.
- What significance do the seasons in Syracuse have for him? Did he read the assignment?
- They’re descriptions that we’re all familiar with and they don’t give any insight into how the four seasons are unique to you. . . . Try focusing on particular scenes and specific events you have seen or; better yet, that have happened to you.

Given the way contexts spill over into one another and collide, we should expect certain conflicts to come about. And they do. How much are we to view the writing in terms of the assignment, the purposes or “intentions” we designate for the writer to take up? How much are we to let students themselves decide the course of their writing and the genres they employ?10 In reading “The Four Seasons,” we have to decide how
much we are going to allow, or even encourage, David to shape the writing in his own ways. Are we going to approve his commonplace descriptions of the seasons? Are we going to call him on the fact that he doesn’t adequately treat the significance that the Syracuse seasons have for him? Are we going to contest his mechanical, self-conscious opening paragraph as inappropriate for the kind of writing we have assigned? In the protocol, the teacher seems inclined to allow the student his intentions—up to a point. She is willing to have him go with his broad treatment of the four seasons. But she is not so interested in having him pursue his own intentions that she is willing to forego her interest in seeing more concrete descriptions, seeing him adopt a new way of getting in and out of the essay, and seeing more of his experiences and views of the seasons in Syracuse. Her way of reading the writing is clearly influenced by the assignment and what she expects this kind of writing to do.

_The Work in Class_

Beyond reading within the rhetorical context, beyond reading in light of the assignment or a particular genre, we must somehow read student texts with an eye on the larger pedagogical setting. Invariably, the work we do in class and the expectations we bring to student texts conspire to make us strong readers, determined to privilege certain features of discourse. If we have been emphasizing introductions and conclusions, we tend to look for how students begin and end their own writing. If we have spent several class periods introducing conventions of reasoned evidence in argumentative writing, we usually look for such features in student papers. The goals we set out to achieve in the course also influence our reading and response. If we are determined to lead students to come up with polished written products, we will be more attentive to matters of unity, coherence, clarity, and correctness. If we are intent on giving students practice in their writing processes, we will emphasize certain strategies of writing and probably place less emphasis on textual completeness. If we are committed to preparing students for their future courses, we will be more attuned to the conventions that are practiced in academic discourse.

The protocol response to “The Four Seasons” illustrates how elements from the classroom context routinely become the focus of our reading. The teacher, struck by David’s generic descriptions, thinks that all the work they did with detail over the past couple of weeks has been lost on him. The lesson on Annie Dillard’s meticulous observation is called to mind and prompts an emotional response that leads her to look all the more
expectantly for signs that David has or hasn’t taken it to heart. A moment later, she is taken aback enough by the writing that she wonders if he even read the assignment. Soon after, she is taken by his image of the heat rising off the pavement. “This,” she tells him, is the kind of detail I’ve been looking for.” Optimally, our reading is an extension of the larger classroom conversation, our emphases as teachers reflecting the instruction and goals of the course (Knoblauch and Brannon; O’Neill and Mathison Fife; Straub, “Classroom Instruction”).

These contexts—the assignment, the work in class, and the teacher’s emphases and expectations—form some of the most powerful influences in our reading of student writing. They may be plotted as part of the larger classroom contexts that inform the ways we read.

Diagram Three: The Classroom Context

These contexts are not neat or mutually exclusive. One context spills over into other contexts in the way that bays, inland waterways, and oceans spill into one another: although they are at some point, from some perspective, clearly distinguishable as entities on their own, with their own distinct properties, they flow into each other and merge. A single comment, in fact, may invoke several contexts simultaneously, for example, the rhetorical context and the classroom context, as in the following response: “Good sharp detail [the text]. It’s the kind of ‘concrete naming’ [classroom context] that will help readers picture the scene [rhetorical situation].” It’s not important to know just when one gives way to another. What’s important is that, when we read, we immerse ourselves in these waters.
The Individual Student

The revived interest in the teaching of writing in the 1960s and 1970s, the New Rhetoric that would eventuate in contemporary composition studies, was powered by two major concerns: a concern for viewing all writing, even student writing, as rhetorical; and a concern for invention and, with it, an interest in composing processes. Both concerns would lead compositionists to an inevitable interest in the student writer as an individual: her experiences, her ideas, her composing methods, and struggles as a learning writer. If writing is, more than clearly and correctly laying out an argument, a way of saying something to someone else, student writers must be guided to find something worth saying. If they are to find something to say, they must learn to investigate their experiences. If they are to form these ideas more aptly in texts, they must be given practice in drafting and revision. Since students are at different stages of development as writers, coming from sometimes vastly different backgrounds and having very different discursive experiences, educators have looked more and more to gear instruction to the individual student. The field has devoted so much attention to students as individuals that “the student” has become a context of its own in the teaching of writing—not unlike the study of the author’s life and work developed into a context of its own in traditional literary scholarship. The next three contexts of student writing bring this “individual student” into the picture and prompt us to view the writing in light of her identity and experience.

The Student’s Writing Process

As teachers, we are in the rather special position of seeing not just finished texts, but writing on the way to realization. We get to see the writing as it unfolds, help students as they draft and revise, and teach the act of composing. Our ways of reading student texts are dramatically influenced by the extent to which we view writing as a process and allow the drafting to determine what we look for and consequently what we see. When we read with such an orientation, we look at a piece of writing as part of a larger process, viewing early drafts with an eye toward revision and later drafts in relation to what the writer has come up with before. We generally read first for overall content and organization, and deal with matters of paragraph structure, sentence style, and word choice only when the larger conceptual matters have been worked through (though not necessarily worked out) or as the final draft approaches. We sometimes even look at final drafts, not summatively as finished products, but in terms of how they may be revised.
Viewing writing as a process, then, colors the lenses that we bring to student writing. Once we decide whether to encourage David to continue work on “The Four Seasons” or call the writing to a halt, we make one giant step in determining what we look for and how we read. As soon as the protocol teacher, early in her response, asks the writer “which trees? What kind of flowers?” she is already orienting her responses toward revision. She’s not looking back at writing that is complete; she’s implicitly looking forward to writing that is to be done, considering the writing in terms of how it might be improved. She also anticipates revision when, on noting David’s over-reliance on generalizations in the fourth paragraph, she remarks: “Let’s hear some details.” Her commentary becomes explicitly concerned with guiding the student toward revision half way through her end comment:

- Try focusing on particular scenes and specific events you have seen or; better yet, that have happened to you. Maybe it’d help to sketch out a few lists of things that you associate personally with these seasons, select the ones that are most vivid and representative, and work those into your essay. This might be one you choose to revise.

By taking a process approach to our reading and viewing student writing as work in progress, we don’t have to deal with everything at once. We can slow down, focus on certain issues at certain times, and deal more fully with the concerns we do take up (Krest; Sommers; Straub, “Teacher Response”). We can guide students more purposefully through their work as writers and use our responses to teach, not just to critique or grade.

The Student’s Work in the Course

The ways we read student writing are also influenced by how we envision the “text” of the course. How much are we going to look at the student’s writings discretely, as separate projects? How much are we going to look at the writing in terms of the student’s ongoing work in the course in light of his other writings, the strategies he has been working on, and his development as a writer? How does this paper stack up against the other papers the student has written? Is there some quality of writing that he’s been working on that should be addressed? Is there any evidence of progress with some composing strategy? In the sample case, is David’s voice more distinctive than in his earlier papers? Are his sharp, imagistic descriptions in this paper notably better than what he has come up with before? These prior texts form yet another context, another “text beyond the text,” that we may attend to in our reading and response. The protocol
teacher makes several evaluations that indicate that she takes an expansive view of “the text.” She looks at “The Four Seasons” as a discrete paper and as a work in progress, yet she also views the writing in terms of the student’s overall work in the course. She has evidently seen some potential in David’s writing and has come to expect a certain level of work as a result: “He’s done some sharp writing for short stretches in his earlier papers too, but he’s not been able to sustain it. He can do better than this.” Paying attention to the student’s evolving text across the course is one of the surest ways of individualizing instruction and using our comments to meet the student where he is in his work as a learning writer (Krest; Onore; Phelps; Straub, “Classroom Instruction”).

The Student Behind the Text

Our evaluation of student writing is also shaped by our “reading” of the student—our sense of the student behind the text. Our reading of a paper like “The Four Seasons” may well be affected by our sense of David as a writer and as a student in the class: his attitudes, efforts, and capabilities. We may also view the words on the page in light of our ideas about David’s experience and identity, whether as an independent agent or, increasingly now, as a socially constructed subject, defined (among other things) by race, gender, class, sexual preference, and religion. How fully has he captured the kind of winters he has experienced? What personal associations does he have of spring in Syracuse? How may his perceptions of Syracuse and the seasons be seen as a function of his race, gender, or class? When we read student writing, more often than not we read the text and the student or person behind the text. More than evaluate, rank, and judge, we diagnose, coach, guide, explain, and teach. Whom we are coaching, guiding, and teaching is as important as what we are teaching. If the student has admittedly had a struggle writing about a subject that is too close to him, we might steer him toward a different topic. If we know he lacks confidence or has a difficult history with writing, we might be more inclined to look for successes to build on. If he has struggled before and is now making progress, we might look at his writing more forgivingly and play up his accomplishments in our response. If he has done solid work on the first three papers, we might well expect more from him on the fourth. “Students use and learn from our comments when we monitor their writing rather than simply evaluate their final papers,” Margie Krest says. “At each point in our monitoring we must strive to be sensitive to our students as writers so that our comments foster positive attitudes about writing” (38-39).
The protocol teacher is sensitive to the writer and the person behind this text. Even before she begins her reading, she has clicked in to certain ways of seeing the writing in terms of her take on David as a student writer. She picks up the first paper, pauses when she sees that it is David's, decides nevertheless to forge ahead, and quips to herself: "Let's see if he walks the walk this time." Not much later, she reads the text against the background of his attitudes toward writing, stroking his confidence even as she uses this confidence to push him to work harder: "she doesn't want to take away from the praise she's just given—he needs the applause—and decides for the moment to let it go." She also makes some inferences from the text, for better or worse, about David's motives as a writer:

- He's getting careless here, she thinks, relying far too much on cliches about spring.
- He's just blowing through these descriptions, not thinking about them. Coastling.

But she's careful not to confront the student with such presumptions about his motives and processes, and reminds herself to keep the commentary constructive. Not surprisingly, when she looks at the writing in terms of David's personal experience she sees this experience in psychological terms, according to his own individual perspectives, not in terms of any social identities.

![Diagram Four: The Student Context](image-url)
In addition to looking at the text in terms of the larger rhetorical and pedagogical context, then, we may view it in terms of some image of the student behind the text, his particular experiences and views, building this image on information we get directly from our interactions with the student or indirectly from the student’s text. In doing so, we read—not just the writer’s texts—but the writer. These writerly concerns may be plotted as a general context that, like the classroom context, provides a broad interpretive frame for reading the text and its immediate rhetorical context.

Classroom writing never comes as a text on its own. It always implies a rhetorical context, a pedagogical context, and a particular student writer. These contexts routinely come into play in our reading, as a matter of course overlapping, complementing, and competing with one another. Such interanimation of contexts is one of the things that makes reading so resourceful. It is also one of the things that makes reading student writing so complex and demanding. Problems occur when we do not acknowledge these various contexts as focuses for our reading. In pursuing other treasures, we read right over them. Other problems occur when the contexts come into play (as they will, spontaneously) and we do not know how to attend to them. We take up one, we take up another, as we will, but with no clear focus or purpose. Still other problems occur when the contexts we do address do not match, in kind or degree, the emphases of our classroom instruction. We spend two weeks considering how writers should adapt writing to the audience, and then when we read we focus almost exclusively on organization and detail—or we read from our own specialized position as writing teachers and do not reach beyond this role to give the writer a sense of how the writing might be read by prospective members of its target audience. As teacher-readers, we have to develop a repertoire of concerns and a knack for reading student writing in ways that will complement and reinforce the work we are doing in class. To do so, we have to reflect on our day-to-day teaching, critically examine our instruction in terms of our goals, articulate the contexts and concerns that are most important to the course, and focus on them when we read our students’ writing. As we ask students to keep certain key features of discourse in mind as they write, we should keep certain features of writing—and certain contexts—in mind as we read and respond.

OTHER CONTEXTS THAT INFLUENCE OUR READING

The text, the rhetorical context, the classroom context, and the student context are the most obvious frames that inform our reading and
establish the features we look for when we read student writing. But there are other contexts that are less obvious but often no less powerful in the effects they have on our reading: our approach to teaching writing, our interpretive theories, the academic setting, the writing program, the larger institutional interests, our own prior experiences with teacher response, the immediate circumstances of our reading. In fact, these concerns may be so ingrained that it may be difficult to see them as sets of expectations, as contexts and constraints, that influence (and make possible) our reading. We don’t focus on features associated with these contexts in student texts. We rarely acknowledge them as we read, and we almost never make reference to them in our comments. Nevertheless, they are so imbricated in what we do that, even though they usually remain tacit, they shape what we look for and hence what we see. These concerns, which are brought to the text in the form of teacher expectations, may be plotted as a backdrop for the more immediate contexts that inform our reading, illustrating the full complexity of the interests and influences that define us as teacher-readers.

Diagram Five: Contexts of Student Writing

Approach to Teaching Writing

In “Composition Theory in the Eighties,” Fulkerson looks to sort out the various components that make up a theory of composition, or what I am calling here an approach to teaching writing. A full theory of
composition, he posits, must have at least four components, each of which, to avoid confusion, must be kept distinct:

- a "philosophy" made up of one's goals for instruction and a set of criteria for good writing;
- a conception of the writing processes students might employ in order to reach these goals;
- a set of classroom practices that are designed to bring about these goals;
- an epistemology, a conception about what counts for knowledge.

Each of these theoretical components has some real effect on how we read and what we read for.

There is no theoretical commitment, no matter how explicit or tacit it is, that more profoundly influences our ways of reading than our goals for instruction. Is the writing class a service course? Does it exist primarily to clean up student writing and perform a gatekeeping function for the university? Is it to give students practice in their composing processes and help them become more confident writers? Is it to help students learn to write better, to use writing to learn to think more independently and more critically, and see what value writing might have for them in their lives? Is it designed to prepare students for the writing they will be expected to do in other courses—or somehow prepare them for the writing they may have to do when they take on a job? Is it to help students develop powers of critical thinking, introduce them to the latest electronic media, engage them in the examination of their culture, or expose them to other cultures? These questions about the aims of composition turn on the broader issue of how we envision the larger goals of college education. Is an undergraduate degree meant to secure students a good job? To broaden their ideas about the world and understand their place in it? To lead them to become good citizens? To mobilize them to resist oppressive social structures? These matters are often decided for us, at least ostensibly, by the writing program, by the department, by the college, or by the teaching approach we adopt. But they are emphasized or de-emphasized according to the decisions and actions of the individual teacher. How we envision these larger goals of instruction will influence how we read and what we look for when we read and evaluate student writing.

Our reading will also be influenced by how we view knowledge and envision the nature of the writer's content and meanings (Anson, "Response Styles"). Are they to come primarily from some fixed common knowledge? Are they to be appropriated from the statements of some prior
discourse? Are they to come from the writer’s own circle of experience—his own views and personal knowledge? The content of student writing depends to a large extent on the assignment and the genre of writing, but it also depends on the writer’s specific subject matter. The more we lean toward an expressivist view of writing, the more we’ll value the writer’s discovery of ideas based on, and giving shape to, his own experience. The more we lean toward a social view of writing, especially some recent social constructionist views, the more we’ll privilege subject matter outside the self and look at invention as a matter of discerning what has already been said and negotiating various voices and perspectives in prior texts (Bartholomae; Bizzell; Lu).

Our ways of reading are also affected by our pedagogical theories. If we see writing instruction as a matter of simply giving students plenty of time to write in different genres and along the way get feedback from others in the class, we will be more inclined than we otherwise might to give students a lot of room to make their own decisions as writers (Elbow, Writing Without Teachers; Moffett; Murray). Instead of specifying changes we’d like to see made, we will provide reader responses, make suggestions or frame our comments as questions for the student to take up as he will, in his own way. If we believe that class time is best used to provide students direct instruction in writing or engage them in hands-on practice with certain composing activities like observing, planning, defining, and arranging, we will be more inclined to look for instances where students make, or might make, use of these strategies (Hillocks, Berthoff). If, in an effort to emphasize the social dimension of writing, we look to turn our classroom into a microcosm of a discourse community and establish students themselves as the sole audience of all course writing—and perhaps even as arbiters of what is to count as good writing—we might find ourselves in the curious position of having to resist many of the comments that come naturally to us as teachers (Cooper). We might not have recourse, for instance, to question a text that lacks unity, relies too much on cliches, or is utterly informal.

The protocol teacher appears to adopt an approach that is largely expressivist. She assumes an expressivist axiology, a subjective epistemology, an expressivist view of the composing process, and a mixed pedagogy. She posits expressivist goals inasmuch as she looks to foster the development of the student’s own thoughts, the development of his own voice, and his development both as a writer and as an individual. But she seems driven not simply by an interest in the student’s self-expression but also by a keen interest in writing for readers, the defining trait of a
rhetorical axiology. She clearly assumes that knowledge and truth are located in personal experience and perception. She enacts a vision of the composing process as a fairly individualistic activity involving a series of recursive activities of planning, drafting, and revising. She seems to shuffle between a teacher-centered and a student-centered pedagogy. She relies on the presentational mode of analyzing model texts and makes frequent use of writing workshops, including collaborative peer-response workshops. At times, she seems intent on directing David to make specific changes. At other times, she seems content to raise an issue for him to take up as he chooses.

These theoretical commitments find their way into this teacher’s reading of “The Four Seasons.” It is not enough that David describe the seasons, he must describe them through his own experience. He must do this, as the assignment reminds him, in ways that reveal the significance the Syracuse seasons have for him and, what’s more, that show how these descriptions are unique to him. She focuses primarily on the content of the writing, but she also deals a good bit with correctness, sentence structure, and the formal shaping of the writing, including the use of such formal devices as thesis statements and transitions. For all her attention to matters beyond the text, she still sees the writing primarily in terms of a cognitive view toward text making. If her work with David’s essay here is typical, this teacher, it might be said, is fairly formalistic and rhetorical in her ways of reading student texts.

But ultimately, with all the evaluative remarks she makes, both negative and positive, she seems to assume a fairly authoritative stance in her encounter with David’s writing. Although a theory of composition more often than not remains tacit, the teacher typically acting intuitively according to quiet promptings, it exerts a powerful influence over our ways of reading and responding to student writing.

Interpretive Theory
Our ways of reading are often colored by our literary theory (or theories). The strategies that we bring to literature spill over into our reading of student writing, leading us to look at texts in certain ways, with certain emphases, for particular kinds of meanings. A lot of us, steeped in Modernism and raised on the legacy of New Criticism, look to perform close readings of the text, appreciating statements that “tell,” seeking out patterns of imagery and theme, and demanding coherence. Many of us, informed by reader-response criticism and attuned to the process of interpretation, look to dramatize our ways of negotiating
meaning and point to productive or troublesome gaps in student writing. Others of us don the lenses of structuralism and attend to various conventions of discourse or look through a Bakhtinian lens for the voices and intertextual struggles at work in a text. More recently, under the pervasive influence of poststructural literary theory, we may find ourselves looking, among other things, to reveal the conflicting voices, hidden ideologies, and unresolved tensions that are inscribed in the words of our students’ texts. Although evidence of such theoretical influence is not always readily noticeable, the pull they may exert over our reading is no less forceful.

An even more forceful, if only slightly more obvious, influence in our ways of reading student writing is exerted by the roles we bring to the text as readers, among them:

1. *Teacher-reader* as evaluator (focused on assessment)
2. *Teacher-reader* as educator (focused on instruction)
3. *Teacher-reader* as universal audience (representing readers in general)
4. *Teacher-reader* as target audience (representing a specific group of readers)
5. *Teacher-reader* as a common reader (presenting herself as an individual reader)
6. *Teacher-reader* as implied reader (assuming the role suggested by the text)

The traditional default mode for teachers has been to read the text new critically as an evaluator, or in what Alan Purves calls the role of judge, with the *teacher-reader* looking primarily to assess the strengths and weaknesses from a privileged position above the rhetorical context, typically without any reference to the audience. A second customary role for teachers to assume is that of instructor, akin to what Purves calls education’s version of the diagnostician/therapist. This *teacher-reader* also establishes a certain distance from the text and positions herself outside the immediate rhetorical context. But instead of looking to critique the writing or fix it, she looks to read the writing from the perspective of someone primarily interested in helping or improving the writer.

Increasingly, however, as Fulkerson notes in his survey, contemporary teachers insinuate themselves into the rhetorical situation and assume the role of some prospective audience. But here again there is more than a little complexity. The teacher, we have come to see, may take on several different roles as “a reader.” She may assume the role of an abstract, universal audience, and speak for how the writing works for “the
reader” or “readers,” without any specification of who these readers might be. She may act as a representative of the paper’s target audience, whether it is one specified by the assignment or somehow indicated by the student writer himself—that is, in the role of some actual audience whom the writer is trying to address, what Ede and Lunsford call an “audience addressed.” She may read the writing as an individual, common reader, showing students how she experiences, understands, and reacts to their writing, whether she highlights her own subjectivity or masks it in favor of some less personal, less partial perspective (Elbow Writing Without Teachers; Gibson; Macrorie; Moffett). Or she may resist bringing a predetermined role to the text and look instead to pick up on the readerly role that the text implicitly invites readers to adopt what Ede and Lunsford call an “audience invoked.” A teacher looking to discern the reader implied in much of “The Four Seasons,” for instance, might find the easy-going, accepting audience of popular magazines or local newspaper columns. These roles are not distinct or airtight. A teacher does not simply adopt one to the exclusion of the others. A given teacher may emphasize one role or another, but she will likely assume different roles in a single reading—and perhaps all of them over the course of a full set of student papers. The object, again, is to match our reading roles with our instruction.

The protocol teacher adopts a number of these reader roles in her response. She is evidently at ease in the role of the teacher as evaluator. Most of her interactions with the text, in fact, are made from this perspective, among them:

• An okay start, she thinks. A good thesis. But he’s slow getting into what he has to say.
• He’s just blowing through these descriptions, not thinking about them. Coasting.

She very frequently casts herself in the role of teacher as educator: Don’t attack, she thinks.

• Keep it upbeat.
• He’s done some sharp writing for short stretches in his earlier papers too, but he’s not been able to sustain it. He can do better than this.

But she also assumes various roles as a teacher-reader. Try to grab the reader’s attention, she tells David at the start of the paper, invoking the needs of readers in general. Much more often, though, she assumes the role of the target audience:

• It’s an image that will lead your readers to imagine how hot it gets in Syracuse.
• These are all general terms. Let’s hear some details.
From time to time the protocol teacher even takes on the role of a subjective reader. “Good,” she thinks as she reads about the moist ground wanting to seep into your shoes, “a really nice image,” and then tells David, “I can feel the squishing. Moments later, reading the description of the trees beginning to blossom and the faint smell of pollen lingering in the air, she thinks of the cherry trees that used to grow in her yard. Both reactions register impressions that the writing has elicited from her as a real reader. This is the kind of response Peter Elbow extols when he speaks about providing students with “movies of the reader’s mind,” that is, the ways the teacher processes the text moment-to-moment as an everyday reader (“Options”).

Some of us may like to think that we leave our subjectivity behind when we teach a class or read a student paper, but nothing could be further from the truth. Our work as teachers, like our students’ work as students, is saturated with our own experiences, interests, and values. Response and judgment, Robert Schwegler reminds us, “are shaped by the reader’s knowledge; ideology (personal, social, cultural); social situation; and interpretive strategies (often shaped themselves by social and cultural ideology and class) as well as by textual features and content” (212). We readily challenge sexist remarks about men mowing and raking while women are left to plant flowers. We overlook stylistic flaws when a student writes about the sudden death of her father. We are easily enamored by an essay about Yellowstone National Park if we have just made our first trip out there ourselves. No matter which roles we adopt as teacher-readers, no matter how much we are wont to admit or try to suspend our own views, two things are clear: (1) what we read for and how we read are invariably affected by our own assumptions, interests, and values, and (2) just how much we admit—or try to suspend—our personal values and beliefs in our reading greatly influences how we read our students’ writing. Any monitoring of what we look for when we read student writing must involve an examination of our roles as teacher-readers (Cowan; P. Murray; Purves; Straub and Lunsford), the ways our values and experiences may come to bear on our ways of reading (Fish; Freund; Tompkins), and, as some suggest, even our personalities (Thompson).

The Academic Setting
Regardless of the type of writing we pursue or the kind of community we look to create in class, we are always somehow influenced

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by the fact that we are dealing with writing in an academic setting. We might, for instance, place greater value than we otherwise would on thoughtfulness and reasoned evidence. We might privilege analysis over emotion or seriousness over casualness and humor. Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch have shown how readers, when they invoke the perspective of the academy, foist on student texts standards and values that are peculiarly academic—and that wouldn’t be stressed in other settings. They cleverly use the example of how our bias against allowing students to rely on emotional argument might well be different if we were acting in another discourse community, say, in a court room and not a classroom. Similarly, Joseph Williams has shown how teachers’ harsh, bionic eyes for error in student writing are made all too human when they don the lenses of nonteachers and read other kinds of writing.

As members of the academic community, we are primed to look for a certain formal tone in student writing, pay special attention to correctness, and look for other conventions and discursive practices that are valued in school. The protocol teacher’s response shows the pressures of these constraints. In spite of her expressed priorities, even as she sees that the draft in front of her is not yet ready for word-by-word editing, she has trouble resisting taking note of David’s problems with transitions and inappropriate usage. She assumes that writers should have something fresh and distinctive to say—or at least have something to add to the communal storehouse of knowledge. These concerns are fundamental to our expectations as writing teachers. They may be so familiar and obvious, in fact, that it may be difficult to see them as expectations at all. But when our expectations as teachers become so rote and generalized that we fail to recognize the particular context of the writing or become so strong that they override the student’s choices and purposes, we impose our own idealized text on students, appropriate student writing, and ultimately discourage students from giving themselves to their work as writers (N. Sommers; Brannon and Knoblauch).

**Writing Program Constraints, Institutional Constraints, and Grades**

There are still other contexts that quietly but routinely shape the ways we read student texts. Some writing programs exert an obvious influence over the teaching staff, requiring the use of certain textbooks, emphasizing process or product, supporting or not supporting collaborative learning, pushing one kind of writing or another, and, in doing so, placing a premium on some features and contexts of writing and downplaying others. The protocol teacher’s decision to resist comments
about wording and transitions or to hold back on critical commentary could each derive from the influence of the writing program. The larger institution itself may also exert a palpable influence. Some institutions create an atmosphere where students are seen as mere clients or consumers, and teaching is seen as just another task to check off a much larger schedule. Other institutions create a more positive environment, where students and teaching are the heart of the matter. These overarching views toward instruction surely have an impact on how teachers see themselves as writing teachers, how they see their classes (and how much they put into them), and how they read their students’ writing.

One of the most obvious and powerful institutional constraints that affect our reading of student writing is the requirement to give grades—an issue that is always bubbling at the surface of new teachers’ concerns and simmering just below the surface when any teacher reads student writing. I’m not interested here in the question of how we decide on grades—or if we should put grades on individual papers. I’m interested in noting how putting grades on student papers affects the ways we read and respond to student writing—sometimes significantly. Consider the case of the protocol teacher. She’s reading what’s intended as a final draft of “The Four Seasons.” She sees, as she’s reading, that it is not realized enough to warrant closing the project down and treating it as a finished essay. She responds to the paper as if it will be revised. When she decides to slash her original C into a cross between a C and a B, I would suggest, she makes a choice that affects her final take on the writing and that affects her response. With this generous grade, she allows David—and herself—more room to rest content with the paper. She can back away from it cleanly and move on, giving the student a wide berth in whether or not to go back to it and revise. But if instead, let’s say, she had opted to give more play to the skeptical side of her reading and gave the paper a C or C-, her posture would change, her reading would change, and her response would almost certainly change along with them. Her response would likely get more evaluative, more defensive. Putting grades on student papers—or refraining from putting grades on papers, for that matter—invariably marks our ways of reading and responding to student texts (Elbow, “Ranking”). It is another powerful constraint to consider when we consider our work as readers of student writing.

The Teacher’s Past Experience with Teacher Response

It is a basic principle of response, especially when we first start out as teachers: we do unto others what has been done unto us. We make the
kinds of comments we remember getting on our own writing: they are what we are familiar with, what we have come to associate with response. So our first ways of reading, our default response style, is usually some version of traditional teacher response: rather abbreviated if not terse in tone and style, and usually evaluative and controlling. Whatever stylistic features we develop later are often echoes of comments that have come from teachers in our past who have made an impression. How often have I started out an end comment with the kind of high praise I remember once getting from Joan Bobbitt on a graduate paper I wrote on Thomas Hardy: This is a herculean effort! How often have I acknowledged a student’s taking on a formidable task the way I remember Jim Phelan acknowledging my own attempt at the formidable task of coming to terms with his first book: Although I can’t say that I’m finally persuaded by your argument, I admire and appreciate the careful reading you give this work. How often have I taken heart at feeling pressed to be upfront and critical in a comment, knowing that I could try to frame the criticism in a way that was both sharp and helpful, as Barnett Gutenberg did a long time ago for me when he wrote on an undergraduate paper I’d written about Jay Gatsby and Thomas Sutpen: Writing is meant to express, not impress. Too often you go for the flashy word instead of the right word. Try to say more simply and clearly what you have to say, in language that you can control. How much has my own upbeat, encouraging response style evolved as a reaction to the burning humility and anger I have felt on receiving comments that were insensitive and (as Nancy Sommers so aptly puts it) mean-spirited? I am convinced that the voice and fullness of my own comments as a teacher are a direct result of the long line of teachers I’ve had, from high school through grad school, who respectfully and generously gave themselves to nurturing my work through their comments. And I believe all of us, as Janet Emig and Robert Parker suggest, have such influences from our pasts at work in the ways we read and respond to our own students’ writing.

The Immediate Circumstances of Reading and Responding

The pull of all these contexts may take effect only as another context—our immediate circumstances as we read—allows them to take hold. The number of papers we have, the mood we’re in, the order in which we read them, the number of papers we’ve already worked through, the number left to go, the other work we have to do before the next class, all the things that come to mind, fill our hearts, and would pull us away from our reading. And, of course, time. How much needs to be said about how
time itself affects—or downright determines—how we read and respond to our students’ writing? The way our readings get fuzzier, our comments shorter and grumpier, as we spend more and more time on a set of papers and get more tired, less patient, and more than a bit less forgiving? The way our comments get astonishingly more efficient as class time rapidly approaches—and remarkably more benign if we hand papers back a week late or a day or two after all the others? Will the protocol teacher have the time to respond this fully to a classful of twenty-four students? Will she be as involved and clear-headed on the twelfth or twenty-fourth paper as she is with David’s, her first? Will the rote introduction in this paper trigger reactions to other such introductions in later papers? Will David’s sharp images and easy cliches lead her to be less accepting of another student’s cliches? Just how much sway these immediate circumstances exert on our reading will depend, of course, on how clearly we are able to keep in mind our vision of what we want to accomplish. The more contexts that we bring or that enter into our reading, the fuller and more textured our response. But the more contexts we bring into play—or, worse, that come into play unbidden—the greater the potential for distractions or confusion. One of the main difficulties in learning to read and respond to student writing is just this: we have to decide, from a dazzling array of options, on the terms that we are to read by and the concerns we will most value in our reading. Further, we have to figure out how to match these criteria to our individual teaching styles and our particular classroom goals. And, further still, we have to discover what is most important on this paper, for this student, at this time. And, yes, always, always, working against time. It’s no wonder, then, why we learn quickly to put our best battle faces on when we bring home a new batch of papers. We know it can easily turn into a struggle.

**Analysis of the Protocol Teacher’s Reading**

Fulkerson grants a major status to the values that teachers bring to their reading of writing—right up next to their goals for instruction. In fact, he says the most obvious inconsistency within a given teacher’s theory of composition “is subscribing to one axiology and then evaluating from another” (422). He does little to define the nature of this crucial component of composition theory or elucidate its importance—they are not central to his project. It is my purpose to do both because they are central to mine. A teacher’s concept of what makes writing good is the most sensitive and vulnerable contact zone between her theory and her classroom practice—and the best place to begin to reflect on one’s work as a teacher. In the following section, I will analyze the protocol teacher’s
reading of “The Four Seasons” and consider (as best as I can given the limitations of this scenario) how the values she enacts in her reading square with her commitments, theories, and practice. In doing so, I’d like to help teachers see how they might use this map of criteria to examine their own ways of reading, clarify their own values and goals, and reconcile their own theories and practice.

The protocol teacher does well to reflect her theories and values in her reading of David’s essay. We would expect such a teacher to emphasize content over organization, style, and correctness, and she does. Fully half of the fifty interpretations she makes across this reading protocol focus on the writer’s ideas and descriptions. Fittingly, almost all of them are concerned with how well David makes these descriptions of the seasons vivid and personal, putting into practice her subjectivist concern for the writer making his own meanings. Another ten interpretations focus on, or look at some textual quality in terms of, the individual student writer: his experience, his involvement in the writing, and his earlier work in class. Such routine evocation of the “student” context puts into practice her emphasis on looking to improve the student writer over simply improving the writing. Six additional interpretations view the writing in terms of the rhetorical situation. Only nine of the matters she takes up in her reading deal with local matters, and over half of all her interpretations invoke some larger context of writing.

Identifying the concerns a teacher takes up is only a start. Other questions also have to be considered: How does she define her key criteria? What, in her view, constitutes good content? Has she been emphasizing such a view in her day-to-day instruction? What sort of voice does she most value? Is such a valuing consistent with this type of writing and her pedagogy? What makes organization “effective”? When she calls on a student to make his style “more direct” or “more informal,” what exactly does she mean? Has she made these meanings clear to students? We never simply apply a prepackaged set of criteria wholesale to our students’ writing. If our terms, as Bakhtin reminds us, always come shot through with prior meanings, they also get filtered through our own experiences and perceptions. We give them our own particular twist, our own individual take, emphasizing one connotation or another. As teachers, it’s our job to unpack these meanings, talk with students about what we mean when we use them, and explain how they fit in with the methods and goals of the course. For the protocol teacher, for instance, good content depends to a large extent on the originality and distinctiveness of the writer’s descriptions. Such a definition fits in well
with the type of writing the class is working on and her expressivist goals. A writer’s voice, in order to be effective, must be informal and personal—a voice that speaks casually with readers and captures something of the writer’s individual way of seeing the world. Such an understanding also seems to go well with the descriptive, personal writing she calls for on this assignment, and it is in line with her student-centered, expressivist pedagogy.

There are, however, some problems and inconsistencies. She seems to think that student writers should be fairly explicit in structuring their writing. They would do well to announce their focus in a thesis statement, forecast topics to come, and make explicit transitions. But are explicit thesis statements necessary or useful in the context of such personal writing? Can such thesis statements typically be found in the personal essays of published writers? Are they consistent with her expressivist pedagogy? Even if these values might be reconciled with her theories, there is another related issue: has she done enough to talk about the nature of such formal strategies of organization in class?

Her concern with transitions also seems misguided. She reads the paragraph about summers in Syracuse and sees a problem with an overly mechanical transition. But it seems more apt—and more theoretically consistent—to see what happens here as a matter of the writer failing to get beyond the obvious statements one might make about the seasons: not a formal problem so much as a problem of invention or a rhetorical problem involving the writer’s failure to make the writing responsive to readers. Her concern with David’s use of the second person “you”—presumably because it is too informal—is also problematic. The trouble is that the writer’s use of “you” seems well within the bounds of the genre and not unsuited to the assigned audience for the assignment: those (common readers) who are unfamiliar with this place. The writer’s use of “you” is also not inconsistent with the conventions of personal writing, which are more relaxed than the constraints of academic discourse. At any rate, like the other instances above, it seems an unnecessary concession to formal academic discourse, given her pedagogical allegiances.

There are more significant problems. When David fails to provide more descriptions based on his own experience and views, she chides him for not following the assignment. Yet her student-centered pedagogy—and her own classroom policy—allows students great latitude in interpreting and following the demands of the assignment. (To her credit, she does not express this concern to David in her comments. She also doesn’t insist that he focus his writing on only one or two seasons if he

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takes up a revision—or that he go back and revise this paper.) More troublingly, she criticizes David for not adopting the voice of an expert on the Syracuse seasons and establishing his authority as a writer. The fact that he is writing a personal essay and the fact that he is writing for an audience of everyday readers both mitigate against her expecting David to adopt the voice of an expert. Such an authoritative voice might be appropriate for an academic audience. It might even be appropriate for some magazine audiences. It might be rightly expected in a course based on a social constructionist axiology or a social epistemology. But it is not necessary for the circumstances of this assignment or the framework of this class. There is no reason David cannot effectively meet the demands of the situation laid out for him by employing the casual personal voice he adopts here—or, for that matter, the second person "you" perspective.

This is a method any writing teacher might use to examine her own theories and practices from the ground up, starting with what she actually looks for in her own students’ writing and then trying literally to come to terms with them. Do you emphasize the content of student writing as much as you think you do? As much as your pedagogy calls for? Do you deal with organization in ways that are consistent with the genre of writing and your theories? Do the contexts you address reflect your values and classroom practice? If you are an expressivist, does your reading deal in some detail with the student’s own experience and views? If you espouse a rhetorical axiology, do the majority of your responses focus on the writer’s persona, purpose, and audience? If you are a social constructionist or if you employ a cultural pedagogy, does your reading emphasize the social side of the map and deal, in particular, for instance, with the conventions of the discourse community or the cultural assumptions that are underneath the writer’s claims? How do you understand the various terms you employ? Do you define “substantive content” in ways that are consistent with your expressivist epistemology? Do you talk about organization in ways that reflect your allegiance to a rhetorical axiology? Does your emphasis on a particular kind of voice go with our social constructionist agenda? Do you read student texts from the perspective of the audience that you ask students to address in their writing? Do you talk about writing as a recursive process in class but then expect students to always be at a certain stage of writing—finished by now with their discovery and planning, done with their drafting, focusing now only on local revisions? By sorting out our criteria and goals, we can crystallize our theoretical commitments, bring our theory to bear more fruitfully on our practice, enrich our instruction, and sharpen our response to student
writing. Moreover, we can make our theory and teaching and response work together to achieve what we are most committed to achieving in the writing classroom.

**Analysis of the Protocol Teacher’s Response to the Writer**

Our sense of what makes writing good is the nerve center that connects and operates our theories and our classroom practice. Everything we assume about the teaching of writing and want to achieve as writing teachers comes down, I believe, to what we value and look for when we read our students’ papers. This is where it all comes together: our goals, our commitments about good writing, our views toward the writing process, and our pedagogy. It is how we actually read our students’ writing, page by page, paper by paper, student by student, that gives breath to our assumptions and that makes or breaks our instruction. But reading and evaluating our students’ texts is only half the work. The other half is what we choose to call to the student’s attention and how we present our readings to students in the form of comments. As important as our ways of reading student texts are, they are finally only as useful as they inform our work in class, are manifested in our comments, engage students in re-envisioning their writing, and teach them something meaningful about their work as writers. I’ll make use of a simple heuristic to analyze the protocol teacher’s comments and evaluate how well she turns her reading of “The Four Seasons” into a *response* to David.

The soundness of a teacher’s commentary depends on how well she accomplishes four general tasks and how well they mesh with her theory and classroom practice.\(^{15}\)

1. **How many comments does the teacher make? How well does she engage the issues of the writing? Does she take on too much in her response? Does she make enough comments to engage the writer in revision?**

   In this protocol the teacher writes 29 comments to David—essentially 29 distinct statements, individually and in clusters: 16 in the margins, another 13 in her end note. It is a generous helping of comments, well above the average of 22 comments that informed writing teachers employ in their responses (Straub and Lunsford). The number of comments enables her to give a fairly close reading to the writing and get into a meaningful exchange with the writer.

2. **How well does the teacher specify and communicate her comments?**
The comments are written out in statements that are, for the most part, text-specific and detailed, and the teacher does a good job in expressing her points to David. In several instances, she even goes on to explain or illustrate some initial response in one or more follow-up comments:

- **Good detail. I can feel the squishing.**
- **Good concrete detail... It’s an image that will lead your readers to imagine how hot it gets in Syracuse. This is the kind of detail I’ve been looking for.**
- **You’re relying too much on cliches; geese flying north in the spring, summers at the beach, raking leaves in the fall, and sitting by the fire with that special someone in the winter. They’re descriptions that we’re all familiar with and they don’t give any insight into how the four seasons are unique to you.**

This is not to say that her comments are always well-stated or that the response couldn’t do with a couple more explanatory comments. The student may have some trouble making sense of her asking in the first paragraph, **Why the disclaimer?** He may not get the gist of her saying **Shift in point of view** in the second paragraph. The teacher would also do well to add some follow-up explanation of what she’s looking for when, just a short time later, she writes **Which trees? What kind of flowers?** or when she circles the general terms in the next paragraph and says **Let’s hear some details.** What kind of details is she hoping to see? What effect would they have? Her terse Mechanical transition could also use some explanation.

3 **How well does the teacher capture her key concerns and invoke what she sees as the most important contexts in her responses? Are her responses focused and coherent?**

The protocol teacher does well on this score. Eighteen of her twenty-nine comments are focused on the content of writing, in this case, on David’s descriptions. Another dozen go beyond the formal text and invoke some larger context: the rhetorical situation, the writer’s personal experience, and his work as a writer. Only three comments deal with local matters—all of them in marginal comments. The end note is reserved for dealing in greater depth with large conceptual and rhetorical matters. The response is particularly apt, given this teacher’s expressivist assumptions and the assignment, in
looking at the writing in terms of David’s own experience with 
the seasons of Syracuse. It reflects what seems to be a strong 
rhetorical emphasis. And it does well to provide some direct 
process-based advice that the writer might follow to help him 
come up with the kind of substantive content that this teacher is 
looking for in the writing. The protocol teacher also does a 
fairly good job of keeping David’s attention on the areas she 
considers most important at this time. She smartly avoids 
presenting a number of her initial reactions in the form of 
comments to David—her seeing his opening gambit as a cop 
out, her sense that he is getting careless and just blowing 
through his descriptions, coasting. For all her good choices 
about staying focused on what’s most important to her at this 
stage of the writing, however, she might do well to resist 
commenting on transitions, usage problems, and minor errors, 
as her emphasis on student development rather than on 
completed texts would advise. There is much more substantive 
revision for David to work on here before he attends in any 
detail to such local matters. The teacher’s marginal comments 
are not overly intrusive on the student’s text, and her end note is 
laid out well, in some detail. The two complement one another. 
Her end note, further, does not merely repeat the same concerns 
she raises in the margins, but focuses on certain key concerns 
and, for the most part, explains them more fully.

4 How does the teacher construct herself as a teacher-reader 
through the ways she frames her comments—and what kind of 
relationship does she establish with the student?

The protocol teacher’s comments are far more evaluative 
and directive than they might be, especially for an expressivist 
with a student-centered pedagogy and a commitment to giving 
students greater authority over their decisions and purposes as 
writers. Twelve of her twenty-nine comments are presented in 
the form of evaluations, seven of them negative. Much to her 
credit, she has a penchant for making note of what is praise-
worthy and looking to build on the writer’s strengths. She 
compliments David several times on his vivid descriptions. At 
times she even goes beyond general praise and explains what 
she likes. Still, her response reveals the limits of our grammar of 
praise. She likes David’s way of looking at Syracuseans coming 
out of hibernation after a long winter, and tells him so. Good
idea, she writes. But she says nothing in her comment about what in her eyes makes the idea good: how it is different from the usual descriptions of people getting outdoors in the spring, how it consequently might capture a reader’s attention. She also likes the way he pursues this metaphor and sees the emerging warmth of the season as stirring a parallel warmth of feeling among neighbors. But again she offers only a quick note of praise—Nice—and moves on, failing to make the most of the opportunity. And while she starts her end note with two praise comments, she leaves both of them unspecified and unelaborated, allowing them to be read merely as a gesture, a conventional pat on the back at the start of a teacher’s end note. How different the comment would read if she specified her praise here in the way she specifies her criticism in the ensuing comments:

- Pretty good, David. You have some fine descriptions of the four seasons in here. The moist ground seeping into your shoes in the spring. The heat resting on the pavement in the summer. The aroma of dried leaves in the fall. The soft scrunching of snow in the winter.

Her comments are made more critical by several additional comments that she presents in the form of closed questions, all of which are more evaluative than interrogatory:

- Why the disclaimer?
- Really? Squirrels and rabbits hibernating? Bears and rabbits chattering?
- Don’t ... the women in your neighborhood ever cut the grass?

To soften some of this evaluative edge, the teacher might employ more reader-response commentary, the kind of commentary she provides to David’s description of the moist ground in spring: Good detail. I can feel the squishing. She might explain, for example, how the reference to geese goes only so far to help her imagine how nature announces the return of spring in Syracuse and to identify the kinds of trees she associates with spring. Such specific moment-by-moment reactions and reader responses might also help establish more of the kind of reader-to-writer relationship she seems to value and help her put into practice her commitment to lead students to assume authority over their writing choices. Still, overall she
does a solid job of transforming her reading into a response, using her comments to reinforce the work in class, and guiding David’s ongoing work as a writer.

Conclusion
Writing at the turn of the last decade, Richard Fulkerson seems hopeful that the confusion he saw in composition studies could be substantially reduced and the consensus he saw emerging could be developed into wide-spread agreement. Such development, he seems to suggest, would come about mainly at the level of theory, through the work of composition scholars. I have no doubt that theory can help us better understand the nature and goals of composition and help reduce the confusion between ends and means that seems rampant both in our scholarship and in our day-to-day teaching of writing. But I also believe that theory and disciplinary knowledge can go only so far in these efforts. The real work of clarifying our values and goals and connecting our theory and classroom practice is a practical problem that must be addressed first of all by teachers, individually.

In this article I have looked to meet the problem head on by calling on teachers to cast themselves in the role of reflective practitioners and critically examine what is at the heart of our theory and practice: our concept of what makes writing good. To facilitate such a project, I have laid out and ordered the range of concerns that we take up as teachers when we read and respond to student writing. I have looked, in turn, to devise a heuristic we can use to clarify our goals, define our values and get them in line with our theories and practice, and test how well our criteria and goals are realized in our comments to students. More than our philosophy or theories, more than the kinds of writing we assign, more than the classroom activities we employ, more than the strategies we ask students to practice, it is our concept of writing and the evaluative criteria that we bring to our day-to-day reading of student texts that enable us to merge our theory and practice, define us as one sort of teacher or another, and determine the strength of our teaching.

By sorting through our values, we can clarify our own commitments and develop a sharper vision for our work as writing teachers. We can become better readers of our students’ texts, become more able to adapt our responses to specific students in specific situations, and, quite simply, improve our instruction. Moreover, by starting with our work as teachers and interrogating our own theories and instructional practices, we will also be in a better position to contribute as teacher-scholars to the disciplinary
knowledge of composition and even perhaps, over time, to the kind of disciplinary continuity that Fulkerson and others hope to achieve. This is the key to working through the inconsistencies that frustrate our attempts to think clearly about the teaching of writing. This is where our energy is best spent in trying to work out our theory and practice and make our teaching more consistent, more purposeful, and ultimately more effective: with the teacher in the classroom looking at her own values, methods, and goals.

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Notes

1 In the following protocol and across the essay as a whole, I will present the teacher's thoughts as she reads in regular type, her written comments to the student in italics.

2 For other sample responses to "The Four Seasons" and a fuller sense of its contexts, see Richard Straub and Ronald F. Lunsford's Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing.

3 Reading—let's define it for our purposes here—is the act of negotiating meaning from and through the text. It is the act of interpretation. In the best of all possible (and less interesting) worlds, reading would be readily distinguishable from evaluating texts—that is, weighing the merits and quality or assessing the significance of a piece of writing: making judgments about our interpretations. We know better of course. Reading and evaluating are no more separable than eating and tasting: one intimately involves the other. Our readings are shot through with evaluations, which is why we are fond of speaking of reading as interpretation. Reading and evaluating might be seen for all practical purposes, then, as interchangeable. We use the term reading when we want to highlight the constructive, meaning-making function. We use the term evaluation when we want to highlight the weighing or assessing function of reading, when we want to make judgments about quality and significance. In my lexicon, response deals with the act of communicating with students about our readings, evaluations, and grades. Further, reading, evaluation, and response must be distinguished from grading. The grades we place on student papers are shorthand labels for our overall assessment of the writing, a quick and always inadequate way of recording our judgments about the quality of the writing (Elbow, "Ranking"). I will not be interested in talking about grading in this essay until the very end, when I will deal with it briefly as it bears on the acts of reading, evaluating, and responding to student writing.

4 The use of such a constructed protocol gives me the opportunity to highlight the range of issues and illustrate the gamut of concerns that teachers address when they read student writing.

5 This is not at all to suggest that these qualities are there in the text, to be read routinely and unmistakably by all readers. The text is not a fixed object, a basket that contains so many different pieces of fruit that are good or bad, ripe or rotten; it's an outdoor market, a gathering place for writers and readers, like vendors and
consumers, to exchange goods and pursue their own projects and purposes. Readers are just as much involved in realizing this exchange as writers and texts, and different readers, bringing different experiences, perspectives, and values to their reading, will see different things in the “same text.” To say these features deal with the text itself, then, is really to say that they are features that are most readily associated with the language of the text, the words on the page.

It is important to note that no quality of writing comes innocent, as a purely formal feature. Every quality of writing—word choice, sentence structure, ideas, development, and organization—comes charged with meanings animated by some particular use. They are valued from some perspective, according to one set of interests or another, be it explicit or tacit. Even what counts as an error, as researchers like Joseph Williams, Susan Wall, and Glynda Hull have explained, depends on context and community—on how a reader approaches and interprets the writing.

The words of the text are always seen in light of some larger informing context; they are never only self-referential. At times, we make explicit reference to these contexts; at other times, we make only very subtle reference to them. When these references are inexplicit, we speak of the writing “formally,” exclusively in terms of the text.

As Brandt rightly notes, “language and context mutually and inextricably constitute each other”(30). Context folds into text, and text emerges from context, the one giving way to the other in the act of making meaning. In this sense, even the text itself depends on context and in fact is itself a “context,” a construction made possible by the conventions, competencies, and cultural knowledge we bring to the text or that are triggered through our interactions with it. But I am more interested here in another sense of the term: the various areas of writing that we use to talk about writing and that we focus on in our reading.

Of course, the student’s intentions are frequently not his intentions at all but the “intentions” of the teacher’s as stipulated through the writing assignment, the assigned purposes for the writing. This is the dimension that Brannon and Knoblauch are talking about when they urge teachers to resist imposing their ideal texts on students and read instead in terms of what the writer himself wants to communicate (“Students’ Rights”). It is also the dimension that Sharon Crowley looks to get us beyond when she speaks of student writers’ intentions in terms not of their rhetorical purpose as writers but in terms of their pragmatic purposes as students—the ways they hope to deal with assignments and classroom demands.

The twelve recognized teachers in Twelve Readers Reading split on whether to insist on, or take a more relaxed attitude about, how closely students follow the demands of an assignment.

For an insightful practical discussion of how the contextual perspectives we bring to student writing may affect our reading and response, see Chris Anson’s “Reflective Reading: Developing Thoughtful Ways to Respond to Students’ Writing.” Anson argues for the same kind of reflective practice that I am arguing for here.

I am using the term “approach” to refer to the composite of a teacher’s goals for teaching writing, her sense of what makes writing good, her assumptions about the writing process and the nature of knowledge, and her classroom practice—in
effect, as an umbrella term that consolidates the four elements that Fulkerson presents in his analysis: axiology (i.e., the teacher’s goals and sense of what makes writing good), epistemology, procedural theories, and pedagogical theories. Finally, while his terminology is more concerned with theoretical inquiry, my terminology more with teaching practice.

There is little talk in the protocol about discourse conventions, as might be found in a reading that, say, David Bartholomae or Patricia Bizzell might give to the essay. The one exception: when the protocol teacher wonders if David thinks the kind of homey descriptions he uses across the essay come about because he thinks this is the way a description of spring is supposed to be written. There is also little talk about the writing in terms of culture and cultural critique, although there is a notable exception on this count as well: the teacher’s reaction to David’s sexist depiction of men mowing and women planting flowers. And there is no talk from that sort of social perspective that looks to detect the voices, conflicts, and intertextual traces that are woven through a text (Recchio; Welch).

No longer an effort to encourage David to revise, her end note might easily become an argument for her evaluation of the writing. She might well go on to write an entirely different closing to her response:

You seem more intent on capturing some homey images of spring than in sharing with us your own views of the seasons in Syracuse. You’ve got to get beyond these generalizations and cliches and show us some real experience—your ways of seeing the seasons, what you like about them and what you miss about them now that you’re in Tallahassee. You also run into some real trouble with point of view, some sloppy word choice, and a number of overly mechanical transitions. I’d like to see you rewrite this one for your revision. There’s still a lot to work to do here.

I’m not talking here specifically about the effectiveness of teacher commentary—that’s a matter that depends on how students read, react to, and make use of feedback. I’m talking only about the quality of the teacher’s role in such transactions. The distinction is not unlike the one Aristotle makes when he says that rhetoric must be concerned primarily with what should work, not what will work finally in an actual discourse, with an actual audience, in an actual situation. Students and audiences are far too individual and idiosyncratic to expect them to act in a single way to any given strategy. All we can do is make what we see as the best possible responses given all the constraints of the circumstances, see how they work on a given student, and see what adjustments we can make for this particular “audience” in the future.

If, by contrast, the teacher were more socially inclined, we would expect her to view the problems David encounters here, for example, as deriving from his lack of familiarity with the conventions of the personal essay or an over-reliance on conventions he is more familiar with: those he has gleaned from feature articles in newspapers and popular magazines.

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