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‘We cannot help students become better writers

if we are unaware of who we are when we read their papers”

-- Frances Jeffrey and Bonita Selting, “Reading the Invisible Ink: Assessing the Responses of Non-Composition Faculty” *Assessing Writing* 6.2 (1999): 195.

For the past two years, I’ve offered a fall workshop called “Editor, Teacher, Reader? What’s Your Style in Commenting on Student Papers?” It’s based on a major study of commentary styles called *Twelve Readers Reading* (1995) by Richard Straub and Ronald Lunsford in which leaders in the field of composition and rhetoric volunteered to have their feedback on student papers analyzed. The analysis revealed a continuum of styles focused on the degree to which the comments enabled students to retain ownership of their writing. On one end is the “authoritarian” style, which is product-oriented, interventionist, and corrective; on the opposite end is the “analytical” style which is process-oriented, maturationist, and reflective. The former plays the role of editor, the latter plays the role of reader. Between these two extremes are the directive, advisory, Socratic and dialectic styles which, respectively, direct, guide, prompt and question the writer. In the middle of the “editor” and “reader” is the “teacher,” or what I like to call the coach.

We all play different roles at different points in time, depending on the course, the time in the semester, the type of assignment, and our relationship with the student. But each of us does tend to have a preferred mode, and the insights from *Twelve Readers Reading* allow us to see more clearly what function our comments can play as we try to help students improve as thinkers and writers.

One thing I have noticed, however, is that because the styles discerned in *Twelve Readers* were based on the practice of composition and rhetoric faculty in writing instruction courses, these models may not be as descriptively helpful as they could be for faculty in other disciplines. Fortunately, I found a later study that examined a broader population of faculty. In “Reading the Invisible Ink: Assessing the Responses of Non-Composition Faculty,” Frances Jeffrey and Bonita Selting of the University of Central Arkansas report on their attempt to better understand how faculty respond to papers in their institution’s Writing Across the Curriculum courses. They wanted to know how faculty from disciplines outside of composition conceived of themselves in their role as reader and responder to student writing. Specifically, they posed two questions: “If they don’t see themselves as ‘writing teachers,’ who are they being as they read and write back to student writing?” And, who “did our colleagues from other disciplines want their students to be?” (183-84 emphasis added).

They used a think-aloud protocol in order to generate as much information as possible on how faculty think about their students’ ideas in a paper. Faculty members were instructed to read the papers out loud and verbalize all their responses, including whatever written comments they were putting on the paper and the purpose of the written mark. The study designers wanted to “hear, both literally and figuratively, the voice in which an instructor ‘talked back’ to a piece of student writing” (185). After analyzing the tapes, and allowing the coding to emerge from the data, they found four paired identities of faculty and students (see chart below): a discipline specific guide with a budding –er or –ist; an intellectual mentor with a critical thinker; an assignment judge with an assignment producer; and finally a general editor with an author of the text.

The most commonly seen pair was the “Assignment Judge and Assignment Producer.” Faculty seemed to focus predominantly on “the rules of appropriate academic discourse as given explicitly in the assignment (prescribed form and style) and following convention when drawing from sources and citing” (191), or more bluntly, “compliance with the parameters of a writing assignment” (195).

What most puzzled Jeffrey and Selting, however, were the stark differences between the verbal comments on tape and what faculty actually wrote on the papers themselves. These differences reflect more than simple attempts to be concise. The verbal comments on tape were qualitatively different; specifically, they reflected detailed responses of readers who sought to assess the “readability” of the prose in a way that, if communicated to the student, could have lead students to “use writing as a way of coming to a clearer and/or broader understanding of both their thinking and the written communication of that thinking” (193).

Jeffrey and Selting conclude that the participating faculty members were actually aiming their verbal comments at them, the colleagues who were conducting the study and who were seen as professional equals: “We were, then, an appropriate audience for explanations about why a particular section would need to be expanded, where the logic succeeded or failed, and how particular ideas seemed connected” (193). Here’s just one example of what a faculty member described verbally: “She used her table, making further investigations, came and found the right answer, and so did a good job on that. She also found that the ball took longer to fall than to rise and that was a crucial thing we were looking at, and she explained how she got that deduction so her paper’s pretty logical” (193). Yet nothing was written on the student’s paper. It’s these verbal comments which represent the “invisible ink” of the article’s title.

Jeffrey and Selting raise some important issues for all faculty as we seek to help students develop intellectually. They emphasize that in order to see writing as a “powerful epistemological tool, [faculty] must become more aware of these paired identities—and the conversations such identities engender” (193).

If you’d like to learn more about your own feedback style and practice commenting on student drafts along with colleagues, sign up for the “Using Invisible Ink” workshop on Wednesday, October 13 @

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~writing/faculty/index.html>. This workshop will also provide tips and guidelines for providing effective commentary efficiently.

**Discipline-Specific Guide Budding “-er” or “-ist”**

They saw “responses that seemed to be coming out of the instructor’s disciplinary perspective, and when they directed this talk to the student, it had the effect of including the student – however peripherally – in the discipline’s conversational circle” (187-88).

**Intellectual Mentor Critical Thinker**

They saw “responses that direct[ed] the student to re-think or to think more . . . these comments [were] directed to students as makers of meaning: furthering knowledge through analysis, exploration, and/or bringing together information to create new knowledge” (188).

**Assignment Judge Assignment Producer**

They saw “comments that seemed, on the surface, to be nudges to think, but under closer scrutiny, were actually about how well the students had fulfilled the assignment” (189).

**General Editor Author of Text**

They saw “comments and abbreviations related to grammar, mechanics and format” (190).

--from “Reading the Invisible Ink: Assessing the Responses of Non-Composition Faculty.” *Assessing Writing* 6.2 (1999): 179-97.