

# HOW CAN I USEFULLY RESPOND TO STUDENTS' FIRST DRAFTS?<sup>1</sup>

BRIAN JOHNSTON *Continuing Conversations*

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Brian Johnston's 'How Can I Usefully Respond to Students' First Drafts?' was first published in *English in Australia*, No. 62, in October, 1982, when Margaret Gill was Editor.

I used to spend too much time writing comments on students' work at home. Three years ago I faced up to my belief that these comments had little effect because they came too late, after the students had finished with the work.

The alternative was to comment on their work in class, while they were doing it. Easier said than done! I arranged tasks so that I had more time to wander around and talk to the students individually. And then I had to face another limitation. I was a very poor reader of students' work. I had been used to reading with an eye to categorising the piece as an A, B, C or whatever. Now as I read a piece, the thought 'How can I usefully respond to this piece?' would rise in my head to the point where I was no longer taking in the piece of writing.

To lift my game, I tried to identify particular ways of responding to students' writing. Then, as I read a piece, I could be poised to give a definite response, quickly. And quick it needed to be because my conversations with individual students were usually interrupted after two or three minutes.

I can remember deciding that my focus would be to provide a personal response to the content of the student's writing. 'This piece excited me, this one reminded me of such and such, I had an experience similar to so-and-so's. I wanted to know more about this.' And it was all a bit unreal.

A lot of the time I was dredging up emotional responses to fairly unemotional writing. It was forced. Much of the time the students weren't particularly interested in my

personal response. Often I was taking the attention away from what they had written. And when I asked them for more I wasn't teaching them about writing. Worst of all, in forming my personal response, I often forgot to linger over their writing.

So I moved on to asking the students what they thought of their writing. 'How do you feel about it? Do you want any help? How do you think it could be improved?' I think this was better. At least we focused on the writing! But often they didn't have much to say. Many would just sit there waiting for me to move on. And they usually succeeded in outwaiting me. It was too non-directive. I've since had teachers respond to my writing with questions like these – and sometimes I've felt like punching them on the nose. 'I've sweated over this and all you can say is "How do you think it could be improved?" Who says it needs to be improved? What do you think!?'

I tried other strategies which were less clearly formulated. In most cases the lesson in which I first tried one of these was also the lesson I gave up on it. Often I fell back on a procedure that fitted very comfortably with me, which was to pinpoint two or three strengths and one weakness that I saw in each piece. And because I thought that criticisms should be *constructive*, I would suggest how the weaknesses I saw should be remedied. Gradually, I was becoming more articulate at doing this, focussing more on big issues in their writing, not just the mechanics. But, in terms of student response, this approach too was very much a hit and miss affair. The students weren't saying much. It was a bit like judgement time. What would I find to criticise this time? Sometimes, when I was in the middle of making an insightful suggestion, I'd find that the student wasn't listening, distracted by something else going on in the classroom. Then I'd get angry. It seemed like a waste of time. After these interactions the students often imposed my suggestions on their writing in ways which made it less compelling than it had been originally.

I also think that when the students accepted my suggestions, they were often taking my advice without making their own decisions as to whether the advice was appropriate or not. I would say 'It's up to you to decide whether this is a good idea', but I was also the person who graded their work. Clearly, the students who wanted high grades would incorporate my suggestions because that was the safe thing to do.

Another approach is becoming clearer in my mind now, and I'm excited about it. This approach encourages me to share with the student how I read the piece and what I make of it. It puts me in the role of a reader, not an unsympathetic judge. I focus on big issues in the writing, not small ones. I think this is a very important in dealing with students' rough drafts. I don't expect all students to write perfectly correctly in early drafts. I don't. But I do want them all to sense a *challenge* which is

demanding, yet possible. All students can write interesting, gutsy stuff and I think those who don't write correctly will learn more spelling and punctuation when they are writing like this.

## A PREDICTABLE WAY OF RESPONDING TO FIRST DRAFTS

When I read a student's draft, I ask three questions of it. It is a predictable, even stereotyped way of responding. That helps me, because I have a clear focus and I can respond quickly. Moreover, a predictable 'conferencing strategy'<sup>2</sup> helps the students because they can predict how their writing will be discussed and can rehearse their views before talking to the teacher. This means that they needn't fear being shot down in flames by unexpected attacks on their weaknesses; and most importantly, they internalise the questions themselves. To reinforce this, I explicitly teach them to ask the three questions of themselves when they read both their own writing and that of others.

Before describing the three questions, a few words on the context in which I've most fully used this approach.

## SOME DETAILS OF CLASSROOM ORGANISATION

My most sustained use of this approach was with a Year 9 integrated studies class at Seaton High School. I required the students to write often; by third term, four out of every five lessons! But they only had to write for ten minutes. Rarely would I give time for discussion or external stimulus before the ten minute burst. This meant that we had many pieces of writing which were short enough to discuss in class, a paragraph or two. To discuss longer pieces, say a page and a half, is very difficult.

While it was compulsory for them to do their ten minutes of uninterrupted, silent writing, they knew they were not expected to produce high quality writing every day. Far from it! We started with a stream of consciousness writing and after a while the students were left free to write what they liked. Occasionally I would supply a model as a stimulus for them to play with. The students knew that, for grading purposes, they were expected to develop just a few of their many small rough drafts into more polished pieces. For a ten week assessment period, two or three polished pieces would be required, with no length requirement.

And so, when the rough drafts were discussed, either with a classmate or a teacher, a consideration in the background was, 'Is this one worth reworking or developing into a polished piece?' In about half the lessons, there would be some structured reflection on the products of the ten-minute writing, individually, in pairs, small groups, in the