Reframing Responses to Student Writing: Promising Young Writers and the Writing Pedagogies Course

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Cover Page Footnote
Thanks to the College of Liberal Arts for the Writing Retreat that created space for Ted to contribute to this manuscript. Thanks, too, to the students and teacher candidates whose work we have quoted.
Reframing Responses to Student Writing: Promising Young Writers and the Writing Pedagogies Course

Michael B. Sherry, Bloomsburg University
Ted Roggenbuck, Bloomsburg University

Recent research (Beach and Friedrich 2008; Graham and Perrin 2007) has suggested that writing instruction can affect secondary school students’ success in college and in the workplace. An essential component of this instruction is how teachers evaluate and respond to student writing. However, while teachers are encouraged in English teacher education to provide effective feedback, they often have opportunities to practice grading and responding to student writing (e.g., Smagorinsky and Whiting 1995), they often have few opportunities to practice or respond to writing of actual students. Moreover, Sommers (2006) describes the challenges in offering feedback that can successfully promote collaboration between teacher and writing student, as well as the level of engagement necessary to act as partners with their teachers in their own development. Research remains to be done on how to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to practice responding to student writing in ways that both challenge their assumptions about their roles as teachers and help them to connect theory to practice. In this article, we begin this inquiry by describing our attempts to provide such an opportunity in a university writing pedagogies course for teacher candidates and creative writing teachers. This opportunity arose from our efforts to pilot a revision to a longstanding National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) program for middle school writers, called Promising Young Writers (for which we both serve on the national committee), by including opportunities for the middle school student participants in that contest to receive formative feedback on the writing they submitted via a contest and gaining experience in a writing pedagogies course. Because the course included not only teacher candidates, but also students from our university’s creative writing program, the conversation about how to evaluate and respond to the middle school writers’ writing provided valuable opportunities to surface and discuss assumptions about the teacher’s role and the nature of feedback in responding to student writing.

Below, we provide background about prior research into teacher feedback on student writing and then offer a framework that responds to this prior research. This framework has informed our piloted revision of the Promising Young Writers program, as well as the portion of that revision that involved having the writing pedagogies course students evaluate and respond to the middle school writers’ writing. In particular, we analyze the evaluations of the middle schoolers’ writing made by the college students (teacher candidates and creative writers) and the eventual feedback they provided, with an eye to what feedback revealed about not only their assumptions about responding to student writing, but also the difficulty many had put into practice the theory they were exploring in the writing pedagogies class. We conclude with reflections on how this analysis informs prior research on English writing teacher education.

Background

According to national studies, many secondary students are not prepared for the demands of writing in college (ACT, 2005) or the workplace (Achieve, Inc. 2005). A 2007 Carnegie Corporation report and meta-analysis has suggested that effective writing instruction in secondary schools can impact students’ success in school and beyond (Graham and Perrin 2007). In particular, teacher feedback on student writing can affect whether and how students make substantive revisions to their writing during the composing process, which involve not only surface level changes but also rethinking the content (Beach and Friedrich 2008). However, because English teaching methods courses are often separated from field experiences as a student, despite his lack of enthusiasm for them, had contributed to an interactional frame for writing instruction that shaped his future interactions as a teacher. Like Tobin, many of our teacher candidates approach writing instruction based on their own experiences as students. Although many have experienced having their most important ideas seemingly ignored while listening to significant reactions to their early draft, those same prior experiences can strongly influence teacher candidates’ feedback practices. As a result, when faced with students’ texts for the first time, many teacher candidates fall into the types of responses they themselves have described as particularly unhelpful. In short, prior experiences as a student can frame writing instruction in powerful ways, defining the roles, responsibilities, and responses available to one as a teacher.

Tobin claims that upon discovering process pedagogy through scholars like Donald Murray and Peter Elbow, he learned to think of students as “real writers” (2) rather than just students. But whereas Tobin began with students and instructional practices, and then encountered composition theory, we believe our students need opportunities to connect the theories they have read about to teaching practices via experiences with ‘real writers’ in order to frame what is possible and appropriate.

Methodology

The idea of reframing writing instruction by providing experiences with authentic audiences in a community of writers informed not only our work with teacher candidates in a writing pedagogies course, but also our redesign of the Promising Young Writers program, for which Mike serves as chair of the national committee. In this section, we describe our pilot of that
Ted had them switch: the teacher candidates scored the Michigan submissions, and the creative and professional writing majors assigned to rank the Pennsylvania students. Based on issues that arose from the initial scores and responses of these two groups, the college students first read and ranked the middle schoolers’ drafts independently, and then met in groups of three to compose responses to the middle school writers to whom they had originally been assigned and posted this feedback to each writer’s wiki personal page. Afterwards, the college students wrote individual reflections on the entire process. Throughout our analysis, we included excerpts from the reflections composed by the college students at the end of the process. In addition, one middle school student’s writing, in particular, serves as a provocative point of intersection across the stages of this process.

The overall quality of the student writing would, we hoped, reframe teacher candidates’ idea of what eighth grade writers are capable of, and encourage them to respond to these students as “real writers.”

### Fall from Grace: Scoring Student Submissions

Despite our perception of the quality of the student writing (especially from the PA group), the second surprise in this round of scoring was the scores assigned to the Pennsylvania student writers from the Promising Young Writers contest. Teacher candidates were surprised by the ranking of several student writers’ submissions, as the writing demonstrated originality and humor as well as trust in her readers. From whose text we have permission to quote, submitted a memoir about adjusting to moving and to changes in her family. Her text demonstrates originality and humor as well as trust in her readers.

### Reframing Responses to Student Writing

Ted was surprised by the remarkable quality of the writing from the Pennsylvania students. Students submitted detective fiction, fantasy, and futuristic narratives, as well as sophisticated arguments. For example, one writing from, from whose text we have permission to quote, submitted a memoir about adjusting to moving and to changes in her family. Her text demonstrates originality and humor as well as trust in her readers.

### Reassessing Writing Teacher Education

Our thinking about reframing writing instruction by creating an authentic audience prompted us to make several changes to the original Promising Young Writers contest in our pilot. Whereas the program has typically invited teachers to submit their students’ work for review by a panel of invited judges, we created an online wiki space where students could post their submissions to receive feedback from their classmates. This shift allowed participants to engage more personally with the writing, and gave them an audience beyond their classroom.

In what follows, we thus draw on several sources of evidence in our examination of how the second round of the feedback to each writer’s wiki personal page. Afterwards, the college students wrote individual reflections on the entire process. Throughout our analysis, we included excerpts from the reflections composed by the college students at the end of the process. In addition, one middle school student’s writing, in particular, serves as a provocative point of intersection across the stages of this process.

Ted reviewed with the class the instructions for judges (included as Appendix 1) that encouraged them to look for strong writing that demonstrated originality and humor as well as trust in her readers. From whose text we have permission to quote, submitted a memoir about adjusting to moving and to changes in her family. Her text demonstrates originality and humor as well as trust in her readers.

### Reframing Responses to Student Writing

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### Reflections From Students Writing

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than enforcers of predictable tropes and gestures. A creative writing student approached Ted saying that when he was in middle school, a contest like this would have really mattered to him, and that he might have been dissuaded from continuing by the judgment arrived at by our class. A future teacher worried that, whereas we were supposed to be creating an opportunity outside of school for students to invest themselves into kinds of writing they most wanted to do, in fact, we were imposing school-based notions of what qualified as good writing rather than responding to the texts as we encountered them. As she wrote in her reflection about the Promising Young Writer’s pilot: Assign[ing] a writer one and only one number was difficult to do, especially when I had the mindset of [sic] having to grade it according to the genre. (I thought that’s why the genres were provided, so that we can assess how well that writer worked within that genre.) I would have wished had a different mindset than that from the get go...As this column indicates, many of the teacher candidates had framed the task of scoring and responding and as an evaluation of the writer’s execution of a generic form, on which the teacher was an expert. However, when confronted with the differences among their scores, and the different perspectives offered by their classmates, they began to realize that another frame was possible.

To reassess the students’ submissions, Ted assigned the class to individually rank again any submission that had been considered in the top six by either group. To do this, the college students used individual student response devices (“clickers”), rather than group consensus, to arrive at initial rankings. The clickers automatically tallied individual scores, calculating the top five from each group, and then the class scored the top five against each other again to arrive at a final ranking. Ted again offered the class the opportunity to argue for or against the results arrived at through the clickers, but all seemed satisfied that our final results reflected the collective judgment of the group.

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<th>Pennsylvania</th>
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<td>Student</td>
<td>Future Teacher Ratings</td>
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Note: Scores in bold are those that differed between the two groups, or from first to final ranking.

Several changes from the initial to the final scores are worth noting for what they suggested about how this experience reframed the college students’ sense of what makes good writing, and what roles, relationships, and responses are available to a teacher- reader of student writing. The text in the Pennsylvania group originally ranked highest by both groups, was ranked tied for fourth in the final tally. Students reported that in their original scoring they had valued it highly because of the heart-warming and reassuring (appropriate) content, but upon review, it did not demonstrate the level of craft evident in many of the other texts. As one college student wrote in her reflection: “I think that our group ending up choosing the ‘safe’ ones (that were actually rather generic) because we thought that they did the best job within that genre.” The sophisticated memoir with the image of Mary, which was originally ranked highest by the Pennsylvania group, was ranked tied for 11th place in the final tally. It initially seemed to frame the teacher as regulator of the generic appropriateness of students’ content and language, their later scores and comments suggested more attention to sophistication and the rhetorical effectiveness of the writer’s craft at accomplishing her purpose.

On the day the class arrived at consensus for the final ranking of middle schooler’s texts, Ted overheard one future teacher tell another that she couldn’t believe that she might have gone into a classroom without first having thought about how she might respond. In her attention to what she experienced as a reader, for her, remained in opposition.

Between Roles: Attempts at Providing Feedback

After the scoring of submissions, Ted asked the initial groups of three to compose feedback to each middle school writer and post it to the wiki. This final stage of the process was an opportunity to put into practice the idea that the goal of providing feedback was to encourage writers in their development, to recognize particular strengths and features of a text, and also to motivate writers to continue to revise. However, re-reading middle schoolers’ texts and recognizing what was laudable in them did not automatically allow future teachers to produce feedback likely to promote growth or development. Though re-ranking the texts helped to reframe college students’ encounters with those texts, and although their attempts at providing feedback revealed progress in applying concepts from course reading, the feedback the groups offered indicated that many of them were still struggling to reimagine their roles as responders. To one middle schooler’s personal narrative, a group of future teachers offered the following feedback:

We thought that you wrote a very heartwarming story, which made us genuinely happy. One of the writing techniques that we really enjoyed was your ability to reflect on the thoughts you were having as a five-year-old, now that you’re in 9th grade. For example...It is very courage to write about a personal experience. If your piece was very organized and easy to follow. Something that you could think about if you are about to continue working on this piece is incorporating more descriptive language to paint a more vivid picture of your experience. Overall, we thought this was a wonderful example of a personal narrative and you should definitely continue writing...

The first half of this response focused on the teachers’ reactions as readers to specific techniques the writer had used. However, the second half was still tinged with evaluations of how effectively the writer executed the genre of the personal narrative. One teacher candidate noted in her reflection the difficulty in reconciling these two frames for responding to writing. “I think this was a good experience for me because I have practice switching between evaluating as a teacher and evaluating as a fellow reader. Up until college, I read things as a peer but the [education] major has really changed my ways of looking at things, and it’s hard to revert back to a person you left behind when you entered the major.” This future teacher also recognized the challenges and benefits of the Promising Young Writer’s pilot for reframing the evaluation of student writing. However, the roles of teacher and fellow reader for her, remained in opposition.

In addition, some of the creative writers sometimes seemed to forget the audience for the feedback they offered. For example, one group wrote: “You exercise a wealth of creativity. Your attempt to mimic the chaotic nature of a dream sequence is evident...though this is a dream-like piece, I thought it well to echo the context of the world in a way which serves as a bridge between reality and the dream. This would make this piece more accessible for the reader.” Though the feedback was positive and might give the writer a sense of accomplishment, the syntax alone would make it challenging to use this response to continue to revise the text. Indeed, the tone suggested that the college students were more concerned with framing themselves as sophisticated readers than with making their comments accessible to eighth grade writers.

Future teachers generally provided more adept as creative and professional writing majors at enacting the role of enthusiastic readers and offering specific feedback. Whereas in the original scoring, creative and professional writers seemed to more readily recognize the worth of the students’ work in some of the categories of appropriate craft and in the responding of the stronger texts, the responses of many of the teacher candidates typified more adeptly as readers rather than authority figures. But the group that provided the most effective feedback was comprised of both future teachers and creative writers. To a future student feedback piece, this group responded: “We found your story to be engaging and exciting. You gave a compelling account of a man trying to escape...” by focusing on the man’s actions, and keeping the action of your story fast-paced. The details of description about the man gave us a sense
In their reflections, future teachers also commented explicitly on how the Promising Young Writers pilot related to their previous experiences with the theories and practices of writing pedagogy. One future teacher wrote: “I think one of the best things I learned in my college education to become an educator is that I have not been given more experience assessing student work. We’re taught all of the theories about how to do pre-, formative, and summative assessment, but we haven’t been given the opportunity to try the theories into action. Getting the chance to actually interact with real student work was an eye-opening experience.” For this teacher candidate, as for many in Ted’s class, our Promising Young Writers revision pilot was her first opportunity to respond to the writing of actual students. Her comment suggested it was also a chance to implement theories of student assessment that had heretofore been abstractions. At the beginning of the semester for the writing pedagogies class, this student’s reflections and contributions to class discussion suggested that her instructional frame for enacting the role of responder to writing was highly formalist—she intended to thoroughly mark the lexical features of her students’ texts so that they could see and correct their errors. She had an excellent grasp of the mechanics of language, and was grateful to the teachers she felt had helped her achieve that by marking her texts. She thoughtfully engaged with the theories provided in the writing pedagogies class, which offered her alternative visions of her role as a writing teacher, but it was in her evaluations of students’ texts (and in discussing those evaluations with others), as well as in composing feedback to post to the wiki, that she was able to realize the practical value of what she had learned mostly theoretically to this point.

Another teacher candidate offered a more passionate reflection along the same lines: “I wish that Bloomington would make a course based off of students’ work for the sake of future teachers. How am I supposed to prepare myself to correct evaluations of students’ texts (and in discussing those evaluations with others), as well as in composing feedback to post to the wiki, that I have never had to do it before until now?” These comments suggested not only the value of the Promising Young Writer’s pilot as an opportunity to connect theories of assessment to teaching practices, but also how challenging it can be for English educators to provide opportunities for framing feedback for student writing.

Discussion

In the preceding sections, we have addressed the problem of how to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to practice giving feedback on student writing in ways that both challenge their assumptions about their roles as teachers and also help them to connect theory to practice. One such opportunity arose from our piloted revision to the Promising Young Writers program, for which Mike served as chair of the national committee, and for which college students in Ted’s writing pedagogies program were our primary audience. In their reflections, future teachers also commented that evidence from this experience contributed to reframing the interaction of teacher response to student writing. That evidence included examples of middle school students’ writing, as well as the scores, discussions, and written feedback Ted’s class generated in response to the writers’ submissions. The difference between evaluations and feedback from college students of different majors, as well as the difference between high and low scoring middle schoolers, suggested that the Promising Young Writer’s revision pilot provided opportunities to challenge assumptions about the roles, relationships, and responses available to teacher-readers of student writing. Below, we discuss these findings in relation to prior research on English writing teacher education.

“Good” and “Appropriate”: Framing Response as Regulation

Teacher candidates in Ted’s class initially assigned low scores to some of the middle school submissions we felt were strong pieces. Their comments in discussions and in their reflections indicated that their evaluations were based less on craft and more on the appropriateness of the students’ work or the feedback they thought would assist the writers in revising their pieces. They were operating from an instructional frame in which the teacher’s role is that of expert evaluator, and response to student writing is an assessment of generic and moral appropriateness. Prior studies have suggested that teacher feedback can be an attempt to “regulate” student writing based on “genre and mode rules” (Harwell 2006) and on conceptions of students as responders represented by their writing (Murphy and Yancey 2008; Taylor 2002). Our experience affirms this previous research and adds that such regulatory practices may stem from the way teacher candidates’ prior experiences have framed response to student writing.

“When Others Could See Something Special”: Reframing with the Help of Other Perspectives

When future teachers and creative writers in Ted’s class rescored submissions, their evaluations of some texts (like Gracie’s) differed. After discussion and resoring, teacher candidates’ evaluations changed. Other students’ different rankigns of the texts, especially Gracie’s, helped future teachers to more readily recognize the roles they had unconsciously stood to encounter those texts. These differences also helped future teachers to revise the same texts with a different frame offered by the

Other students for how to read the writing of middle schoolers as an appreciative audience. The Promising Young Writers’ texts, and the experience of reading them differently, seemed a particularly important opportunity for future teachers to benefit from the perspective of a different audience. Some teacher candidates specifically noted the difference in how they would evaluate a piece of writing: “I would not have been as lenient for when I am a teacher. I would hate to have that piece of work wouldn’t get the recognition deserved because I was not particularly captivated by the writing when others could see something very special in it.” In short, hearing others’ perspectives contributed to transforming the teacher role of the responses and the responses available to the reader’s role, which in turn contributed to the divergent response. Future studies (e.g., Bush 2002; Tulley 2011) have found that competing agendas from Composition Studies and English education in writing pedagogies courses like ours can lead to tensions and disunity, our findings suggest that there are benefits to having students from different majors react differently to the theories and practices presented in the course.

Students as “Real Writers”: Connecting Theory and Practice

Although teacher candidates, like most students in Ted’s class, had reacted vociferously against accounts of formalist writing pedagogies in previous composition theory courses, their reactions to Ted’s revision of the Promising Young Writers contest were more muted. The initial responses to the middle schoolers had applied similar practices to the students’ writing. This disconnect between theory and practice echoes other experiences we (and others) have had with future teachers in the writing pedagogies class (e.g., Alsup 2001; Bush 2002), who often ask, “But will it work with real students?” (Alsup and Bush 2003). Yet, exploration of how to offer effective feedback has been an important aspect of the writing pedagogy course, not until Ted’s class had the opportunity to respond to actual student texts through the addition to the course of the Promising Young Writer’s pilot, were they able to put into practice the concepts and principles from the course material. More important, they had the opportunity to clearly recognize that the theories they were encountering could be applied to actual texts from students in the future. Previous research has suggested that teachers are more likely to adapt theories and strategies when they can see the worth of the research (e.g., Smagorinsky, Cook, and Johnson 2013) and when discussions of strategies for commenting on student writing appear in writing pedagogies courses they may be confined to the abstract (Tulley 2011). Based on our experience with the Promising Young Writers pilot, we argue that concrete experiences with an audience of “students as real writers” (Tobin, 2) may be important in reframing future teachers’ conceptions of what is possible for teachers of writing.

Boundaries and Limitations

In addressing the disconnect between theory and practice in our teacher candidates’ initial responses to student writing, and the possibilities for reframing their sense of the teacher’s role afforded by the Promising Young Writers revision pilot, we do not mean to reinforce a dichotomy between theory and practice. Nor do we suggest that the inclusion of writing by actual students would “fix” the difficulties encountered by instructors of writing pedagogies courses. Indeed, responding initially to the middle schoolers’ writing, alone, was not enough to frame candidates’ conceptions of the responses available to them as teachers. Some researchers (e.g., Grossman 2000; Smagorinsky, Cook, and Johnson 2003) have found that classroom experience can cause beginning teachers to forsake the principles they learned in teacher methods courses and revert back to more traditional practices for teaching writing; likewise, Smagorinsky and Johnson (2013) has suggested that, far from challenging their prior experiences, fieldwork during teacher preparation can sometimes encourage teacher candidates to assimilate. We make no claims about the future effectiveness of these teachers as responders to student writing, but we emphasize that the thoughtful integration of practical experience with an audience of student writers and discussion of composition theories and pedagogies is what allowed for our students to frame response to student writing.

The college students’ prior experiences with writing instruction were not the only influence on their frame for responding to the texts submitted by the middle schoolers. We acknowledge that the nature of the context, itself, may have contributed to their judgments about the appropriateness of content and form. Their role as judges, and the requirement of ranking students, likely contributed to the initial framing of their responses. Indeed, one of the teacher candidates wrote in her reflection that she had understood the inclusion of a genre label on a list of the students’ submissions as an invitation to evaluate their execution of a generic form. On the other hand, the nature of the three rounds in our piloted revision to the Promising Young Writers program, and the instructions for college students to respond to the second round, suggested the importance of revision for particular genres and modes (e.g., Smagorinsky, Cook, and Johnson 2003). Our findings indicate that the inclusion of the three rounds of feedback contributed to the students’ initial framing of their responses. In class, Ted reminded college students of their role as judges and not teachers, and his invitations to reexamine the middle schoolers’ submissions certainly implied his own values as a reader of student writing. That college students noted and reacted to both types of influences in their responses to student writing only reinforces for us the way classroom discourse—including assignments, instructions, and teacher feedback—can contribute to framing (and reframing) responses to student writing. Finally, while we continue to recognize the potential advantages for writers of providing them with real audiences outside the classroom (e.g. Paszcella and Richardson 2009), our efforts to use real external audiences did not spur the focus on revision and learning about other genres and modes that characterized the writing pedagogies class. Accepting the challenges presented by establishing authentic audiences at three institutions limited the time middle schoolers had to revise their texts based on feedback from their peers in a different state. In most cases, college students had already completed scoring before peers had provided comments or voted. Also, though college students did provide feedback that could have potentially motivated middle schoolers to revise their texts and revise in earnest, with the idea that the text had been considered seriously and was about to go to the next level to

Winter 2014/2015
In Ted’s writing pedagogies class, the dual audience of teacher candidates and creative writers provided a useful opportunity to compare different perspectives on the submissions to the Promising Young Writer’s contest. However, we recognize that the competing agendas of college writing, rhetoric and composition, and English education present many other challenges to instructors of a writing pedagogies course. We, ourselves, continue to explore possibilities for a section of the course created exclusively for future teachers, which could focus more precisely on the needs of these students and could potentially provide them more field experience opportunities than does the current, primarily theoretical, course designed to support future teachers, create writing majors, and professional writing minors. Who are the various college student audiences for the writing pedagogies course? How do those audiences frame the interaction of response to writing? What other opportunities (like the one afforded by our piloted revision to the Promising Young Writers program) might allow instructors to bring those audiences’ different frames for response to writing into useful relationship?

In this article, we have addressed the problem of how to provide English teacher candidates with opportunities to practice giving feedback on student writing which surface and challenge their assumptions about the roles, relationships, and responsibilities available to them as teachers. Our pilot revision to NCTE’s Promising Young Writers program, for which Mike chairs the national committee, provided such an opportunity for Ted’s writing pedagogies class, as college students evaluated and responded to writing from middle schoolers in Michigan and Pennsylvania. To the scores, the discussions, and the reflections teacher candidates initially approached responding to student writing as evaluators of the appropriateness of form and content, framing the interaction as regulatory practice. The difference between their initial scores and those of their creative and professional writing classmates helped the future teachers begin to reframe response to student writing. Their participation in the Promising Young Writers revision pilot also provided the students in the writing pedagogies course with a valuable opportunity to connect theory and practice. Research remains to be done on what kinds of experiences before, during, and after English teacher preparation might contribute to framing (and reframing) response to student writing at various stages of their careers.

Conclusion

In this article, we have addressed the problem of how to provide English teacher candidates with opportunities to practice giving feedback on student writing which surface and challenge their assumptions about the roles, relationships, and responses available to them as teachers. Our pilot revision to NCTE’s Promising Young Writers program, for which Mike chairs the national committee, provided such an opportunity for Ted’s writing pedagogies class, as college students evaluated and responded to writing from middle schoolers in Michigan and Pennsylvania. To the scores, the discussions, and the reflections

Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education

Appendix 1

NCTE PROMISING YOUNG WRITERS PROGRAM

INSTRUCTIONS FOR JUDGING STUDENT WRITING

ROLE OF THE JUDGES

The National Council of Teachers of English thanks you for the time and interest you are devoting to this program. Without your support, this program could not be offered to students, teachers, and schools. The role of judges in selecting outstanding eighth-grade writers is paramount. Students may receive special attention from their local schools, state and national officials, and NCTE state affiliates. NCTE recognizes each student with Certificates of Recognition or Participation and their names and schools are posted on the NCTE website. It is very important for judges to meet the deadline so schools can be notified in time for end-of-the-year awards ceremonies.

JUDGING PROCESS

Each team of two judges will work independently to evaluate the same students’ papers (Best Writing and Themed Writing for each student). Score each paper between 0 and 3 based on the criteria which follow (that is, one score for each Best Writing and one score for each Theme Writing). Record the scores for the two writings from each student.

EVALUATING THE WRITING SAMPLES

In evaluating the two pieces of writing (described below), judges should consider the effectiveness of each piece for its intended audience. The comprehensive question is whether the writer exhibits power to inform and/or move an audience through control of language. Fuzziness should not be mistaken for proficiency, nor mechanical sloppiness for originality. Although editorial correctness is a virtue, meaningful variations should be allowed and the absence of mechanical error should not be overvalued. As a rule, flawed brilliance is to be preferred over correct dullness.

Best Writing Evaluation: Judges have the opportunity to read a wide variety of writings student students have chosen as their best. More than one poem or prose work will be accepted as long as the entry does not exceed ten pages. We do not accept research papers, novels, or novelettes. A judge may ask, “How can I compare the relative worth of a poem and an essay?” The only honest answer is that one cannot. Yet the piece of writing may be judged in terms of itself and how it compares to the writing evaluation rubric. It is possible to adapt the descriptions in the rubric to submissions in various genres/media. The major question to ask is whether the sample, whatever its type, reveals high achievement in writing for a student at this grade level. In many instances, the best writing samples will have been examined by a committee of teachers, or a committee of teachers and students, who have judged the writings of these students. A teacher’s corrections or remarks should not be on the paper.

Themed Writing Evaluation: Judges have the opportunity to evaluate writing done on the same topic. Judges are reminded that this writing is done by eighth-grade students, and their responses to the assigned topic may not be the equivalent of those written by more mature writers. However, having one composition on the same topic by each participating student does provide a point of comparison not only between that individual student’s two submissions but also across all the writings being evaluated.

HOLISTIC WRITING EVALUATION

Use the Holistic Writing Evaluation Scale below to score papers. Scores of 3 and 2 should be reserved for those writings that are clearly outstanding and that could be printed in a magazine or local newspaper as representing the best junior high/middle school writing in the state. However, it is possible that judges may select a winner who is not equally good on both writing samples.

To recognize varied achievement, judges are urged to:

1. Read supportively in order to reward students for what they have accomplished. Eighth graders include a wide range of writers, including English Language Learners, all of whom are developing their writing in different ways.

2. Avoid applying formulaic standards (for instance, insisting that compositions follow a specific essay format such as the five-paragraph paper, or that one kind of error is automatically disqualifying [e.g., “dote” rather than “a dot”, or English Language Learners’ errors in the use of the articles a, an, the]).

3. Recognize that a 3, like other ratings, represents a range, not a pinnacle—high achievement, not flawlessness—and must therefore be used ungrudgingly if those who deserve to be winners are going to get the score necessary to qualify them.

Note that while these instructions for the national program address two writing samples (a themed and a "best writing") for each student, in our piloted revisions we asked for only one best writing sample.
NCTE PROMISING YOUNG WRITERS PROGRAM


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First-Year Composition and the Common Core: Educating Teachers of Writing Across the High School-College Continuum

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An effort is now underway in America’s public schools to implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS); these assessment standards seek to align K-12 exit standards with college-level entrance requirements, thereby producing high school graduates that are, according to the architects of the CCSS, “College and Career Ready.” This article will discuss the implications of the CCSS on the teaching of writing instructors at the college level. I will argue that, with the nationwide adoption of the CCSS, the most effective models of the training of writing teachers in higher education will now include collaboration with educators at the K-12 level; I will also offer a model for this kind of collaborative work, based on an effort I am currently leading as the Director of English Composition at my institution. I will begin with a brief overview of the CCSS, and the shifts in the teaching and learning of English Language Arts at the K-12 level they suggest. I will then suggest a model for teaching teachers of first year composition, based on recent collaborative efforts with high school teachers and administrators involved in my institution’s Concurrent Enrollment Program. Specifically, I will discuss how this collaborative model can help us understand the strengths and weaknesses of beginning college writers, from the perspectives of both high school and college teachers, and how this understanding should then inform our instruction of first-year composition teachers. Finally, I will suggest that it is essential that the education of secondary and post-secondary writing teachers be grounded in current theories and practices of the field of composition and rhetoric.

The Common Core State Standards and English Language Arts: Background and Shifts

The Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governor’s Association jointly initiated the Common Core State Standards, and began work on the standards in 2009 (Common Core Background). A final draft of the CCSS was published in June 2010. According to the official website of the CCSS, sponsored by the CCSSO and the NGA, the CCSS, “define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs” (About the Standards). The CCSS set standards of “College and Career Readiness” only for English Language Arts and Mathematics, although they establish literacy standards for science, technical subjects and social studies in grades 6-12 (ELA Standards). As of the middle of 2013, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the standards. The CCSS for ELA suggest several significant shifts in standards for language arts in K-12; these shifts that will impact the way that literacy is taught and learned across the K-16 continuum. As the purpose of this article is not to provide an analysis of these shifts, only a brief discussion of these shifts is necessary, in order to establish context for the discussion. According to Student Achievement Partners, a non-profit founded by the chief architect of the CCSS, David Coleman, these shifts can be reduced to three major changes: 1. “Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction,” 2. “Reading, writing and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational,” and 3. “Regular practice with complex text and its academic language” (Common Core Shifts). Of these shifts, the move towards the inclusion of a higher percentage of “informational texts” in the K-12 language arts/English classroom has generated the most controversy. The architects of the CCSS, most visibly David Coleman, argue that students need to spend less time reading and writing narratives (or about narratives), and more time reading and writing what the CCSS terms “informational texts.” As The New York Times notes, in the newspaper’s account of an incident representative of the controversy over this aspect of the CCSS, Coleman himself ignited a storm of criticism when he argued against the use of personal writing in English classes by saying, that, in the business world, no one ever tells an employee, “Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday, but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood” (Lewin). The Times notes that progressive educators reacted strongly to this comment; this upset is part of a generally negative reaction among progressives and some conservatives to the CCSS emphasis on informational texts over literary texts. An understanding of the major shifts brought about by the CCSS for ELA, how these shifts are presented by the backers of the CCSS, and an awareness of the controversies over those shifts, is particularly essential for those teaching writing in K-12. An understanding of these issues is also important to anyone preparing writing teachers at the college level, as these changes will have an impact on what incoming students know, and don’t know, about college writing.

1 See Diane Ravitch’s blog, for the progressive perspective on the ELA shifts.
2 See Sandra Stosky’s post on the website of the Heritage Institute, for a conservative perspective on the ELA shifts.

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