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Ways to Critique Writing

The following is a handout I give to my students on how to go about class discussion of student writing.

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Quite a few people have learned to write well without much teaching, perhaps without any at all; but hardly anyone, I suspect, has ever learned to write well without an audience. The reason why a writing course is conducted as a collective activity – why I would hold class meetings even if I had time for weekly conferences with everyone in the class – is that a class can provide a helpfully critical audience for its members' work. This is not easy to come by. Once you get out of school it is very difficult to round up a roomful of potential readers.

In my conception, writing courses spend a lot of time teaching a certain kind of reading – namely, an ability to notice many different qualities in a piece of writing – on the theory that if you notice them you may get some idea of what to do with your own work. The purpose of looking at another student's work, in the context of a writing course, is this: responding to another's work gives you perspective on your own, and in the long run leads to internalization of the questions you ask. It helps to give you the distance you need in order to see your own paper clearly, and it leads to discriminations that can become part of your private awareness of what it means to write well.

Because discussions of student are conducted for the benefit of all the people present, not just the writer, we may at times discuss a writer's work even though she is absent.

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Of course the writer wants to know if you liked or didn't like her paper, but the most helpful criticism is often descriptive or interpretive rather than evaluative. What she needs to know is not so much "What did you think of it?" as "What did it make you think?" Most responses to writing are based on something that can be pointed to (though finding that something may require considerable reflection). Try to be as specific as you can.

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Comments on papers are not commands. The writer is always in charge of deciding what use will ultimately be made of anyone else's criticism. Learning to reject advice – overriding the judgments of others – is as important a part of working with other people as is learning to make use of others' comments. This does not mean, of course, that you have to tell the responder you are rejecting her advice.

I would suggest, however, that in order to make the fullest use of readers' comments you should at first try to believe that they are valid. Extract as much truth as you can even from the untrue. This attitude is related to the believingness with which one approaches an art work.

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Following are some ways of structuring the conversations about papers which form a large part of this course:

1. Responses centering on the reader:

Pointing ("I liked . . .")

Reader points to words or phrases that stand out. Simply a listing, or pointing to, things that strike the listener. A good starting-point for other kinds of responses.

Active Listening, or "say back" ("I hear your paper saying . . .")
("So, are you saying that . . .?")

Reader says, in her own words, what she hears the writer saying. This is an invitation for the writer then to say more about the piece, to explore its meaning further. The object is not for the reader to "get it right," but to help the writer discover what she has said and wants to say.

Center of Gravity ("Your central idea seems to be . . .")

Reader says what she hears as the focus or heart of the piece. Again, the job is not to "get it right" but to help the writer see how well she has communicated (or not).

2. Responses centering on the writer:

The writer is in charge here, and can ask whatever questions she wants. It's important not to get involved in a discussion of the content that leads away from the paper being considered. The reader should restrain herself from describing the paper she would have written about the same subject; that's probably irrelevant. Some useful questions for the writer to ask are:

What holds this piece together?

What seems (to a reader) to be the focus of this piece? Are all the parts somehow relevant to that focus?

What do you want to know more about?
or, more pointedly, What else could I say?

What needs to be said, what needs to be elaborated, what's circling around the edges of the paper that hasn't been talked about yet?

What parts worked the best for you and why did they strike you?

This is a request for the activity called "pointing" above.

When you read this, what did you feel I was trying to say?

It can be very revealing to ask what the reader took to be the writer's *intention* in writing the piece.

3. A movie of the reader's mind:

The reader's subjective reactions while reading, rendered in detail. What did you think, experience, feel as you read? What happened in your mind and exactly when, at what words on what page?

4. Evaluations:

Of clarity, wording, overall conception, organization, logic, convincingness, vividness, liveliness (this list could go on and on) . . . But notice that I've put evaluation last, and for a reason. A useful discussion of a piece of writing starts with a detailed look at *what* is in front of you, rather than with passing judgment on it. It is not necessary or even desirable to try to reach consensus on exactly how good the piece of writing is.