

REVIEW ESSAY

Response to Writers, not Writing:  
A Review of *Twelve Readers Reading* by  
Richard Straub & Ronald F. Lunsford

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*Picture this:*

*Bill, a man in his late 20's and native of the Northeast, applies for and gets accepted in a graduate program at a large state university that lies at the intersection of the South, the Southwest, and the lower Great Plains. As part of his graduate assistantship he will teach several courses in the university's first-year composition program. Bill's first impressions of the people of this region are, to him, unfavorable: Bill sees the people in the state, and the students in the university, as rubes, rednecks, as beneath himself in sophistication, culture, and literacy. His students' rural drawls and dialects mark them as his social inferiors—he dreads his composition classes and the struggles he will find in bringing his students' writing up to his standards. He finds that his impressions are shared by most of the full-time English faculty and the majority of teaching assistants who have difficulty accepting the conservative, Christian values of many students, the parochial views of state residents, and the colloquial speech practiced and off on campus.*

*In Bill's very first composition class, he is dismayed when in walks Charlie, all 6'8", 285 lbs. of him, wearing cowboy boots and dungarees, a football recruit straight off the farm, so deeply set in his rustic ways that his teammates quickly nickname him "Pure Country." To Bill, big-time football is emblematic of the perversion of university values, bringing onto campus unprepared and unqualified students such as Charlie, big galoots who fill stadiums a few Saturdays of the year and otherwise have no place in an institution of higher learning. Bill's expectations have been formed by the university's recent past, where national championships have come at the cost of investigations and probations, where players have been arrested for rape, drug dealing, and weapons violations, where coaches have resigned in disgrace. Looking at Charlie, Bill sees the decline of civilization as he knows*

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and loves it. After the first week of class, of listening to Charlie's mangling of the English language that marks him as a misfit in the world of higher education, Bill identifies Charlie as a likely failure—big, blustery, crude, and barely literate. He recommends that Charlie be treated as an at-risk student who will be required to seek assistance in the athletic department tutoring center.

Charlie's initial papers confirm Bill's dim view of student athletes and rural students. Given a choice of topics to write on, Charlie chooses to expound on the intricacies of defensive line play, a topic Bill takes no interest in and sees little point in. Charlie describes defensive line formations and responsibilities with a combination of arcane terminology and nonstandard language that Bill finds nearly incomprehensible and quickly grows impatient with him. His response to the paper is somewhat curt, and is not only directed at Charlie, who bothers Bill in his personification of all that's wrong with university values, but who is also strongly influenced by his developing doubts that his decision to pursue a graduate degree at this university has been the right thing to do. His marginalia are a series of question marks and requests for clarification; his summative comment at the paper's end tells Charlie tersely, "Your writing does not meet the standards of this university, and must improve if you intend to pass."

Over in the athletic department tutoring center, Charlie's tutor works with him much differently. She has both grown up and taught high school English in small towns in the state and feels comfortable with rural students. She finds Charlie to be a straight shooter, a delightful contrast to the pretentiousness of many college students and faculty, and takes a special interest in him. As a long-time resident of the state, she is a fan of the football program and so wants to see Charlie stay eligible and his scholarship put to good use. She knows how to shift into his own dialect to connect with him during moments when he feels unsure of himself in the college environment. In the more intimate setting of the athletic department tutoring center, surrounded by other athletes from nontraditional backgrounds, likely to run into his coaches at any time, Charlie is more receptive to response to his writing than in the more hostile, distant, and alienating environment of the classroom. And with her personal interest in Charlie and concern for his welfare, and with the relatively few numbers of students she is assigned to assist, his tutor provides him with supportive, yet critical, advice on how to learn to write for his college teachers.

This vignette (adapted from Whiting, 1995) illustrates the difficulties I have with Straub and Lunsford's *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing*. The book purports to be a study of response to college student writing, based on 12 well-known college English professors' responses to a series of papers presented to them by the researchers. Straub and Lunsford offer this study as "clinical" research—limited, they

say, by the fact that the “response” is directed to writers that the professors never meet and who will never actually get the feedback, yet still valid as a way of learning more about effective ways of responding to student writing. I disagree. In my view, a study of “responding to college student writing” is much different from a study of “responding to college student writers,” which is what real writing teachers do.

The authors claim that their inclusion of a scenario (brief description of the student, of the assignment, etc.) allows the twelve professors to envision the students, thus, they say, providing sufficient context to validate the results. The study nonetheless focuses on a database consisting only of these 12 professors’ responses to writerless writing. Such a methodology presents to me substantial problems with the ecological validity of the research—that is, the extent to which it predicts the way people would perform in “real” social contexts. As Fred Newman and Phyllis Goldberg (1996) argued in their critique of clinical medical research, “whatever researchers may discover in the laboratory setting is what there is to be discovered in the self-consciously constructed environment of the laboratory; the findings may be valid for that very particular ‘ecology,’ but they are not necessarily applicable, or even relevant, to the broader human environment from which it is abstracted” (p. 182). In my view, *Twelve Readers Reading* lacks validity in informing what would happen in the “broader human environment” of the classroom that teems with personalities, personal histories, multiple goals, power relations, and other human facts of social life. In the vignette that opens this review, Bill did not simply respond to Charlie’s writing; he responded to Charlie as a representative of his state—in Bill’s view “a backwater, hick state, full of pickup-driving, cowboy-hat-wearing uneducated losers” (Whiting, 1995, p. 59)—and as an athlete, “a typical bonehead jock” who “would never be able to pass any class here” at the university (p. 54). In the following sections I will identify specific areas that, for me, make this book questionable in developing a theory of response, or of situating a theory of response in a broader theory of communication, human development, social action, or other perspective on human activity.

#### **Absence of a Theoretical Perspective**

One oddity of this study is the disjuncture between the authors’ opening claim that response to writing is here being re-envisioned through the lens of modern theories, and the absence of those theories in providing a perspective on the data reported or the analysis conducted. The authors begin by justifying their research as “appropriate and useful at this time, when different approaches to teaching and writing are competing for dominance in composition theory; when poststructuralist theory is helping to redefine our images of writing, reading, and the nature of response; when teachers are decentering the authority of the classroom and distrib-

uting it among students; when classwork is increasingly being devoted to peer response; when computer technology is providing innovative ways of putting theory into classroom practice; and when traditional methods of commentary are being transformed by process pedagogies and collaborative approaches to teaching writing” (p. 1). Yet as I read the book I looked in vain for any account of these new theories, and my doubts about their presence were confirmed by a review of the references (pp. 469–471). The reference list includes 57 citations. Seven are from the 1960’s; 14 are from the 1970s; 25 are from between 1980–1984; 9 are from 1985–1989; and 2 are from the 1990s (both from 1991). Forty-six of the study’s 57 references are therefore over ten years old at the time of the book’s publication. While Straub and Lunsford open with the claim that current theory will inform their investigation, the citation base that frames their study is surprisingly dated. The lack of a current citation base is suggestive of the problems that follow in the book; in terms of methodology, grounding assumptions, and conclusions, *12 Readers Reading* ignores cultural and constructivist theories that present formidable challenges to the premises that undergird their approach to studying professorial response to students and their writing.

### **Absence of a Theory of Communication**

*Twelve Readers Reading* is based on the assumption that we can learn something about response to student writing by studying 12 college professors’ hypothetical responses to hypothetical students. Yet response to students about their writing is inherently an act of *communication*. Current theories of communication tend to take a constructivist approach in which writing is a fundamentally social act in which meaning is constructed through the relationship between writer and reader (Nystrand, 1986). Witte and Flach (1994), for instance, in discussing the assessment of writing, identify the following principles of communication that should underlie evaluation:

- communicative acts demand meaning-constructive interactions (regardless of whether managed through linguistic or non-linguistic texts or through speaking, reading, listening or writing) between the Self and at least one Other; and
- shared meanings are constructed or mediated through “texts,” that is, constructed dialogically and interactively (i.e., socially) through the use of one or more symbol systems. (p. 225)

Straub and Lunsford’s study, with teachers responding to student *writing* but not writers, ignores the communicative function of both student writing and teachers’ response comments. Without a real recipient of the remarks (other than, perhaps, the researchers—in which case this is a study of how

people respond to research prompts, not student writing), the comments provided by the 12 readers reading do not communicate, and therefore are not *responses*. The responses of Bill and Charlie's tutor to Charlie's writing, for instance, take place only through the filter of assumptions and experiences that each of his teachers sees him through. His teachers respond to Charlie the writer, not just to Charlie's writing. And Charlie entered the situation as part of a web of social relations he had little understanding of and no control over: Prior to Charlie's arrival on campus, another football player (another large, white, rough-hewn lineman from a nontraditional background) had successfully appealed a failing grade from his first-year composition instructor, a situation that brought the disrepute of athletes (particularly football players) among English department faculty into sharp relief and raised great tensions between the English department and the athletic department. Charlie was, to Bill, not just a big oaf who didn't belong in the university, but the latest in a series of big oafs who would not have been admitted without their sporting prowess. Bill was impatient with Charlie from the beginning—impatient, indeed, with athletes as a whole—and it showed in his response to his writing.

Circumstances conspired to change Bill's view of Charlie, however. Bill and Charlie's tutor took graduate classes together and became friends. She told him about Charlie's extraordinary work ethic, not only spending several hours a day with football but having the highest attendance in the tutoring center of any athlete in the university's extensive support programs. She began showing Bill the endless drafts Charlie would produce based on her own suggestions and Bill's. Bill developed a grudging admiration for Charlie as he began to see changes in his writing based on his willingness to write and write and write, and a respect for his intelligence based on Bill's increasing understanding of the complexities of playing college football. His remarks on his papers became less sharp, more supportive, more encouraging, based on his changed perceptions of Charlie as a person.

I do not intend to belabor the point about this one teacher and one student. I do hope to illustrate, however, why I feel that you cannot study response to student writing independent of a study of the relationship between teacher and writer—without, that is, recognizing that response is part of a reciprocal social relationship. A teacher and student have a relationship of some sort that affects a reading of response to writing. Is the teacher arrogant, distant? Warm and caring? Sarcastic and bitter? Supportive? Scathing? How do these traits interact with those of individual students and the social groups to which they belong? Surely these interpersonal characteristics make a difference in the ways in which teachers couch their responses, and in which students read them. Ruling out the idea of intersubjectivity eliminates much about the ways in which a teacher's commentary is intended, and in turn interpreted.

To give another example: I had a master's degree student a few years ago who'd gotten married, and whose husband began beating her on their honeymoon and regularly thereafter. She finally left him, whereupon he began stalking her in spite of court orders to stay away from her. Meanwhile, she was developing severe conflicts at the high school where she taught; her principal was highly critical of her departures from the school's "drill and kill" curriculum. During this time she wrote a very weak master's thesis, which I read far less critically than I normally would because of the duress she was experiencing at the time. My comments were, for the most part, gentle and undiscriminating because she was in such a fragile emotional state. Another student might have been disappointed by the uncritical reading I gave her thesis; however, a trenchant reading might have pushed this writer over the emotional edge. I was not responding simply to her writing, but to her *and* to my view of what she needed most in her situation. Indeed, if her marriage had worked out well, I would have responded much differently to her work—the comments would have been sharper, more critical, more challenging. I would not have accepted the thesis in the form she turned in.

My point with these examples is that "response" implies some sort of human relationship, which Straub and Lunsford have "controlled" in this study. To me, controlling this variable invalidates the research, because without the variable they are not studying the problem.

#### **Acultural Taxonomy of Response**

Following from the problem of the study's lack of a coherent motivating theory is the authors' acultural taxonomy of response. In examining the 12 readers' response styles, Straub and Lunsford develop a scale of response ranging from "authoritative" to "interactive" in what the researchers see as a teacher's "control" over student writing. They associate "authoritative" responses with those that are "directive" and exercise "firm control" over the writer's text. In their analysis, "authoritative" remarks are "controlling" and therefore undesirable; they proceed to rank the twelve professors in the degree to which they "control" the hypothetical student writers. As I was reading this, I was reminded of Lisa Delpit's (1996) argument in *Other People's Children* about cultural differences in communication styles. According to Delpit, there's a tendency among mainstream whites to prefer *indirect* ways of conveying their wishes to others, and a tendency among blacks to prefer *direct* ways of communication. To Delpit, "In this country, students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it. And that product, based as it is on the specific codes of a particular culture, is more readily produced when the directives of how to produce it are made explicit. . . . Somehow, to exhibit one's personal power as an expert source is viewed as disempowering one's

students. . . . But those veiled commands are commands nonetheless, representing true power, and with true consequences for disobedience. . . . In other words, the attempt by the teacher to reduce an exhibition of power by expressing herself in indirect terms may remove the very explicitness that the child needs to understand the rules of the new classroom culture” (pp. 31–35). What Straub and Lunsford find authoritarian and controlling, then, Delpit finds clear and facilitative.

Straub and Lunsford present Tilly Warnock’s response “You might address those questions in your next draft” (p. 336) as an exemplary way to couch a suggestion because it is indirect and therefore less controlling than an alternative such as “Address those questions in your next draft.” Based on my reading of Delpit, I would say that it might seem to be a kinder, gentler, less directive type of response to a mainstream white student because it gives a command in an indirect, polite, suggestive way; yet Delpit argues that indirect remarks such as these are confusing to many nonmainstream students who are accustomed to, and prefer, direct statements such as those that Straub and Lunsford find controlling and therefore undesirable. I suspect that Delpit would envision a nonmainstream reader coming across Warnock’s response and saying, “I might address them?? But I might not?? But what are you saying I should do?” To Delpit, both types of responses are controlling, but differ in the degree to which they anticipate and explicate the speaker’s expectations.

This problem illustrates to me the ways in which a teacher’s *intentions* might not match a student’s *needs and expectations*, and the ways in which strong cultural matches may allow for indirect response among those who share an understanding of cultural codes and speech genres, yet exclude those students who are enculturated to different discourse practices and need explicit guidance. Is an “authoritative” response always bad? I don’t think so. I think that the need for explicit direction is particularly necessary when students are learning to write within specific conventions. I wish, for instance, that someone had been highly directive with me as I spent years flailing around trying to learn how to write grant proposals. I’d have much preferred some concrete corrections—no matter how “corrective,” “interventionist,” or “directive” they might have been—to experiencing failure at something I felt I needed. With doctoral students who are learning how to write research reports, I’m highly directive with regard to their development of an understanding of the APA format and the discourse conventions of writing within particular disciplines; if I’m not, then they will be penalized when they attempt to publish their research subsequently. To me, an “indirect” response is appropriate for some situations, but not others—the context suggests to me what’s appropriate (see Colomb, 1993, Bartholomae, 1984; and Bazerman & Paradis, 1991 for discussions of enculturation to discourse communities).

Straub and Lunsford, on the other hand, make the acultural argument that certain types of response are always best. They present the following pair of response statements, along with their view of which is preferable:

Move this paragraph to the start of your paper.

You might want to move this paragraph to the start of your paper.

It might well be argued that these two sentences perform the same speech act, that is, request that the paragraph be moved. But that is not to say that the two are synonymous. There is a definite change in meaning—and in the relationship between teacher and student—when the sentence changes from an imperative to a declarative statement. Although we would grant that the two sentences may be taken to mean the same thing when they are presented in the full context of a real classroom setting, given the power relations that conventionally adhere between teachers and students, we think the different ways the comment is framed does make a difference in the way it is interpreted. The form of a comment makes a difference in meaning. (p. 166)

Straub and Lunsford thus argue that explicit directions are more controlling and less desirable than suggestions and hints about what to do, *regardless of the context of the response*.

Delpit, on the other hand, also contrasts direct and indirect responses but comes to a much different conclusion. She first provides a quote that typifies the response of a progressive white teacher to the “meanness” of a black colleague, and then explains it as a cultural misunderstanding:

*“It’s really a shame but she (that black teacher upstairs) seems to be so authoritarian, so focused on skills and so teacher directed. Those poor kids never seem to be allowed to really express their creativity. (And she even yells at them.)”*

This statement directly concerns the display of power and authority in the classroom. One way to understand the difference in perspective between black teachers and their progressive colleagues on this issue is to explore culturally influenced oral interactions.

In *Ways with Words*, Shirley Brice Heath quotes the verbal directives given by the middle-class “townspeople” teachers:

- “Is this where the scissors belong?”
- “You want to do your best work today.”

By contrast, many black teachers are more likely to say:

- “Put those scissors on that shelf.”
- “Put your name on the papers and make sure to get the right answer for each question.”

Is one oral style more authoritarian than another? (pp. 33-34)



To Delpit, the answer is NO: Both are authoritarian. The indirect method preferred by Straub and Lunsford benefits those students who are already enculturated to the codes of school-based communication and thus know how to read the “suggestion.” The indirect comment, however, leaves the uninitiated students to read the suggestions however they might—usually, argues, Delpit, the “wrong” way. Delpit’s concern is mostly with minority students, but I would say that students like Charlie, who as the first members of their families to attend college have little exposure to the speech genres expected by university professors, also illustrate her point well in that they are unfamiliar with the customs they are expected to practice and need explicit help in learning the ways of the new world they are trying to enter. Students like Charlie are confused by indirect, “nonauthoritarian” responses to their writing, rather than being “empowered” by them.

The lack of a motivating theory, then, results in an acultural view of students, teachers, and learning contexts. The less “authoritative” professors in the sample are lauded for the indirection of their comments, even though there’s no theoretical reason for making such a judgment. And the *reasons* behind the various professors’ explicitness is never explored. To take one contrast: Anne Gere is characterized as one of the least controlling teachers in the study, and Richard Larson among the most. From a cultural perspective, it’s possible that Gere’s students at the exclusive University of Michigan *allow* her to be indirect, in that the admissions policies of the university tend to screen out those students who, in Delpit’s terms, are not enculturated to the codes of power. Larson, on the other hand, teaches in the CUNY system with its more open admissions policies. From a cultural perspective, he may have spent decades explicating codes to uninitiated students, thus making him appear in the acultural view of Straub and Lunsford to be “controlling.” My interpretation here is speculative (one could also contrast Gere & Larson by gender, or by age, or by other professional and life experiences), but points again to the need to contextualize any judgment about the quality of response in the human milieu in which it is situated. In that the research ignores the communicative, constructivist nature of response to writing, we’ll never know how different types of students actually use the different types of response; instead, all we learn is that the researchers themselves prefer indirect response over direct. The absence of nonwhites in the sample of 12 professors raises questions about the extent to which the authors are studying response to writing in terms of any contemporary issues or theories of writing; the assumption that the professors who are enlisted are all teaching in a cultural vacuum raises questions about the ecological validity of the research; and the assumption that we can judge the quality of response to writing without seeing how writers use that response suggests that the researchers’ conclusions were well-established before the study began.

### Final Remarks

In *Twelve Readers Reading* the authors assume that texts are not written with specific teachers in mind. My 20 or so years of teaching have taught me that, no matter how much I encourage students to write for diverse audiences, they know that if I'm putting the grade on it, they're writing with me in mind. This critical student-teacher relationship is not part of Straub and Lunsford's research, however. On p. 165 the authors present a diagram that illustrates "The five contexts of student writing," none of which is the relationship between reader and writer. In my view, this relationship is fundamental to any study of response to students and their writing. Straub and Lunsford, in the subtitle of their book, announce that they are studying response to student writing; yet their assumption of an autonomous, writerless text, along with their ungrounded preference for indirect response in the face of evidence that it is simply a cultural bias, makes me question the import of this work as research that could inform our understanding of the ways in which writing teachers assist their students in developing as writers. Among their conclusions from their study is that response to writing "should be adapted to the student writer behind the text" (p. 373). Yet they have not studied student writers, at least not in terms of these 12 professors' knowledge of them, and so have no business reaching such a conclusion. In spite of the great amount of effort that has gone into this study, I see it providing little illumination on the problems it sets out to investigate.

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