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Relational Response: Preservice Teachers Providing Writing Feedback in Three Middle School Partnerships

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Abstract

Providing meaningful feedback to student writers is a nuanced, fully human endeavor. Thus, teaching preservice teachers, in all disciplines, to respond to students' writing is a complex task, one that requires intentional instruction and practice. In this article, we use practitioner inquiry to analyze our experiences and teaching approaches with preservice teachers who provided feedback to middle school writers through three public school partnerships. The partnerships employed varied modes of communication, including digital platforms, paper notebooks, letter writing, one-to-one tutoring, and face-to-face school visits. Response patterns suggest authentic experiences that explicitly teach and support writing practice spur the ability of preservice teachers in crafting relational, generative feedback to student writers while considering the affective experience.

Key words: feedback, writing, teacher education, affective learning

Two Paradoxes of Responding

First paradox: The reader is always right; the writer is always right...

Second paradox: The writer must be in charge; the writer must sit back quietly too.

Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff in Sharing and Responding

The qualities of good writing are complex and nuanced. But they can be named, and I'm convinced they can be taught. Of all the arts, writing should be among the most democratic: all one needs is paper and a pen — and I would suggest, a teacher or two along the way who works to make the intangible tangible, so every student might know the joy of writing well.

Nancie Atwell in Lessons that Change Writers

For preservice teachers and veteran teachers alike, the task of responding to student writing can be daunting. Unlike many subjects taught in school, writing is more than the answer to a factual question or a measurement; writing is a heuristic approach to learning. Writing begins with an empty page or blank screen and is fully generated by the internal workings of a writer. Writing involves risk taking, making one feel vulnerable and exposed. Writers know this and so do preservice teachers. Thus, the work of responding to student writers often feels risky. It is a process that must be taught and practiced.

Responding effectively and humanely to student writing while building a relationship of trust, a process we dub relational response, is all the more fraught with uncertainty when preservice teachers themselves lack confidence as writers. We observe a typical pattern when discussing early literacy experiences with preservice teachers. Reading is often recalled with wistful nostalgia. Writing, by contrast, is often recalled with palpable stress, an activity rarely owned outside of school but, instead, controlled by the demands of teachers, a task to be done right. There are exceptions, of course, but the pattern is typical. The red pen haunts, and high-stakes tests loom large as preservice teachers begin to support and assess student writing.

Appreciating the complexities of learning to respond to student writing, we, Beth, Jenny, and Karen, each designed and implemented writing partnerships between preservice teachers and middle school students in semester-long relationships. These partnerships highlighted different aspects of responding to writers and employed varied modes of communication, including digital platforms, paper notebooks, letter writing, one-to-one tutoring, and face-to-face school visits. In this article, we use practitioner inquiry as a means to analyze experiences and teaching approaches designed to engage preservice teachers in providing feedback to middle school

writers through partnerships. Response patterns suggest authentic experiences and practice spur preservice teachers in crafting relational, generative feedback to student writers.

Background Literature

Responding to writing is, for many teachers, a primary activity with the goal of improving student understanding and performance. Research shows quality feedback from teachers is essential for student learning (Gamlen & Munthe, 2014; Koole & Elbers, 2014). Examinations of learning to write and providing effective feedback are plentiful. Writing process advocates Atwell (1987), Graves (1983), Elbow and Belanoff, (1999), and Elbow (2007) highlight the lingering problem of the teacher's red pen and the limiting power of the internal self-editor. Culham (2003, 2006) and Spandel (2000) provide insights on teaching traits of writing; nonetheless, we, as teacher educators, continue to wrestle with ways to teach preservice teachers the complex steps of responding effectively to student writing. Providing meaningful response to student writers is a nuanced, fully human endeavor that considers the writer and the functions of the written text. However, there is little evidence to suggest that direct instruction on how to give feedback to student writers is included into curricula for all teacher education licensure areas. What we do know is that meaningful experiences and feedback to student writing helps to develop a writer. Warner (2018), an accomplished writer and writing educator, purports that teaching writing requires prioritizing values. "What is most important at a given part of the process? What conditions and experiences help learners improve and make them eager to keep coming back to learn more?" (p. 108). Partnerships work to provide students with meaningful conditions for writing: audience, purpose, autonomy, and response.

In the school experiences of many preservice teachers, test-driven writing instruction drives curricular choices away from workshop models and, while there is interest in developing

writing as an element of learning in all contents, what many see as best practices in teaching writing are not implemented by teachers compelled by curricular limitations (Smagorinsky, Wilson & Moore, 2011). If response to writing is to yield rich learning experiences, we must attend to an idea that Elbow and Balanoff (1999) make clear: it is a two-way street fraught with paradoxes. Both the student writer and the teacher have a say in the direction of meaningful feedback. Beyond rubrics and percentiles, effective feedback is dialogic, guided by the student and also teacher directed.

Partnerships between teacher education programs and public schools provide an avenue for dialogic feedback. With the capacity to pair individual preservice teachers with student writers in one-to-one dialogic writing relationships, partnerships serve multiple needs of beginning teachers and student writers. Varied models and foci for such collaborative efforts exist (e.g. Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007; Brock, Moore, & Parks, 2007; DiPardo, Staley, Selland, Martin, & Gniewek, 2012; Jennings, & Hunn, 2002; Wilford & Oberhauser, 2012). Consistently, such partnerships prove to be reciprocally beneficial and complex (Lehman & Martin, 2018).

These sites provide opportunities to examine one-on-one response practices, but the literature includes little documentation about response practices (format and content) in one-on-one settings (Baird, Hopfenbeck, Newton, Stobart, & Steen-Utheim, 2014; Gamlen & Munthe, 2014). Therefore, a more direct examination of what happens within the dialogic process of response between one teacher and one student is necessary (Brown, 2016).

Partnership Contexts and Processes

We, Beth, Jenny, and Karen, each teacher educators, initially approached partnerships for curricular purposes. Wanting to provide preservice teachers with authentic practice in the

complexities of generating feedback for students, we were drawn to connect preservice teachers with the current writing of middle school students. Preservice teachers were enrolled in literacy, content literacy, and educational psychology courses and included varied discipline areas; the middle-school students were enrolled in reading support courses or a history course (see Table 1). Participating middle schools were located in an urban area, rural community and midsized city. While courses and public-school settings varied, we each planned a partnership as an opportunity for preservice teachers and students to interact personally, either face-to-face or online, and to respond directly to writers (see Table 1). The goals and objectives were determined by the teacher educators in conjunction with the needs of the middle-school teachers. Texts took the form of paper notebooks and online documents. The focus on learning to provide supportive feedback was the same in each partnership.

Table 1

Distinguishing Features of Three Partnerships within EPPs

Partnership	Preservice Teachers	Participants	Duration	Method of Communication	Goals & Objectives
Beth: Writing Partners	Enrolled in: Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum and/or Middle School Curriculum Licensure Areas: 6-12 & PK-12	8 th graders placed in a required reading support class Setting: midsized city	~15 weeks	Letter and drawings in composition notebooks, a single visit to each campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To interact with linguistically, racially, culturally, and economically diverse students • To engage with students through writing • To foster asset-based views of students
Karen: Literacy Learning Partnership	Enrolled in: Intermediate Literacy Licensure	7 th graders (identified by school reading specialist as struggling readers)	~15 weeks	Written Letters, Google Hangout, Videos, Face-to-face	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide preservice teachers with authentic student writing to assess • To provide practice giving feedback to

	Area: PK-6				an authentic audience
		Setting: rural			
Jenny:	Enrolled in:	7 th -grade	~5 weeks	Google Slides and instructional videos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gain internship experience via mentoring 7th graders in developing cognitive and noncognitive skills Consider how this experience may be useful to their future teaching
Digital Internship	Educational Psychology	history students			
		Setting: urban			
	Licensure Areas: 6-12, PK-6, & PK-12				

Instructional Approaches Inquiry

Our practitioner inquiry deemed “knowledge-of-practice” by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), developed from conversations focused on the procedures and activities embedded in our partnerships (p. 250). This type of practice involves a shared repertoire of resources (experiences, stories, tools) and collaborative analysis of student-learning data to construct new learning by means of collaborative inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Wenger, 2006). After our discussions generated additional questions about responding to writing, we framed our inquiry to examine more precisely how each of us taught preservice teachers to provide feedback to student writers.

Examining our course materials, assignments, and instructional approaches, we identified three specific commonalities in our teaching approaches: concern for the affective experience of writers, a desire that feedback to writing be generative, and the need to connect responses to learning goals.

Concern for Affective Experience

We each shared a concern for the affective experiences of students receiving writing responses, and our teaching approaches reflect this concern. We engaged students directly with

examination of affect, noting how one short word or phrase can propel a student to achieve something great, or it can stop them in their tracks. To drive this point home, Karen began her instruction on meaningful feedback by asking students to remember and give an example of a phrase or piece of feedback they received from a teacher. Some remembered something positive, others something negative. Karen then asked them why they think they remembered that particular exchange. Recollections almost always began with “because it made me feel....” Karen stopped them there. Whatever the piece of feedback was, it made them feel something so strongly that they not only still remembered it, it was one of the first things they recalled about the subject.

We each also highlighted times we experienced a miscommunication in the form of responding to writing. Karen intentionally started her written response with the student writers’ names and was surprised when one student asked her to stop beginning feedback with his name because it felt like he was being scolded. This was always how he was addressed as a child when he was in trouble. The attempt to make a personal and positive connection had done just the opposite for him. We informed our students that we do not know when our best intentions may not be received in the way intended. Likewise, Beth reminded preservice teachers that we cannot be certain we understand students’ intentions in the writing process. Beth shared a story about a student who over the years of schooling developed the habit of writing less and less. Teachers were inclined to see him as disengaged, but his own reflective comments to a trusted mentor revealed he began writing less in order to feel less wounded by criticism of his writing.

We share tales for the purpose of fostering intentionality in word choice when responding to student writing. Jenny noted how she was particularly cheered on by a mentor’s one-word comment made in track changes on her document. Her mentor had highlighted a section of

writing, and inserted the comment, "Important!" Jenny read what was designated as important, and the simple, yet specific word gave confidence and direction to her writing. Preservice teachers related to such stories as a means of identifying social emotional experiences related to writing and responding to writing.

Generative Feedback

While preservice teachers provided ongoing feedback to students during the partnerships, we coached them to first, do no harm, and second, to lead the writer to growth. We expected preservice teachers to provide generative feedback. Neither merely affective encouragement nor evaluative critique, we define generative feedback as responding to writing in ways designed specifically to produce growth in a writer's awareness of possible actions in the writing process, to increase fluency, and to expand a writer's perceived range of possibilities in writing.

Generative feedback should increase engagement with writing and expand thinking; it should nurture more expansive, purposeful writing. While it seems obvious that feedback should do this, it is not simple. A primary concern in designing generative feedback is matching feedback to the writer's purpose.

Beth worked in particular ways to teach students that responses to writing come in many forms depending on purpose. She shared Elbow and Belanoff's (1999) list of options, ranging from simply listening to offering criterion-based feedback, and invited preservice teachers to practice these responses with each other while responding to their literacy autobiographies, a requirement of the course. It was affirming for the preservice teachers to know they will, as teachers in all content areas, assign student writing, and the feedback they provide will vary depending on the purpose of the writing. They were relieved by the idea that generative response to writing does not necessarily require detailed grammatical correction and extensive written

response. Some student writing will be polished to the degree that response to these conventions will be critical. Often, and in most of the written exchanges in our partnerships, the larger concerns of response were to generate thinking, effective expression of idea, and fluency of text.

Another particular practice Beth facilitated for her students was Schaffer's (1996) model, "peer response that works." Schaffer highlights that peer response is not peer editing, but rather generative inquiry into the ideas of a peer's text. The process involves responding to student writing by only asking meaningful questions. Beth led the preservice teachers in practicing meaningful questioning as a way of responding in support of writers and writing. This process is intended to encourage improved writing by building a writer's sense of purpose in expanding a text for an audience beyond the teacher.

That a student writer's improvement in writing can be fostered through student-selected feedback is a new idea to preservice teachers. Karen asked her preservice teachers if they had ever been asked by a teacher how or what kind of feedback they would like to receive. None recalled that experience, and many were confused at this suggestion. This opened preservice teachers up to the possibility of giving their students some ownership of the feedback they receive. Because Jenny's partnership was housed in an educational psychology course, connections to motivation were explicit, and our shared instructional concern was teaching that responding to writing in ways that empower students is a strategy for increasing fluency.

Attention to Learning Goals

Our collective appreciation of the affective and generative elements of responding to writing do not diminish our shared concern that writing responses must also move the work of young writers toward learning goals and effective writing. Presenting Elbow and Belanoff's (1999) possibility of responding to writers by merely listening does not mean preservice teachers

are off the hook for setting effective learning goals for writers and structured forms of response to help student writers achieve these goals. To aid students in clarifying when and why a particular response is chosen for a particular writing experience, Beth also employed Maxwell's (1996) 3 Levels of Writing (Level 1 = daily, writing-to-learn, free from editorial constraints; Level 2 = communicative writing, generated quickly, not polished; Level 3 = occurs least frequently, polished, revised work, scored more fully).

Beth used these levels to help preservice teachers determine what kind of response is fitting to the learning goals of student writing. She also noted explicitly the texts they exchange with writing partners were almost entirely Level 2, so they had a range of strategic choices for response to support learning goals related to fluency and expression. Jenny's digital partnership included support for writers creating Level 2 and Level 3 writing, and the feedback to writers in the digital internship was geared toward that purpose.

Per the learning objectives of the 7th grade partners and the goals of the content literacy course, Karen taught her group more particular strategies and conventional methods for interacting with different texts and lessons. Feedback can take different forms (prose, numeric rubrics, oral) and reflect different functions (encouragement, admonishment, explanation, etc.). Karen presented on the importance of clarifying our objectives as teachers before giving feedback, a concept most of her preservice teachers have never considered. And finally, because the preservice teachers were working with struggling readers, they talked about the importance of encouragement while providing substantive feedback for improvement on the skills of summarizing and making inferences. Therefore, Karen always suggested using the feedback "sandwich" method: starting with something positive (even if it is difficult), providing guidance

on the topic along with any necessary corrections, and then finishing with a positive affirmation of encouragement.

We also modeled examples of responses to writing in relation to learning goals. Karen worked through several short pieces of writing together with her class. First, she modeled her thought process by doing a think aloud, then guided preservice teachers through an example as a class, and finally they practiced independently. Preservice teachers were then ready to provide feedback to their assigned 7th graders. Their feedback was peer-edited by another classmate, and the pairs discussed revisions and edits of the feedback before it was returned to the students. Many preservice teachers indicated they had no idea responses could and should be so purposeful or take on so many different forms.

This collaborative examination of our pedagogy provided us with a frame for identifying what we value most in teaching preservice teachers to provide feedback. We also collectively appreciate how our partnerships allowed us to coach preservice teachers in these practices. While shared inquiry of our teaching practices affirmed and defined our driving concerns, the next level of inquiry was an examination of the written responses preservice teachers generated for their middle school writing partners.

Response Patterns Inquiry

Seeking to understand more precisely what the feedback patterns of preservice teachers in our partnerships suggest about their developmental strengths and needs in supporting student writers, we each examined and coded a purposeful sampling of our preservice teachers' written responses. We examined response samples in composition notebooks, digital communications, and written letters that remained available to us after our courses ended. Our examination of preservice teachers' responses to their writing partners suggest eight primary patterns of response

(see Table 2). Table 2 provides a few samples of thematic groupings drawn from the larger collection of responses generated in each of our partnerships.

Our instructional concerns for affective experience, generative feedback, and attention to the learning goals of the activity are reflected in the responses preservice teachers generated. These thematic similarities are of interest considering the differing assignments and experiences. The notable gaps are likely due to the nature and/or constraints of the assignment(s) and offer us an opportunity to consider how these types of responses may be addressed or practiced within the constructs of each partnership in the future.

Table 2

Response Patterns

Response Type	Response Samples Beth’s Writing Partners	Response Samples Karen’s Literacy Learning	Response Samples Jenny’s Digital Internship
Empathy	<p>“I remember when I was your age, I hated reading and writing. I’m glad you actually enjoy reading because reading is useful skill and reading pleasure can be fun and relaxing.”</p> <p>“I understand how you don’t like reading. I don’t like reading much either but...I am beginning to like it more.”</p>	<p>“Sometimes reading can be hard... but hopefully us writing each other about the book will be something new and fun to do.”</p>	<p>"Need help? I'm here."</p> <p>"If you have any questions, don't be afraid to ask."</p>

**Personal
Connections
and Shared
Interests**

“I’ve never had a boyfriend, but I sure hope to one day.”

“Have you ever been there?”

“I’m thinking about visiting there.”

“I agree about the suspense and action.”

“Wow, teaching is a fantastic occupation.”

Can we write in Spanish?

“I look forward to talking about it more when I meet you!”

“My sister is looking to be a lawyer. It’s a really great field!”

Soccer

Song lyrics

Books

Affirmation

“First off, wow! Some of these questions I’ve never been asked before, but I will do my best to answer them.”

“You got that detail perfectly correct!”

“I like the way you began the commentary by using a question, it catches attention and makes the reader want to find out what you have to say.”

“I think this is important because...”

“Wow! I really enjoyed your letter and I love your drawing!”

“Your summary hits a lot of key things in the chapter...and I enjoyed reading it.”

“Overall, this is a very solid response! You’ve got a good answer, with supporting evidence from the documents, and you have it all well-organized in a clear flow of ideas.”

“Thanks for writing back and forth with me for this project!”

😊

Summary

N/A

“You remembered a lot of key points in the book, such as...”

N/A

“In your first letter, you told me all about the main ideas of the first three chapters. You talked about...”

Format Variations	Poems Drawing	N/A	Links Images
Request for Elaboration	“...if you could become a professional in anything, no matter how ridiculous, what would you be and why?”	N/A	“Add...” “Think about why...” “You may want to give more detail on your answers as to why it's important.”
Redirection	N/A	“It’s also important to remember...” “I think it’s important to make the connection in our summary ...”	"This is a great profession for 2017, but let's find something that would be done in 1890." “Go into more depth than using the adjective ‘large.’ I suggest using specific numbers."
Grammar and Mechanics	N/A	N/A	"Grammar/spelling error...look it over and correct.” “There are a few grammar mistakes in the writing that could be fixed.”

Our preservice teachers often experienced some nervousness themselves as writers, while demonstrating strength in offering support for the affective experience of their partner. The response patterns we categorized as *Empathy* and *Personal Connections/Shared Interests* serve to recognize writing as a fully human and social endeavor through which writers take risks and

make connections. These kinds of responses value the relational aspect of writing and help build trust between writer and responder.

Affirmation, Summary, and Format Variation response types also value relational aspects of writing, and for these types of responses, the relationship extends beyond the person-to-person connection to the work of building and linking ideas. Affirmation to the writer and summary of their text makes it known that their ideas have connected with the reader, although, only Karen's students utilized summary as a form of response. A level of playfulness in the form of text variation, including drawings and poems, invites playful interaction with ideas for the purpose of expanding and connecting ideas in new ways. These categories of response attend to our collective concern that responses to writing be generative. The responses of our preservice teachers are intended to support increased fluency and expanded writing.

We identified the responses categorized as *Elaboration, Redirection, and Grammar/Mechanics* as those that most strongly address concerns for providing feedback that is specific to the learning goals of the writing task. Jenny's digital internship, which was the only one to work toward Level 3 writing, involved preservice teachers responding to writers for the purpose of revising and completing a formal writing task that was graded using an International Baccalaureate rubric.

The preservice teachers' response patterns, overall, are also fitting to the varied purposes of each partnership. Karen's literacy partnership was structured whereby many of the responses were guided to relate to the specifics of an assignment and focus of the program (e.g., summarizing, making inferences, and comprehension). Therefore, no feedback was given in some areas, such as grammar and mechanics and requests for elaboration. In Beth's writing partnership, preservice teachers generated more conversational feedback in their friendly letters

and also worked to respond in ways that would produce a substantive reply from students. It was the creative effort of seeking substantive feedback from writing partners that led Beth to suggest varied forms, and some partners routinely incorporated drawing as part of their writing. Jenny's preservice teachers responded to students while supporting the development of a polished product and, therefore, incorporated a wide range of responses.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In examining our teaching approaches and the response patterns of our preservice teachers, we conclude that our partnerships serve as a catalyst for structure, purpose, and variation for the teaching, learning, and practice of providing feedback to writers. We endorse the development of writing partnerships between teacher education programs and public schools as sites of reciprocal opportunities, including providing an authentic arena for preservice teachers to examine and practice methods of responding to student writing in ways that build relationships and spur their ability to provide effective feedback. In our experiences, it is important to note, the partnerships were productive toward the goal of preservice teachers crafting their feedback to writers specifically when combined with direct instruction and support generated within teacher education courses. Combined with direct instruction on how to respond to writers, the partnerships provided rich opportunities for preservice teachers to develop and practice relational responses to student writers.

Because our partnerships involved preservice teachers earning licensure in a variety of content areas, practice with relational response to writing seems particularly important. In future classrooms, these preservice teachers are likely to employ writing to learn and writing to generate ideas. Thus, they and their students will, in support of content learning, benefit from a range of responses to writing that extend beyond scoring rubrics and numeric values.

While our process of collaborative practitioner inquiry has been fruitful and offers meaningful insights to the larger teacher education community, our analysis is limited by a process of analyzing our partnership efforts and outcomes only after the courses and partnerships ended. It would be meaningful to apply our insights to future partnership courses and begin intentional inquiry sooner so as to build assignments and assessments of the written responses of preservice teachers throughout the semester. Such a timeline would allow us to notice growth and development of written feedback practices during the course. Our current focus was types of responses rather than the development of responses over time.

This examination of our teaching and preservice teacher response patterns within the partnerships calls attention to the need to learn to provide feedback in expansive and humane ways to encourage voice and fluency in student writers, and when appropriate, coach them toward final products.

Recommendations

This examination of preservice teachers' responses to student writing has informed our practice and increased our desire to continue developing the learning potential in partnerships. Our practitioner inquiry leads to these suggestions within teacher education programs:

1. Teacher education programs must attend to teaching how to provide feedback to writers in intentional ways that address affective experience, generative responses, and learning goals. This attention to feedback is related to, but different than formal assessment. We need to be clear and direct in teaching preservice teachers in all content areas to seek balance in the types of responses they provide to student writers. We must teach the affective and academic impact of varied options of response.

2. Partnerships with schools provide an authentic and meaningful structure for teaching writing response. We must seek and nurture school partnerships as reciprocal learning experiences and recognize that these delicate relational endeavors are fostered through personal connections (Lehman & Martin, 2018). It is ideal to build partnerships into teacher education coursework with clear and direct curricular alignment, and all involved must believe in and be willing to teach toward partnership goals for preservice teachers and school students.
3. Finally, preservice teachers need to experience authentic feedback as both recipients and providers. Therefore, we must model for our students the kinds of evidenced-based feedback experienced English educators advise (Culham, 2003, 2006; Elbow, 2007; Elbow & Belanoff, 1999; Graves, 1993). Teacher educators must prepare students to become classroom and school leaders who are able to engage relationally with students, texts, and colleagues. Practicing the craft of relational response with school and university partnerships is an excellent first step.

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