

THE WRITING TEACHER'S SECOND SELF: THEORY AND PRACTICE OF RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

Wendell Mayo

Department of English, Bowling Green State University,
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403, USA
Tel. 8-10-1-419-372-7399,
E-mail: wmayo@bgnet.bgsu.edu

Although rhetorical theorists such as N. Sommers (1988), C. H. Knoblauch and L. Brannon (1984), and E. M. White (1984) suggest that writing teachers insinuate clear and helpful reader-personae in the written comments they make on student writing, this article focuses on students' impressions of such personae. The research employs A. A. Lunsford's (1992) key topoi of teachers' commentary on student writing in the United States, analysis of marked student essays, and interviews of student-authors to ascertain the relationships among the types of comments teachers make, the impressions these comments make on students, and their impact on students' strategies for revising their writing. Results suggest that teachers' comments in the third person impersonal point of view, on form, and in the declarative or imperative modes suggest a 'teacherly' persona and students are more willing to adopt the comment and revise the text in question. Comments in the first person, on content, and in the interrogative mode suggest a 'writerly' persona, one that reinforces students' identities as 'writers', though they are less likely to revise the text.

'But need the author be so retiring? I think we're a bit too squeamish about these personal appearances these days'.

-Aldous Huxley, Point Counter Point, 1928

1. Introduction

As writing teachers, we are of course concerned with the notion of 'authorship'—students as authors. However, I would like to take a different view of 'authorship'. What if we view writing teachers as authors and the comments they make on students' papers their 'texts'? This view raises a number of interesting questions. For example, do students sense a writing teacher's 'second self' or 'voice' in the process of reading comments a teacher makes on their papers? Are these second selves students sense important to the ways students approach revising their writing? Over the past several decades writers and scholars have approached these questions in different ways. For example, in her essay, 'Responding to Student Writing', Sommers suggests that teachers 'comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students become that reader themselves' (1988: 170). Although Knoblauch and Brannon suggest that writing teachers be suspicious of responses that ask students to quest after a teacher's 'Ideal Text', like Sommers they also recognize the critical importance of a sense of the writing teacher's second self, a persona that is 'insinuated through the reader's commentary' (1984:

120). Certainly, if the comments teachers write on students' essays create selves rooted in institutional conceptions of writing, such as the 'Ideal Text', White (1984: 190) notes that teachers can also project other selves, selves responsible for 'creative misreadings' of students' texts, selves that create alternative perceptions of the possibilities latent in students' writing.

Not only have scholars been concerned with the single 'self' a teacher might project in comments to students, Lees writes that teachers' comments should be associated with different selves or voices speaking to different purposes, such as those implied in her typology of responding: 'creating, emoting, describing, suggesting, questioning, reminding, and assigning' (1979: 370-371). Whether or not we feel comfortable with the notion of 'second self', especially when it is sometimes defined in exclusively expressive terms, Lees and other observers seem to assume its importance when they suggest that written responses of teachers 'dramatize' a presence 'insinuated' in a reader's commentary. One of the most complete theoretical accounts of this dramatized presence is given by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. He calls this presence 'voice' the 'second self', 'alter-ego', or 'Implied Author' (1983: 74). Booth suggests that 'the "Implied Author" chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer [the Implied Author] as an ideal ... created version of the real [author] ... the sum of [the author's choices]' (1983: 74-75). Booth's account of the second self is consistent with those articulated by Sommers, Knoblauch and Brannon, White, and Lees, and further suggests that teachers' written responses become texts themselves, sums of authors' choices, rhetorics of a kind. Moreover, as Booth points out, this raises a familiar but important theoretical issue: 'The author cannot choose to avoid rhetoric; he can choose only the kind of rhetoric he will employ' (Booth, 1983: 149). Perhaps a good example of what Booth means is the matter of minimal marking, a rhetorical choice teachers make, among other reasons, to create less authoritative, self-effacing second selves to encourage students to negotiate meaning. But if teachers believe they can relinquish authority by their choices of self-effacing second selves, should not writing teachers also create helpful, authoritative impressions as well? But which sorts of authoritative impressions should these be? In which responding contexts ought a teacher seem 'teacherly', 'writerly', or otherwise? More specifically, do these second selves change given different rhetorical situations and different formal characteristics of teachers' comments on student papers? Finally, can we connect these second selves to other theories of *teaching students to write*?

I believe we can make a reasonable theoretical argument for the investigation of these second selves. The dramatized presences or second selves students construct in the process of reading teachers' comments on their writing imply a range of reading and writing personae whose roles students may adopt or reject in the process of shaping their own identities as writers. This matter of writing and identity is described in the identity negotiation theory of Brooke (1991: 11-12), whose work is informed by social psychology, cultural theory, and anthropology. In my investigation of the role writing teachers' second selves play in writing instruction, I draw on Brooke's identity negotiation theory in two ways:

- a) Given that students sense teachers' second selves as they read comments on their papers, it is from their sense of these selves that students identify 'readerly' and 'writerly' roles, and
- b) If students believe these roles are available to them, they are free to incorporate them in different ways into their own identity structures.

While theoreticians have recognized the importance of the writing teacher's second self, especially as it relates to how student writers perceive these second selves and reject them or adopt them into their identity structures, the pedagogical question persists: Can teachers of

writing *do* anything to exercise control over the second selves students sense? Certainly, the theoretical gulf exists between the teacher as writer, full of intentions at the moment of creating and writing responses on student papers, and the student reader bringing with herself the force of innumerable cultural and situational contexts. But Brooke (1991: 39–42) identifies two contexts that are particularly important in this case: 1) a ‘teacherly’ context that casts the teacher as evaluator and student as performer and 2) a ‘writerly’ context that casts the teacher as a writer helping another writer.

2. The Writing Teacher’s Second Self: A Case Study

I wanted to know how students associated particular types of comments written by teachers on their papers with particular teacher-personae. I also wanted to know if students felt free to reject certain kinds of comments depending on the teacher-persona they identified. To answer these questions I conducted a case study; moreover, I conducted the case study to gather information that might suggest the particular roles teachers’ written comments played in students negotiating their identities as writers—the kinds of writers they were becoming.

For my case study I defined several rhetorical features of teachers’ comments on student manuscripts based on my experience, theory, and what Lunsford calls key *topoi* in her United States survey of 3,000 student essays marked by teachers (‘Data, Analysis, and Methods’, 1992). These rhetorical features are point of view, mode of address, comments that deal with form or content, comments which are global or specific, and comments which are positive or negative.

2.1 *Point of View*

Since rhetoricians such as Booth associate ‘second self’, ‘implied author’, and ‘voice’ with rhetorical features of a speaker, point of view is important. Booth suggests that in belletristic texts point of view is partly responsible for the reader’s sense of the speaker’s persona. Of course, in belletristic texts the point of view persona may or may not reflect the values and beliefs of the author’s second self, what Booth calls the perfect author, distinct from the flesh and blood author (1983: 150–151). But in the two contexts used in my study, one teacherly, one writerly, it is reasonable to assume that the speaker’s persona is, in terms of Booth’s concept of narrative distance, so close to the teacher’s second self as to be one and the same—in a word, reliable.

2.2 *Mode of Address*

Although Booth suggests that point of view is related to the speaker’s persona and, as I have pointed out, the speaker’s persona related to the writing teacher’s second self, he also claims that the distinctions between different points of view are ‘overworked’ and that we must look to ‘particular qualities of the narrators’ to establish the range of impressions they can make on a reader (1983: 150). The question for my study, then, was clear: Which ‘particular qualities’ are relevant for the teacherly or writerly responding contexts I chose? If I further defined these two contexts by looking at the purpose of teacherly or writerly transactions, then the quality of a second self must also make sense in terms of the task facing the student: revision. Like Lees typology of responding, which includes ‘describing’, ‘questioning’, and ‘assigning’

(1979: 370-71), Elbow and Belanoff have suggested that sharing and responding to texts is most effective if writers hear a range of voices in the responses, each speaking to different purposes, for example, *descriptive responses* (the commentator describes a meaning of the text) and *interactive responses* (after reading a passage the commentator asks the writer, 'Do you mean ...?') (1989: 13).

Descriptive and interactive responses clearly suggest two modes of address: a *declarative* mode for descriptive responses and an *interrogative* mode for interactive ones. But in my study I added an *imperative* mode to cover comments that command a writer to make specific revisions.

2.3 Three Other Key Rhetorical Choices

The following are three other kinds of comments I used in the case study, all identified by Lunsford (1992): a) comments which deal with the form or content of a student's essay; b) comments which are global (e.g. rhetorical) or specific (e.g. mechanical) in nature; and c) comments which are essentially positive or negative, begin positive then turn negative, or begin negative then turn positive.

3. Method

To determine the kinds of second selves formal written comments on student papers create, eighteen intermediate composition students at Indiana University-Purdue University

Fort Wayne were asked to write essays in the first person point of view. In their essays, students were asked to introduce a possible topic for a research paper, and then narrate their personal experiences in the topic area in about four typed, double-spaced pages. In a baseline survey, half of the students identified themselves as experienced writers and half as inexperienced. The students' essays, along with a description of their writing assignment, were divided up and sent to four experienced university teachers of writing, all holding different positions. Two taught writing at Ohio University, one a teaching associate and doctoral candidate, the other a Ph.D. who teaches writing as an adjunct faculty member. Two instructors at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne were also sent student essays, one a full-time member of the writing faculty and the other an associate instructor and student in the master's program. These instructors were asked to give complete responses in their usual manner and were told that students would be revising their essays after receiving their written comments.

The manuscripts were returned to the students and they were asked to read the comments made by the teachers and to revise their papers. Then, in audio-taped interviews I asked students the following questions:

- a) Point to a comment on your paper that you feel came from the commentator as a teacher, an evaluator and representative of the university. Why did you point to this comment?
- b) Point to a comment that you feel came from the commentator as an individual writer like you, not an evaluator or representative of the university. Why did you point to this comment?
- c) Point to a comment that you feel you could reject in your revision and still consider yourself to be a good writer. Why did you point to this comment?
- d) Point to a comment that you feel you should adopt in your revision or you would not be able to consider yourself a good writer. Why did you point to this comment?

The taped interviews generated about forty pages of transcripts. First, I sorted the comments students pointed to on their marked essays by whether students felt the presence suggested by the comment was teacherly (a teacher-persona) or writerly (a writer-persona). Then I further sorted the comments into the five categories of comments I developed and into specific rhetorical features within those categories, for instance, into point of view, then first person, second person, or third person impersonal. Because a critical assumption in Brooke's theory is that students negotiate roles among those projected or available to them (1991: 21-26), I also examined the transcripts to find relationships among rhetorical features within the same five categories and students' sense that they were free to adopt or reject a given comment.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Point of View

Most students associated comments in the second person and third person impersonal points of view with a teacher-persona. As Table 1 indicates, no students pointed to comments in the first person that reflected a teacher-persona. On the other hand, the writer-persona was associated with comments in the first and second person. Only 13% of comments pointed out by students as written by the writer-persona were in the third person.

Some students pointed to comments that were fragments of sentences or words, which I interpreted to be in the third person impersonal, for example, 'AWK', or 'This is awkward'. One student pointing to this comment identified it as a teacher-persona and remarked, 'I don't even know what "AWK" is... I know my friends wouldn't write anything like that'. While this may be an instance of simple miscommunication, other students felt similar comments in the second or third person points of view also reflected a teacher-persona: 'These are the kinds of things teachers pick on', one student noted, 'overuse of certain words, or misuse ... but that's good. That's what teachers are for'.

In most cases students identified a writer-persona when the speaker either identified herself in the first person or addressed the student in the second person. For example, concerning a comment in the first person, one student remarked, '[The commentator] was more interested in what I was doing and who I was rather than the grammatical content or structural content [of my paper]'. After pointing to a comment in the second person, another student said, '[The comment] was not anything to do with the ... paper itself, but a question to me [to explain] myself'.

While students were more likely to associate comments in the first and second person points of view with a writer-persona, they were also more likely to reject them when revising their papers. Conversely, as Table 2 illustrates, students seemed more willing to adopt comments in the third person impersonal point of view.

Table 1. Commentator's Second Self as a Function of Point of View

Person	Persona		Total (%)
	Teacher (%)	Writer (%)	
First	-	40	19
Second	63	47	55
Third	37	13	26
Total	100	100	100

Table 2. Willingness to Adopt or Reject as a Function of Point of View

Person	Adopt (%)	Reject (%)	Total (%)
First	8	21	26
Second	54	64	59
Third	38	15	15
Total	100	100	100

Generally students felt that they should adopt comments in the second and third person because they sensed, as one student noted, '[It was] and unbiased critique'. However, students felt free to reject some comments in the first person because, as one student said, '[It sounded like] opinion. This is my piece and I wrote it'.

It is significant that students tended to associate either a teacher-persona or writer-persona with the commentator's choice of point of view. The results of this portion of the study raise important questions about written comments themselves. Students' tendencies to reject comments in the first person associated with a writer-persona (and still feel they were good writers) reinforces the notion that a commentators' text itself is an important site of negotiation between reader and writer – a potential starting point, but not an end. This also suggests the importance of continuing negotiation of meaning among teachers and students in conferences, peer work, and group work after teachers make initial written comments.

4.2 Form and Content

I was not surprised that 94% of the comments students associated with a teacher-persona concerned form. But Table 3 also shows that a significant 60% of the comments students associated with a writer-persona concerned content.

One student linked a comment to a writer-persona because the commentator 'had curiosity' about the content of the paper and did not focus on 'technical faulting'. Another student simply felt the comment was made by a writer-persona because the commentator 'liked my topic'.

Table 4 indicates that students were as likely to adopt or reject a comment in terms of form versus content.

But most students who associated a writer-persona with comments in the first or second person points of view (see Table 1) also pointed to comments that concerned content. This not only suggests that the commentator's text is an important initial site for meaning and identity negotiation, but that content is as well.

4.3 Mode of Address

While Table 5 shows that most comments (68%) were declarative, students were fairly evenly divided in assessing whether these suggested a teacher- or writer-persona (75% versus 60%, respectively). Even more interesting is that most students tended to associate imperative comments with a teacher-persona and interrogative comments with a writer-persona.

Table 3. Commentator's Second Self as a Function of Form or Content

Form/Content	Persona		Total (%)
	Teacher (%)	Writer (%)	
Form	94	40	68
Content	6	60	32
Total	100	100	100

Table 4. Willingness to Adopt or Reject Comment as a Function of Form or Content

Form/Content	Adopt (%)	Reject (%)	Total (%)
Form	85	79	81
Content	15	21	19
Total	100	100	100

Table 5. Commentator's Second Self as a Function of Mode of Address

Mode	Persona		Total (%)
	Teacher (%)	Writer (%)	
Declarative	75	60	68
Imperative	19	7	13
Interrogative	6	33	19
Total	100	100	100

Table 6 further suggests that more students indicated they would reject interrogative comments than would adopt them in revision.

Table 6. Willingness to Adopt or Reject Comment as a Function of Mode of Address

Mode	Adopt (%)	Reject (%)	Total (%)
Declarative	69	50	59
Imperative	23	29	26
Interrogative	8	21	15
Total	100	100	100

4.4 Two Other Rhetorical Choices:

On the whole, students did not closely associate global versus specific comments with a teacher-persona or writer-persona. Comments considered positive or negative, positive turning negative, or negative turning positive were also not clearly associated with either persona. Nor did students' choices clearly suggest that they would adopt or reject comments of these types.

5. Conclusion

I suspect that writing teachers have long intuited these results from their experiences, and I do not intend to suggest that one kind of second self – teacher-persona or writer-persona – is more or less effective in teaching writing. In fact, students were generally positive about both senses they had of teachers' second selves. Students were most positive when they felt that a teacher's second self came into clear focus one way or the other, when the persona was clearly teacherly or writerly. When these second selves were clearest, students could best sense the range of reading and writing roles available to them and feel the most confident about adopting or rejecting a comment without being thrown out of the writing situation or the game of negotiating their identities as writers. Figure 1, then, illustrates the overall theoretical implications of the case study.

Students were more likely to associate interrogative comments in the first or second person that addressed the content of their work with a writer-persona. Conversely, students were likely to associate declarative and imperative comments in the second and third person impersonal that address matters of form with a teacher-persona. Given a single written transaction between a teacher and student, students were less willing to reject comments associated with a teacher-persona and more willing to reject them if they felt the comments were associated with a writer-persona. As one student reasoned, sensing the writer-persona, 'That wasn't the voice I was looking for'. To a teacher it may seem a negative development when a student does not revise text based on a question raised. But the evidence I gathered in interviews strongly suggests a positive development: Students sensed the teacher's interest in what they had to say, and were enthusiastic about the intellectual curiosity their teachers possessed – and (as Brooke suggests) how they might adopt such a role for themselves as readers and writers. Therefore, a tendency to reject an interrogative comment opens the possibility for further interaction between reader and writer in other contexts (such as a conference), and serves as a point from which students can negotiate their own identities as writers and readers.

We cannot avoid rhetoric in our responses to student writing; nor can we avoid the second selves our students make

Teacher-Persona	Writer-Persona
- 2nd/3 rd Person	- 1st/2nd Person
- Comments on Form	- Comments on Content
- Declarative/Imperative	- Interrogative
- Tendency to Adopt	- Tendency to Reject

Figure 1. Implied Persona, Rhetorical Features of Comments, and Tendency to Adopt or Reject Comments

of us, or the writing roles our second selves suggest to students. In a sense, the challenges we face in responding to student writing are no different than those our students face as developing writers – to write and rewrite ourselves so that our voices, our second selves become clear and available to our readers, our students.

REFERENCES

- Booth, W. C., 1983. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brooke, R. E., 1991. *Writing and Sense of Self: Identity Negotiation in Writing Workshops*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Elbow, P. & Belanoff, P., 1989. *Sharing and Responding*. New York: Random House.
- Knoblauch, C.H. & Brannon, L., 1984. *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.
- Lees, E. O., 1979. Evaluating Student Writing. *College Composition and Communication* 30, 370-374.
- Lunsford, A. A., 1992. Data, Methods, and Analysis. Panel Session: Teachers' Written Comments on Student Essays: A National Study. Forty-Third Annual CCCC Convention. Cincinnati, 20 Mar. 1992.
- Sommers, N., 1988. Responding to Student Writing. *Teaching Writing: Theories and Practices* ed. by J. K. Tarvers, 170–177. Boston: Scott Foresman.
- White, E. M., 1984. Post-Structural Literary Criticism and the Response to Student Writing. *College Composition and Communication* 35, 186-195.

AKADEMINIO RAŠYMO DĚSTYTOJO ANTRASIS 'AŠ' KOMENTUOJANT STUDENTŲ RAŠTO DARBUS: TEORIJA IR PRAKTIKA

Wendell Mayo

Santrauka

Nors retorikos teoretikai N. Sommers (1988), C. H. Knoblauchas ir L. Brannon (1984), E. M. White'as (1984) teigia, kad, komentuodami studentų rašto darbus, akademinio rašymo dėstytojai atskleidžia kaip tikri ir geranoriški skaitytojai-asmenybės, šiame straipsnyje bus aptariamos liktai studentų nuomonės apie tokias asmenybes. Tiriant remiamasi pagrindiniais mokytojų komentarų tipais, parengtais A. A. Lunsford (1992) Jungtinėse Amerikos Valstijose, analizuojamos dėstytojų, skaičiusių studentų rašto darbus, pastabos bei apklaudiami patys studentai-darbu-autoriai, kad galima būtų išsiaiškinti ryšį tarp mokytojų komentarų tipo, studentų reakcijos į tas pastabas ir tų pastabų įtakos studentų strategijoms, kai jie ima taisyti savo rašto darbus. Rezultatai leidžia manyti, kad mokytojų pastabos apie rašto darbo formą, parašytos vartojant apibendrinamuosius įvardžius bei konstatuojamosios arba liepiamosios nuosakos beasmenius sakinius, rodo esant "mokytojišką" asmenybę ir studentai yra labiau linkę sutikti su komentarais bei, perrašydami darbą, į juos atsižvelgti. Darbo turinio komentarai, kurie parašyti pirmuoju asmeniu ir klausiamąja forma, rodo esant labiau "rašytojišką" asmenybę, būtent tokia asmenybė leidžia studentui pasijusti "rašytoju", nors pastaroju atveju jie yra ne taip linkę atsižvelgti į dėstytojo pastabas ir taisyti savo darbą.

Submitted for publication
20 May 2002