

Review of *Reconstructing Response to Student Writing: A National Study from Across the Curriculum*

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Melzer, Dan. *Reconstructing Response to Student Writing: A National Study from Across the Curriculum*. Utah State University Press, 2023. 194 pages.

There is plenty to be optimistic about in Dan Melzer's *Reconstructing Response to Student Writing: A National Study from Across the Curriculum*. First, writing is in fact happening across the curriculum and in all kinds of institutions across the country. Melzer collected ePortfolios from 70 institutions and from a wide range of disciplines, as he seeks to analyze the responses students receive from their peers and professors alike. Not only are instructors requiring writing, but also these WAC instructors are incorporating some of the best practices composition has been trumpeting for decades-- multiple drafts, peer response, writing to learn, reflection, and more (143). These disciplinarily-diverse faculty have applied the practices that were taught to them, not in grad school, but most likely through the hard work of WAC coordinators, centers for teaching and instruction, writing centers, and other campus writing programs. The training luncheons are paying off!

But the best news may be that the black box of peer feedback is more encouraging and more helpful than instructors perhaps assume. Melzer reports that although peer response scripts that require a mere yes/no response are just as brief as you'd expect (108), overall, students reflecting on their peer review "point out the ways that peer feedback helped them refine or refocus their entire essay" (104) and that the peer review "provides a balance of praise and constructive criticism even when there is no peer response script" (102). Peer response, according to Melzer "is more likely than teacher response to include praise comments, more focused on global rather than local issues and more specific" (99). If we consider peer writing tutors as a type of peer review, writing centers specifically come across quite well in the research. Melzer declares that students "report being highly satisfied with the feedback they receive from tutors" and that "tutors are focused on the content of their writing" and inspire students to make significant revisions (131).

The good news about peer review continues. Students participating in peer review show two sophisticated metacognitive skills. The first is the ability to extrapolate revisions from a selection of peer review to their whole project. One student reflects how even though the feedback was "only related to the first sub-claim...[it] guided me through my second sub-claim; I made sure not to make the same mistakes," while another student is able to "apply the main idea behind [the reviewer's]

criticisms to the last two pages” of unreviewed work (96). This is especially encouraging to those of us in writing centers who find that time constraints often limit us to looking over a mere fraction of a student project. Students can, and do, apply the discussion to the whole project.

The other skill, which writing center tutors will recognize immediately, is how looking at someone else’s writing improves the writing of the reviewer. Melzer reports that “one of the strongest patterns in my research is students reflecting on how much they learned from reading their peers’ drafts and how they were able to apply what they learned to improve their own” writing (94). Even students who were skeptical or dismissive of the quality of feedback they received during peer review reflected positively about the process itself. Those students who don’t think their classmates write well still value how peer review gives them new ideas and highlights what to avoid doing (93). Students who can transfer lessons about writing from a peer to their own work stand to gain double through the process of peer response.

With all this cheery good news, what’s the bad news? I’m afraid it’s on the instructor side. Melzer finds that “teachers in my study often focus on lower-order concerns in their comments” (124) and can, at times, edge into “a tone of frustration or even anger” (74). Melzer reports a paucity of multimodality in the responses that teachers provide on student writing. Although Melzer champions recording screencasts and other methods that embrace the human voice (86-7), he finds few examples and urges that instructors “carefully consider the affordances and constraints of whatever mode of response they choose” (87). Most shockingly, a third of instructor comments were still handwritten, and Melzer was “not surprised to find many of these handwritten comments are illegible” (83). And overall, while “most students avoid taking control of their peers’ drafts,” Melzer found more “examples of teachers wrestling control of drafts from students” (100).

But beyond the nuts and bolts, and before we start planning a workshop to address these clear and easily corrected failings, the larger problem according to Melzer is that we have perpetuated an obsession with grades over learning and have not prioritized transfer outside of the classroom. He makes much of the fact that only a few dozen of the thousands of teacher comments discussed transfer. “The type of response that the research shows is most impactful is the type of response that is the rarest in my study,” writes Melzer (135), who recommends instead that faculty “think of response in terms of programs, departments and the entire institution” in encouraging vertical transfer of skills (137). The WAC work of creating shared language within programs, encouraging long-term reflection assignments and more (137) feels a little daunting on the institutional level, regardless of how effective it would be. But for Melzer this is the next step for WAC work: to “shift our focus in assigning and responding to writing, to emphasize not just process and growth but transfer” to other classes, to future professional writing and to personal writing (144).

Melzer is, perhaps, too iconoclastic about changing our institutional obsession with grades. He is palpably frustrated that “many of the students in my research associate writing with sniffing out the

rules of the game, following those rules blindly, and obtaining that A, self-efficacy be damned” (142), but it’s a big step to say that “gradeless universities can be looked upon as the ideal model for encouraging writing development” and surely declarations like “The less grading, the more writing development” (146) will need much further research to substantiate. Further research in WAC about the relationship between low-stakes grading, no grading, and how student writing develops could be a fertile field for us to develop.

Melzer’s book is an important one for WAC programs and writing centers. It contains a rich repository of student reflection on response *in their own words*, which we can compare and correlate to the student responses we collect in our own classes and writing centers. We can see that students across the country have similar experiences with writing response to what we in writing centers and WAC find, and that, by and large, those experiences are positive and formative. Also, Melzer gives us a blueprint of what’s going well and where the field can develop. Knowing that peer review can be trusted to develop student writing on two fronts, that open-ended questions can lead to fruitful review conversations, and that we still have a way to go in how we train instructors to respond to student writing, we can then seek targeted change in our own contexts. I myself read this book slowly, not because it was inaccessible, but because I had to open next semester’s syllabi and start making revisions as I read along.