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

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Melzer, D. (2023). *Reconstructing response to student writing: a national study from across the curriculum*. Utah State University Press.

After spending the better part of the year with [Dan Melzer's *Reconstructing Response to Student Writing: A National Study from Across the Curriculum*](#), I find myself recommending it to experienced instructors and graduate students entering the classroom for the first time. The book has reshaped how I think about response, challenging some of my earlier assumptions and opening new possibilities for practice. Even though Melzer does not offer a step-by-step guide for easing the labor of feedback, his attention to modality—both in theory and in application—helped me move away from older response methods that are arguably less effective. Melzer had me think about what response modalities to use and how multimodal approaches can save time while giving students a stronger sense of their own ability as writers. At the same time, Melzer (2023) raises empirical questions about how instructors position themselves when responding to student writing, which pushed me to rethink what he calls the “narrow and intimidating role as judge and jury” (p. 88). That shift allowed my students to see me less as an evaluator and more as a reader and guide, and it reflects Melzer's central concern in the book: reimagining response in ways that place students, rather than instructors, at the center of the feedback process.

In the opening pages, the reader encounters an author concerned about his pedagogical impact. As an educator, I found myself in his reflections, contemplating “if students were paying close attention to my feedback and applying it to future drafts, and if students were able to transfer my suggestions to the writing they were doing in their other courses” (Melzer, 2023, p. 3). He lays this personal concern alongside the historical trend of writing researchers identifying instructor comments as likely to be controlling, directive, and mean, which results in students relinquishing control of and appreciation for the writing process (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Sommers, 1982, as cited in Melzer, 2023, p. 12). It is Melzer's intention to change this dynamic by putting students, not teachers, at the helm of response and assessment.

Melzer bases this argument on his review of e-portfolios from 70 U.S. colleges and universities, involving a thousand-plus drafts as well as peer and teacher responses, student reflection on feedback, and student self-assessment. This corpus notably provides insight on student

perceptions and opinions about received feedback, which is important contextual information that previous studies of written comments often lacked (Melzer, 2023, p. 6). Due to the size of the corpus, Melzer has the opportunity to investigate the role students play in evaluating their peers in the feedback process, specifically the manner in which students participate in self-monitoring and reflect on their learning contextual considerations (Lee, 2014, as cited in Melzer, 2023, p. 14). Thus, in *Reconstructing Response to Student Writing*, Melzer's (2023) contribution includes students' perspectives in the research corpus and suggests how writing instructors can assess students contextually.

The second chapter is devoted to Melzer's constructivist heuristic, which researchers can consider when studying response but can also be used by writing instructors who are designing contextualized responses to writing. Because writing instructors occupy several convoluted roles such as evaluator, educator, and audience, it can become difficult for instructors to recall the context in which students are writing. Melzer's (2023) heuristic helps untangle roles and guide response through six questions:

1. Who should respond?
2. What should the response focus on?
3. What contexts should responders consider?
4. What type of feedback should responders give?
5. When should a response occur?
6. What modalities should responders use? (p. 8)

Chapters three through five are an application of the heuristic that directly addresses the relationship between the components of the heuristic and the role the student or teacher plays.

In the third chapter, "*Teacher Response to Writing*," Melzer explores how power dynamics shape response output. Melzer interprets most students as trying to meet their instructors' expectations. Following Straub (1996), we know that instructors leave comments that are evaluative and directive and therefore dominate the revising process (as cited in Melzer, 2023, pp. 54-55). For example, Melzer (2023) describes a comment left on a student draft that displays this power dynamic: "You MUST correct your format" (p. 51). As Melzer sees it, the prescription for such a malady would be that instructors focus on metacognition and transfer for learning: "Next time, please allow time toward the end of your revision process to find your clearest presentation of your claim, and add it to the introduction" (Melzer, 2023, p. 62). In short, Melzer argues for facilitative rather than directive feedback, especially when it comes to the transfer of learning with comments that "feedforward."

In the fourth chapter, Melzer applies his constructivist heuristic to peer review, finding that peers are less directive and use open ended questions to shape their response. Students engage with each other and provide meaningful commentary, but Melzer argues peer reviews are typically seen as a supplement to teacher commentary. Melzer stresses the importance of peer review, as he is interested in putting students at the forefront of response as opposed to the writing instructor. Melzer (2023) notes previous studies show how peer review feedback can often be

similar to teacher response (p. 90). The 419 peer responses he studied align with those prior studies. Within the corpus, Melzer finds peers provide facilitative feedback along with open-ended questions that shape their commentary. Melzer grants peer review cannot wholly replace instructor feedback but demonstrates how students can engage and provide meaningful response and argues how peer review illustrates writing as a social process, thus altering students' perspective on the writing process as a whole.

In the fifth chapter, Melzer (2023) shifts focus away from teachers even more by supplying evidence that students are able to “assess their own writing and meaningfully reflect on their writing habits, processes, and growth” (p. 112). Melzer claims that students can explain their growth as writers and further argues that teachers should be concerned with a student's self-efficacy and engage in dialogue with this self-assessment, not with the final draft. Melzer suggests teachers provide scripts that guide student's thoughts about their writing but still allow individual students to reflect on their abilities. He also notes writing instructors can observe this growth by examining their students' literacy histories, which provide valuable context.

Chapter six concludes that writing instruction needs to move away from the teacher-student dyad because ultimately, the student will perceive the writing course as a game to earn a grade. The goal is to empower students to have self-efficacy and continue to use self-assessment in conjunction with critical self-reflection which should be fostered early on in any writing course. Melzer ends the book with a postscript with a prescriptive measure to improve writing curriculum in higher education.

Despite the upbeat and progressive tone of the book, Melzer is open about limitations. There are nods towards teacher bias as it relates to disability, gender, and race, but Melzer does not speculate on how his approach might mitigate ableism, sexism, or racism. Melzer also mentions several times that audio and screencast are potentially more engaging ways of conducting response, but he has so few examples of these modalities that he cannot comment on them.

Overall, *Reconstructing Response to Student Writing: A National Study from Across the Curriculum* is a concise yet densely packed book that offers clear guidance for anyone looking to improve the feedback they provide to students. The constructivist heuristic is practical, and Melzer's suggestions are doable for any writing instructor.

Isaac Castillo is an administrative assistant in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego State University, where he is also pursuing his second master's degree. He previously earned an M.A. in Philosophy at SDSU and a B.A. in Human Communication from CSU Monterey Bay. Castillo occasionally teaches in the philosophy department and identifies as an interdisciplinary scholar.

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