Responding to Writing—A Taxonomy

Sharing (no response): Simply sharing a piece of writing, either by reading it aloud or by distributing the text, can be valuable. It may prepare the way for future discussions and allow writers to reflect on their work without worrying about the responses of others.

Center of gravity: A "center of gravity" is a specific place in a text that seems especially important interesting, or generative. It is not necessarily the ostensible thesis or main idea.

Summary: Simply having respondents summarize a text or say back what they have just read or heard can be an illuminating exercise. Discrepancies between what the writer "meant to say" and what respondents "heard" are valuable sources of information. They tell writers how their texts are being construed or misconstrued and thus serve as useful guides for revision.

What's lurking?: What is "coming through" to the reader that is not being said explicitly? Identifying this can help writers recognize the full implications of their ideas and discover directions for further development.

More about: What do respondents want to hear more about? This question can help writers better understand readers' desires. "Can you tell me more here—I don't understand?" "How does this relate to what you've said earlier—can you explain it here?"

Voice, personality, tone: In academic writing, one often struggles to find an appropriate voice (public yet not impersonal or abstract), and it is often helpful to attend directly to this issue. A discussion of voice can also help writers make important stylistic decisions or recognize and reflect on their attitudes toward their subjects (e.g., is there a latent sarcasm in the piece? is the writer guarded or overly deferential?) Asking readers: Who do you think the intended audience is for this piece and what in the text suggest this? is a helpful question to help writers understand how their writing targets audiences, shapes audiences.

Real-time responses: Real-time responses are an especially illuminating kind of feedback, because they allow the writer to see the reader's mind in action. Some versions: Have respondents mark striking or confusing passages as the writer reads his or her text aloud. Have readers narrate their responses paragraph by paragraph.

Metaphorical descriptions: Inexperienced writers and readers often lack a detailed vocabulary for talking about their texts. By describing texts and responses in metaphorical terms, they may find indirect ways of communicating what they are otherwise unable to express (e.g. what genre of music is this text? what kind of weather is it? what sport is it?)

Believing and doubting: These exercises can help writers identify the strengths and weaknesses of their writing and argument. Because doubting often comes more easily than believing, it is important to strive for balance. Remember that in revision, building on strengths is as important as remedying faults or weaknesses. Some variants: reading charitably vs. reading skeptically; reading generously vs. reading critically; reading to understand vs. reading to engage.

Says/Does outline: Have respondents sequentially note (verbally or in writing) the content and function of each segment of a text (what it says, what it does). This exercise is an effective way of helping writers make decisions about the relationship between structure and content. It can be employed at a variety of levels: sentence by sentence within a paragraph, paragraph by paragraph within a larger section, section by section within an entire piece. It is most effective when the number of segments is kept relatively low.

Directed feedback: Ask respondents to attend to specific features of the text or provide them with direct questions to answer.

Direct advice or critique: Invite respondents to make direct criticisms of a piece or to offer direct advice to a writer.