

The Response Factor

Knowing exactly who is going to be reading your work is a crucial factor in determining your attitude towards it. When we write we are putting ourselves on the line. Judge it harshly and our self-esteem takes a blow. I see this all the time as a teacher. My students identify their sense of self with their work. Their developing confidence as learners is nurtured by an understanding, supportive audience which is interested primarily in the content of what is said, read or written. I regularly read my tutor group's course folders and books. There, I often see many teachers' responses to students' work and they are basically critical elaborations of the mistakes made in achieving accepted notions of literacy and numeracy. Many of the students I teach suffer from having low opinions of themselves and of their work. This is a problem which is surely reinforced by insensitive responses from the readers of their writing. In the second year of the Exchange Project my aims were similar to those in the first year but now I also wanted the students to be aware of the importance for writers of having the content of writing sensitively validated (for themselves and for others). I felt that this could provide further motivation for more active involvement in writing as a real communication. This is something, I think, which does not happen enough in schools.

Before both classes began writing to the American students, many expressed fears about how their work would be received. They worried that they would feel shamed and hurt if the Americans laughed or were too critical. Daniel made this very clear replying to a question about why he was anxious: *I thought the students might laugh at my work and be jokey about it.*

Interestingly enough this anxiety is remembered by Daniel who was very keen to tell his partners that he took their work very seriously. In fact he opens his response letter to Blizwell with the sentence, *I didn't laugh at your work because I thought it was very very good and very detailed like the other piece of work I read by your best friend JRW.*

Many expressed fears about being humiliated by the fact that the American students might find what they had to say laughable. There was an initial reaction from both classes that they had to prove their worth. Veronica wrote in response to the question, How does this writing compare with other writing that you do in school? *It would have more detail in the American students' work because they live in a different state to us so we try to impress them by writing neater and with more effect into our work.*

Receiving the first pieces of work caused many sighs of relief as my students saw that the work was sent by ordinary children. Not special. Not mini-teachers, but individuals writing about their lives in similar ways ...

It was now important to be understood. Now there was a real reason to explain things properly and to use the detail required for "effective" communication. This ranged widely from long class projects to informal letters and the more formalized "response" letters which I set up after the class had received much of the Americans' writing. These included personal descriptions of childhood accidents, hair-styles, knowledge about car mechanics, and so on. Aspects of their lives which mattered to them. For Christos, "getting the explanation right" created two pages of writing on A4 paper which described how to play cricket (a creditable attempt which I understood). The classes were genuinely interested in each other and through their writing they were able to build up an informative dialogue. The clarity and style of writing was thus rendered important because it was their only method of communication.

The need to "perform" had been transformed from an outside pressure to "measure up" to a personal desire to involve, interest, inform, entertain, manipulate and "move." For example, Daniel wanted to ... *make them afraid (in his description of a Russian satellite which was apparently out of control) ... of what was happening and where it might land.*

For others the sheer pleasure of being able to utilize their "expertise" in telling others about their interests was an

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important aspect of the project; e.g., Oben, a reluctant writer, now had the opportunity to write about his obsession, snakes, which he did in a thorough manner, even including a part of one of his snake's shedded skin in his work.

Through the work which was swapped and the letters which were exchanged, the American students gradually became "real." Some students became quite emotionally involved and were able to empathize strongly (empathy being a quality we value in a response to a text). This is clearly evidenced in Jane's response to the autobiography she read, ... *But when I got to the part when I found out one of her cats had died I didn't laugh at all. I felt quite sad and I guess Kitty felt that was as well let alone lonely.*

The developing "friendships" meant that as the year progressed the students demanded more say in what was written. They realized that they were the experts in deciding what their audience might like to read.

The Response Letters

After we had received the American students' autobiographies, spooky stories, and some personal letters, I felt the class was in a good position to respond directly to the writing. They'd already sent their own autobiographies and other more informal letters. I wanted to develop their responses further. I decided to talk through with them ways of responding which showed the recipient that their work had been read and thought about as well. I wanted to encourage my students to personally relate to the writing. I felt it was important for them to take another student's writing seriously in this way. I devised a worksheet to help them structure their ideas. I wanted the writing to be read thoroughly—not just skimmed, or just admired for the decorations, photographs or drawings, which could happen if there was no responsibility to respond—and then explore the writing as text, including picking out sections to comment on and discuss. I also encouraged them to include ideas which the writing evoked for them. The results are relaxed and successfully integrate response with reflection. For example, Jason's letter opens, *To Micky. I read your Autobiography and enjoyed it. I can see you like making models. I have quite a few. I only make Planes or Helicopters. I have a big model of Concorde and have seen both Concorde at Heathrow airport. The best part I liked of your Autobiography was about Halloween. I think it was real good, have you seen the film Halloween 1 and 2. On Halloween in England some of us go trick or treat but we don't dress up alot like you do.* Stavros writes at length about the sections he likes in Jenny's spooky story and winds up by saying, *I can't understand why you would never walk on 33*

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Street again, not even for a million dollars, but if that was me I do it for half a million dollars. A shy student who hardly ever speaks to the girls in his class, he finds courage through writing to be quite personal with a girl he's never met. At the end of his response letter he writes, I can see that you like hearts a very lot because you got hearts on you at the front of your Autobiography and you was wearing a heart jumper and on your response letter at the top.

The students responded carefully to the details which struck them as particularly interesting. Farah was very clear about what she liked about Andy's story. *We got your spooky tales stories and I found yours good. At least in the end Cindy, Brenda and Liz didn't get killed, like in some of the stories my friends got! ... I liked the way Brenda turned out not to be such a scaredy-cat after all. And they turned that old man over to the cops.* Whilst James was particularly struck by the luxury of having a whole house to yourself on a Sunday morning. *I like the most ... your typical Sunday with your mum and dad waking up at 1:00 p.m. and you having the house to yourself would be nice for me. But my mum and dad get up at 9:00 a.m. then my brother who is 5 years older than me gets up at 8:00 a.m. so I never have the house for myself, so I go out with my brother for a game of snooker.*

In my journal I noted that *The letters were very friendly, they've really got the idea of being a sympathetic audience, e.g. Attila, 'I'll try not to be insulting—I'll try and put it a better way.' The letters are relaxed and they are responding very much as if they were their friends.*

We had discussed as a class the importance of being sympathetic to each other's work and about how you can help to build confidence. In fact many of the students had begun to work much more collaboratively, helping one another with drafting and ideas, and they appreciated the value of this. These letters reveal their sensitivity to the other students as learners. They had connected their own feelings of insecurity about writing outside themselves to realize that others might feel the same way too. They had received letters where the students had been enthusiastic about their work, responding positively to what they had written, and they had understood the importance of that support and encouragement for themselves. Jane writes openly about what she was trying to do in her response letter. *In my responses ... I was trying to help by*

saying how interesting it was. How much I enjoyed reading it. I think I made Kitty more confident about writing and drawing because I don't think she was too sure. To be quite honest I wasn't really sure of what I was writing but Kitty made me feel really confident about my work.

I feel that my students' progress as developing writers went hand-in-hand with a developing confidence in themselves as individuals who had something to say. Far from finding humiliation and rejection from their audience, they found encouragement and acceptance. In return they offered similar nurturing. All this is a far cry from the usual red-inked corrective treatment of students' writing.

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