



## REVIEW

## Understanding Student Writing— Understanding Teachers Reading Contextualizing Reading and Response

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Tobin, Lad. *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Mediations, and Rants*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2004. 416 pp. Paper \$34.50, ISBN 1-57273-394-2.

Let me begin with what Brian Huot has called a rather “simple argument”: If an instructor wishes to respond to student writing, he or she must read that piece of writing first. I imagine (or, at least, strongly hope) that most readers would agree with this statement. If there is an instructor who has developed a method of response that does not involve reading, I would be curious to hear about the success of such a method.

So, if we are in agreement with the above, let me now offer a second argument, perhaps not so simple: Because responding to student writing is one of our most important methods of assessment (if not the most important method), then reading (the natural precursor to response) must also be an act of assessment, complete with all of the benefits and fraught with the problems that other forms of writing assessment possess (i.e., it is a subjective form of evaluation that is influenced by

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our experiences, theories, practices, and academic environments). We do not read inside of a vacuum, and what influences our reading is sometimes not located on the pages of the student paper, but rather can be found in our relationships with students, our beliefs and assumptions, our social environments, our institutional constraints, or our unconscious feelings. In addition, our assessment of student texts and how we read them may change from class to class, student to student, page to page, and our readings may not always be productive, encouraging, or even fair. In effect, I argue that specific(s) affect the way we read student writing. I imagine many readers may find it more difficult to accept this argument.

And these readers would not be alone; the thought that the act of reading student writing has any direct involvement in the act of assessing student texts has received a very limited discussion in the field of composition and writing assessment (and more specifically, in literature and research on teacher response). Most of us realize and accept that we must read student writing in order to respond to it, yet we often fail to consider the importance of this act of reading. As I discovered in a recent study (Edgington, 2004) in which I engaged (and as Brian Huot, 2002 and Louise Wetherbee Phelps, 2000 argued), reading is an act of assessment, as the instructors who were part of my study often assessed student texts before, during, and after reading. And yet, past and present research seems uninterested in pursuing this connection between reading and assessment, preferring to focus on developing “how-to” response lists (Bean, 1996; Straub, 2000) or contrasting different response styles to highlight the success or failures of these methods (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Straub, 1997) or pointing out the difficulties and/or problems experienced while reading and responding to student texts (Harvey, 2003). I believe that before we can work on extending our practices and theories concerning written response, we need to better understand how teachers read student writing and how this act influences response, grading, and assessment. In his most recent text, Lad Tobin echoes these arguments and offers illuminating personal evidence as support.

In *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants*, Tobin discusses the role of the composition teacher as reader of student writing. He stresses that when teachers read a student text, they are also reading their knowledge of the student writer, the classroom context, previous experiences (academic, social, and personal), and themselves (along with whatever resides within the instructor’s unconscious). In other words, reading student writing is actually an act of reading not only the text, but also the context surrounding the text, and all of these different readings come together to assist instructors in formulating an assessment of the paper. Tobin’s arguments can assist those involved in both writing assessment and reading theory in elevating the status of reading during teacher response, extending our theories of assessment to include such aspects as reading styles, individual, unconscious beliefs, and social context. Before I offer a discussion of how Tobin’s text specifically relates to the theories and practices involved in the assessment of writing, I first offer an overall summary.

## Reading Student Writing

In the first section, “Reading Student Writing,” Tobin focuses on those problematic papers that often perplex teachers, scholars, and students, texts that address issues often too controversial, too personal, or too depressing for many readers. Included among his examples is a text from a Native American student discussing his views on the *Googus* (a slang term used for a portion of the Native American population that is often seen as very “cheap” and, at times, deceiving); emotional essays written by students who write in their papers about eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, and issues of sexual orientation, and the “typical” male essay (i.e., the “hero” essay about completing some type of odyssey successfully, such as scoring the winning touchdown, winning the important race, or outlasting/outwitting some form of authority).

While discussing these problematic essays, Tobin offers several ideas and possible methods on how to read, react, and respond. First, he stresses that instructors must begin to envision student essays as student “texts,” much like those scholarly and leisure texts we assign in our classes or read for our own pleasure. When Tobin encounters the essay on the *Googus*, he is at first perplexed as to how he should read and respond to it. Interested in how others may react, he asks several teacher-scholars (including an African-American scholar, a performance theorist, a creative writing instructor, a critical theorist, and so on) to read the paper *as a text* (not as a student essay) and is amazed at how many different and detailed critical responses he receives. These readers did not immediately search for faults or offer possible revisions but rather read and discussed the text as one that was heavily influenced by different factors related to race, gender, and culture. Thus, Tobin argues that approaching student writing as a text opens up the possibility of discovering more about our students, their writing, and our responses than first imagined.

Second, Tobin finds that reading these essays is not simply a textual experience, but one that is also tied to an instructor’s context, pedagogy, and reading process. What becomes most apparent in these early chapters is Tobin’s interest in both what students tell us about themselves through their writing (consciously and unconsciously) and what influences teachers (consciously and unconsciously) while they read these texts. Tobin does not envision reading as an isolated event; instead, he suggests that students often speak from their unconscious when writing texts (especially personal narratives), disclosing information about personal problems (such as eating disorders or conflicts with parents) either openly in the text or subconsciously through their writing. As Tobin argues, “what I notice immediately about these essays are the striking differences between what many of my students mean to say—about their families, their feelings, and themselves—and what actually comes out” (p. 44). Responding to these student texts is a challenge Tobin acknowledges, noting that instructors may have to learn how to “read like an ethnographer” in order to understand these unconscious feelings. He stresses the value behind incorporating psychoanalytic theories and theorists into our reading and response theories, arguing that doing so does not mean that writing teachers must become “therapists,” but it does mean that teachers must begin to understand the role of the student’s unconscious in writing.

However, it is not just the students' unconscious that needs to be valued and analyzed; teachers must also begin to recognize how their own unconscious thoughts influence how they read and respond to student texts. Tobin argues that what teachers read on the page is as much a reflection of themselves as it is of the student; while the field of composition has begun to incorporate methods for helping students uncover and understand their own unconscious thoughts (through activities like freewriting, personal narratives, and conferencing), "what didn't follow, oddly enough, were acknowledgements of the significance of the teacher's unconscious" (p. 50). For example, Tobin has found that he often has difficulty reading male narratives because his tumultuous relationship with his own father becomes an obstacle during his reading. He suggests that other teachers may have difficulties with similar papers because of their own unconscious feelings about these writers and/or these types of texts, possessing "largely negative reactions and particular resistance" to texts like the male narrative (p. 59). Tobin suggests that instructors need to recognize their beliefs, biases, and assumptions about certain types of students and texts when they read, interpret, and respond to student writing in order to find ways to productively use these feelings to make themselves better teachers and responders.

### Reading Ourselves as Writing Teachers

In his second section, "Reading Ourselves as Writing Teachers," Tobin elaborates different dilemmas and obstacles instructors encounter while reading student essays. Specifically, he delves into those emotions and feelings we experience yet are resistant to acknowledge or discuss—like boredom, inattention, bias, eroticism, and disgust. These emotions and feelings often conflict with our early teacher identities that enforce heightened levels of authority and the need to be knowledgeable on all topics (i.e., the fear that we will be "found out" for not knowing an answer). As Tobin explains, the problem becomes paramount when adopting a more personal, open classroom approach:

(As soon as) I am aware that there is what I take to be a powerful emotional quality—in a student essay, in a workshop or discussion, or in my relationship with a student—I start to get scared that the emotion will somehow become difficult to manage or contain and that it will produce hurt or angry feelings in the students who read it, shame in the student who wrote it, or trouble for me for teaching a course that allows such unprofessional displays of emotion when (according to the voices in my head, not to mention the voices in the hallway) I should be focusing exclusively on rigorous critical and textual analysis. (p. 79)

As Tobin foreshadows, the failure to recognize these feelings often leads to the creation of an unnatural and uncomfortable teacher identity ("teaching with a fake I.D.") that can lead to additional problems like teacher stress, conflicts with students, and dissatisfaction with teaching. Borrowing again from psychoanalytical theories, Tobin suggests that teachers should not try to suppress or resist these emotions but rather seek ways to understand how and why these emotions occur and to productively use these feelings when reading and responding. For example,

responding to the “common thought” that teachers must read every student paper with intense focus, he suggests that a more free-ranging, less attentive style may be more appropriate for reading initial student drafts that are often fragmented and in the beginning stages of development, allowing the instructor to free-associate more with the text.

### Reading the Teaching of Writing

In his final section, “Reading the Teaching of Writing,” Tobin links reading and responding to the beliefs, values, and assumptions instructors often possess toward the field of composition. He first addresses our anxious views towards the use of personal writing in composition courses, views that either see the genre as too easy (with no apparent way to be assessed) or too difficult (because it often opens up a student’s emotional Pandora’s box, releasing feelings and emotions that are often uncomfortable and distressing). Tobin acknowledges these concerns, yet he does not feel these objections validate the elimination of personal writing (or similar genres) from our pedagogy, stressing instead that we need “to anticipate the risks and concerns associated with these forms of writing and to help students become more capable and versatile writers” (p. 109). Tobin also addresses the value of the writing assignment, arguing that many instructors rely on traditional assignments that produce sterile, unenthusiastic student writing, texts that teachers often disdain reading. He suggests incorporating more creative nonfiction in our courses (including memoirs, personal and critical essays, and literary journalism), which can lead to richer essays students will want to write and, perhaps more importantly, teachers will want to read. The possibility “is that there might actually be pleasure and play and passion in our courses” (p. 125). Finally, Tobin stresses that we will not begin to value pedagogy and student writing until we make this an important part of our practice, scholarship, and research, arguing that “like many scholars in composition and rhetoric, I have often felt virtually alone in my department in my scholarly interest in student writing, in the literacy narratives of teachers, or in pedagogical theory” (p. 128). He suggests discussing these issues in teacher education programs and faculty discussion groups, focusing on the need to “read” not only texts, but also contexts, classrooms, students, and ourselves. Much like George Hillocks (1995), who has warned instructors about the dangers of viewing teaching as a protected activity, Tobin also warns that not seeing and understanding the different “texts” around us can lead to a more passive, less reflective teaching stance.

### The Role of Writing Assessment in *Reading Student Writing*

At its roots, Tobin’s text focuses on the most basic of writing assessment strategies: how one reads and, subsequently, responds to and assesses student texts. Yet as he points out, these tasks may not be so basic and clean-cut as the field tends to envision them. For located beneath these strategies are multiple, shifting contexts that greatly influence the success or failure of the methods.

Teachers do not (and actually cannot) read and respond within a vacuum, being influenced by factors ranging from the instructors' relationships and attitudes toward student writers to institutional constraints to unconscious thoughts and feelings (a context that Tobin sees as highly influential). Teachers are "reading" more than just the written text; the need to understand how we read these other contexts (i.e., the student writer, the classroom, our own teacher identities) and how these contexts influence the reading strategies we use is one of Tobin's most important messages.

Of course, many teachers may resist these ideas (a point Tobin also stresses). Many will undoubtedly continue to hold onto a more objective, a-contextual view of reading and response. But, context is highly influential; while Tobin refers exclusively to his own personal experiences and theories, I can offer more empirical evidence to validate his views. During a recent study (Edgington, 2004), I asked eight composition instructors to participate in context-rich think aloud protocols while reading and responding to student texts for periods ranging from 50 minutes to as long as 2.5 hours. The protocols took place in the environments in which the instructors normally respond (office, home, porch, etc.) while the instructors read student papers from their current classes (not sample and/or a-contextual papers from unknown student writers). I found that these instructors were highly influenced by the various contexts they found themselves in, including the classroom context (i.e., classroom experiences and student-teacher relationships), the response context (i.e., where they were responding, the previous responses they had written, and what criteria they were using), and their own personal contexts (such as the authors, mentors, theories, and practices that have strongly influenced them as responders).

However, the acts that stood out as most visible were the different reading strategies employed by the instructors. Throughout the protocols, they verbally thought out loud about their reading experiences more than 50% of the time and utilized strategies such as questioning, inferring, restating, evaluating, and summarizing. And, as Tobin also argues, these reading experiences were often emotional events, with the instructors discussing feelings of elation, anger, sadness, depression, satisfactions, and, yes, even boredom (three instructors "skimmed" through sections of certain students' papers because they found the information repetitive and "not very interesting"). Thus, as shown through both Tobin's personal reflections and the results of my study (Edgington, 2004) on teachers' thought processes while responding, the act of reading and responding to student writing takes place in a multilayered, contextual environment that is influenced by both external (including environment, relationships, experiences) and internal (including beliefs, assumptions, and emotions) factors.

What most intrigued me about Tobin's text, however, is what will surely be one of the more controversial issues he addresses: the instructor's unconscious thoughts about students, student writing, and themselves as teachers. For Tobin, these unconscious thoughts (which can range from excitement to boredom to depression to eroticism) can have a significant effect on how one reads and responds to student writing. For many, the acknowledgment that we have a range of feelings about student papers may also be difficult to accept; the extended belief that these thoughts

make us highly subjective readers may prove too difficult for a field that often continues to rely on the objective teacher stance toward reading and response. Looking back at my own study (Edgington, 2004), I never considered the role of the unconscious in the instructors' acts of reading and responding, yet now I wonder what role (and to what extent) it was influential. I think about one instructor, an African-Latina female who taught both for the university and for a local high school, who stressed the need for teachers to understand that there is a real person on the other end of a text when we are responding to it. I also wonder to what extent her own unconscious feelings (possibly related to past experiences she had experienced, some of which she conveyed to fellow instructors) influenced her responses to students. Another instructor insinuated that she did not have enough mentor support in her graduate program and, while responding to students in her practicum class who would be future teachers, tended to stress teacher practices and mentorship while responding, regardless of the paper topic. Tobin's book has made me question myself as a researcher; if I were to spend time looking back at how I studied and analyzed these instructors and their protocols, would I find that my unconscious thoughts and feelings affected how I describe these experiences in the study? Regardless of the answer(s) to my questions, reflections and musings, I would have to agree with Tobin about the possibility of connections between one's unconscious and one's actions as a teacher (and in my case researcher). Additional empirical research on this topic is definitely needed in the future.

Will Tobin's text appeal to all teachers, researchers and assessment professionals? Probably not. Many who resist seeing the reading of student writing as subjective writing will undoubtedly also resist Tobin's arguments. And, Tobin's strong connections between reading and a teacher's unconscious thoughts and feelings may place teachers and assessment readers in large-scale scoring sessions in an uncomfortable position (I must admit that I was at first shocked and reluctant to admit that I often fall into Tobin's categories of the bored, resistant, biased reader-teacher). Yet, I would argue that this resistance should not be seen as a way to dismiss Tobin's book. Instead, I believe that examining and accounting for these various feelings teachers and readers can have toward student writing will prove beneficial for understanding how student writing is read, assessed and responded to.

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