

Talking about the text: Bringing the culture of response into the workplace

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The Section of Philosophy, Education and Rhetoric at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, offers a full undergraduate/graduate program in rhetoric. At the rhetoric program a strong culture of response pervades. Giving and receiving response on texts and presentations is the rule, not the exception. Once employed in the industry in a variety of positions, rhetoric graduates report back to the department that the single most useful skill they learnt while studying rhetoric is the ability to give to colleagues accurate, kind and constructive response on both written and oral communication efforts. Their employers agree. The readiness to receive response is an additional characteristic of our graduates.

Writing groups and working with peer response is a teaching mode described in the literature on composition in the classroom, particularly when working with writing for publication (Murray 1968) and writing with a personal emphasis (Elbow 1974). Concepts such as task representation as a determinant for 'good' revision (Flower et al. 1986), and knowledge transforming vs. knowledge telling (Scardamalia and Bereiter 1987) were, as were the ideas of Elbow and Murray, among the inspiration for establishing writing groups in composition classes at the rhetoric program in Copenhagen. To this day, composition course designs place the emphasis on personal writing.

What happens, however, is that the culture of response finds a strong resonance among students as well as faculty and permeates the entire rhetoric program; students form reading and writing groups independent of curricular requirements and voluntarily and enthusiastically engage in giving and receiving response on expository writing, papers and presentations. In fact, they embrace the culture of response so gladly that they help each other to produce texts outside of their academic life, for example job applications and CVs. Students become, in the five years that the full program takes,¹ keen and able communication responders with a strong sense of decency and respect for the uniqueness of each communication effort which they provide feedback on. It has become clear to us that this very quality is what distinguishes our graduates from their competitors in the recruitment race.

Nevertheless, I believe that we should shift the programmatic focus on response and writing groups from personal writing to a more workplace oriented one. For two reasons: 1) As outlined above there is clearly a need for competent constructive criticism of communication efforts in the workplace. Our graduates must be even better at providing response to texts produced in a professional setting. 2) Research on professional writing demonstrates that the majority of writing in the workplace is done collaboratively in one sense or another (Burnett 1996; Cross 1993; Dautermann 1993; Ede and Lunsford 1990; Lay and Karis (eds.) 1991; Reither 1993; Spilka 1993; and many more). For collaboration to succeed, the ability to talk about the text in an accurate and constructive manner is fundamental; the ability to give and receive response. Looking ahead, more research is needed on response in the workplace and how to teach the necessary skills.

¹ Almost all students in Denmark complete both undergraduate and graduate studies.

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