

This unedited transcript is for a webtext interview (conducted by Geoffrey Middlebrook) with Beth Hewett in the 17.1 issue of *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*. For the full text, see <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/17.1/interviews/middlebrook/>

**You mentioned reading and writing fundamentals. Could you elaborate in the context of OWI?**

Sure, I mean that any theory of digital response to writing is a theory of instruction, and that theory necessarily deals with reading and writing. In a way, OWI creates a reading problem for students.

Think of it this way.

Let's take an asynchronous paper cycle: student receives an assignment, writes an essay in response to that assignment, posts the written response to the teacher. The teacher then reads and then writes about that assignment to the student—provides some kind of feedback and critique. The student receives that written response from the teacher, reads it, interprets it, and hopefully makes some kinds of changes.

We think that if the student is a good reader, he or she shouldn't have any trouble understanding what the teacher is saying in response, and then, in fact, be able to enact and make changes to the paper based on the guidance that the teacher provided.

But I think that's not an accurate scenario for most students. A lot of online students, a lot of first-year students, developmental writers, non-traditional students or returning students, and non-native speaking students can exhibit particular problems with reading and then using the instructional text about their writing. We know this when we get a paper back and no revision has occurred, or the revision that has occurred is off the mark in terms of what we were hoping to see.

A student can be a really good reader of various genres like biography, fiction, nonfiction, lab reports and even text books, but not necessarily be a good reader of instructional writing about his or her own text. Instructional text, especially when it's written about the student's own writing, uses jargon particular to the discipline, and it assumes an ability to put into practice what has been advised. It involves what I am calling a cognitive leap between the student's writing and the teacher's response, and then what needs to happen in rewriting.

So we wonder, how is this different from a traditional face-to-face setting? In a face-to-face setting, any written response that we provide to students is developed anticipating a face-to-face meeting, which allows the student to prompt the teacher to rephrase and reframe the critique, by looking at the student's blank expression, or confused eyes, or even hearing a student's question, even when the question itself is oddly phrased.

In an online setting, where we don't have the oral or aural or visual signals of student comprehension, teachers don't necessarily know that a particular student doesn't or cannot understand that response, no matter how many times the student reads it. This is a problem of what I call "intention versus interpretation." It's what the teacher intends the student to understand, but the student himself or herself interprets quite differently. And that leads to a lack of success.

So we take this problem a step further. Students don't always know what questions to ask when they are unclear about the feedback that they receive in a face-to-face session and often won't ask questions. In a face-to-face session, we might prompt that.

Oral transcripts from research show us often a cryptic dialogue between teacher and student where there are starts and stops, lack of response, incomplete sentences, interruptions, and then finally some kind of a

statement of apparent clarity. At some point, students tend to express some clarity orally and indicate that they are ready to move on to the next steps. Something has been communicated that brought about that movement.

In the online setting, students who were unclear about feedback may have even more trouble expressing their lack of understanding because now they have to use writing to express their problems with the instruction and with their own writing.

The oral/aural/visual component is completely gone, and so there is a problem of reading the instructional text and then translating what they have read into something they can do in writing about that text. [This task] would be like asking a question of the teacher or tutor, or [expecting the student to] write something from written feedback in revision to enact changes. Students must make a challenging cognitive leap from the reading into action.

### **What do students have to read that is difficult, and what makes it especially challenging?**

Well, I have to smile when you ask that question. Students have to read what their instructors write about their writing, and I think that is challenging in and of itself.

There is language in that writing about essays, arguments, expositions, thesis sentences, assertions, topic sentences, content development, organization, and all kinds of sentence level issues. Often, there is a thick jargon from our discipline.

Students have to figure out the hidden meanings behind timeworn and clichéd abbreviations like AWK for awkward and SV for subject-verb disagreement. They have to look at edits and corrections to sentence-level concerns that their teachers have said are not as important as the higher-level issues, but the fact that there are strike-outs and corrections and edits in their writing sort of belies what the teacher has said.

Students have to understand the meaning of all these words that they have heard and read about for so many years in application to their own writing without the benefit of the teacher's oral intervention about their writing.

Note that most of the time when students have received these kinds of words in exercises that these exercises have not been about their own writing. The exercises have been about somebody else's writing in a workbook. It's very different to take and apply these words and these phrases to what we are writing ourselves.

I see a problem, a reading problem, in OWI that can strongly affect what students do with the feedback and instruction that teachers, tutors, and even their own peers provide to them.

### **What is the writing problem then? We know students need writing facility, which is the aim of OWI.**

While I'm quite sure that students need help with reading instructional text and applying it to their own writing, which is in fact the subject and the skill that they're studying, the writing problem isn't theirs, it's the educator's. The educator, teacher, and tutor own the writing problem in that much writing instruction

conveyed online is alternately overly lengthy and discursive, or simply curt and cryptic.

There are often uses of conditional and rhetorical language to create a well-intended but false sense of politeness about writing choices that students could make to meet their teachers' goals (even when the teacher professes not to want to "appropriate" the students' writing). But in fact, most of the time the students ought to make those types of changes.

The writing that is produced also uses technical terms to name writing behaviors that without clear context and pointing to the student's own writing can be nearly impossible for some students to decode.

All of these strategies can be found in the instruction of teachers and tutors I've seen from across the country. All of them require a cognitive leap on the part of the online writing student that can prove impossible for many of them.

While the teacher or tutor is quite sure that she has made herself clear and doesn't understand why the student isn't following through, the student similarly is quite sure that he or she has done so. This kind of written instruction is one that I would say lacks "semantic integrity." Semantic integrity is a term that I use to imply that there is in fact a relationship, a fidelity, between what is intended in the instruction and what the student can interpret from that intention.

*The Online Writing Conference* is all about how to develop online conferences—or written response—in ways that will help students to decode the instruction that's being provided. Doing so includes a variety of interventional instructional strategies such as using linguistically direct, instead of indirect, language; writing mini-lessons for the student focusing on the most important or highest-order concern for changing that particular text; raising it a degree in terms of skill; using the student's own writing as the subject of the lesson or the tutorial; and providing ample examples of how to change the writing based on the student's writing and not on an odd example from the teacher's past. For example, the teacher might model revision using the student's own writing and using cloze or stem sentence procedures (among other types of strategies).

The student in this case is the audience, not other teachers who recognize and appreciate the jargon of our discipline. It may be an unconscious practice in fact that we use such jargon when we're responding to students.

The personal reply of reader response theory aside, we have to remember that instructional writing is transactional in nature and not expressive or poetic for the purpose. When the student's own text is the specific subject matter rather than grammar rules or some generalities about English, or generalities about writing an argument, for example, students can better make the cognitive connection needed to understand what their next steps are in drafting and revision processes.