Audio-Taped Response and the Two-Year Campus Writing Classroom: The Two-Sided Desk, the "Guy with the Ax", and the Chirping Birds

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This article makes an argument that audio-taped response to student writing is particularly useful in teaching two-year campus students. The argument is grounded in a historical overview of response literature in *TETYC,* student surveys, and a case study of one undergraduate student.

Jeff's Observations

This is an essay about memory: for much of my teaching life, I have been trying to remember what influenced me when I was a student in order to work more effectively with the students I currently teach. Well over a decade ago, as part of that ongoing effort to recall my own past, I wrote, "... Instructors who mimic the ineffective teachers who taught them suffer . . . from too defective a memory" of their own student days ("Rhetorical Situation," 12). In that essay I wrote about an experience I had had with a student who misread my marginal comment "Good" on her paper to be saying "Garb," which she interpreted as teacher shorthand for "garbage." Her equanimity in the face of such an insulting comment troubled me deeply and led me to reconsider my own approach to responding to student writing. In fact, the heart of my efforts to plumb memory has been in the area of responding to, assessing, evaluating student writing.

But as I have tried to remember, I have also observed that my experiences as a teenage undergraduate at a four-year private university have not matched the experiences of my own students at public two-year campuses. In this essay, then, my plan is to recall as best I can what I was learning about my students some twenty-one years ago when I came to this campus and how it led me to one specific method of responding to their writing: the use of audio-tape cassettes. My goal, frankly, is to convince readers that audio-taped response is particularly well-suited for the diverse student body at two-year campuses. Most of my writing has been about teaching composition and in particular about assessment, so my journey into memory is largely going to be a journey into my own archives. But I want also to recreate the milieu of the early 1980s by examining, in an admittedly impressionistic way, what other teachers at two-year colleges were saying about their students and about writing assessment. Finally, since my remembering is an ongoing feature of my work, I want to bring the story into the present by examining current students' views of tape-recorded response and by listening to one current student in detail as she analyzes the effects of tape-recorded response on her writing.

Not So Long Ago, in a Galaxy Not So Far Away

My initial experiences at a two-year college took place in 1976-1979. After a two-year stint at a four-year campus, I returned to a two-year campus position. I have been rereading issues of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*

(*TETYC*) from 1980 through 1984 because it was during that period of time that I began to use audio-taped response.

Karen Lewis Dale speaks of her own changing career when she moved in the early 60s from a four-year state college to an open-admissions junior college and encountered "the 'new' students whose educational and social backgrounds and needs are now clear to us, but who were, in those days, indeed *new* " (117). Sketching out how her open-admissions students differed–focusing primarily on their lack of experience in reading literature and their unsophisticated approaches to written language–Dale comments that "the new students of 1963 are simply 'the students' of 1979" (118). If we take Dale's comment as accurate, the roots of the teaching challenges I faced in the early '80s had taken hold almost a generation earlier.

What were the students of the 1970s like? They differed from the "traditional" teenaged college student of the 60s in several ways. They were older, and they were probably the first generation in their families to attend college; they were more likely to be married or to be parents (or both), more likely to hold down a job while attending college, more likely to be female, and more likely to have struggled academically in high school (Troyka, 253). And how were instructors viewing these "new" students, circa 1980? The articles of the time suggest two threads of thought. John Rachal looks back to the 1980 Two-Year College Section of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAMLA) meeting which addressed the topic "Missing in Action: Grace and Style

in Language." He describes the student body of the two-year college as representing a "radically expanded" horizon of post-secondary educational opportunity, "students who otherwise would not have gone to any college" (91). However, on that first page of his essay, he echoes the military metaphor of the SAMLA meeting when he writes of "a war on semi-literacy" and asserts that two-year instructors are members of the "first battalion" (91). He too hearkens back to the '60s when he further describes the "new" students as those who in that earlier time would have been considered "grossly and helplessly unqualified" for higher education but who in 1982 "are now welcomed in the guise of educational altruism, into developmental studies programs." (91). Rachal is not alone in his emphasis on the deficits of two-year campus students, on what they lack, and on the difficulty of "fighting" to help them.

In that same issue of *TETYC,* we encounter another metaphor for this "battle": "As alchemists of language, we face twenty or twenty-five students in Eng 101 or some pre-college composition course, hoping to turn base metal into gold. Like my medieval predecessors, I haven't found the right formula." (Sbarratta, 131). While the imagery is not a violent, martial one, the message is quite similar: the defining characteristics of "new" two-year students is a deficit view that focuses on what they lack. As "base metal," these students do not glitter in the way a teacher would wish.

Sometimes the emphasis on what two-year students lack is less overt, however. Karl Taylor examines the writing processes of inexperienced and

experienced writers, his research plan calling for a comparison of the working strategies of strong, experienced writers and weak, inexperienced writers. His study included four "below-average students" whom he selected at random from several English classes at a Midwestern community college (220). What is noteworthy here is that when his study required him to include weaker writers, he immediately turned to the local two-year campus to find subjects, his assumption being, one would suppose, that even a random choice from such a population would readily locate deficient writers.

This thread of emphasis on the negative is most vividly–and disturbingly–captured in an article revealingly entitled: "The Teaching of Freshman Composition: The Creation of Mutants." Rosemary Stewart begins by referring to a Chinese proverb: "A Chinese proverb says, 'Don't play music to oxen.' Have I, for three years, been ignoring the wisdom of the ancients? Yet, pondering this question, I believe that I am beginning to heed them. As a writing tutor in what is euphemistically called a 'supplemental learning-center,' I find that now I frequently want to throw down my lute (my pencil) and ... stalk off in search of goats." (185).

Stewart describes teaching her students as an attempt to pour water into "leaky containers," referring to her students' "blocked" ears and "apathetic" minds (185). She regales readers with purportedly amusing bloopers from her students who "possess neither general knowledge nor vocabulary" (186). Having already emphasized how different she herself is from her students (she is a lute player

while they are unappreciative oxen), she then compares their writing to professional writers' work and terms her students' attempts "ugly." (186). Describing her tutoring style, she writes, "I descend upon the hapless writer like a hawk that sees its supper scampering on the hillside" (186).

Instructors who preyed on their "hapless" students obviously existed in sufficient number that my student had learned to ignore insults such as having her writing called "garbage." However, the name-calling of the articles I have reviewed does not present a complete portrait of the teaching outlook of the times. A second thread runs through those issues of *TETYC.* Even Rachal acknowledges that the war he is waging is not the same war his grandparents waged against illiteracy, choosing instead the word "semi-literacy" to describe the enemy (94). The implication, grudging and negative as it sounds, is that the "new" student is not *illiterate* but *semi-literate.* He asks, "Even if we can recognize potential, how, specifically, do we encourage it?" (94)

Some instructors, however, recognize that potential, focusing on what their students can do rather than on what they cannot.[1] Merle O'Rourke Thompson praises her students for their willingness to "take any advice and run with it." (38). Karen Lewis Dale notes that "some of the traits which many of us have decried as deficiencies in our students may also be strengths" (118). She emphasizes in particular how comfortable her students are in working with oral language (119).

Other writers also emphasize the power of the students' oral literacy as a pedagogical tool. Barry Kroll stresses the value of talk in teaching a composition class, both the talk between students and teacher and the talk among students themselves engaged in collaborative activities (17-21). Another writer proposes the use of tape-recorders in tutoring situations, arguing that students can teach themselves when they hear their own writing read aloud in their own voices on a tape recorder (Petite, 123-4).

For instructors like Dale, Kroll, Thompson, and Petite, whose view of students is that they possess potential, the deficiency model would have been troubling on two counts: it leads to a pedagogy that emphasizes the students' inability to do things; it inevitably colors the interaction between the instructors and their students because the students cannot fail to be aware of how their instructors view them. When Lynn Quitman Troyka reflects on two-year campus students, she argues that these students are "confused or even insulted when teachers are inaccessible, detached, or unfriendly" (256). Perhaps nowhere is the possibility greater for confusion or insult than in the interaction of teacher and student through the grading of writing. So, how did instructors view evaluation at that time? Once again, there are two threads to follow.

J.D.Bell comments that "the greatest problem a teacher of composition must face is informing students of the mistakes they make" (215). Although Bell goes on to advocate a collaborative approach to response between students, he also continues to emphasize that response is largely a matter of correction.

While confirming the prominence of the deficit thread, John Stephen Patterson actually offers us a glimpse of the second thread. He routinely refers to responding to student writing as “correcting compositions” (176), but his main argument echoes the humane concerns of Troyka: he emphasizes the instructor’s ethos in commenting. His essay counters the negative form of response and begins by asking, “Why is it that writing comments on student papers brings out the worst in some instructors the same way that playing Monopoly or Jeopardy or driving a car brings out the worst in some people?” (176). He invokes the “Golden Rule” out of concern about how students view their teachers; do they see us as helpful, sympathetic, cruel, sadistic, harmful, perceptive, cursory, comprehensive? Finally, he advises readers to “stop correcting after your first snide or sarcastic comment” (177).

What Patterson is writing about is the rhetoric of response. Mary Hayes and Donald Daiker, departmental colleagues of mine, express this concept explicitly in a research article: “Each response we make to a student’s writing involves a rhetorical situation as sensitive and as complex as any that we, as teachers, are likely to face” (4). In the early 80s, I faced a choice then between two prominent ways of viewing students and of responding to their writing, and I decided to begin using tape-recorded response

My Response to the Situation

As the 1980s began, I had noticed that my students possessed some of the same characteristics, or legacies as she calls them, that Troyka describes:

the students were “highly gregarious and social. For them, social interchange is imperative” (256); they were more “comfotable in an oral rather than a written mode” (258); they were “holistic thinkers . . . [who] perceive the world as a whole, not as a combination of separate parts” (258); and they were often “ambivalent about learning” and the changes it might bring (260).As I look back on the writing I was doing, I can remember myself responding to these choices, deciding that I would not see my students as deficient nor attack their writing in an effort to “correct” its shortcomings. In my own writing, I used metaphors of orality in describing how I perceived the students' literacy. I had constructed an entire composition course around the concept of imitating written voices, asking students to “model their writing on a voice they had heard” (“Developing a Writing Voice,” 37). I had written another piece about communicating with my students about their drafts in progress that emphasized orality in its very title: “Listening to Our Students: The Student-Teacher Memo.” In other words, I noticed what others like Dale were writing about our students: that they were quite adept in oral tasks.

At the same time, through my contact with Hayes and Daiker, I was concerned with the same issues that concerned Troyka and Patterson: how do students respond to our responses? I expressed that concern in one article as follows:

We who teach composition stress the need to write to an audience, the need to anticipate the needs of the reader as we write, if we hope to

communicate... By extension, then, just as we must always be aware of how our written messages will come across to our reader, so we must be equally aware of how our teaching message comes across to our students.... The humane instructor who would never sexually harass a student far too frequently thinks nothing of slicing open the student's jugular with a sharpened pen...

("Rhetorical Situation," 12)

I finished my argument in that essay by asking how teachers could reach across the barriers dividing themselves from students. "I simply do not believe any longer that I can communicate with students," I wrote, "unless I remember that I am in a rhetorical situation, one which requires careful analysis of audience" (13).

Lynn Troyka's analysis of two-year campus students concludes that the differences brought to our classroom by our students should "determine not so much *what* we teach but *how* we can reach and teach." (256). In an article based on my research comparing student attitudes toward writing at both my university's four-year central campus and two-year branch campus, I reached some conclusions about why those different students reacted differently to the same pedagogy. The surveys presented an interesting portrait of the two groups of students: the four-year students appeared to experience much less anxiety about their college writing class, but they also evidenced very little enthusiasm for the activity of writing itself. The two-year students, I concluded, "seemed more confident in their writing abilities than did the four-year students, yet at the

same time seemed more fearful of teacher evaluation." ("Paradigm Shift," 3). My research led me to conclude that two-year campuses offer a unique opportunity for instructors to be innovative (4) with a student population who possesses a desire to write better but also has a fear of traditional methods that have failed in the past.

All of these ideas–that two-year campus students are strong in oral literacy; that they are social beings; that they are holistic thinkers; that responding to student writing is a rhetorical situation; that how teachers make an effort to reach the "new" students is of paramount importance; that two-year campuses are sites for innovation–led me to tape-recorded response to student writing.2

I make no claims for inventing the method. Indeed I learned about it from a writing center director at a four-year campus, and other instructors have been using this approach for years. In fact, Gary A. Olson advocated its use in *TETYC* in the early '80s. Olson offers taped response as a means of getting away from the red ink school of response. Although he uses the phrase "correcting student papers," with its value-laden connotations of errors and deficits, he conceives of the taped responses in richer ways. "Ideally, the teacher's response to a student's paper should go beyond mere evaluation; it should be an extension of classroom instruction, in that the pupil is made to see *how* and *why* certain passages are vague, unconvincing, or ungrammatical..." (122). He recognizes and stresses how taped response acknowledges the rhetorical nature of the

situation, describing the instructor's use of tone to adapt to individual students as "pseudotutorial." Students, he argues, will respond to the instructor's ethos (although he does not use that term); they will recognize that the instructor cares about them as writers rather than caring only about the written product. He discusses how the taped response fosters a more rewarding relationship between teacher and student, in great part because "the recorded response enables the teacher to be more supportive and encouraging." (123)

Olson's arguments are persuasive–for readers willing to accept what he says on faith. His article is a careful one as he does not attack the more traditional modes of response, but he also offers no evidence to support his assertions. As time went on, I became as convinced as Olson that taped responses were meeting the needs of my students, and, like him, I wanted to "go public" with my ideas. To build on what he and a few others had already said in print, I chose to write a case study, the story of how taped response worked in the case of one student working through multiple drafts of a single paper.

My article corroborated Olson's arguments in several respects; I asserted that the tape-recorded response approach was more individualized (1989, 52), more time-efficient for instructors with large numbers of students (1989, 53), and more detailed and expansive (1989, 51) than written comments, and I supported these arguments by including excerpts from transcriptions of my comments on the student's five drafts. Like Olson, I stressed the relationship that the taped response can develop, pointing out that students are accustomed to hearing the

instructor's voice in class and the familiarity of that voice helped personalize the response. I echoed Olson's assertion that the tapes were invaluable in moving response away from evaluation toward a more productive collaboration with students (1989, 72). Additionally, I argued that taped comments created a vehicle for a more spontaneous, holistic response to a first reading (1989, 59), provided the opportunity to use extended analogies to explore my own reading response to the draft (1989, 65), and served as a model for students to emulate when they engaged in the social act of talking to one another about their rough drafts (1989, 57).

That article appeared in 1989, based on research I had done in 1985, and culminated an entire phase of my thinking about two-year college students and response. But let me move forward approximately three years from the publication of that article to a conversation I had with a prominent compositionist who was visiting Miami in a consultant's role. While I drove him back to his hotel room, we chatted about writing instruction. Then he asked me, "Do you still use tape recorded comments on your students' work?" and mentioned having read my *Journal of Teaching Writing* article. I quickly replied that I was still committed to using the tape-recorded approach. Only later did I think more carefully about the import of his question. The phrasing of the question ("still") and the tone with which he asked it suggested that he viewed the whole concept as something I would have moved beyond after some several years. I am troubled by this assumption because I remain convinced that all of the arguments Olson, myself

and others have presented still hold true, and that particularly for two-year campus students, the approach remains invaluable. So I decided to find out if indeed tape-recorded response still has value for my students.

The Other Side of the Desk: A Student Survey

In the fall of 1996 I surveyed three sections of my college composition course to see what students had to say about tape-recorded response. Recalling that one of my initial motivations for switching to this method was to redirect my own responding away from "correcting," I asked three questions about how the students would describe my comments. See Table 1 (the totals vary slightly as not all students responded to all three questions.)

Table 1. (n=54)

What percentage of the comments you hear me making on your drafts would you call praise or positive comments?

Less than 10%	**3 (5.6%)**
10-25%	**34 (62.9%)**
25% or more	**17 (31.5%)**

What percentage of the comments you hear me making on your drafts would you call negative comments?

Less than 10%	**21 (39.6%)**
10-25%	**28 (52.8%)**
25% or more	**4 (7.5%)**

What percentage of the comments you hear me making on your drafts would you call neither positive/negative so much as suggestions?

Less than 10%	**5 (9.6%)**
10-25%	**13 (25.0%)**
25% or more	**34 (65.4%)**

The results of the survey encouraged me. I interpreted the statistics to suggest that the students heard my comments primarily as positive (94% reported over 10% of the comments were positive) or neutral (90% reported over 10% of the comments were neutral) rather than negative (60% reported over 10% of the comments were negative but close to 40% reported less than 10% of the comments were negative).

I also asked students to describe how they had reacted to the tapes. See Table 2. (Only two classes responded, and students were encouraged to check off more than one response.)

Table 2. Usually after listening to the tapes, which of the following reactions describe how you feel? (N=37)

too discouraged to want to revise	**4(10.8%)**
confused	**11 (29.7%)**
encouraged to want to revise	**26 (70.2%)**
bored	**6 (16.2%)**
angry or irritated	**5 (13.5%)**
more confident about my writing	**20 (54%)**

While I was pleased with the high percentage of students who reported that their confidence had increased and that they were encouraged to want to revise, I was troubled by the number of students who reported confusion, boredom, and anger. And here is where my co-writer enters the picture. Cheryl ----- is a non-traditional student returning to college after twenty years. She described herself in her introductory letter to her course portfolio:

"To be honest, I was dreading taking a composition course. I had taken English 111 twenty years ago. I was not a success in that class. Topics were vague, my experience was limited, and I lacked self-confidence. I just floundered... my understanding of sentence structure, spelling, punctuation and any other grammatical rule was weak at best. By the time I completed [that] ... composition class, it was pretty clear to me that I couldn't write. You can imagine just how much I looked forward to taking your class."

Cheryl recounted how she had been asked to write opinion papers in her educational psychology class the previous semester. Because the professor was not interested in issues of standard usage in these free-written responses, Cheryl reported that she "was able to relax and just write what I wanted to say. And a funny thing happened. I realized that what I wrote wasn't too bad."

Then her theater professor required everyone to write a five-minute play. "I was nervous," she reported, "but the instructor emphasized that although he would select seven to be performed from the thirty-four submitted, we would not be graded on our writing ability. Instead he would focus on the 'do-ability' of the play for our class. Well, if that was all, hadn't I directed or acted in enough plays to have some sense of how to write a simple five-minute sketch for two or three people using very few props on stage? Yes! I understood the use of exposition, stage direction, and dialogue."

Even this brief introduction makes it clear that Cheryl is representative of the "new" student of the 70s whom Dale and Troyka describe. She was a student who arrived on campus already literate in certain ways (such as theatrical writing) even if she lacked confidence in her ability to succeed as an academic writer. Her experience in theatre suggests her comfort in working with others and her expertise in oral expression. Her critique of her earlier composition course indicates that Cheryl thinks in holistic ways about writing rather than emphasizing smaller parts such as sentence structure and spelling. She is very representative of the students for whom I had hoped tape-recorded

response would be an effective teaching strategy. The rest of her letter describes her growing confidence and her feeling of having succeeded in the course. She concludes, "I think the biggest factor in achieving this has been all of the input I've received." While Cheryl is referring not only to input from me but also from her peer editors, she specifically mentions the taped comments as useful to her. How did those taped comments help her become a more confident and successful writer?

The Other Side of the Desk: Cheryl's Observations

Generally, I would listen to the tape all the way through once. Then I would get out the draft of my paper being discussed and try to find the areas the teacher had mentioned. Then I would replay the tape while going through the paper at the same time, stopping the tape as necessary to make quick, notes for myself. Next I would reread my paper with the notes I had made concerning the comments on the tape. Finally, after some thought, I would rework the draft, using whatever comments I had agreed with.

One aspect I find helpful about the tapes is the enhancement of meaning. When a professor writes quick comments on a paper, it is hard to know their context: *add more; unclear; good thought* are all pretty general. By "context," I mean that it is hard to know what instructors actually mean by the quick comments they jot down on a paper. The comments generally require more input to be clear to the student. So when I say context, I am asking "what goes with this comment that would help me understand it correctly? A sentence taken

out of context can mean quite a different thing than intended. Depending on my mood, I could become very defensive or overly inflated. I don't have vocal tone to build on. With the tapes, I not only have the words being spoken, but also the inflection, pauses, emphasis to guide me. What would seem the harshest criticism were it merely written, becomes much more palatable when softened by a concerned and interested tone of voice. I'm more open to the suggestion. I try harder to understand what is being said without feeling violated. By its very nature, it is more personal.

Yet there is the protection of a physical barrier. We aren't face to face. Ignoring totally the time constraints against meeting with every professor concerning every paper and visa versa, there is an added benefit to its not being in person: students have the time to consider remarks rather than just reacting as they might in person. What might be embarrassing to hear straight "from the horse's mouth" isn't so hard in the privacy of my own tape player. I can replay comments I was bothered by at first. Do I feel the same the second or third time I hear them? I listen to the tone. Oh, maybe he meant this. It's very hard to have my work critiqued by someone else, especially if the critic is a person of supposedly superior knowledge of the art form. I can be very confident in the privacy of my own computer, but with someone scrutinizing my work to my face, I would think it's quite common to feel uncomfortable. Or if a student is extremely confident in her work, I would assume it is difficult to sit and listen to "an expert" (or at least the person in power–those GPA's do matter) give criticism. Even if

the critique is positive, it can be uncomfortable. And if it isn't positive–just remember it takes ten "atta girls" to equal just one "you idiot."

What does this say about how students construct their professors? Well, no big surprise–they're the guys holding the ax. That's just reality. That's not to say all professors are looked at as ogres, far from it. I also don't mean to say that the student should not be an adult and not let this affect what they can learn. But the truth is that most students want a good grade as much as they want to learn. I would not have felt as comfortable with my professor twenty years ago as I do now. I'm too damn old to get overly influenced by someone just a few years my senior. I have respect for his knowledge (and I like him as a person), so even though I am not particularly intimidated by him, I still hope that he likes or approves of what I write. I don't think many people are so self-sufficient that they are unaffected by other people's commenting on their work.

Also, I find the taped comments tend to go more in depth than written comments. I find this understandable. I tend to be terser when asked to write comments on fellow students' papers. I would much rather just tell them what I mean. It takes less time than formulating the perfect stand alone sentence to express what I mean. And again, if I word it improperly, they might be offended and miss my meaning altogether. So the temptation is to write things like *good, what?, more here, nice passage* and hope they will ask questions if they don't understand. Whether for the same reasons, I find my professors tend to be less complete, understandable, and clear in their written comments on papers. I find

I'm constantly asking, "What did you mean here?" I wonder how many more timid students don't even bother to try for clarification; I tend to think the tapes would help timid students who would get more information without having to ask for it.

What age group do I think the tapes would work best for? Well, both older and younger students. For the older, experienced students, I think it's nice to hear that "voice of a colleague" that values our abilities. For the younger, perhaps more timid or less motivated students, I think the fuller explanations on the tapes are very helpful. Actually, I think the fuller explanation works for everyone. The difference is the younger students might not make the effort to acquire it if it weren't on the tape. The older student might want to know more, but it's nice not to have to try to schedule extra time into an already over full day to learn more.

When listening to the tapes, I get a sense of being the professor's equal. In class I was much more aware of his being "the instructor" and my being "the pupil." But on the tapes he spoke to me as if to a fellow writer. That can be an automatic ego boost–or at least somewhat of a confidence builder–for a student listening to the tapes. Along with this, the professor communicated in a more personal way on the tapes than he did in class. I would assume this is a natural outcome of being able to speak so freely to one person concerning her work, unlike in a classroom setting. I wonder if this is a conscious strategy: the

professor purposely speaking as an equal? being more personal? Or is this just a side effect of the tapes?

Let me be more specific by talking about my first paper for the course. In this paper, "Mr. O'Connor and Me," I wrote about how reading Frank O'Connor's short story "My Oedipus Complex" had brought back some childhood memories for me. I eventually wrote two more drafts of this paper before completing it.

In his response to the first draft, Jeff talked of the paper's "lacking shape," and of the need for "a clearer sense of focus." He then explained what he meant. Those comments were the kind that I felt would not have been possible to write. At least I don't think the explanations would have been included had he written the comments. And of course the explanations were the most helpful portion for me. Vague comments like "lacks shape" and "needs a clearer sense of focus" can be interpreted many ways. However, on the tape he was able to explain specifically what he meant, plus offering suggestions on how to accomplish these concepts better. Because he had so much to say, by the way, he built credibility with me; I believed he knew what he was talking about, that he was someone worth listening to about my writing.

In that very first tape, I began to get that sense of being an equal. Jeff made comments such as "when I write." He referred to his own experiences as a writer, and by applying these comments to my writing, he included me in the same group with him. I found that very respectful and non-threatening. It made me feel more of an equal without feeling like a buddy.

I think the other great thing about using tapes is how much praise and reassurance he worked in to counter each potentially negative comment. He began on the first session by applying words like "vivid," "interesting," and "detailed" to my draft. That was very gratifying. It put me in a more receptive mood to listen to the rest of the criticism. Actually, I believe the first couple of minutes were devoted to positive comments about the paper, a nice foundation before he began to point out the weaknesses. And even when he brought attention to a weakness, such as how my paper "just stopped" without a good ending, he added suggestions on how to improve it. It wasn't just "you need to end this better," it was "here's an idea how." And he introduced his suggestions with the phrase "I'm just brainstorming" or "you *might* include," which indicated to me that here was an idea he had, but he felt sure I could come up with something myself. There was a tentative quality in the suggestions that implied to me that he had expectations of what I could do. The comments valued my intelligence rather than overwhelming me with his superior knowledge of how a paper should be written.

Would Jeff have gone into such detail on paper in a written comment? I don't see how. Also, his vocal tone was encouraging throughout, something that is lost in quick written notes. "Lacks shape" and "needs clearer focus" somehow seem harsher without explanation or a voice saying them. I could also hear his kids' pet birds chirping in the background throughout the tape. Those bird sounds

were just another reminder to me that he is a person who lives in a house with a family and pets, not just the guy with the ax. It helped a little to know that.

The Guy with the Ax (and the Birds)

In our original plan for this essay, Cheryl's comments were to conclude the discussion, but because this is an essay intended to be read by others who, like me, "hold the ax," we have agreed that I am having the "final say" in an effort to provide some sense of closure. I find Cheryl's remarks are both encouraging and chastening, but ultimately they convince me that using tape-recorded response remains a viable and useful approach on the two-year campus.

What is encouraging about Cheryl's remarks is that she not only cites advantages of the tapes that corroborate my earlier arguments (greater volume of response; personalized tone of the response; a reconfigured relationship between students and teacher), but even articulates some ideas that I had not realized:

•the sense of collaborating with a peer. Cheryl emphasizes that the tentative nature of my comments and the way I included her conversationally as a member of the same community of writers to which I belong combine to create a sense of collaboration rather than a more hierarchical, directive form of response.

•convenience to students. Students with busy lives and what Cheryl calls "timid students" have access to more of my ideas through the tapes than if they

were required to visit during office hours, simply because many of them would not visit me very often.

•a welcome safety barrier. Cheryl argues, persuasively, that the tapes are, paradoxically, both personal yet not too personal and provide a safer distance for students to hear critiques of their work.

•establishing the professor's credentials. Cheryl points out that the volume of the response helped convince her that she ought to listen to me, that I actually knew what what I was talking about.

The chastening aspects of her comments are the reminders that we instructors have to earn our students' respect and that students never forget who wields the ax of the final grade. While tape-recorded comments may create the feel of two peers or colleagues working together and may encourage the student's confidence in both herself and her instructor, ultimately, the student and teacher are not equals because of that grade book. No wonder some distance proved welcome. Thus, Cheryl's comments offer a realistic reminder that students and teachers are indeed on two sides of the desk. At the same time, she endorses tape-recorded comments as a particularly effective means of communicating across that desk.

The students I teach continue to resemble the non-traditional students who first arrived in large numbers at two-year campuses some thirty years ago: they still work many hours, travel many miles, and struggle to improve upon indifferent academic preparation. Still oral and gregarious, these students

remain receptive to unfamiliar teaching strategies. Both the results of my research and Cheryl Mellen's testimony are persuasive to me. Now, as much as in the early 1980s, I am convinced of the singular appropriateness of tape-recorded commentary in the two-year campus composition classroom. So I plan to continue using tape-recorded commentary. "Still."

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1 Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, "Teaching in the Contact Zone," more recently has explored this notion of how two-year instructors might view students in constructive ways. She uses the metaphor of the contact zone to explain that while two-year campus students may feel deficient and may be viewed as deficient in skills by some, they are more likely experiencing a cultural dislocation as they move into the academic culture. She thus argues that they are not by any means "illiterate" or "semi-literate," but in fact arrive at the academy as *multiply* literate. Her teaching approach is designed to use those literacies which the students already possess to assist them in acquiring the kind of new literacy demanded by the academy. Because Cindy is my colleague and writing partner, her thinking on these issues has not only validated my own but also encouraged me to continue developing my own pedagogy.

2 I require students to provide one audio tape for use during the term. Most students simply use an old tape they have lying around; I have provided a tape for those who forget or cannot obtain one. Most students own tape players or boom boxes or car stereos and use them to listen to the tapes; some make

use of the tape players in the library's media center. Over the past 20 years, I have had a small number of students, probably fewer than a dozen, who have asked me to switch back to written comments because of the inconvenience.

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