Episode 6: Nancy Sommers
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, Nancy Sommers joins us. Nancy has been an inspiration to composition studies at large, but also to me personally. I really look up to her and her work as a teacher and writer. I met Nancy as an MA student. I was lucky enough to go to one of her workshops on campus and then go to dinner with her and some colleagues. I remember sitting across the table and Nancy spending the whole time asking us questions, asking questions about our teaching, about our writing. I'll never forget that. I know my teaching has been influenced by her work on responding to student writing. The ways I think about responding to writing, the ways I interact with students, the ways I listen – a lot of that has been shaped by Nancy Sommers. She's an incredible person, and incredibly kind, and I really look up to her. So this conversation is special to me, and I'm not just saying that, I really mean that.

Nancy Sommers led the Harvard College Writing program for 20 years, directing the first-year program, establishing the Harvard Writing project, and leading a series of research studies about college writers. Sommers now teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she leads writing workshops and mentors new writing instructors. She's the co-author of four writing textbooks, including A Writer's Reference and A Pocket Style Manual. Her article, "Responding to Student Writing," is one of the most read and most cited articles in teacher response research and writing studies.

In this episode, Nancy Sommers talks about her first-time teaching and what led her to teach. She shares what she feels like has changed the most about her work on response, and the way she responds, and what responses best complement her own teaching values, and why.

Nancy, thank you for joining us.

SW: I'd like to start by asking about your first experience teaching, and what that was like, and what led you to teach? Was there a moment, an event, an experience, something that really encouraged or inspired you to teach?

NS: Oh, it's so much fun to think back on what led me to teaching. You know, we always have to be careful when we try to identify or tell the story of our origins. But if I were to try to look back all those years, I would look back all the way to junior high, when we had a Career Day and the boys and girls were separated, and the girls had the choices to learn about being a nurse, a homemaker, or a teacher. Those were the only choices, and you can only imagine the boys of course had much more exciting – doctor, lawyer, engineer – type choices. But anyway, at that moment I was very excited to think about teaching and what that might mean, and so I formed very early in my mind this idea that I would be a teacher, and I don't believe I really understood what that meant, but it was just part of my own identity as I went through high school and college.

And I think partly too, it's because I have had, or I had so many crazy, wonderful, idiosyncratic teachers who took leaps of faith with me. I wasn't an obviously promising student at various points in my career, but I had these wonderful teachers. I think of an eighth grade Language Arts teacher, a high school English teacher, a College Literature professor, and my dissertation advisor, who all took leaps of faith with me. And there was something about that, that said to me, "I want to do that too. I want very much to find those students who don't believe that they have promise academic or otherwise, and help them to see that."

So I think that became a mission. I think also in college we were all very, very political, and at a certain point I realized that I was not actually going to solve all the problems, the end of the war or solve ... create peace in the world, but that maybe I could help somebody to write a good sentence, and maybe I could help somebody appreciate literature, and that that seemed like, again, a good direction.

My first teaching experience was to teach eighth grade, and I look back and smile when I think about that year. I was at Northwestern University and they had a program that took undergrad ... or recent college graduates and said, "You can go into the classroom." And I suppose there was a teaching shortage, or otherwise we wouldn't have been able to do that. And we had almost no training, and we were just plumped into classrooms in Chicago.

I had tremendous amount of enthusiasm, and great passion, and very much a person of my time. I just wanted the students to go outside, and read Walt Whitman, and conjugate the color green, and think about *Leaves of Grass*, and look under the microscope, and look at grass, and write about it, and write poems about it. And I had just read *Pride and Prejudice*, and I wanted my eighth graders to do that too, and it was a crazy curriculum as I think about it, but students became very enthusiastic and loved it. And one thing led to another, I traveled and taught English as a foreign language, as a second language in various places, in Europe and in Israel. And then came back and went to graduate school, and then started my real interest in love for teaching and writing.

SW: You've been teaching for over 40 years now, Nancy, and one consistent theme in your research is responding to student writing – and that has really impacted composition studies and many of us. So, I'm thinking about three articles specifically, the first in 1980, "Revision Strategies of Student and Experienced Writers." The second, "Responding to Student Writing" in 1982, and then the third, "Between the Drafts" in 1992.

In "Responding to Student Writing," you write this, "We comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because ultimately we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing. Even more specifically, however, we comment on student writing, because we believe that it is necessary for us to offer assistance to student writers when they are in the process of composing a text, rather than after the text has been completed."

So this was published 37 years ago, and you're talking about the reasons why teachers respond to student writing. And I would say that many of those purposes and reasons for responding are

still accurate, and are still the same answers that we would give today. So maybe you could share a bit about what got you interested in work on response to student writing, and then what has really changed the most for you when it comes to reading and responding to student writing, and if there's one purpose for responding that stands out now more than before.

NS: I started studying commenting as a result of the work I did on revision, because it was quite clear that students revised, or their sense of why they should revise was in response to the comments they receive. So it seemed that I needed to do a companion study about commenting. And so as you say, I did the first one, that was a long time ago, and since then I've done lots of other smaller studies. I did a small study on commenting with Bunker Hill students, and of course I did the longitudinal study at Harvard to understand the role of comments in student's undergraduate education.

And I think it's important to think about comments of course, because when we think about all the time we spend teaching writing, commenting and responding to our students' work is really what we spend the most amount of time doing, and it takes a lot of time to write comments, and it takes a lot of time to write a good comment. So I think how my thinking has changed is to realize how important comments are to students in ways that I didn't realize before.

I think the first piece I did really was looking at comments through the perspective of teachers, much more than students. But when we did the longitudinal study started really to see comments through the eyes of students. It helped me to see how important our comments are in a deeper way than I understood before. I think the way that my thinking has changed is understanding the difference between what I would say writing comments to the writer versus writing comments to the writing. And what I mean by that is that it's very easy when we're reading a student's paper to just circle the things that aren't working, or to say a sentence is confusing, or we're responding to the writing.

But when we step back and say, "Well, how would a student use this comment?" Or, "What would the students do with this comment that would make the next draft better?" Or, "How could a student use this comment to expand thinking, or to do something specific, a specific skill?" Then, we're thinking about the writer. And then again, we think about it as an act of communication, a dialogue between a teacher and a student, between a reader and a writer. So I think in those ways I deepened my thinking.

I've also realized through all the studying I've done about feedback, and also through all the comments I write how complex it is. It's not simple. And one of the things I learned was very important, was to start a semester by talking about commenting, and not wait until the first time students received comments to talk about comments, but to say right from the very beginning that, "I will be giving them comments, and their peers will be giving them comments, and I would like them to use the Writing Center to work with Writing Center tutors, so that they can enlarge their world of receiving comments and feedback." I want them to see that the way we learn and that we ... nobody writes in isolation, we write in community.

And so, I ask them a couple of questions. One is, why do you think teachers comment on papers? And also, what kinds of comments will help them the most? So I want to get students right from

the first week engaged with the process of commenting. I think it's really important to think of commenting as part of a pedagogy, and not just that thing you do when students turn in papers.

SW: I really love that idea of commenting as pedagogy. So you're really talking about responding to student writing as being a foundation to teaching as a primary guide, so to speak, for the entire class through the entire semester. You know, we all have different teaching styles, and if response is a pedagogy for some of us then that pedagogy might look completely different, because response is so complex. I'm thinking about all the different kinds of response: marginal comments, end comments, teacher conferences, peer review, rubrics, and then also points, percentages, letter grades. All these responses can be taken up in different ways by both teachers and students and they can be interpreted differently. Some of them might be more effective and more productive than others, given our values. So with that being said, what types of response or comments have you found to best complement your own values as a teacher?

NS: I really like that question, Shane. I really like the idea of thinking about how comments reflect values as a teacher. I hope you'll do a research project on that. I think that has a lot to teach us in our profession. But also, I think that it's a way in which a teacher ... we all could learn a lot by thinking about the ways in which our comments reflect our values. I like that idea a lot.

I think that my comments reflect my values because I want to bring a spirit of generosity into the classroom. And so, I want my comments to ... I want students to feel that the voice they hear in my comments is the same voice they hear in the classroom, that it's not as if I become this other person when I comment. It's my voice, and it's the voice they know and trust from the classroom. So I try very much always to respond with generosity and compassion.

So for instance, instead of if a student ... a common thing is a student who has written a paper, and there's just a scattershot of ideas. So instead of saying, "There are just too many ideas here," I might start with very positive statements such as, "You have an abundance of good ideas in this paper. Think about which one means the most to you, and pick one, and develop that idea." You know, any comment we want to write can be phrased in a generous way.

I think also that I want my comments to reflect the classroom. So one of the things that's always important to me in teaching is that there's a common language in the classroom, that students and I have a shorthand when we talk about a thesis, for instance. We always talk about the “so what” of the thesis. Why does this thesis have to be argued? Or when we look at a reading, an argument, we always talk about, why does this argument need to be made? So we have this shorthand language of “so what.” And so, I want my comments to reflect the language of the classroom. And in fact, I think about commenting as something that begins on the first day of class. And so how can I use that language from the classroom in my comments?

I think also, the comments reflect my values, because I think a lot about how students develop as writers. So I wouldn't want to write a comment that a student would just look at and say, "Huh? What am I supposed to do with that?" I want my comments to match where students are developmentally, and I want my comments to say to a student, "You can do this. This is something you know how to do." So that means that I'm always thinking about where students are in a developmental perspective, and what they can do and can't do, and I would never

overwhelm them. I would never give them 15 things to do between the drafts. I would focus on, "Well, what are the two or three things that would make a difference in the next draft?" And that's where I would want to put students at attention.

SW: Are there any strategies or suggestions you have for teachers wanting to better see how their comments are being taken up by students, and potentially even how their teaching values are being communicated and interpreted by students through their comments?

NS: One of the things I have found really useful is to ask students in the middle of a semester to go back, and then reread all the comments they've received from me, and the comments they've received from their peers, from Writing Center tutors, and do a little analysis and say, well, how might they categorize these comments, or what did they see as the pattern in these comments? What are they learning from these comments? What do they understand about these comments? And to write me a letter and to say, "Here's what I'm learning from the comments, and here are one or two things that I might do differently because of these comments."

But then I also ask them, "Which of the comments are helpful, and which are not?" and I find that really useful, to get feedback from students about my own feedback, because I do want to make sure that my comments reflect my values. So I'll give you a good example. So for instance, a couple years ago, a student wrote to me, "You ask a lot of questions in your comments, but you asked too many questions. What do you expect me to do with all these questions?" That was fabulous because he was right, I was asking too many questions.

So here on one level, the questions were reflecting my values. I am always urging students to ask questions and to show them how questions are really the engines of academic writing, especially research, and helping them frame questions. And so, I bring my questions to the writing, but it was clear I was overwhelming the student with too many questions, that I needed to pull back. So I think that's really helpful, which is we might be going down a pathway where we think our comments reflect our values, but maybe they're not working for students.

SW: I want to end with this theme on reflection, and perhaps what might work against ongoing classroom conversations on response. I'm thinking specifically about the letter grade, and how grades can potentially end conversations on a piece of writing, because they often symbolize finality, or a finished product, unless students are being asked to revise. So grades might work against having students continue thinking, and reflecting on their writing and our responses. How do you see grades interacting with teacher comments, and when should teachers use reflection to continue those conversations about response?

NS: I think it's important to begin that conversation way before a grade. For instance, I ask students to write what I call a Dear Reader letter after they write their first draft, which begins the dialogue I have with students about their writing. In their Dear Reader letter, depending upon the genre, depending on the assignment, I'll ask them to write why they chose the topic, or what their thesis is, why they think their thesis needs to be argued, what the most important piece of evidence is, so that they tell me something about it. And then they tell me the kinds of questions they're asking that they would like me to address in my comments, so we're starting a dialogue.

Then between the drafts, after I commented on an early draft and they're revising, I ask them to write a Dear Reader letter again, or ... and sometimes we call it a Writer's Memo, in which they say, "Here's what I've done between the drafts. Here's where I've put my attention. Here are the things that I did in this revision and why it matters." So when I'm responding to a final draft, I'm really responding to both the product, and they're thinking in the Dear Reader/Writer's Memo letter. So the conversation is beginning before they ... I've given them a grade, and I find grading is so much easier, because I can respond to their word, and then the giving of a grade is part of a conversation.

I don't ever want to say that grades are easy for me though. I find grades one of the most difficult things, and I always try to say to students because it is true that students in my class are usually never disappointed about their grades, or surprised by their grades, because there are so many opportunities for feedback, and comments and conferences. So we're talking a lot about their writing.

I really want students to be able to see the kinds of comments I write on their paper that will help them with the paper in hand. And then I also want them to see the kinds of comments that I write on their papers, especially on a final draft, that will help them transcend that paper and transfer and travel with them to the next writing whether it's a piece of writing they do in my class, or a piece of writing they do in another class. And so, that to me is the difference between the early draft comment, and the final draft comment. One of the important things for all of us to do is to build reflection into a course.

SW: Nancy, thank you for joining us. I really, really do appreciate it.

NS: Well, this has been wonderful. I've really enjoyed it. Really, I hope to always be part of your work.