Responsiveness

Joseph Harris

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In January, San Jose State University announced a partnership with Udacity, a for-profit provider of online education. The first courses that will be offered by "San Jose State University Plus" will be two entry-level math classes and an introductory statistics class, intended for "underserved" groups.

A week later, Udacity published on its blog a Bill of Rights and Principles for Learning in the Digital Age. The bill is signed by theorists of online learning like John Seely Brown and Cathy N. Davidson, along with other digital educators and the CEOs of Udacity, Edsurge, and Inside Jobs.

It's good that San Jose State wants to provide affordable courses to nonmatriculating students, and it's also good that Udacity is concerned with the rights of digital learners. For the most part, the Bill is unobjectionable. It begins by emphasizing students' rights to access, privacy, and control over their own intellectual work, and moves on to extol the digital values of hybridity, flexibility, innovation, and collaboration. The authors also stress that the Bill is meant to start conversation, and they invite response, revision, and "hacking." It is an intelligent and earnest document.

Still, I think something vital is missing from it, something I find hard to imagine happening in large online courses. That something involves what occurs when a good teacher responds carefully and closely to the work of a student.

I vividly recall a conference I had one afternoon many years ago with my instructor in what was still then called Freshman English. The meeting was no doubt required; I would never have thought to ask for help on my own. It was about midway through the semester, and I was doing poorly in the course, as I was then doing in almost all of my courses. I read all the time, but not always or even usually the books that had actually been assigned in my classes. I also loved to write, but mostly in wild, erratic bursts of prose late at night.

We were working that afternoon on a draft of an essay I had written on Kierkegaard and Satan in Paradise Lost. I no longer remember what point I might have been trying to make about the two, and, frankly, I'm not sure I was ever very clear on that point. But I remember my professor puzzling slowly through my paper with me, trying to discern some order in my thinking and prose. Then, his pencil poised over a sentence I had typed, he turned to me and said, "Now, this is a typical Harris-ian move."

The comment struck me out of the blue. Until then, I hadn't thought of myself as having any particular writing moves of my own. But evidently my teacher did, and the reason he had pointed to that move was that he thought I could do it better. He went on to talk about Lord Byron and springing tigers, urging me to try to stalk my prey a little more before pouncing.
But what I had already learned most from him was the simple fact of his attention. Here was someone who knew my work, who had read closely not just this paper but the ones I had written for him before, and who was offering me not general formulas about good writing but specific advice about this sentence, this essay. I decided to try to take my game up a notch.

No doubt my professor took me seriously before I had earned such care. In my experience, that's what good teachers do. The crucial moment in teaching, or at least in teaching writing or literature, lies not in presentation but response. We hand students a text and ask them, *What do you make of this?* Then we listen hard to what they have to say, looking for ways to help them develop their thinking.

There's a nod to such work in Udacity's Bill of Rights for Learning in the Digital Age, in a section that notes the importance of "learner-oriented feedback systems," in which students receive "individualized and timely (formative) rather than end-of-learning (summative) assessment." But I worry that digitized feedback systems can only be a pale version of the focused response that a trained and attentive reader, a teacher, can offer a young writer.

The teaching of writing has long been a textbook-driven field precisely because such readers are in short supply. The hope is that a good textbook can give an inexperienced or indifferent teacher something to lean on. But it doesn't really work. What students need is not someone to walk them through a textbook but someone who can respond to their own work and ideas.

It's argued that online courses can offer students models of such response. (So can textbooks.) And, in my own courses, I often ask students to share and discuss their writing with one another. But there's a difference between being presented with a model or heuristic and working under the guidance of a teacher. I watch over and coach the work that my students do together. And I respond to what they write, too—in class, in conference, and on the page.

If we take ourselves out of that ongoing dialogue, out of the give and take of draft and response and revision, then we are no longer teachers but content providers. Well-designed assignments and curricula are important. But they are only the very start of good teaching. A textbook is not a course. And I don’t see how a MOOC can be much more than a digitized textbook.

The key right of any learner is to the attention of his or her teacher. As my friend Eli Goldblatt says, “We teach by hand”—by which I take him to mean that we teach not subjects or courses but individuals. I suspect we still need to figure out how to offer online learners that sort of care and responsiveness.

*Joseph Harris teaches digital writing and creative nonfiction at Duke University.*