“Have you finished correcting our papers yet?”

“Which ones were those, Mary?” I’m stalling.

“The ones we turned in before vacation.”

“Oh those. Yes. Well, I still have a few more to do, but you should get them back by the end of the week.” I lie.

I used to repeat this game in all my classes regularly, hoping someday they would just quit asking. They never did.

I used to hang on to their papers longer than they did. I used to think errors — especially in grammar, mechanics, and spelling — were evidence of information students did not have. If I noticed a misspelled word, then I needed to teach the student how to spell the word. I did this by correcting the word. Then, I got smart (or mad) and started circling or underlining the misspelled word(s). I spent much of my time identifying and correcting those errors. When I stopped to think about what I was doing, I began to realize that I could fix that one paper, but as soon as I gave the next assignment, those same errors would come marching right back. This was driving me crazy, but it didn’t seem to bother my students at all. I complained to my classes. I complained so much one student even tried to comfort me, “But that’s what you’re supposed to do. We write the papers and then you fix them.” This didn’t help.

For the last few years, I’ve been thinking about what happens when we write on students’ papers. I always had too many papers to read, too much to say about each paper and never enough time. I began to wonder if that was really my job.

Digression — In order to get my first teaching job, I lied and said I could coach tennis. A week before the season started, I swiped a book from the library on beginning tennis. The first page explained, “The only way to score points in tennis is to keep the ball in your opponent’s court.” That was enough for me. I got a whistle and a clipboard, held the first practice and told the eager young players to “keep that ball in your opponent’s court.” Everyone seemed satisfied, we had a winning season, and after I was sure I wouldn’t get fired from teaching, I quit coaching.

I forgot all about tennis for years until I started to look at the way my students and I were batting their papers back and forth. First, the paper is in their court and they are responsible for it, then they turn it in and it’s all mine, then I return them, then they ask, “Do we have to keep these?” and so on.

As long as I had the student’s papers, they weren’t thinking about them and they couldn’t do anything with them. Once I accepted a paper, I was responsible for everything in it — that meant all the problems from handwriting and proofreading to style and logic.
I found myself doing the problem solving, the thinking that I wanted the students to be doing. I had it backwards. Besides spending much of my time thinking about how my students could revise and improve their papers, I was also spending quite a bit of time cleaning up the proofreading for writers who never accepted it as their job. Something had to change.

Now, early each fall when we are talking about writing, I tell my tennis story in each class. All the students agree that it is my responsibility to fix their papers. I disagree. So we discuss — at length — what they can do and what they will now be held accountable for doing. I have come to realize that only one person can be responsible for a paper at a time. My job now is to “play net” and keep the ball in the student’s court as long as possible.

What does this mean in my classroom? First, much practice writing stays in the student’s writing folder. It’s practice so I don’t need to collect it. Longer papers that go through several drafts and are turned in, I now read with different eyes. If the paper contains problems the student can solve, I stop reading and send it right back to the student so she or he can fix it. If the student and friends cannot solve the problem, then I set up a quick small group lesson on whatever the problem is. The students then apply their new skill to the paper and resubmit it. Papers without these problems get read faster. I make one or two content-based responses and give one direction for a specific idea to work on in the next paper. Since my job is to teach the student rather than to fix the paper, I limit my instruction to one item at a time. This focuses the writer’s attention on a single item to practice instead of requiring him/her to make sense of numerous red marks on the papers.

I know this sounds over-simplified and certainly it cannot solve the myriad writing problems encountered in each of our classes. However, by simplifying what I do with student papers, I have found that my messages to students are much more clear and, consequently, much more effective.

Response groups, peer editing, and many other student-centered activities can help put more responsibility into the students’ court. By constantly asking myself and my students “whose problem is it?” I am able to become a more effective, less frustrated teacher. With more free time, I may someday even take up a new sport. Tennis anyone?

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**Afterword**

It’s a rainy Saturday night and I have four sets of papers to read. My son, Andy, has an essay to write for his eighth grade English teacher. But there is a basketball game on TV so we’re stalling. Long after the game is decided we’re still stalling. Andy doesn’t want to write to his teacher who cares more about reading and writing than he does. Soon I will be writing comments to students who care less about reading and writing than I do. Come to think of it, I should be writing to his teacher and he should be writing to my students. I think what we have here is an audience problem.

Let me explain. About ten years ago when I wrote the tennis article, I was still trying to get the student papers fixed. I was fighting the idea that it was my job and the students were certainly fighting the idea that it was their job. No one wanted to do the editing. I think that problem is universal. Writers care most about their ideas and less about their words. Unfortunately, readers cannot get to the ideas without first reading the words. If the words are a mess, the ideas get lost.

I think this dilemma of marking papers is a curious form of what Linda Flower and John Hayes refer to as “writer-based” and “reader-based prose.” Teachers are always trying to get students to turn writer-based prose into reader-based prose, but unfortunately we rarely write reader-based prose for our students. Let’s face it, our comments are writer-based prose (and some of it not very good prose, either.) Basically we don’t write what they want to read. If we want to be effective writers, we should aim our messages directly to our audience and say only what we know they can hear. Judging from various experiments with my sons, they may not be ready to hear much of anything pertaining to their writing. (As a parent, I’m not exactly sure just what eighth graders are ready to hear.)

I was getting pretty depressed writing this so I decided to talk to my son, Jeremy, who is in the

continued on page 64
Tennis Anyone?

continued from page 51

He agreed with his older brother that he doesn’t like to write either. When I asked him if he read what his teacher writes on his papers he looked puzzled, turned to my wife and asked if he did. I rephrased the question. “Is there anything you look for when you get papers back from your teacher?”

He shook his head yes immediately, “When she writes something good.” Funny, that’s what his parents look for in his papers, too.

Lucy Calkins has written that teachers should write to “the writer behind the writing.” That’s an image I can work with. Look past the errors to the person and say what they need to hear in order to write better next time. It’s not so much what I have to say about a student’s paper as it is what is the student ready to hear. The problem is, for many students they don’t want to hear anything from us except that they are done.

I look up and see Andy coming out of his room with his essay in hand. “Dad, I’m done.” I wonder...

Reformers Proceed ...

continued from page 53

inhabitants of Plato’s cave, are in a position to only make out the shadow of a real or (ideal) classroom. Principals, professors and politicians are ready with simplistic advice and thoughtless mandates. I am struggling to help a student articulate an idea while faceless but important people lobby to require that I teach a performance-based something-or-other.

The truth is, however, that I find these reformers cooks, with their generally ill-conceived recipes, less dangerous than irritating. Without the involvement of teachers, educational tinkerers will not be able to do good, but neither will they do much harm. Teachers will pretty much ignore what they are not part of.

So real reform must begin with teachers, and in turn, teachers must take responsibility for affecting change.

While I am a little embarrassed by this elevated rhetoric, my belief in the centrality of teacher control over reform explains my own involvement now as National Writing Project Editor for The Quarterly. For me, the core idea of the Writing Project is teachers teaching teachers. The Quarterly should be, in part, a space in which we who know what really happens in school, can advance our ideas. Those closest to a situation are the ones who best understand it and the ones most capable of altering it for the better. This— dare I say—is a solidly conservative idea, one that has been around even longer than Warriner’s Handbook.

Correction: In the Fall, 1994 issue, Cynthia Roy was mistakenly omitted from the byline of the Connections article, “Teacher Researchers Together: Delving into the Teacher Research Process.” The byline should read, Sarah Warshauer Freedman, with Elizabeth Radin Simons and Cynthia Roy, and New Orleans M-Class Teachers Karen Alford, Reginald Galley, Sarah Herring, Doris Williams Smith, Elena Valenti, and Patricia Ward.