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Editor's Introduction

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JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

Editor's Introduction

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It's exciting to already be introducing the first issue of our second volume year of this new journal! We've been receiving positive feedback on volume 1 and great contributions for this and upcoming issues.

In this issue, we present two research articles and two teaching articles. In the first piece, "Papers are Never Finished, Just Abandoned: The Role of Written Teacher Comments in the Revision Process." M. Sidury Christiansen and Joel Bloch examine the delicate dynamics occurring between teachers' written comments and subsequent revisions. Their study follows four students receiving written comments from one teacher over a series of three papers and two revisions per paper. The four students were postgraduate science or engineering students, all international students taking an ESL writing course at a university in the U.S. The teacher feedback took the form of marginal comments using the Microsoft Word® Comments tool as well as an add-on set of macros allowing the teacher to standardize commonly made comments (and customize them as needed).

Through extended analysis of each of the four cases (original text, teacher written comment, revision), the authors show that while these advanced students, writing in their own disciplines, could sometimes revise effectively

based on instructor suggestions, at other times, they were unable to do so and made changes that were unsuccessful rhetorically or that weakened the text syntactically or lexically. Differences were also seen related to genre (there were three different types of writing tasks studied) and type of comment (more abstract, open-ended comments led to some problems).

Though there have been previous studies examining the nature of teacher commentary and its influence on revision, this contribution extends the knowledge base by focusing on graduate students writing in their own fields (compared with more general courses for beginning undergraduates) and adds an examination of how the affordances of technology may (or may not) help with the process of providing written commentary. Specifically, this study highlights the limitations of marginal commentary, especially delivered somewhat generically through the use of macros, to deliver effective feedback about complex rhetorical/content-driven issues.

In our second article, authors Ryan Shepherd, Katherine Daily O'Meara, and Sarah Elizabeth Snyder focus on the specific issue of corrective feedback (CF) on language errors and ways for instructors to improve it. Their paper, "Grammar Agreements: Crafting a More Finely-Tuned Approach to Corrective Feedback," highlights the role of student responsibility and agency in the feedback and editing process. Arguing that "we need to develop innovative approaches to provide more effective feedback for the students that are also a more efficient use of our time," the authors present one approach, the grammar agreement, in which teachers and students negotiate the amounts and types of language/error-focused CF they will receive.

Teachers in fourteen sections of first-year composition ($n = 279$ students) designated for second language (L2) students offered students the choice between "extensive," "focused," and "minimal" CF on their work ("the grammar agreement"). Students' writing at the beginning and ending of the semester was compared, and both students and teachers were asked for their feedback on the grammar agreement innovation. Of particular interest are the instructors' reactions: while they appreciated the idea of increasing student agency, they expressed concern that students' preference for "extensive" feedback increased their own (teachers') workload without

necessarily being better for the students' overall writing development—and indeed, the end-of-term analysis of student texts demonstrated no significant benefit for those students receiving extensive feedback versus those in the other two groups. The authors provide a number of suggestions about how the grammar agreement approach could be improved, based on their research and experience. It is a fascinating (and highly practical) discussion of the interaction (or even mismatch) between what students may want and what teachers may think students need (and what teachers themselves need to make their work sustainable).

While the first two papers in this issue studied L2 writers (in graduate and first-year composition writing classes), the insights and implications are not necessarily limited to those populations. Similarly, in “Promoting Metacognitive Thought through Response to Low-Stakes Reflective Writing,” Jenae Cohn and Mary Stewart critically analyze a pedagogical approach—reflective writing and teachers' response to it—that could apply as well to student writers in designated L2 classes as it does to the mainstream first-year composition setting on which they focus.

Though reflective writing has rapidly become ubiquitous in college-level writing contexts and is argued to promote transfer of writing knowledge and skills to other settings, it is unusual for instructors to respond to reflective writing in any systematic way, and studies on such feedback have been virtually nonexistent. Indeed, Cohn and Stewart comment that

these tasks are often assigned without much instruction on how or why reflection is an important part of the writing process, and without instructor response indicating whether or not the student achieved the desired goals

of reflective writing. Without these important teacher interventions, reflection can become a quick task that students complete because they are asked, rather than an avenue for practicing metacognition.

To discuss this topic, the authors present as an illustration a case study of one teacher responding to her student's reflective writing. In this first-year writing context, students must produce a “high-stakes” piece of reflective writing at the end of the course (a portfolio cover letter submitted with a final portfolio worth 50% of the student's grade) but also low-to-medium

stakes reflective pieces in the form of memos to accompany individual papers that are submitted throughout the term. These lower-stakes pieces are worth only a small portion of the students' course grade and are primarily assessed on good-faith completion, but the authors argue that they are important in themselves because they build students' schemata for the higher-stakes reflection that awaits them (i.e., the portfolio letter).

In a first-person narrative, Cohn describes her own journey from being hands-off in her processing of students' lower-stakes reflective writing to providing more instruction and feedback so that students' understanding of reflection and metacognition could be scaffolded over time. Cohn provides one extended example of her interactions with one student, "Courtney," over several reflective memos leading to her portfolio cover letter. She highlights specific ways in which Courtney's reflections "do more metacognitive work" over time, and while Cohn acknowledges that she cannot tie that progress directly to her own feedback, she has observed similar improvement in other students since she (Cohn) implemented a more intentional approach to presenting and responding to students' reflective memos. The authors then conclude the piece by calling for additional focused research on the question of how reflective writing promotes metacognition and especially how feedback and assessment variables interact with that process.

The final paper in this issue, by Anthony Edgington, is called "Split Personalities: Understanding the Responder Identity in College Composition," and it focuses on the persona of the instructor in providing feedback to students. While in a sense Edgington's paper brings the issue full circle from where it began with Christiansen and Bloch's article on the characteristics and effects of teacher written commentary, it also goes in a somewhat different direction in focusing primarily on the identity and the work of the teacher-as-responder.

Edgington, an experienced writing program administrator (WPA), begins his piece with an anecdote about a new graduate student instructor coming to his office for guidance about how to respond to a specific student paper. He notes that such interactions are a common part of his WPA experience, especially with new teachers, and that

Instead of searching for a perfect method or a starting point, new instructors are often asking “What stance or position should I take in responding to this student paper?” or put more simply “Who am I supposed to be for this student?”

Building both on the response literature and on his own insights from preparing new teaching associates (TAs) in a “Teaching College Composition” course, Edgington discusses not only the persona/identity options that teachers can (intentionally or subconsciously) assume but also the positive choice teachers can and should make to engage productively in the “intellectual endeavor” of being effective responders to their students’ writing.

He defines “intellectual endeavor” as involving (a) the same level of intellectual engagement teacher-scholars give to other reading and writing in their professional lives (contrasting it with the cursory readings many teachers give student papers that focus mainly/only on error-hunting and style) and (b) time and effort. However, he also discusses the professional and psychological benefits such intellectual engagement can offer to writing teachers, who, after all, are going to spend a great deal of time on response to student writing regardless of what persona they adopt. One might as well spend that time and effort in ways that are intellectually and emotionally satisfying, not to mention more effective for students themselves.

Taken together, these four papers provide challenging insights on a range of response issues and cross genres in innovative ways. We are very proud of this issue and grateful to our authors for sharing their work. We hope you enjoy it!

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