



2016

## Volume 2 Number 1 (2016)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

(2016) "Volume 2 Number 1 (2016)," *Journal of Response to Writing*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw/vol2/iss1/6>

This Full Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Response to Writing* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

---

# RW

JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

## Editor's Introduction

Dana R. Ferris

*University of California, Davis*

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!

### Copyrights

© JRW & Authors.

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the Journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

---

# RW

JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

## “Papers are never finished, just abandoned”: The role of written teacher comments in the revision process

M. Sidury Christiansen

*The University of Texas at San Antonio*

Joel Bloch

*Independent scholar*

---

The debate over the efficacy of written teacher comments has raised a variety of questions for consideration by both researchers and practitioners. Teachers can use written comments, in Vygotsky’s (1978) framework, to scaffold the development of student writing. By reflecting on his or her own commenting process, a teacher can assess and modify his or her comments as well as the method by which the comments are delivered. This study examines how four second-language (L2) students responded to comments on a series of three papers. The results show that students overwhelmingly followed the strategy training given during class on how to respond to teacher’s comments; however, the strategies used to make changes did not always result in a positive revision. While students believed they followed the teacher’s suggestions, they did not always pay attention to the paper as a whole, which resulted in problems with coherence or grammar, and even instances of plagiarism. Results indicate that strategy training does not guarantee an outcome of successful revision. This suggests that revision will be more effective for student paper development if understood as part of the creative process of writing rather than mere error correction. Based on these results, several proposals are made for modifying the comment process.

*Keywords:* revision, academic writing, teacher comments, writing process, technology

---

*Papers are never finished, just abandoned.* –Paul Valery

## Introduction

Valery's quotation illustrates the long-held importance of revision in the writing process. Writers often find difficulty when revising without feedback. Written corrective feedback (WCF) is an approach that operationalizes what Vygotsky (1978) called scaffolding, wherein more experienced learners provide aid to lesser experienced ones. Although commenting may come from various sources, Andrade and Evans (2013) argue that teacher commenting is an important factor for developing independent learners. Research has shown that the analysis of teacher comments can provide important insight into both understanding the role of commenting and changing pedagogical practices (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2015; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Farrell, 2007; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Russell & Spada, 2006; Straub, 1996; Zamel, 1985). The goals for commenting, as well as the context of these practices, can vary greatly depending on factors involved in the commenting process.

Variations can also be found in how students respond to teacher feedback (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2015) and may reflect bias in how teachers view the potential of each student (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). Such variations can make it difficult to generalize research results to individual teacher practice. In their review of existing literature on written comments, Liu and Brown (2015) found that factors such as variations in assignment, genre constraints, and classroom contexts make it difficult to generalize conclusions. Ferris (1995) found that students valued teacher feedback in

their development as writers but were sometimes unable to understand or respond to their teachers' comments. In their meta-analysis of research on written corrective feedback, Russell & Spada (2006) found that even when feedback proved to be effective, it was difficult to determine which factors contributed to that effectiveness.

In response to these problems, teachers have developed more and more complex pedagogies that are connected to the commenting practice. In her discussion of her pedagogical approaches to using feedback, Ferris (2015), for example, addresses a variety of factors she incorporates into her classroom to aid the process. Teachers, however, may not have the time or resources to incorporate all such factors. Therefore, despite the number of individual studies on written commenting, new research can aid teachers in understanding the impact of their comments within their own rhetorical pedagogical contexts, as well as within individual pedagogical contexts. The value of reflecting on one's own commenting process may not only help teachers further develop their own commenting practices, but may also provide a perspective for other teachers to cultivate their own processes. Finally, it should be noted that the technology used in teacher commenting, from the personal computer to the World Wide Web, is also evolving along with pedagogy.

This paper examines the array of comments provided by one teacher to four students on a series of three papers and how the students addressed the comments through two revisions of each of their papers. This research gives insight into the strategies students use to respond to comments. Findings show that although students followed the strategy training on responding to their teacher's comments, there were both successes and challenges in their revision strategies. Based on this analysis, the teacher could remediate the commenting process to better aid the students in their revision processes.

## Literature Review

### *The Problem of Teacher Commenting*

Teacher commenting has evolved from functioning as the rationale for a paper's grade, often focusing primarily on grammatical correctness, to

playing a greater role in the process of creating knowledge (Connors & Lunsford, 1993). This greater role has expanded the areas for research to examine all the possible factors that can affect teacher commenting. For instance, research has included topics such as providing direct and indirect feedback (Baker & Bricker, 2006), general or text-specific comments (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005), marginal/end comments (Goldstein, 2006), social context (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), student perspectives (Sheen, 2007), and teacher perspectives and attitudes (Ferris et al., 2011).

Likewise, research has also explored multiple factors (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999), including the value and type of teacher commenting (Ferris, 1995, 1997; Lee, 2008; Lee & Schallert, 2008; Tuzi, 2004) and their ability to promote improvement (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009) or learning beyond the revision process (Bruton, 2007; Chandler, 2009). This research has long been an area where first language (L1) and L2 composition teachers have shared a common ground but, at the same time, has demonstrated the complexity and often-chaotic nature of the commenting process. This research both reflects and impacts the dilemma of incorporating more and more factors into teacher strategies for commenting, as the goals for the revision process have evolved.

The growing complexity of the research has affected pedagogy, which in turn has impacted the students, who must develop strategies to respond to the comments made by their teachers. The movement away from commenting as focusing on grammatical correctness and towards a greater integration into the overall writing process can greatly affect underprepared students who may find it difficult to understand what teacher comments are asking for and may produce revisions that do not match teacher expectations (Peck, 1989). In her study of L2 students, Ferris (1995) similarly found evidence that students may have trouble in understanding their teachers' comments, sometimes because of a lack of understanding of the intent of the comment and sometimes because of external factors such as handwriting. As written commenting has moved to digital environments, handwriting ceased to be an issue; however, L2 students continue to struggle more with understanding the comments because of a lack of grammatical or rhetorical knowledge or appropriate strategies with which to respond (Baker & Bricker, 2006; Ferris, 1997; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

The growing complexity can make commenting a frustrating process for teachers, particularly when the results are less than satisfactory. L2 composition teachers often ask why WCF often provides limited benefits to students (Ferris et al., 2011). Ferris et al. (2011) found teachers are often unaware of the problems L2 writers have and may be unsure how to respond to them.

A new factor that may have affected the commenting process is the implementation of new technologies (Bloch, 2007). The introduction of the personal computer greatly facilitated strategies for multiple revisions. Even the development of larger screens with higher resolutions impacted how computers could be used for revision (Haas & Neuwirth, 1994; Ware & Warschauer, 2006). Today, computers allow for the insertion of print, oral, and even visual comments within the student's paper. Although there has been less research on the impact of these technologies on the commenting process, these technologies can create new contexts that may better respond to the problems that the students have encountered in the revision process.

### ***The Importance of Teacher Commenting in the Writing Process***

Despite these problems, teacher commenting has remained a central focus of composition classes, which has prompted researchers to question its effectiveness. Anson (2012), for example, has argued that much of the research on L1 teacher commenting traditionally focused on the types of comments teachers made (e.g., Hillocks, 1986; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Straub & Lunsford, 1995) and not how the students responded. This research has led Anson to raise the question perhaps every composition teacher has asked about the effectiveness of his or her commenting: "How do we know that burning the proverbial midnight oil over a stack or electronic folder of papers really make any difference to the development of students' writing abilities and their identities as literate individuals . . . ?" (p. 188).

Anson (2012) argues that one of the lesser researched approaches to understanding teacher commenting has been to examine the various ways in which students respond to the comments of their teachers. The problem with generalizability has been complicated by the plethora of factors involved in teacher commenting (e.g., Ferris, 2015), which can result in

this lack of generalizability to individual teacher practice. Therefore, new research can be important in examining the particular contexts in which teacher commenting occurs. Specifically, we ask the following questions about the students' strategies, their effectiveness, and the impact of the variations of the comments according to the goals of the teachers and the nature of the assignment:

1. What types of comments did the instructor use?
2. What strategies did the L2 students use when responding to written teacher comments?
3. What was the quality of the student revisions?

With this information, the instructor, one of the authors of this paper (Bloch), can reflect on the commenting process. Anson (2000) argues that "there is currently a pressing need for teachers of writing to become more reflective of the conditions, nature, and sources of their response to "errors" in students' texts" (p. 17). From this reflection, the instructor can evaluate the effectiveness of the commenting processes and how the weaknesses can be remediated. In the remainder of this paper, we discuss the context of the course in which the comments were made, the responses of the students to the teacher's comments, and the implications for our understanding of teacher commenting and the teaching of L2 composition.

## Methodology

### *Teacher*

The teacher in this course is an experienced composition teacher who has taught this course many times over a 20-year period. He had studied process approaches to writing and had written a dissertation on academic writing.

### *Participants*

The participants were first-year graduate students studying a variety of disciplines. A sample of papers from a randomly selected group of four students out of a class of 15 was chosen for the analysis of the teacher comments and student revisions. At the end of the course, the students

had signed permission forms allowing the teacher to use the papers for research with their names removed. The nationality of the students, their majors, and the general topics of the papers are given in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Participant's Nationality, Major, and Paper Topic*

Student	Nationality	Major	Paper Topic
Student A	Chinese	Biostatistics	Biodiesel Energy
Student B	Korean	Civil Engineering	Resolution
Student C	Turkish	Food Sciences	Probiotics - Food Science
Student D	Korean	Mechanical Engineering	Nanotechnology

### ***The Composition Course***

The course, located in a large ESL program at a Research I university, is the highest level of three post-admission graduate-level writing courses. Students were placed into the course based on a test designed by the department and administered and evaluated by the instructors when the students arrived on campus. The class met three times a week for 10 weeks. The course focused on academic writing following the first four chapters of *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* by Swales & Feak (2007). The three papers analyzed for this research were a definition paper, a problem-solution paper, and a data analysis paper.

The research here is a post-hoc study of the revisions students made in response to their teachers' comments. Each student chose a topic in his or her field and was expected to develop that topic throughout the course. It was, therefore, assumed although not verified that each student had some degree of prior knowledge about his or her chosen topics to draw upon during the revision process. By focusing on the written work of graduate-level students writing about their own fields, we could assume that the revision process would not be constrained by a lack of interest or background in the paper topic (cf. Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Goldstein, 2006).

In the definition paper, students chose a topic from their area of study, preferably from research they were working on in their other courses, and defined a concept in the field. In the problem-solution paper, students analyzed a problem, which was also chosen from their field,

discussed existing research, and presented possible alternative solutions or approaches. For the data analysis paper, each student chose a journal article and analyzed the data found in the article for a non-academic audience. Each paper was drafted three times, but we only focused on comments made to the first draft. The comments on the second draft were not analyzed because these drafts were written after one-on-one student-teacher tutorials, which included oral feedback from the instructor.

Research on the effects of context on teacher comments has shown that the individual characteristics of the course can greatly affect the nature of the commenting process (e.g., Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 2015; Hyland & Anan, 2006). In this course, the teacher commenting focused on the rhetorical and syntactic levels in each draft. Therefore, the comments included macro-level comments at the rhetorical level and micro-level comments at the sentence level. At the rhetorical level, the teacher saw commenting as part of the iterative process of invention by which the comments are used as scaffolding to help students develop their arguments.

Many of the comments asked the students to explain their ideas in more detail. Specific goals of the course, such as developing arguments or creating cohesive sentences, were also focused on. At the syntactic level, comments focused on several key issues connected to the rhetorical issues discussed with each assignment, such as verb tense or the choice of reporting verbs. Each comment addressed a specific problem, which had been explained during the class. Certain grammatical problems, such as the use of articles or subject/verb agreement, were ignored.

The comments were entered onto the students' papers using the comment feature of Microsoft Word (Microsoft Office version 2007), a technological change that could respond to concerns about teacher handwriting (e.g., Ferris, 1995). Another technical change involved entering comments using Macro Express 3 (ver. 3.8), an add-on program that simplified the creation of macros. Macros associate a piece of text with a keystroke (e.g., ctrl-a) and were primarily used for presenting readable feedback without having to retype the same piece of text. Each comment has a unique set of keystrokes. The teacher had created a set of 30 macros, which could be continually updated. Research has shown that macros can be valuable by providing students with both standardized and individualized feedback (Martinez, 2009).

In addition to the text entered with the macro, the teacher could personalize the comment by adding additional, text-specific comments. With the macros, a teacher can enter as much text as desired, adding more detailed explanations and links to other sources, such as concordance websites like COCA ([corpus.byu.edu/coca](http://corpus.byu.edu/coca)), which students could use for certain lexical problems (Davies, n.d.). The student could also ask questions or respond to the instructor in the same text box. These commenting boxes can create a dialogical interaction between teacher and student where students can ask for clarification on a comment or explain why they do not think the comment was useful. Ferris (2015) points out the importance of contextualizing commenting within the course. At the beginning of the course, the teacher introduced the macro for each comment and gave examples of various ways of addressing the problems that each macro was meant to highlight. In addition, each type of comment was reviewed at least once during the remainder of the course.

### ***Teacher Comment Categories***

Our first step in the data analysis was to create categories that included each of the comments based on a list proposed by Ferris (1997, 2006). All the comments and revisions were read, and then using a post-hoc analysis of the students' papers based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we created four categories that reflected different aspects of the commenting process. The categories reflected the specific goals for the course (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2006), which included using source texts, developing a voice, understanding the organization and structure of an academic paper, and making appropriate syntactic and lexical choices.

Category I includes the comments on the development of the content of students' papers, reflecting the social-epistemic nature of composition teaching where writing is used to explore and develop new ideas and claims (Berlin, 1988). These comments provided scaffolding to help students use their background knowledge to develop claims, cite other texts to support their own claims, and evaluate the claims from the papers they read and refute those they disagree with.

Category II includes comments on developing the structure and organization of the paper; for example, comments showing the

cohesiveness between sentences (e.g., Halliday, 1989), a topic highly valued and frequently discussed in the classroom.

Category III includes comments on grammatical items and can be related to the rhetorical development of the paper. Hopper (1987) has argued that grammatical choice is not a-contextual but emerges from the often-messy nature of rhetorical context. Therefore, a writer can make a number of appropriate choices depending on their understanding of the rhetorical context. For example, many syntactic items commented on, such as verb tense, the use of reporting verbs, and vocabulary choice, can be affected by the rhetorical choices of the writer. The choice of reporting verbs can vary depending on the writer's strength of agreement with the claim or the amount of evidence the writer feels is available for support (Bloch, 2009). Other comments, such as "cut" (asking students to delete something in their essays), that were categorized in this group reflected the rhetorical importance of writing style in academic writing, specifically the exigency of academic writing for conciseness and accurate word choice.

Category IV contained comments that either had to be inputted individually since they were infrequently used or did not belong to any of the coded categories. These included epistemic comments related to a specific assignment (e.g., Why is this a problem?), which was found in the problem/analysis papers, those grammatical comments that were rarely used. A detailed list of the comments and their categories can be found in [Appendix A](#).

We grouped each revision into a category based on Ferris's (2006) student revision analysis scheme. For instance, we divided Ferris's category of "Error Corrected" into three sub-categories that focus on how well the student followed the teacher comments. We then categorized student responses into six types: Followed instructions, followed instructions partially, followed instructions and made other non-requested changes, omitted text, ignored comment, and ignored comment but revised another part of the text.

The goal of the data analysis was to explore both where the students were successful and where they were not. We read each paper using the following protocol: initially, the first and second drafts were read to understand the paper and its changes; in the second reading, each teacher

comment was compared to the second draft and categorized according to the strategy employed. Then, one of the authors of this paper (Christiansen) evaluated whether the change(s) produced a “much better,” “better,” “same,” or “worse” piece of text.

For example, if a student used a present tense verb where a past tense was needed, the comment asked for a tense change. If the student changed it to past tense, the change was evaluated as “much better.” If the changes required the student to change a conjunction for a subordinate conjunction at the beginning of a paragraph, which the student only changed to “but” and not to “however,” nevertheless, the change was evaluated as “better.” Likewise, if the student was asked not to start a sentence with “and, but, or so” and the student replaced “and” for “but,” the change was evaluated as “same.” If the student attempted to revise the text but the revision was judged to still be problematic, it was rated “same,” and if the text was judged to be less comprehensible, the change was rated “worse.” To ensure reliability, the researchers assessed their data analysis methods by evaluating a practice set of comments.

Our overall agreement using Pearson’s Product-Moment Correlation was  $r=.88$ ; differences were then reconciled since the study was only exploratory. We then used the SPSS statistical package to generate descriptive statistics of the distribution of the comments and responses. We primarily used the chi-square test to find areas where they may be significant differences. Since the sample was small and the context was specific to the course, we could not generalize our findings.

## Analysis of Written Comments

### ***Question 1: What types of written comments were given?***

There were 299 comments given to the four students on their twelve papers. We first present the frequencies of the feedback by (a) category, (b) type of comment, and (c) type of paper. Then, in the next section, we describe the strategies used by students and discuss their quality based on the type of comment and type of paper.

***(a) Corrective feedback by category.***

Frequency data were used to explore the differences in the number of comments coded into each category. Results indicate that the instructor provided a variety of different kinds of comments, mixing grammatical, rhetorical, and organizational suggestions. The largest number of comments was found in Category III, which included grammatical items, ( $n = 111$ , 37%) followed by Category I, which included comments on development of ideas, ( $n = 79$ , 26%) and Category II, structure and organization, ( $n = 30$ , 10%). Category IV contains personalized comments, which included more than thirty types. Category II contains the least frequently given comments ( $n = 30$ , 10%). This category only has two types of comments: structure (organization) and cohesive relationship (between one sentence and another).

***(b) Corrective feedback by type of comment.***

The most frequent comment is “explain reasons or give examples” ( $n = 56$ , 18%) from the Category I, and the second most frequent is “specific problems” (the title of the macro followed by teacher’s particular comments) addressed to students in the Category IV ( $n = 48$ , 16%). The purpose of these two comments was to help students develop and/or clarify their arguments by asking them to provide additional information. Such types of comments reflect an attempt by the teacher to create a dialogue with the student by asking for more information, although, given the role of the instructor as the primary evaluator, the student may not see these comments in the same way but perhaps see them as challenging or critical (e.g., Sommers, 2011).

***(c) Corrective feedback by type of paper.***

In general, the comments given were evenly distributed across the type of paper. The problem solution papers contained 107 comments, closely followed by the data analysis papers with 101 and the definition papers with 91. Although there was some variance in the number of comments per paper, there was no deliberate attempt to do so by the teacher. A chi-square test revealed that the differences were not significant ( $p > .005$ ).

## Question 2: Student Strategies for Responding to Comments

As can be seen in Table 2, the students mostly followed their teacher's suggestions ( $n = 147$ , 49.16%), although they were more likely to do so on the definition and data analysis papers than on the problem solution paper ( $n = 56$ , 59, and 32 respectively). To a lesser extent ( $n = 18$ , 6.02%), they made revisions where the teacher had not commented. In other cases, the students deleted the text highlighted by the teacher instead of revising. Less frequently, but still significantly, they partially followed the suggestion ( $n = 29$ , 9.69%); that is, they modified some aspects of the text but not others. The least frequent student strategy was to ignore the comment completely ( $n = 14$ , 4.68%) or to ignore the suggestion but revise other parts of the text ( $n = 18$ , 6.02%). Table 2 has the overall counts.

Table 2  
*Student's Strategies by Type of Paper*

Student's strategies/Type of paper	Def.	PS	DA	Totals
Followed instructions—specifically to what teacher said	56	32	59	147
Omitted Text	6	27	12	45
Followed instructions—partially	8	15	6	29
Added information from a non-specific comment	4	13	6	23
Followed instructions—and added non-marked corrections	6	8	9	23
Ignore correction suggested but added other changes	5	8	5	18
Ignore correction suggested	6	4	4	14
Totals	91 (30.43%)	107 (35.79%)	101 (33.78%)	299

Note. Def. = Definition Paper; PS = Problem-Solution Paper; DA = Data Analysis Paper

### *What strategies did the students use?*

Since we were analyzing students' classwork, we could not control the number of comments given to each student; therefore, unlike the design of the experimental or quasi-experimental studies, not every student in

this study received the same amount of feedback. The comments were distributed across the four students as 35%, 23%, 22%, and 20%, respectively. The type of paper did prove to be a factor in the types of interactions.

The interaction between the student and the type of paper was statistically significant as demonstrated by a chi-square test  $\chi^2(10, N = 299) = 31.50, p < .01$ . Such differences could have resulted from differences in how invested the students were in their papers. As Goldstein's (2006) research on student attitudes towards revision shows, the student responses to the teacher's comments can greatly vary, which they did in this case. For example, Student C responded either completely or partially to the teacher comments almost 82% of the time. On the other hand, Student D mostly chose to omit text ( $n = 29, 41\%$ ) followed by responding specifically to the teacher's comments ( $n = 24, 34\%$ ). Table 3 contains all the percentages of student strategies by discipline.

The amount of additional information the student adds might perhaps illustrate how students use the comments to draw upon their working knowledge and develop their claims and, in many cases, their voice (e.g., Hyland, 2006). One factor that Bitchener (2008) focused on was the background knowledge of the student. In the rhetorical context described here, background knowledge can refer both to the student's understanding of what the comment is asking for and, perhaps more importantly, knowledge of the topic that can be drawn upon for revision.

By developing a better understanding of these factors, the teacher can adjust his or her commenting practices and related teaching pedagogies to better exploit the skills and the knowledge the student is bringing to the classroom. It was assumed that each student had at least some working knowledge and an interest in his or her topic, which they could draw on for revision. However, we cannot generalize about the role of prior knowledge since we did not measure student background knowledge. Nevertheless, our findings indicate areas where the nature of the writing assignment can influence the revision process; a factor, which Bruton (2009a, 2009b) claims, has not been adequately addressed.

Table 3  
*Percentages of Student Strategies by Student*

Student's strategies/Student	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Totals
<b>Followed instructions—specifically to what teacher said</b>	24 (36.37%)	26 (46.42%)	73 (68.22%)	24 (34.29%)	147
<b>Omitted Text</b>	9 (13.63%)	3 (5.36%)	4 (3.74%)	29 (41.43%)	45
<b>Followed instructions—partially</b>	7 (10.60%)	6 (10.71%)	14 (13.08%)	2 (2.86%)	29
<b>Added information from a non-specific comment</b>	0	10 (17.86%)	4 (3.74%)	9 (12.85%)	23
<b>Followed instructions—and added non-marked corrections</b>	13 (19.70%)	2 (3.57%)	4 (3.74%)	4 (5.72%)	23
<b>Ignore correction suggested but added other changes</b>	10 (15.15%)	4 (7.15%)	4 (3.74%)	0	18
<b>Ignore correction suggested</b>	3 (4.55%)	5 (8.92%)	4 (3.74%)	2 (2.86%)	14
<b>Total amount of strategies</b>	66 (22.07%)	56 (18.73%)	107 (35.79%)	70 (23.41%)	299

### **Question 3: Quality of Student Revisions**

There were two main differences that could affect the ability of the students to revise: the differences in the types of comments and the possible effects of paper type. In this section, we discuss how these factors may have affected student revision.

#### **(a) Differences according to type of comment.**

Given the differences in the types of comments presented, particularly the ones that did not ask for a specific kind of revision, we were concerned with what differences could be found in the revisions to these different types. We found a large difference in the acceptability of the revision depending on the type of comment. For example, the data show that students spent the most time with subjective comments for which there was no clear answer. Of the corrections that had the highest success rate of “much better” ( $n = 93$ , 31%), only 6% ( $n = 18$ ) addressed the rhetorical concerns of the paper (e.g., comments such as “organization,” “explain reasons,”

“evaluate,” and “show relation”). These comments lacked clear criteria for judging their success, something the teacher explained numerous times in class. The remainder of the “much better” ( $n = 82$ , 27%) revisions had a clearer set of criteria for judging, such as “vocabulary,” “cut,” “verb form,” and “verb tense problems.”

The teacher limited the choices for verb tense to past, present, and present perfect, so depending on the student’s original choice, there may only be one or two options to choose from, greatly simplifying the decision-making process. Moreover, the instructor had discussed how some comments, such as those asking for evaluation, had no clear-cut correct answer and depended on the subjective judgment of the teacher/reader.

The relationship between the quality of the correction and the type of teacher comment was significant  $\chi^2(85, N = 299) = 132.01, p < .01$ . A possible reason why successful local changes did not always result in better drafts overall relates to how the students interpreted the teacher’s comments and his intention.

Overall, the revisions were generally judged to make the paper “much better” ( $n = 93$ , 31%), “better” ( $n = 82$ , 27%), and the “same” ( $n = 81$ , 27%). The remainder of the revisions was judged not to have been successful, either by making the text “worse” ( $n = 21$ , 8%) or by ignoring the comment. This suggests that in general, students’ revisions were judged favorably.

***(b) Differences according to type of paper.***

Another factor that could affect student revisions was whether the genre demands of each paper type—in particular, the need to respond to audience and evaluate the significance or limitations of the work that varied across different assignments—caused students to respond to the comments in different ways. Research on genre has pointed to specific rhetorical functions that students need to focus on, specifically the ability to support claims and critique existing claims (e.g., Bazerman, 1988, Swales, 1990). Anecdotally, we have found that the students had much more difficulty with the problem/solution paper, which contained a greater need to understand the backgrounds of the audience and to evaluate prior claims discussed in the paper. Thus, to a great extent, teacher commenting focused on helping students develop these rhetorical strategies.

We used quantitative and qualitative analysis to determine if any of these categorical variables were related. A chi-square test for independence was used since the variables had two or more categories and we wanted to compare the frequency of cases found in those categories. The chi-square test indicates that the relationship between the quality of the correction and the type of paper is significant  $\chi^2 (10, N = 299) = 31.50, p < .01$ . The quality of the correction resulted in “much better” when the paper was a definition paper ( $n = 37$ ) compared to the problem solution paper ( $n = 24$ ) and the data analysis paper ( $n = 32$ ). Another example where paper type may have been a factor was when the quality of the revision was judged the “same,” which occurred more often with the problem solution paper ( $n = 40$ ) compared to the definition paper ( $n = 21$ ) and the data analysis paper ( $n = 20$ ).

This relationship may be a result of the difficulties in the genre demands of the task itself. While the definition paper asks students to simply describe a concept, the problem-solution paper requires a more complex analysis of a problem as well as an evaluation of possible solutions. The problem-solution paper may require more complex revision strategies since it involves a detailed analysis of the problem and possible solutions that need to be explained.

For example, sometimes, a comment aided the student in noticing a problem, which can be the first step in making a revision (Flower & Hayes, 1981), which the teacher did not identify. In the example below, the student responded in a different way than the comment seemed to intend, providing a different direction for possible new revisions for the subsequent draft.

### **1. Student D definition paper.**

“Japanese scientist Norio Taniguchi first defined terminology ‘nanotechnology’ as ‘consists of (a) the processing of, separation, consolidation, and deformation of materials by one atom or by one molecule’ in 1974 in his paper. Dr. K. Eric Drexler promoted the technological significance by nanotechnology in his books ‘Engines of creation: the coming era of nanotechnology’ in 1986 (b).”

**Teacher’s comments:** (a) Correct the form of the verb—you should paraphrase so it fits your grammatical form; (b) What did he say?

*Revision.*

“Feynman **described a process** by which the ability to manipulate individual atoms and molecules might be developed, using one set of precise tools to build and operate another proportionally smaller set, so on down to the needed scale. Dr. K. Eric Drexler promoted the technological significance by nanotechnology in his books ‘Engines of creation: the coming era of nanotechnology’ in 1986. **In his book he said that we can make extremely tiny machine just using hundreds of atoms. In addition, he argued that we can create new things like god using nanotechnology. His argument becomes a base to found molecular nanotechnology.**”

The ability of students to go beyond what the teacher asked for often led to creative ways of improving the paper. The first comment (a) asked the student to “correct the form of the verb” to better fit with how the student paraphrased the source. In response, however, the student omitted the original information and source and added a different and somewhat more detailed source. In the first draft, the author quoted Taniguchi, but for the second, the student referred to Feynman and Drexel as new sources, dropping the quote from Taniguchi even though the teacher comment did not ask for that deletion. The revision clearly better responded to the needs of an audience who lacks expert knowledge of the field (one of the stated goals for the paper). Note that there is information (in italics) that had not been previously provided. Because the student had been asked to paraphrase, the teacher assumed that the information did respond adequately to the comment.

While, as discussed above, some deviations from the intent of the teacher led to improved texts, the same strategy could result in additional problems, such as poor citation techniques, patch writing (Pecorari, 2008), or a lack of clarity and cohesiveness. In response to comment (b), for example, the student added a second source without connecting these sentences with the remainder of the paragraph, which caused it to be rated “same.”

The student responded to the comment directly but does not connect the material to the previous (Feynman) source. Here again, the student could draw upon background knowledge to add more information but may

have lacked the procedural knowledge to link the new information to the old information. The importance of contextualizing the revision process in multiple drafting is clear here since the teacher and student had another chance to revisit these issues in the succeeding drafts while retaining the improvement made in this draft.

**(c) *The impact of paper type on revision strategies.***

The teacher's comments sometimes play a role mediating the relationship between teacher and student, often incorporating the values of the discipline. To make this interaction successful, both the student and the teacher have to share a meta-understanding of the intent and the assumptions behind the comment. Therefore, it is important that the student see how revision can play a role in knowledge creation and not just view revision as a series of criticisms that undermine or appropriate their writing (e.g., Sommers, 2011). Comments such as "explain what is important" or "evaluate the claim" assumed certain values for the academic paper the teacher wants the student to develop. Since these assumptions may not be apparent, it is important for the teacher, perhaps in the class or in a tutorial, to clarify that this is the purpose of the comment and not simply an attempt to have them "write more."

Writers can use the genre demands of the paper type to guide whether they need to make a revision or where they can bypass what the teacher asks for. Different paper types require different understandings of the constraints on the paper genre (e.g., Bazerman, 1988) and different degrees of background knowledge. In this passage, the teacher comments focused on the evaluation of the claim regarding the pretreatment of maize, but the student responded by cutting the original claim regarding reducing cost and substituting research from another article that evaluates the claim from a different perspective.

**2. *Student D data analysis paper.***

"Decreasing the cost in SSF can significantly reduce the cost of the whole process . . . can be much smaller when water and extra nitrogen sources are replaced by AD manure. . . . In this paper, wet-oxidation is a pretreatment of the maize in the AD manure was proved to

improve the ethanol production a lot. (a) The optimal conditions of the pretreatment of the maize and straw were also studied. The study will be more creative if other carbon sources such as algae are studied in the AD manure economically. This research is meaningful because it provides a new method of producing bio-ethanol and gets a positive result.”

**Teacher comment:** (a) This sentence needs to be evaluated. Explain why this is important.

*Revision.*

~~Decreasing the cost in SSF can significantly reduce the cost of the whole process . . . can be much smaller when water and extra nitrogen sources are replaced by AD manure. . . . In this paper, wet-oxidation is a pretreatment of the maize in the AD manure was proved to improve the ethanol production a lot. The optimal conditions of the pretreatment of the maize and straw were also studied. The study will be more creative if other carbon sources such as algae are studied in the AD manure economically. This research is meaningful because it provides a new method of producing bio-ethanol and gets a positive result.”~~

In the paper written by Oleskowicz-Popiel et al., **AD manure is proved to be a more efficient way to produce bio-fuel instead of water because it can provide nitrogen but water can't.** Water and extra nitrogen resource such as urea together cost much more than AD manure. **As a result, the pretreatment of maize in the AD manure is an economical way to produce ethanol.** This result from this article can lower the cost of biofuel production, thus people can buy it at a lower price. However, **this study may be more creative if other carbon sources such as algae are studied as well.**

In the revision, the student replaces the original claim, which was based on his own background knowledge, with a citation to another source claiming that the manure is more efficient and then expands on the significance of the claim, as the teacher suggested, by arguing that such efficiency made the process more “economical.” In doing so, the student may be seen as better incorporating the values of the genre for incorporating

textual borrowing as a means of providing the evaluation the teacher asked for. Since the teacher's comment only uses the general term *evaluate*, the student must understand from previous discussions what that term means in the context of the genre of the assignment.

Sometimes, understanding the demands of the genre can lead the student to revise in a different direction than expected. For example, in the problem-solution paper, the constraints were that the students were expected to evaluate the possible solutions proposed to solve the problem. In (3) below, the student replaces the old information that the teacher had asked to revise hoping that this replacement would eliminate the problem.

### 3. Student D problem-solution paper.

"Second, to give special functional property or high quality to the materials, the process was very expensive and the yield was quiet low using conventional bulk size materials. This high cost process and low yield percent to give special property and high quality." (a)  
**Teacher comment:** (a) Explain the reasons for this position or give examples.

*Revision.*

"The evolution of nanotechnology in materials science and engineering does not only overcome the limitation of conventional bulk-size materials, but also has dramatically expanded the classes of materials being explored and new devices. In the past our knowledge about materials was limited to metal, clay, and organics in bulk size . . ."

The student responded by replacing the information in the original version with different information that focused on the positive qualities of the new process. In the initial version, the student had simply criticized the traditional method for solving the problem. In the revised version, the student still criticizes this method (**limitation of conventional bulk-size materials**) but does so by comparing it to a better method. The revision eliminated the more negative criticism of the original process and replaced it with a more positive evaluation, while still retaining the criticism of the old method. This resulted in a "much better" rating for the

evaluation. The revision demonstrates the value of substituting a more sophisticated rhetorical strategy. While it is not clear why the student eliminated the old version, his revision better evaluates the research, to make a successful revision.

This strategy for evaluation was extensively taught in class, illustrating the link between teacher commenting and classroom discussion. The classroom discussion focused on Swales' move 3 for opening a gap with the previous research (Swales, 1990). Regardless of his motivation, his use of this rhetorical strategy resulted in the revision being judged "much better." There were other cases, however, where the use of general comments fails when the student lacks the understanding of the genre constraints. In (3) above, a student is given a comment asking to explain what the claim means.

#### ***4. Student A data analysis paper.***

"Fig 3 shows that the concentration of ammonia changed apparently at the first 20 hours but stayed relatively fixed from 20h to 140h. (a) At the beginning, ammonia level was a little higher than that in the rest of the process."

**Teacher comments:** (a) What does this mean?

*Revision.*

"Fig 3 shows that the concentration of ammonia changed apparently at the first 20 hours but stayed relatively fixed from 20h to 140h. At the beginning, ammonia level was a little higher than that in the rest of the process."

In this case, the revision was not judged to be adequate, resulting in a rating of "same." One problem that the students struggle with is responding to the needs of the audience, which are often ambiguous. Here the teacher's comment attempts to have the student clarify the claim, perhaps for a more general audience. The student, however, responded with very little revision, which may have been the result of the ambiguity of the comment or a lack of having more background information. From the teacher's perspective, it is more important to focus on the possible ambiguity of the comment. In one interpretation, the teacher may seem to ask about the relevance of this information, hoping the student elaborates on its significance.

In another interpretation, the teacher may appear to ask for more elaboration. Thus, the ambiguity may not clearly convey the intentions of the teacher, nor can it be clear to the teacher what might be the cause of the breakdown in their interaction. In this situation, the teacher hoped the student would exploit the affordances of the technology to ask for clarification. If the student did not understand the comment or wished to challenge the teacher's interpretation, the comment feature of Word could be used to explain the reasons. However, this feature was rarely utilized.

These examples illustrate how a comment may trigger the student to recall the necessary information or rhetorical strategy that had been learned either inside or outside the classroom for a successful revision, as well as to recall areas where breakdowns can occur. Since we did not interview the students about the motivations for the revisions, we do not know what incited their decisions, but surmise that it could have less to do with the type of comment and more to do with how the comment was contextualized into the genre of the paper type and how well it was understood when explicitly taught in class.

## Conclusion

This paper explores the interactions between teacher commenting and student revision through a reflection on one teacher's comments and how the students responded to them. The ability to consider questions regarding the successes and problems inherent in written comments that have long been addressed in the literature highlights the complexities that commenting still poses. The problem of generalizability explored in the introduction raises questions about whether this research can impact how other teachers comment.

Nevertheless, this research does raise questions that teachers and researchers can consider. Teacher comment is never a neutral process. Cohen & Cavalcanti (1990) argued how teacher bias can affect the commenting process. Our exploration of the teacher's commenting processes illustrate the biases that the teacher expressed in his comments and how students responded to them. The long history of research on teacher commenting illustrates how students face the same problems with

understanding comments that students have long faced and how teachers still encounter the same questions about motivating student engagement (e.g., Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995).

As Robb et al. (1986) found, commenting can be most effective when it directly addresses the students at the point where they are making meaning. This research attempted to examine how the teacher's comment impacted this process of meaning making. This research may not have answered Lee's (2013) question of whether "L2 writing teachers become any wiser in their WCF practice" (p. 108). This question, however, does try to elucidate how written teacher comments can create a dialogical relationship between a teacher and a student. Nevertheless, these findings can help teachers rethink both the nature of WCF and how the goals for the comments are integrated into the structure of the class.

Consistent with previous research, the analysis of this data suggests that student revision strategies can be affected by various factors that include individual differences, the type of assignment, and the nature of the comment (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener et al. 2015). As a result, students may exhibit more than one strategy to respond to the same type of comments. Students can choose to follow the comment exactly, make further modifications that go beyond the comment itself, omit information, or ignore the comment altogether.

Some strategies, moreover, proved to be more effective, especially if the writers considered how the revision fit the text as a whole as well as the overall goals of the course and the nature of the paper. On the other hand, even the use of appropriate strategies may not necessarily lead to positive revisions. Consistent with what Conrad & Goldstein (1999) and Goldstein (2006) found, our students often revised successfully, but they also ignored or unsuccessfully responded to the comments.

This research also attempts to demonstrate the impact of how the teacher views commenting. As with other aspects of the writing process, the responses to the teacher's comments could not be easily predicated. Commenting is not just a form of correction; it serves as a heuristic in the knowledge-making process in which teacher comments can help students not only improve their writing but also help them enter the conversations of their learning communities (Graff, 2003). Therefore, writing teacher

comments can have important pedagogical implications for the larger goals of teaching academic writing.

Responding to a variety of types of comments can also help students develop their writing skills (e.g., Sheen, 2007). As Flower (1979) proposes, a writer's ability to revise as the teacher/reader expects, can require a variety of strategies more often found in expert rather than novice writers. It is, therefore, crucial that the teacher in the commenting process develop the expertise of the students' writing skills and the expectations of the writing genre they are learning. For the teacher, the commenting process reflects the approach to learning that the teacher is incorporating into the classroom. Straub (1996) argues that commenting can help student writers engage in the types of meaning creation that reflect the nature of their disciplinary communities. The nature of comments may help explain both the successes and failures in meeting the teachers' goals for commenting.

This research still leaves large gaps in our understanding of the commenting process. The question, for example, about what constitutes learning within this revision process is more difficult to show. Overall, our results show a mixed picture, which is consistent with what Ferris (2008) has argued about the difficulty of measuring learning in the revision process. We cannot claim that providing feedback always results in better papers, for students interpret comments differently and apply different strategies in different contexts. Han & Hyland (2015) found students may lack an understanding of the assumptions underlying the comments. Remediating this problem may entail revising the comment and/or increasing classroom discussions about the issues incorporated in the comments.

There are pedagogical risks in this approach to teacher commenting as well. Of particular concern is that there can be misunderstandings, which can result in problems with the revision. On the other hand, such problems and misunderstandings can help teachers to revise their comments or to better integrate them into the classroom teaching. Although we have no evidence that the use of computer macros aided the students' responses to the comments, our attempt to standardize the wording of the comments was intended partly to deepen their understanding of the goals and values underlying each comment and to help them develop more consistent strategies for responding to the comment. The evidence for success in

this goal was inconclusive. The repetitiveness of the comments may have helped the students better understand them, but this standardization also may have made the comments less conversational and more formulaic. Although we attempted to remediate this problem by encouraging students to respond in the comment feature of Microsoft Word, few of them did so.

One question this research only briefly addressed was in the role technology can play in the commenting process (e.g., Tuzi, 2004; Milton, 2006; Ware, 2014; Ware & Warschauer, 2006). Since the introduction of the personal computer, technology has played a role in how teachers give comments and how students respond to them (Bloch, 2007; Hill, Wallace, & Haas, 1991). The evolution of comment boxes in Microsoft Word allowed teachers to address problems with handwriting (e.g., Ferris, 1997). These boxes also allowed teachers to insert hyperlinks to other sources as well as macros, which allowed teachers to simplify the commenting process. Straub's (1996) suggestions for "clarifying and extending" (p. 393) comments has helped us reformulate how we use the macros program since they are easy to revise, based on what we learned from this research. The reflective nature of this research allowed us to address the limitations of the macros. Later, we created a YouTube channel containing videos that could be directly related to the individual comments (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqFZU2Zl0fNcg0BxQ9-zVSg>).

The limited nature of this research leaves other questions about the effectiveness of our commenting process. Bitchener's (2012) recent overview of research on commenting concludes that it is difficult to make judgments about the effectiveness of comments because there are so many different factors involved. Can students become more independent writers with the help of teacher commenting, as Andrade and Evans (2013) suggest? This independence requires a more longitudinal study (Ferris, 2006) that includes a greater focus on the persona of the students as they interpret and respond to their teacher's comments. Providing these insights into the students' revision strategies can help teachers understand the personas they want to project in this dialogue. This persona can include both the goals and values the teachers want to focus on and the relationship the teacher wants with the student.

Thus, reflecting on the comments and the responses the students make to those comments can help teachers understand whether their comments accurately reflect this teacher personae, whether the students understand what their instructor is looking for, and how the students want to respond to what the teacher is asking for. Although teachers may project their persona in their comments, students may not interpret it in the way teachers intend.

There are pedagogical risks in this approach to teacher commenting as well. Of particular concern is that there can be misunderstandings, which can result in problems with the revision. Because we did not interview students about their goals for revision, we cannot comment on the reasons for their decisions regarding revision. Nevertheless, such problems and misunderstandings can help teachers to revise their comments or to better integrate them into the classroom teaching.

The approach to revision outlined here reflects research on both L1 and multilingual writers. While there are unique factors about writing in a second language that make the revision process particular, other aspects cut across L1 and multilingual writers. Even the most experienced academic writers learn from submitting papers to journals, receiving feedback, and having their papers evaluated. They learn that the relationship between writer and reviewer involves a complex set of social interactions that immerse all parties in the process of knowledge creation, which can be both exhilarating and frustrating. The recent controversy over the revisions Harper Lee made to her original draft of the novel that would become *To Kill a Mockingbird* demonstrate how commenting, at least from highly informed resources, can impact even the most skilled L1 writer. The editor suggested Harper Lee change the narrator to be a young girl; however, Harper Lee made this change and changed the father as well. The controversy is whether this additional change was what made the book so popular. Thus, we need to look at revision not simply in terms of what is suggested by the reviewer or editor as our data showed, but as a whole. As we attempt to contextualize research on teacher commenting to better include the actual relationship between teacher and student, it becomes clearer that not only are papers never finished but neither is the research.

As has long been noted in the literature, (e.g., Robb et al., 1986; Sommers, 1982), these interactions reflect the chaotic nature of learning; the problems encountered with the comments can be helpful for revising commenting practices. Although sometimes the chaotic nature of the interactions often resulted in positive changes, we felt we still needed to clarify some of the problems the students were having. For example, in response to Ferris et al.'s (2011) finding that decontextualized instruction may not be of great value to students, we attempted to elaborate on the context of the comments by creating a series of videos that explained each of the comments. Links to these videos could be included in the comments and if the students felt they did not understand the comment, they could view the videos wherever and whenever they wanted to. All of these factors were intended to increase the engagement between teacher and student during the revision process (Han & Hyland, 2015). However, how effective this engagement was, particularly over the long term, remains a question for further research.

## References

- Andrade, M. S., & Evans, N. W. (2013). *Principles and practices for response in second language writing*. New York: Routledge.
- Anson, C. (2012). What good is it?: The effects of teacher response on students' development. In N. Elliot & L. Perlman (Eds.), *Writing assessment in the 21st century: Essays in honor of Edward M. White*. New York, NY: Hampton.
- Anson, C. M. (2000). Response and the social construction of error. *Assessing Writing*, 7, 5–21.
- Baker, W., & Bricker, R. H. (2006). The effects of direct and indirect speech acts on native English and ESL speakers' perception of teacher written feedback. *System*, 38, 75–84.

- Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping written knowledge: The genre and activity of the experimental article in science*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Berlin, J. (1988). Rhetoric and ideology in the writing class. *College English*, 50(5), 477–494. <http://doi.org/10.2307/377477>
- Bitchener, J. (2008). Evidence in support of written corrective feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17(2), 102–118.
- Bitchener, J. (2012). A reflection on ‘the language learning potential’ of written CF. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 21, 348–363.
- Bitchener, J., & Knoch, U. (2009). The relative effectiveness of different types of direct written corrective feedback. *System*, 37, 322–329.
- Bitchener, J., Young, S., & Cameron, D. (2015). The effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14(3), 191–205.
- Bloch, J. (2007). *Technology in the L2 composition classroom*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Bloch, J. (2009). Designing Learning Objects Using Concordancing Data for Teaching Reporting Verbs: An Exploration of the Role of Technology in the Teaching of Academic Writing. *Language Learning & Technology*, 13(1), 59–78. Retrieved April 15, 2011, from <http://llt.msu.edu/vol13num1/bloch.pdf>
- Bruton, A. (2007). Vocabulary learning from dictionary referencing and language feedback in EFL translational writing. *Language Teaching Research*, 11, 413–431.

- Bruton, A. (2009a). Designing research into the effects of grammar corrections in L2 writing: Not so straightforward. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 18, 136–140.
- Bruton, A. (2009b). Improving accuracy is not the only reason for writing, and even if it were . . . *System*, 37, 600–613.
- Chandler, J. (2009). Response to Truscott. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 18, 57–58.
- Cohen, A. (1987). Student processing of feedback on their compositions. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning* (pp. 57–69). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Cohen, A., & Cavalcanti, M. (1990). Feedback on compositions: Teacher and student verbal reports. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 155–177). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Connors, R. J, & Lunsford, A.A. (1993). Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers. *College Composition and Communication*, 44, 200–223.
- Conrad, S. M., & Goldstein, L. M. (1999). ESL student revision after teacher-written comments: Text, contexts, and individuals. *Journal of Second Language Composition*, 9, 147–179.
- Davies, M. (n.d.). The View. Retrieved: April 15, 2011, from <http://www.corpus.byu.edu/coca>.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2007). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. London, England: Continuum Press.
- Ferris, D.R. (1995). Reactions to teacher response in multiple-draft

- composition classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 33–53.
- Ferris, D. R. (1997). The influence of teacher commentary on student revision. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 315–339.
- Ferris, D. R. (1999). The case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes: A response to Truscott (1996). *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8, 1–11.
- Ferris, D.R. (2002). *Treatment of error in second language student writing*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Ferris, D. R. (2004). The “Grammar Correction” debate in L2 writing: Where are we, and where do we go from here? (and what do we do in the meantime . . . ?). *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 49–62.
- Ferris, D. R. (2006). Does error feedback help student writers? New evidence on the short- and long-term effects of written error correction. In K. Hyland & F. Hyland (Eds.), *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues* (pp. 81–104). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferris, D. R. (2008). Students must learn to correct all their writing errors. In J. Reid (Ed.) *Writing myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching* (pp. 90–114). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Ferris, D. R. (2015). Inclusivity through community: Designing 11 response systems for “Mixed” academic writing courses. In M. Roberge, K. M. Losey, & M. Wald (Eds.) *Teaching U.S.-educated multilingual writers: Pedagogical practices from and for the classroom* (11–46). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Ferris, D., Brown, J., Liu, H., & Stine, M. E. A. (2011). Responding to

- L2 students in college writing classes: Teacher perspectives. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45, 207–234.
- Ferris, D., & Hedgcock, J.R. (2005). *Teaching ESL composition: purpose, process, and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Flower, L. (1979). Writer-based prose: A cognitive basis for problems in writing. *College English*, 41, 19–37.
- Flower, L., & Hayes, J. (1981). A cognitive process theory of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 32, 365–387.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Goldstein, L. (2006). Feedback and revision in second language writing: Contextual, teacher, and student variables. In K. Hyland, & F. Hyland (Eds.), *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues* (185–205). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Graff, G. (2003). *Clueless in academe: How schooling obscures the life of the mind*. Location: Yale University Press.
- Haas, C., & Neuwirth, C. (1994). Writing the technology that writes us. In C. Selfe, & S. Hilligoss (Eds.), *Literacy and Computers* (pp. 319–335). New York, NY: Modern Language Association.
- Han, Y., & Hyland, F. (2015). Exploring learner engagement with written corrective feedback in a Chinese tertiary EFL classroom. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 30, 31–44.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1989). *Spoken and Written Language*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

- Hill, C., Wallace, D., & Haas, C. (1991). Revising on-line: Computer technologies and the revising process. *Computers and Composition*, 9(1), 83–109.
- Hillocks, G. (1986). *Research on written composition: New directions for teaching*. Urbana, IL: National Council on Rehabilitation Education.
- Hopper, P. (1987). Emergent grammar. *Berkeley Linguistics Conference (BLS)*, 13, 139–157.
- Hyland, K., & Anan, E. (2006). Teachers' perceptions of error: The effects of first language and experience. *System*, 34, 506–519.
- Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. (2006). Feedback on second language students' writing. *Language Teaching*, 39, 83–101.
- Lee, I. (2008). Student reactions to teacher feedback in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17, 144–164.
- Lee, I. (2013). Research into practice: Written corrective feedback. *Language Teaching*, 46, 108–119.
- Lee, G., & Schallert, D. (2008). Meeting in the margins: Effects of the teacher-student relationship on revision processes of EFL college students taking a composition course. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17, 165–182.
- Liu, Q. & Brown, D. (2015). Methodological synthesis of research on the effectiveness of corrective feedback in L2 writing, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 30, 66–81.
- Milton, J. (2006). Resource-rich Web-based feedback: Helping learners become independent writers. In K. Hyland, & F. Hyland (Eds.)

*Feedback and second language writing* (pp. 123–139). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Martinez, N.A. (2009). Tips for teaching: Using macros to create reusable comments and feedback. Retrieved: March 12, 2013, from <http://www.slideshare.net/Nicola.Martinez/tips-for-teaching-using-macros-to-create-reusable-comments-and-feedback>

Peck, W. C. (1989). The effects of prompts upon revision: A glimpse of the gap between planning and performance. *National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy Technical Report*. Retrieved: March 23, 2011, from [http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp\\_file/130/TR26.pdf?x-r=pcfile\\_d](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/130/TR26.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d)

Pecorari, D. (2008). *Academic writing and plagiarism: A linguistic analysis*. London, England: Continuum.

Robb, T., Ross, S., & Shortreed, I. (1986). Salience of feedback on error and its effect on EFL writing quality. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 83–91. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3586390>

Russell, J., & Spada, N. (2006). The effectiveness of corrective feedback in SLA: A meta-analysis. In J. M. Norris, & L. Ortega (Eds.), *Synthesizing research on language learning and teaching* (pp. 133–164). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

Sheen, Y. (2007). The effect of focused written corrective feedback and language aptitude on ESL learners acquisition of articles. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(2), 255–283.

Sommers, N. (1982). Responding to student writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 33(2), 148–156.

- Sommers, N. (Producer). (2011). *Beyond the red ink: Teachers' comments through students' eyes*. Retrieved from <http://pages.mail.bfwpub.com/hackerhandbooks/authors/videos/>
- Straub, R. (1996). The Concept of control in teacher response: Defining the varieties of "Directive" and "Facilitative" commentary. *College Composition and Communication* 47(2), 223–225.
- Straub, R., & Lunsford, R. F. (1995). *Twelve readers reading: Responding to college student writing*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Swales, J. M., & Feak, C.B. (2007). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills*. Ann Arbor, MI. University of Michigan Press.
- Tuzi, F. (2004). The impact of e-feedback on the revisions of L2 writers in an academic writing course. *Computers and Composition*, 21, 217–235.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological process*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ware, P. (2014). Feedback for adolescent writers in the English classroom: Exploring pen-and-paper, electronic, and automated options. *Writing & Pedagogy*, 6(2), 223–249.
- Ware, P., & Warschauer, M. (2006). Electronic feedback and second language writing. In K. Hyland & F. Hyland (Eds.) *Feedback and second language writing* (pp. 105–122). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Zamel, V. (1985). Responding to student writing. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 79–102.

## Appendix A

Category of Comment	Type of Comment	Wording of Comment	Def.	PS	DA	Subtotal	Total
I	Development	1. Explain the reasons for this position	18	16	22	56	79
		2. This sentence needs to be evaluated. Explain why this is important	2	8	10	20	
		3. This is an opinion so you have to cite it	2	0	1	3	
II	Structure	1. Show the relationship between this sentence and the previous ones	6	7	6	19	30
		2. There is a problem with the organization	2	5	4	11	
III	Grammatical	1. This is unclear-rewrite this and explain what you mean	8	6	1	15	111
		2. Change the tense of the verb: use only past, present, and present perfect	7	8	9	24	
		3. Cut – redundant or irrelevant	6	18	8	32	
		4. Vocabulary – choose another word. You might check corpus.byu.edu/coca for some suggestions	4	2	7	13	
		5. Verb Form	7	9	11	27	
IV	Other	a. Addresses specific problems	12	21	15	48	79
		1. What is the problem the research is addressing/Explain the problem		2	2	4	
		2. Why is this a problem?		4	1	5	
		3. How does this deal with the problem		1	1	2	
		4. What is the purpose of this			1	1	
		5. Why – how does the method attempt to answer the question (you don't really have a clear question), so your organization isn't very clear.			1	1	
		6. What are the causes/consequences of this?		3	1	4	
		7. What does this modify?		1		1	
		8. Low enough to do what?			1	1	
		9. First explain what they are doing	1			1	
		10. This paper is too short to be summarized – just discuss the importance of the results		1	1	2	
		11. Be more specific		2	1	3	
		12. What paper?		1	1	2	
		13. Who?	1		2	3	
		14. You need to cite your reference if you used any	3		1	4	
		15. Check this	1			1	
		16. Hedge this claim	3	2		5	
		17. Too specific – be more general	1			1	
18. Too much detail-need to focus more on the problem		3		3			
19. How do know this?	1			1			
20. What did he say?	1			1			
21. You have already said this		1		1			
22. What does this mean?			1	1			
	b. Addresses Specific Grammatical Problems	17	7	7	31		
	1. Missing a verb/noun			2	2		
	2. Add X word	5		3	8		
	3. Adjective		1		1		

Christiansen, M. Sidury and Joel Bloch. (2016). "Papers are never finished, just abandoned": The role of written teacher comments in the revision process." *Journal of Response to Writing*, 2(1): 6-42.

4. Make this another sentence			1	1
5. Clause	6	2		8
6. Reverse	1			1
7. Parallelism	2			2
8. Pronoun reference – the pronoun should match the noun that precedes it	1	4	1	6
9. Korean-English	1			1
10. Not a sentence	1			1
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>299</b>

Note. Def. = Definition Paper; PS = Problem-Solution Paper; DA = Data Analysis Paper

### Copyrights

© JRW & Authors.

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the Journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Christiansen, M. Sidury and Joel Bloch. (2016). "Papers are never finished, just abandoned": The role of written teacher comments in the revision process." *Journal of Response to Writing*, 2(1): 6–42.

RW

JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

# Grammar Agreements: Crafting a More Finely Tuned Approach to Corrective Feedback

Ryan P. Shepherd  
*Ohio University*

Katherine Daily O'Meara  
*Emporia State University*

Sarah Elizabeth Snyder  
*Arizona State University*

---

This article introduces the idea of grammar agreements as a way to offer a more “finely tuned approach” to grammar feedback in the L2 classroom (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, p. 307). These agreements offer students options for how the teacher will respond to writing done in their first-year composition classes. The authors offer suggestions for both why grammar agreements are a useful tool in the L2 writing classroom (and possibly beyond) and how to implement grammar agreements effectively.

*Keywords:* L2 writing, second-language writing, grammar, grammar feedback, corrective feedback

---

**H**ow to approach grammar in the second-language (L2) writing classroom can be a complex and often frustrating issue for students, teachers, and researchers. L2 writing students taking their first composition class often feel that they should be getting grammar feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2003; Bitchener & Ferris, 2003) but may feel overwhelmed, confused, or frustrated by their teachers' feedback styles and prioritizations (Ferris, 2003). Teachers also feel like they should be giving students this feedback (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012) but may feel overwhelmed, confused, or frustrated by diverse student expectations and ability levels. Still, teachers have an ethical obligation "to identify the most effective ways to help [their] students write more accurately" (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum & Wolfersberger, 2010, p. 448). We, as teachers and researchers of L2 writing, believe that teachers should test new methods to refine feedback given to L2 writing students. We need to develop innovative approaches to provide more effective feedback for the students that is also a more efficient use of our time. This article seeks to offer one such alternative for feedback: grammar agreements. These agreements offer students choices of how they would prefer to receive feedback on grammar and mechanical errors in their writing. In this study, we explore the limitations and potential benefits of using grammar agreements in order to "take a more finely tuned approach to corrective feedback" (Ferris, Liu, Sinha & Senna, 2013, p. 307).

## Background

Grammar agreements bring students into the decision-making process instead of simply giving students a predetermined amount of feedback on assignments. In the model we have used for this study, students were able to choose from three levels of grammar feedback that involve varying levels of commitment from the teacher as well as the student (see [Appendix](#)). These three levels were called "extensive," "focused," and "minimal" feedback. If a student chose extensive feedback, the teacher would make note of most grammatical errors in the student's papers in whatever way he or she saw fit. The student would then be expected to correct the errors and meet with the teacher to discuss them outside of class time. If a student chose focused

feedback, the teacher would mark one to three serious or repeated errors in each paper. The student would then be expected to correct these errors, but meeting outside of class time would be optional. If a student chose minimal feedback, the teacher would only mark grammatical errors if the meaning was unclear. There were no additional expectations in regard to grammar if this option was chosen.

The grammar agreements are set up to be in line with what research suggests for written corrective feedback in L2 writing classes. Bitchener and Ferris (2012) note that students “should be responsible and accountable for editing their work and improving in accuracy over time” (p. 163), a sentiment that initially led to the development of this method.

Grammar agreements are attempting to address several issues that commonly result from providing explicit grammar instruction in composition classes. Part of what makes the grammar agreements appealing is that grammar is not graded, but students who choose to get grammar feedback are still held accountable for improvement. This concept draws from suggestions put forth by Matsuda (2012), who called into question the logic of grading grammar for L2 students in first-year composition without teaching grammar explicitly. Grammar agreements are able to sidestep this issue while still keeping grammar part of the class. There is also the question of how effective grammar feedback is for students in the short- and long-term. For example, the literature questions the effectiveness of direct grammar instruction (Chandler, 2003; Lee, 2003; Truscott & Hsu, 2008; Ferris et al., 2013). The grammar agreements were set up to take an indirect approach to grammar feedback, or possibly a mix of direct and indirect feedback, to “better address the goals” of a writing class (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

By allowing students to select how much feedback they receive, teachers are able to bring students into the conversation regarding how much feedback will meet their needs. While composition research—at least L1 composition research—may lead us to believe grammar is not part of the composition class, Bitchener and Ferris (2012) remind us that “both students and instructors believe in written CF [corrective feedback]” (p. 96). By allowing students to choose their level of involvement, we also give them some agency in the classroom. Ferris (2003) notes the importance

of having open communication lines between teachers and students with regard to overall feedback practices, as it “helps [teachers] to be aware of what [their] students may think and how they may react to [their] pedagogical practices” (p. 93). Students are able to see what options are available to them in the grammar agreements and are able to choose how they would like grammar to be approached in their papers after thoughtful discussion with the teacher about the pros and cons of each option. This also enables students and teachers to have a more dialogical relationship about pedagogical practices and expectations.

### The Study

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of grammar agreements, we set up a study to see how they were used in L2 writing classrooms. Fourteen teachers at a large Southwestern research institution used grammar agreements in their classes in the fall of 2013. All of the sections were first-year composition, and each section was designated specifically for L2 writers. In total, 279 students took part in the study, and nearly 600 samples of student writing were taken. Each text was reviewed for number of grammar errors, number of mechanical errors, and overall writing quality by a minimum of two reviewers. A third reviewer was consulted to resolve scoring disputes. At the end of the semester, students and instructors were asked to participate in surveys to gauge their perceptions of the grammar agreements. Offering the teachers' views on the use of grammar agreements is a perspective that Ferris (2003) notes is relatively absent in previous literature.

Students showed general improvement in grammar errors, mechanical errors, and overall writing regardless of whether they chose extensive, focused, or minimal feedback. Analysis of the student writing samples showed that there was no statistically significant difference between students in each feedback category (Table 1) in terms of improvement in these areas.

While the type of feedback did not show a marked difference in improvement, the study did yield two notable impressions in other areas: students are interested in receiving grammar feedback, and teachers

Table 1  
*Overview of Improvement*

	<u>Extensive</u>	<u>Focused</u>	<u>Minimal</u>
Percentage showing improvement (writing)	70.45%	75.56%	60.00%
Percentage showing improvement (grammar)	70.33%	62.22%	66.67%
Percentage showing improvement (mechanics)	52.27%	64.44%	46.67%
Average improvement (writing) <sup>i</sup>	1.91	1.50	0.86
Average improvement (grammar) <sup>ii</sup>	1.98	0.39	1.23
Average improvement (mechanics)	0.33	1.08	0.34
Number of errors per 100 words: pretest (grammar)	8.35	7.00	7.36
Number of errors per 100 words: posttest (grammar)	6.38	6.60	6.12
Number of errors per 100 words: pretest (mechanics)	3.17	3.60	2.30
Number of errors per 100 words: posttest (mechanics)	2.85	2.52	1.96

<sup>i</sup> Based on a comparison of 20-point scores of pretest vs. posttest.

<sup>ii</sup> Based on comparison of errors per 100 words in pretest vs. posttest.

generally appreciated grammar agreements but wanted to modify them to their contexts and needs.

### ***Student Interest in Grammar Feedback***

Of the 279 students who took part in this study, 132 chose extensive feedback and 129 chose focused feedback. That leaves 18 who chose minimal feedback, only about 6.5% of the students. While 6.5% is certainly significant and shows that some students are not interested in grammar feedback, it also suggests that the vast majority of students in these L2 writing classes were interested in receiving some kind of feedback. This is consistent with other research in the area (e.g., Chandler, 2003). While not all students wanted that kind of extensive feedback, a majority did, and a vast majority wanted some kind of feedback. As shown above, more feedback did not necessarily translate directly into more improvement in writing, grammar, or mechanics, but many students were still interested in, and likely expected, this type of feedback.

This finding is supported by the exit survey. A question on the survey asked students “What was/were the most important factors in your choice” of type of feedback? “Learning grammar” (61.4%) and their “grades” (62.7%) were the two answers which students were most likely to mark as “very important” to their choice. Students also rated as “very important” the “amount of work” (44.1%) and “amount of time” (44.0%) they expected to spend revising grammar. Students were also

able to write in answers to this question. While relatively few students wrote in answers (just 7 out of the 70 who responded to the exit survey), their answers were telling. One student said that he or she wanted to “enhance [his/her] ability in English writing” and that he or she hoped “to improve [his/her] English comprehensively.” Another student said, “I like to know what I did wrong rather than blindly repeating the same mistakes again.” Three other students also mentioned wanting to learn more about English or grammar.

While it is not necessarily clear how much students can learn from the different types of feedback over the course of 16 weeks (e.g., Truscott, 1996), it's clear that students perceived that the feedback would help them learn. Denying these students the opportunity to continue to work on their grammar and mechanics in our writing class would be a mistake. If grammar were to be ignored, students may be unhappy with the class and may feel that they are not doing enough to improve their English skills along with their writing skills. Ferris (2003) corroborates this idea, saying that “ignoring students’ wishes about error feedback may lead to frustration [. . .], anxiety, decreased motivation, and a corresponding loss of confidence in their writing instructors” (p. 141). Imposing a single track of grammar feedback (extensive or focused, for example) may also leave more than half of the students unsatisfied with the feedback they were receiving.

### ***Teacher Perspectives on Grammar Agreements***

After a semester of using grammar agreements, participating teachers were asked to take a perception survey on the efficacy of using this tool in an L2 writing course. The results were mixed. Five out of eight teachers indicated that they were “satisfied overall with the benefits” that grammar agreements afforded in their classes, one citing that the agreements gave students more agency to ask for grammar feedback. Another teacher wrote that “Students appreciated having the ability to request more one-on-one time with their instructor.” Two of the three teachers who were not satisfied with the agreements felt that they had other strategies that accomplished the same goals, one stating that “I do appreciate what [the agreement is] trying to accomplish, and I use other methods to do similar things.” Another teacher noted that she did not continue using the

grammar agreements while also ceding that “that does not mean I won’t use something similar in the future.” The teachers’ reasons for their opinions were often linked to students’ individual needs: “I found that it did help some students, but individuals who needed the most help were not always the ones who signed up for it.” Others based their impressions on how much time they had to dedicate to giving feedback. One teacher asserted that the agreements “didn’t necessarily help manage my time,” adding that the agreements increased her workload. Perhaps the most insightful comment from a participating teacher reflects the overall purposes of offering students agency and choice in their feedback from teachers. Her comment offers possible revisions to the current options:

I think that the students like when they have a choice regarding their learning and that some sort of [agreement] is a good way to provide that. I am not sure if students need the option “extensive” though. We know that focused feedback is probably more effective for students’ learning and I am thinking of modifying the [agreement], so that the first choice is eliminated but the second one (focused feedback) comes with the required conference. I also vary my feedback instead of only providing indirect feedback by locating the error; I vary it depending on the type of error, as I can sometimes tell that the student would not be able to self-correct the error. What I feel is more important is to make [students] think about the correction that is provided and try to see why the error occurred, so they can spend the time on internalizing the correct language instead of spending that time searching for the correction.

This mix of direct and indirect feedback is also recommended by Bitchener and Ferris (2012). It is interesting to note that one of the researchers of this study independently came to a similar conclusion: he also eliminated the “extensive feedback” option in later semesters and moved the conference requirement to those students who selected “focused feedback.” Perhaps modifying the grammar agreement would offer more effective feedback for students and would overcome the problem of the work required for teachers to respond to the “extensive” option. Both the researcher and this instructor seem to be agreeing with Bitchener and Ferris (2012)

that selective feedback may be more effective in the context of a process-oriented first-year composition course (p. 144).

Two main conclusions can also be drawn from the results of the teacher perception survey. The first is that both teachers and students need to fully understand the parameters and expectations of the grammar agreements for them to be successful. One teacher noted that the start of the semester is already packed with new and potentially complicated information for English-language learners, and so instituting the grammar agreements amid other start-of-semester announcements was “confusing.” She noted her students’ uncertainty with the choices. This uncertainty persisted throughout the semester: “Even though I would remind students when I commented on their drafts that some would receive intensive responses while others would receive global remarks, in the end the majority of them wanted grammar feedback even if they did not agree to this option from the onset.” Another teacher noticed, “when students are asked to make their choice, they may not necessarily be able to understand what the choices really mean for them in the long term or for their language learning in general.” A third teacher attributed any ineffectiveness of the grammar agreements to his own inadequate explanation of the tool that he provided to his students, stating that if given the opportunity to do it again, he would rework the way he explained the agreements to alleviate confusion. These statements reiterate the importance of clearly explaining the agreements and bringing students into the decision-making process.

A second conclusion is that for grammar agreements to be beneficial for L2 writing teachers, these teachers should implement the agreements in a way that complements their individual teaching styles, practices, and pedagogies. As one teacher noted, “Students appreciated [the grammar agreements] overall. However, I find tailoring conferences and other office visits to students’ needs more convenient.” In another case, the teacher chose not to use the grammar agreements in future classes because, “it just isn’t as effective for me as I feel my own strategy is.” As with any new tool or innovation proposed for the classroom, its success depends on how well it aligns with the needs of the users.

## Recommendations

Although the grammar agreements as used in the study worked well, we would make a few modifications in future grammar agreements with regard to improving student and teacher satisfaction. In particular, the option to offer extensive feedback may need to be adjusted or eliminated in specific contexts. As a few of the teachers who took part in the study mentioned, this feedback choice was very time-consuming. It may even be counterproductive: “If a teacher focuses too much on errors when the content is still being formulated, it sends the wrong message to students—they get the idea that writing is more about pristine final products than it is about engaging in the process to produce interesting and mature content” (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012, p. 141). Perhaps eliminating this option or replacing it with a more manageable option would help to reduce the time necessary to offer students feedback and may avoid sending this wrong message. If the extensive feedback option is desired by the student, one alternative may be to create an option in which teachers mark four to six repeated or serious errors. This may be a bit more manageable while still offering students an option beyond focused and minimal feedback. If the extensive feedback option is removed entirely, we do recommend adding the grammar conference requirement to the focused feedback option as a means of providing more feedback for students who desire it.

Teachers who may want to implement this strategy in the future may try to create an escalating ladder of agreement choices for students with the policy that the more feedback the teacher gives, the more required work (e.g., revisions, explanations, grammar logs, exercises, face-to-face meetings) the student must complete to utilize that feedback. Teachers are welcome to use previously studied and innovative strategies that promote explicit grammar knowledge and production. Although many students will not choose the highest levels of this type of grammar agreement, we feel that offering this option allows for fruitful discussions of grammar feedback theory between teachers and those students who have a strong desire for extensive grammar feedback.

We also recommend a combination of indirect and direct response to grammar feedback. This was suggested by one of the teacher participants

in the study and is further supported by the recommendations of Bitchener and Ferris (2012). As the teacher says, "I can sometimes tell that the student would not be able to self-correct the error." An experienced and intuitive teacher may be able to make such an observation, and in that case, a more direct approach would be more effective for certain errors. We would like to note that each of the researchers of this study use this approach as well. Teachers have many choices involved in the feedback practices they employ with second-language writing students; Ferris (2003) notes:

Considerations include the knowledge, abilities, needs, and preferences of the students, the types of errors being considered, the stage of development of a particular text, and the time, ability, and willingness of the instructor to incorporate error treatment (including feedback, revision, and instruction) into the overall plan of the writing course. (p. 157)

Each context is different, and ultimately it is up to each individual teacher to decide the precise combination of feedback techniques that are beneficial for the student and reasonable for the teacher. It is these choices that Ferris (2003) says have the potential to have a "profound effect on the progress and development of . . . students' writing" (p. 159).

Finally, we also recommend keeping grammar and graded classroom concerns separate. Nowhere in the agreement is the separation of grammar and grading mentioned, but it has been the practice of the researchers to separate these concerns. We are unsure if the participant teachers did this as well, but we assume, based on survey responses, that some did not. When asked for drafts of a paper, we asked for two copies if the student asked for grammar feedback: one that would be used for graded concerns and one in which grammar errors would be marked. We also kept grammar conferences separate from conferences we had with students about other concerns. This practice helps to reinforce to students that grammar is not the primary concern in their writing classes, but it is still important enough to address and focus on in out-of-class meetings. Hartshorn et al. (2010) suggest a separation as well: "Efforts to improve accuracy may be more successful if separated from attempts to develop other aspects of ESL writing" (p. 102).

## Conclusions

The use of grammar agreements with L2 writing students is beneficial for a number of reasons. In particular, grammar agreements are a way to incorporate grammar instruction into L2 writing classes without affecting student grades or taking over classroom content, complementing recommendations made recently in the field of L2 writing (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Student agency is an important part of the agreements as well, as 97.3% of students reported that they “Strongly Agree” (47.3%), “Agree” (36.5%), or “Somewhat Agree” (13.5%) with the statement, “I liked being able to choose the amount of grammar feedback I received.” With the grammar agreement, students are able to take part in the decision for how grammar will be approached in their papers and have agency in their own learning. The instructor responses supported that students liked to have more agency and that most students wanted grammar feedback (regardless of agreement selection).

The instructor surveys also clearly demonstrate two other important points about grammar agreement implementation. It is important to explain the options to students clearly so that the students have maximum understanding of what they are selecting and have more agency in their choice. It is also important to remember that the grammar agreements, how teachers respond, and how teachers conduct grammar conferences should be individually tailored based on both teaching styles and specific student needs/abilities. No one version of the grammar agreement will be equally effective in all teaching situations. Therefore, customization is a necessary component in implementing grammar agreements. In addition, as L2 writing literature suggests, it is always a good idea for teachers to thoroughly explain any and all of their feedback practices, techniques, and procedures, “rather than assume that everyone (both instructor and students) is operating under the same philosophies and assumptions” (Ferris, 2003, p. 93).

Although this study was done in the specific context of L2 writing classrooms, we see the grammar agreements as a strategy that teachers can use in many different contexts of teaching writing—regardless of the students’ language background. For example, this same agreement could

be used for mainstream and mixed composition classes, writing across the curriculum, basic and developmental writing, graduate writing classes, and any other context where the teacher may feel the need to give grammar feedback. We also see this concept working in contexts such as the writing center, as it may disambiguate where to start giving feedback and how to allot energy within a tutoring session. However, before asking students, who may not be as acutely aware of their grammar needs, we suggest first implementing a grammar awareness activity or survey, such as the one found in *Language Power: Tutorials for Writers* (Ferris, 2014, pp. xiii–xxii). This preemptive survey will allow students to make informed decisions about the amount of grammar feedback that they would appreciate.

Overall, grammar agreements are a thoughtful method of managing the potentially burdensome workload of giving grammar feedback. Future research may improve on this model by exploring how grammar agreements affect student satisfaction with classroom content and grades. Additionally, a longitudinal study may also be developed to see if the choices students make in the grammar agreement have long-term effects on writing or grammar improvement. By tailoring the amount and type of feedback given to students through the use of grammar agreements, and by involving students directly in that decision, these agreements can be one option to provide the more finely-tuned approach to written corrective feedback that may benefit both student and teacher.

## References

- Bitchener, J., & Ferris, D. R. (2012). *Written corrective feedback in second language acquisition and writing*. New York: Routledge.
- Bitchener, J., & Knoch, U. (2010). Raising the linguistic accuracy level of advanced L2 writers with written corrective feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 19, 207–217.
- Chandler, J. (2003). The efficacy of various kinds of error feedback for improvement in the accuracy and fluency of L2 student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12, 267–296.
- Evans, N. W., Hartshorn, K. J., McCollum, R. M., & Wolfersberger, M. (2010). Contextualizing corrective feedback in second language writing pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research*, 14(4), 445–463.
- Ferris, D. R. (2003). *Response to student writing: Implications for second language students*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ferris, D. R. (2014). *Language power: Tutorials for writers*. London, England: Macmillan.
- Ferris, D. R., Liu, H., Sinha, A., & Senna, M. (2013). Written corrective feedback for individual L2 writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 307–329.
- Hartshorn, J. K., Evans, N. W., Merrill, P. F., Sudweeks, R. R., Strong-Krause, D., & Anderson, N. J. (2010). The effects of dynamic corrective feedback on ESL writing accuracy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44, 84–109.
- Lee, I. (2003). L2 writing teachers' perspectives, practices and problems regarding error feedback. *Assessing Writing*, 8, 216–237.

- Lunsford, A. A., & Lunsford, K. J. (2008). "Mistakes are a fact of life": A national comparative study. *College Composition and Communication*, 58(4), 781–805.
- Matsuda, P. K. (2012). Let's face it: Language issues and the Writing Program Administrator. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 36(1), 141–163.
- Truscott, J. (1996). The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes. *Language Learning*, 46, 327–369.
- Truscott, J., & Hsu, A. Y. (2008). Error correction, revision, and learning. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17, 292–305.

## Appendix

### Grammar Agreement

---

This is a composition class and not a grammar class. Grammar will not be the main subject of this class, nor will it be something that you're graded on. However, many students learning English as a second language may wish to improve their grammar. Because of this, you will be given three options for how your instructors will respond to grammar in your papers. *Please note: None of these options will affect the grade of your writing in any way.*

1. **Extensive Grammar Feedback:** If you are interested in receiving extensive grammar feedback, your instructor will note (but not correct) most major nonstandard grammatical constructions or spellings on first drafts. If you choose this option, you will be expected to meet with your instructor with an additional draft between first and revised drafts to have a 15-minute grammar conference. In this additional draft, you will need to attempt to correct all marked items. During the grammar conference, these corrections will be discussed, and you can raise any questions or concerns about your corrections.
2. **Focused Grammar Feedback:** If you are interested in receiving some grammar feedback, your instructor will note (but again, not correct) one to three *repeated* nonstandard grammatical constructions or spellings on first drafts. If you choose this option, your instructor will expect that you will attempt to improve your use of these nonstandard constructions for your final draft. You may also have a grammar conference if you choose to, but this is optional.
3. **Minimal Grammar Feedback:** If you are not interested in receiving grammar feedback, your instructor will not mark nonstandard grammatical constructions or spellings unless he or she does not understand the meaning of the sentence. If you choose this option, nonstandard constructions will not be addressed in any drafts, but you're still welcome to meet with your instructor outside of class time to discuss grammar issues if you'd like.

Please circle the number of the option from the choices above. If, at any time, you choose to change the kind of grammar feedback you will receive, please just let your instructor know.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Copyrights

© JRW & Authors.

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the Journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Shepherd, Ryan P., Katherine Daily O'Meara, and Sarah Elizabeth Snyder. (2016). "Grammar Agreements: Crafting a More Finely Tuned Approach to Corrective Feedback." *Journal of Response to Writing*, 2(1): 43–57.

# RW

JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

## Promoting Metacognitive Thought through Response to Low-Stakes Reflective Writing

Jenae Cohn

*University of California, Davis*

Mary Stewart

*University of California, Davis*

---

Metacognition is a typical learning outcome in composition courses, but providing feedback on low-stakes reflective writing and assessing high-stakes reflective writing are complex tasks that warrant more attention in the literature. Consequently, this article explores how the assignment of and response to low-stakes reflective writing can provide effective scaffolding to higher-stakes reflective writing tasks. We present an example of our strategy for response through one instructor's experience with responding to her first-year composition student's low-stakes reflective writing. Ultimately, we call for more research on responding to reflective writing that will ensure the valid and reliable assessment of metacognition in composition courses.

*Keywords:* reflective writing, portfolio, metacognition, validity, response

---

## Introduction

Metacognition, most literally defined as “thinking about thinking,” or, as Flavell (1979) phrases it, “cognition about cognitive phenomena” (p. 906), is a typical learning outcome in first-year composition. However, it is not one we often explicitly discuss. More frequently, writing instructors describe the importance of reflection in the writing process and ask their students to engage in a variety of reflective writing tasks, such as freewriting (Elbow, 2000), journaling (Fulwiler, 1987), and composing memos to introduce essay drafts (Giles, 2010; Shvidko, 2015). The goal of these reflections is to increase students’ awareness of their strategies and intentions—to get students thinking about their own thinking—but 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. As education researchers Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) put it, because “metacognition often takes the form of an internal dialogue, many students may be unaware of its importance unless the processes are explicitly emphasized by teachers” (p. 21). Several writing studies scholars echo this point. Randazzo (2012) argues, “reflection and reflexivity require guidance from a mentor” (p. 378), and Kimball (2005) cautions that, without instructor guidance, students may view reflective writing as “an extra hoop” through which they must jump (p. 451). We thus propose that instructors more deliberately evaluate their assignment and assessment of reflective writing, and we argue that a key element in ensuring that metacognition is a valid learning outcome in first-year composition is to respond to students’ low-stakes reflective writing.

When we say that metacognition is a learning outcome, we mean that a primary goal of first-year composition is for students to develop their abilities to self-reflect and self-assess, to understand and articulate the reasons for the decisions they made during the writing process. This learning outcome is important in any educational context because it helps

“students learn to take control of their own learning” and it can “increase the degree to which students transfer [learning] to new settings and events” (Bransford et al., 18–19). Specific to writing studies, metacognition helps students generate “a better understanding [of] . . . cognitive and linguistic processes” that both enhances reasoning skills and improves writing ability (Bower, 2003, p. 49), and supports composition studies’ increasing focus on transfer (Downs & Wardle, 2007). As a course learning outcome in first-year composition, metacognition is developed in a variety of ways, including both high-stakes and low-stakes reflective writing.

Reflective writing is high stakes when students feel social or academic pressure to perform well, which is typically accomplished by publicly presenting the writing or receiving a substantial grade for it. In the first-year composition courses we teach, our students compose cover letters that accompany their final portfolios, which are worth 50% of their course grade. The reflective writing is high stakes because the cover letters introduce the portfolio and are read by not only the students’ instructor but also by another composition instructor at our institution (following a community model of portfolio assessment) (Broad, 1994; Hout 2002). The portfolio cover letters are also the final opportunity for students to demonstrate the metacognitive skills they have been developing throughout the course.

Low-stakes reflective writing has less pressure, providing students with opportunities for honestly and authentically reflecting on their thinking and writing processes. In the courses we teach, we ask students to compose reflective cover letters, which introduce and reflect upon completed writing assignments, similar to Giles’ (2010) “process notes” and Shvidko’s (2015) “letters to the reviewer.” The cover letters are an interesting middle-point between low-stakes and high-stakes writing because they are graded, but only worth a cumulative 10% of the student’s grade, and they are in the same genre as the final portfolio cover letter. As such, these lower-stakes cover letters are meant to prepare students for the high-stakes portfolio cover letters, and can create an opportunity for scaffolding students’ development of metacognition.

While we suspect that our institutional context is not unique, there is not much attention in the literature to the ways low-stakes assignments prepare students for high-stakes assignments that measure metacognition

as a learning outcome. Consequently, our concern in this article is the extent to which instructors can prepare students for high-stakes reflective writing tasks by responding to low-stakes reflective writing. What does it look like for a student to demonstrate metacognition in a cover letter? What kinds of responses to low-stakes reflective writing will encourage students to practice and develop metacognitive skills?

This article answers those questions by first discussing different strategies for responding to low-stakes reflective writing, then offering an example of Cohn's practice of responding to a first-year composition student's reflective writing, and concluding with a discussion of how responding to low-stakes reflective writing increases the validity and reliability of measuring metacognition as a learning outcome in first-year composition courses.

### **Strategies for Responding to Low-Stakes Reflective Writing**

Elbow (1997) describes a "continuum" of response strategies from zero response to critical and diagnostic response. While he does not suggest that "we can just mechanically match low stakes responses with low stakes assignments," he observes that "the lowest stake response goes most naturally with low stakes assignments: when the writing doesn't much matter to the final grade, we can afford to withhold our response or criticism" (p. 10). In practice, these low-stakes responses are often full-credit or no-credit point allocation, and, if there is written commentary, it is noncritical and supportive. The primary advantage of providing zero or minimal response is that it maintains the "low-stakes" status of reflective writing, which enables students to take risks.

While Elbow (1997) certainly has a point, his perspective assumes that students have an inherent ability to engage in metacognition, which other scholarship tells us is unlikely, especially when reflective writing takes the form of a cover letter or process memo. As Sommers (2011) asserts, reflective memos must "intersect with [students'] own experiences as writers/readers in multiple ways" (p. 108), but students may not be able to recognize the intersections without feedback from the instructor. Ash and Clayton (2004) further explain that students "need help with connecting

their experiences to course material, with challenging their beliefs and assumptions, and with deepening their learning” (p. 138). Without challenging students to articulate the relationships between their work in class and their independent attempts outside of class, reflective writing can become a redundant exercise, one where students replicate a formula for describing their process between drafts without moving beyond description. Further, encouraging students to challenge their beliefs and assumptions necessarily involves response; without seeing a response to their writing, students may not know that someone may disagree with them or think differently than they do.

An alternative strategy, then, is to provide a more rigorous response to reflective writing. Bain, Mills, Ballantyne, and Packer (2002) describe such a strategy for responding to student-teacher journals, arguing that the more detailed feedback reflective writers received, the deeper their reflections became. In their study, some writers received feedback primarily on the content while others received feedback on the form of their journals and the nature of their reflection. The strong reflective writers did not necessarily benefit from receiving detailed feedback, but the weaker reflective writers began to shift from mere description to the analysis characteristic of metacognition (p. 186). Therefore, Bain et al. conclude that, “feedback focusing on the reflective writing process” can encourage students to use reflective writing as “a learning tool,” not just a method of describing events (p. 193).

The need for response to low-stakes reflective writing increases dramatically when those low-stakes tasks are meant to prepare students for a high-stakes demonstration of metacognition. Bower (2003) illustrates this in her rhetorical analyses of 88 cover letters from a basic writing class. She found that the students were more focused on convincing the teacher that they were good students than they were on demonstrating authentic metacognition. Students frequently asserted that they had changed as writers and as learners, but they did not support those claims with evidence, nor did they demonstrate any critical reflection or analysis that led to this conclusion. Bower thus reasons that most students were “merely paying lip service to the classroom’s values” (p. 60), and were not “actually exhibit[ing] metacognition” (p. 62). In other words, simply asking students to engage in

reflective writing does not necessarily lead to authentic metacognition—we need to teach students how to do this.

An effective teaching strategy is responding to student writing, such that students' multiple attempts at low-stakes reflective writing throughout the quarter are guided by instructor feedback that prepares them for high-stakes reflective writing at the end of the quarter. To describe this strategy, Cohn offers a narrative example of giving a student feedback on reflective writing.

### **An Example of Responding to Student Reflective Writing**

When I began to teach first-year composition, my composition pedagogy courses had convinced me that metacognition was valuable. However, I wasn't entirely sure how to communicate that value to my students. The reflective cover letter prompt I used was built to promote flexibility, as it pointed students not only to a description of their writing process, but also to a number of different ways in which they might analyze that process (see [Appendix](#) for Reflective Cover Letter prompt). However, because the reflective cover letters were meant to be low-stakes activities, I kept explicit instructions to a minimum. I also refrained from responding to the cover letters because I assumed that writing without the looming pressure of feedback would make students feel more comfortable detailing their feelings and learning experiences.

I soon found myself disappointed. The reflective writing my students produced could best be described as progress reports, where students detailed what they did to complete the assignment, typically in the way that a prescribed "writing process" gets described: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and revising. Because I had not given students any real vocabulary for writing about their processes, most turned to the linear, formulaic writing process narratives with which they were familiar. Finally, most cover letters ended with a salutation expressing their hopes for their performance on the assignment and a brief, anxious inquiry about whether I thought they deserved an A. It was clear that they were writing this reflective cover letter for me alone, and I didn't see any evidence that a lack of feedback was encouraging them to use this assignment as an opportunity to examine their ways of thinking about the assignments. In spite of efforts

to encourage students to see reflective writing as an opportunity to examine their own processes and practices, it was still a graded assignment where the real audience was the instructor.

Given my experiences, I made two decisions: (1) I needed to make my own expectations for the assignment clearer, and (2) I needed to start giving students some feedback on their reflective writing, even if it was minimal.

As I thought about my expectations for the task, I realized that I wanted to see students analyzing both their writing process and their products to a greater extent. I hoped that this assignment would be a way for students to develop the autonomy and self-confidence essential for making informed writing choices. Upon reflecting about the value of reflective writing for my students, I knew that I needed to model this reflection in turn by making the assignment goals more explicit and aligned with the metacognitive work I had done myself. My hope was that by making metacognition's transferable quality clearer, I would also make clearer the concrete value of reflective writing to students.

In addition to explaining the assignment instructions with greater clarity, I started to respond to every reflective cover letter submitted in order to give students an understanding of how they could deepen analysis of their progress. I knew that part of developing metacognition is also developing new ways of thinking about writing; these possibilities might not be immediately obvious to students without some guidance. Below, I offer an example from one student to whom I gave feedback, tracing the ways she responded to this feedback and how the feedback was applied in both her lower-stakes cover letters and her final portfolio cover letter. "Courtney" (a pseudonym) offered consent for use of her written work in publication.

Writing in response to completing a digital literacy narrative for the class, Courtney wrote many paragraphs like this one where she describes what she did and how she felt about what she did:

*The hardest part for me is always the topic and formulating it into a thesis, probably because I believe it is the most important step. I often spend a couple hours over the course of several days before I even begin typing thoughts into a Word Document and this time was no different. For this paper I was*

*trying to narrow down my laundry list of ideas to pick a topic specific enough to elaborate on but also one I really felt comfortable discussing . . . I finally decided I wanted to branch out and challenge myself with not only a negative viewpoint, but a very personal topic.*

While I appreciated that Courtney went beyond simply describing her process by reflecting on the challenging feelings she experienced while developing her topic for the assignment, it also seemed that Courtney could have done more to explain why she found it so challenging to pick a topic. Further, it didn't seem that Courtney did very much work to analyze why she thought these steps worked for her. In response to this first cover letter, then, I gave Courtney the following feedback:

*Great work describing your writing process, Courtney! You do a nice job in your cover letter of describing what your thought process was behind each of your decisions for this essay. I agree that coming up with the thesis statement and the topic can certainly be some of the hardest parts. Future cover letters might do more to consider what you think could be revised and what things you still have questions about it. If you feel like you don't have much to revise, you might reflect instead on what you learned from what you wrote. Did you learn anything new in the process or did any of your knowledge about writing get reinforced?*

My feedback to Courtney began on a positive note, offering my honest assessment of what I thought worked well in her cover letter. I also gave her some guiding questions to consider during her next cover letter attempt, encouraging her to focus on not just the work she did, but also on what she learned from that work and how she could apply it to future scenarios. I hedged my response, however, using words like “might” to show that my suggestions were simply some among other options she could choose. I didn't want my feedback to be too prescriptive, but I also wanted her to be aware of options for deepening her reflection.

Although she continued to organize her writing based on her chronological process, Courtney ended her next reflective cover letter with some thoughts on what she learned from the experience, responding directly to my feedback on her last cover letter.

*Composing this paper forced me to become very aware of my audience and purpose. I found myself constantly checking back to who specifically I was writing to and what I was trying to persuade them of. This assignment has taught me that a great paper is obviously written and designed in the interests of one specific audience and it is obvious at all points who that audience is. I truly discovered the importance of having a clear purpose and clear audience. In every other paper, presentation or video I write/make from here on out, at every step I will remind myself who my audience is and what I am writing to achieve. I have learned that that clear focus in a paper is what differentiates the good papers from the great papers.*

I found Courtney's thoughts insightful; she addressed what she learned from her writing process in clear and specific terms (e.g., "the importance of having a clear purpose"). Further, by addressing how her understanding of audience and purpose allowed her to distinguish "the good papers from the great papers," Courtney shows an awareness of how she could apply concepts she learned in class to future writing assignments, both within and beyond this class. In response, I gave Courtney the following, entirely positive feedback:

*Excellent cover letter, Courtney! It sounds like you put a lot of good and careful thought into your genre and audience choices for this piece. I'm glad you learned some new things from this assignment, too!*

While Courtney's growth may not necessarily be dramatic, the minimal feedback offered to her gave her something to work with for her next attempt at a reflective writing assignment.

When it came to her high-stakes final portfolio cover letter, Courtney maintained the structural patterns of her previous cover letters, telling the story of her revisions in the order in which she completed them. Like her second reflective cover letter, she also maintained a focus on transferable skills and what she learned from the experience of revising her work:

*Overall, this portfolio represents me as an adaptive writer. I came into this class with a limited skill set for a specific genre and came out learning how to adapt to new genres and tailor each piece to a specific audience. The design of*

*my portfolio is very straightforward. I am a very logical thinker and presenter so even the few pictures on my audience and purpose essay are a symbol of me branching out and letting myself add personal touches. My hope is that this portfolio showcases my abilities as a writer to adapt to various genres and execute in a manner that is organized, persuasive and focused. I have not only broadened by scope of writing to include more genres, but I have built confidence in my ability to write.*

As this final paragraph of Courtney's letter moves between discussing what she learned and what the design of her portfolio reflects about her work, it reiterates many of the lessons learned from the most recent cover letter. While we cannot say for certain—without getting into a conversation about the influence of classroom interactions on her work—whether she is responding this way because she received the positive feedback or because she truly considered these skills the most important thing she learned over the course of the quarter, she demonstrates more metacognition than she did earlier.

Without interviewing the student, we cannot be completely sure that her demonstration of reflective skills are a direct result of my feedback, but we can see that her cover letters do more metacognitive work over the course of the quarter. As the instructor, I observed many other students progressing in similar ways, an observation I did not make in earlier quarters when I did not respond to my students' low-stakes reflective writing.

### **Measuring Metacognition**

While more systematic research is needed, we believe Courtney's experiences indicate the potential for students to develop as metacognitive thinkers throughout a writing course. However, this potential must be nurtured by careful instructional design. Courtney's development was facilitated by several factors, including the fact that the low-stakes reflective writing assignments were clearly explained and Cohn's feedback offered personal and specific guidance on how Courtney could improve her reflective writing. In addition to helping students write more successful final cover letters, this combination can increase the validity

and reliability of measuring metacognition as a learning outcome in a writing course.

When the content that students are taught and the work that students do aligns with the criteria on which they are assessed, the assessment is considered valid (Legg, 1998). If we are going to validly assess students on their metacognitive abilities at the end of a course, students need to be taught the differences between descriptive and reflective writing, and they need to be asked to practice writing in ways that exposes their metacognition. Of course, the nature of reflective writing complicates this seemingly straightforward recommendation. As Yancey (1998) articulates, evaluating reflective writing requires navigating the “sticky territory” of “outlin[ing] our expectations at the same time we want students to articulate their own sense of accomplishment” (p. 14). Nevertheless, we need to develop clear guidelines for students to traverse this “sticky territory” in order to guarantee that high-stakes reflective writing like portfolio cover letters are, indeed, a valid assessment of their metacognitive ability.

Reliability, or consistency, is historically problematic for writing assessment. Huot (2002) explains, “the importance of reflection or point of view in writing is contradictory to an objective approach, because to assume a particular position is to be subjective” (p. 92). If objectivity is not possible, then it becomes difficult to say that a given portfolio will receive the same score regardless of reader, hence the difficulty of establishing reliability in writing assessment. Moss (1994) offers a useful strategy for responding to this challenge in her “hermeneutic approach,” which blurs the distinctions between validity and reliability in favor of:

holistic, integrative interpretations of collected performances that seek to understand the whole in light of its parts, that privilege readers who are most knowledgeable about the context in which the assessment occurs, and that ground those interpretations not only in the textual and contextual evidence available, but also in a rational debate among the community of interpreters. (p. 86)

By offering a first-person example in this article, we privilege the instructor as most knowledgeable about the context of her classroom,

and, by publishing this article, we welcome debate about the strategies for responding to reflective writing and measuring metacognition. The broader community of writing scholars and the narrower communities of writing programs can increase the reliability of metacognition as a learning outcome in writing courses by engaging in more conversations about what we mean by “metacognition” and how we identify demonstrations of metacognitive ability in our students’ reflective writing.

As illustrated in Cohn’s experience with responding to her students’ low-stakes reflective cover letters, an important first step toward establishing valid and reliable measurements of metacognition in writing courses is for instructors to respond to students’ reflective writing. Writing is difficult to assess in any situation, and reflective writing is particularly challenging, but this only makes it more important to employ careful course design and thoughtful feedback.

## Conclusion

Few will contest the complicated nature of responding to and assessing reflective writing or the value of metacognition as a learning outcome in writing courses. It is for these reasons that we need to engage in more conversations about how to assign and assess reflective writing. From our experiences, direct instructor response to low-stakes reflection is a good strategy for helping students successfully develop and demonstrate metacognition in high-stakes reflective writing.

An important next step for this line of inquiry is to conduct interview research to learn more about students’ approaches to reflective writing, as well as systematic comparisons of response strategies and assignment instructions. This research is critical for the field of writing studies because so much of what we hope to instill in our students requires metacognition, yet many instructors shy away from direct response to or measurement of this complex skill. In Ferris’s (2015) call to return to scholarship on response, she acknowledges all of the ways in which scholarship on response to writing has been limited in the past decade. Among her list of suggested ideas to explore is how response interacts with writing assessment. We agree that this relationship is valuable and, particularly in the context of developing

metacognitive writing, we think students could use significantly more guidance and support. Failure to do so risks reinforcing students' beliefs that metacognitive work is an "extra hoop," and may prevent students from experiencing the full benefits of reflective writing.

## References

- Ash, S., & Clayton, P. (2004). The articulated learning: An approach to guided reflection and assessment. *Innovative Higher Education*, 29(2), 137–154.
- Bain, J.D., Mills, C., Ballantyne, R., & Packer, J. (2002). Developing reflection on practice through journal writing: Impacts of variation in the focus and level of feedback. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 8(2), 171–196.
- Broad, R. L. (1994). “Portfolio Scoring”: A contradiction in terms. In Brian Huot & Peggy O’Neill (Eds.), *Assessing writing: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 301-314). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s (2009).
- Bower, L. L. (2003). Student reflection and critical thinking: A rhetorical analysis of 88 portfolio cover letters. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 22(2), 47–66.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Downs, D. & Wardle, E. (2007). Teaching about writing, righting misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning “First-year composition” as “Introduction to writing studies.” *College Composition and Communication*, 58(4), 552–584.
- Elbow, P. (1997). High stakes and low stakes in assigning and responding to writing. In M. D. Sorcinelli & Author (Eds.), *Writing to learn: Strategies for assigning and responding to writing across the disciplines* (pp. 3–13). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Elbow, P. (2000). Freewriting and the Problem of Wheat and Tares. *Everyone Can Write*. New York: Oxford University Press, 85–92.
- Ferris, D. (2015). A catalytic event for response research? Introducing our new journal: Editor's introduction. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 1(1), 1–9.
- Flavell, J. H. (October, 1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring—A new era of cognitive-developmental inquiry. *American Psychologist* 34(10), 906-911.
- Fulwiler, T. (1987). *Teaching with writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Giles, S. L. (2010). Reflective writing and the revision process: What were you thinking? *Writing spaces: Readings on writing series 1*, 191–204.
- Huot, B. (2002). *(Re)Articulating writing assessment for teaching and learning*. Logan, UT: Utah State Press.
- Kimball, M. (2005). Database e-portfolio systems: A critical appraisal. *Computers and Composition*, 22, 434–458.
- Legg, S. M. (1998). In Willa Wolcott & Susan Legg (Eds.), *An Overview of Writing Assessment: Theory, Research and Practice*. National Council for the Teachers of English, pp. 124-142.
- Moss, P. (2009). Can there be validity without reliability? In Brian Huot & Peggy O'Neill (Eds.), *Assessing writing: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 81–96). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- O'Neill, P. (1998). From the writing process to the responding sequence: Incorporating self-assessment and reflection in the classroom. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 26, 61–70.

- Randazzo, C. (2012). Positioning resumes and cover letters as reflective-reflexive process. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75, 377–391.
- Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Shvidko, E. (2015). Beyond ‘giver-receiver’ relationships: Facilitating an interactive revision process. *Journal of Response to Writing* 1(2), 55–74.
- Sommers, J. (2011). Reflection revisited: The class collage. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 30(1), 99–129.
- Yancey, K. B. (1996). Portfolio as genre, rhetoric as reflection: Situating selves, literacies, and knowledge. *Writing Program Administration*, 19(3), 55–69.
- Yancey, K. B. (1998). *Reflection in the writing classroom*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

## Appendix: Reflective Cover Letter Prompt

### Digital Literacy Narrative Reflective Cover Letter

#### Task:

Now that you have finished your Digital Literacy Narrative, reflect on the process you went through to produce it. You will want to consider the following:

- How did you decide how to respond to the assignment prompt?
- What steps did you take in approaching your response to the prompt?
- Why did you decide to take these particular steps?
- How did you organize your essay and why did you decide to organize it in that way?
- What do you want your reader to learn from reading your essay?
- As you look at your paper, what do you think are the best parts of it? Why do you like these parts?
- Which parts are you unsure or less happy about? Why are you less happy with these parts?
- What did you learn from the process that you could transfer to future assignments in this class or other classes?

You do not need to answer all of the questions—just the ones that are most interesting and relevant to you.

#### Format/Specifications:

Write this as a cover letter with several well-developed paragraphs. I will read your cover letter before I read your essay, so consider what you think I should know about your essay before I read it. The cover letter should be 300-400 words (longer is OK), double-spaced. It should also be spell-checked, proofread, and edited.

#### Grading:

This cover letter is worth 25 points. You will receive full credit (see the rubric) for a thoughtful, thorough, well-written response.

#### Copyrights

© JRW & Authors.

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the Journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Cohn, Jenae and Mary Stewart. (2016). "Promoting Metacognitive Thought through Response to Low-Stakes Reflective Writing." *Journal of Response to Writing*, 2(1): 58–74.

RW

JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

# Split Personalities: Understanding the Responder Identity in College Composition

Anthony Edward Edgington  
*University of Toledo*

---

For decades, researchers and teachers in composition have wrestled with how to respond to student writing. Part of this discussion has focused on what role teachers should assume when reading and responding to texts. From these discussions, different roles have emerged, including the gatekeeper, the critic, the facilitator, the coach, and the judge, among others. While some have argued that the use of response identities helps teachers focus their responses while offering students an audience for their texts, others are more wary of what influence these roles may have on the student-teacher relationship and teacher comments. This article explores the history of response identities, including research on both the positive and negative outcomes from their use. It then offers a new perspective of response as an intellectual endeavor, emphasizing both the labor that goes into response and the rewards that both students and teachers can receive from the process. Ideas of how to move toward this view of response are offered.

*Keywords:* response, identity, labor, student writing, reading

---

Sitting in my office, I hear a faint knock on my door. Tim, a graduate student instructor who is about ten weeks into teaching his first composition course, enters, asking for a few moments to discuss a student matter. Opening up a folder filled with random notes and papers, he slowly pulls a student text out from the pile, sighing noticeably as he does so. After offering some background on the student, his writing, and his participation (or often lack thereof) in the course, Tim proceeds to list the issues he is having with this particular text: the lack of a definitive thesis, a breakdown in overall organization, the use of subpar research sources, and a list of grammatical and mechanical concerns. As Tim concludes, he asks the question I have now grown accustomed to hearing from new teachers (and even a few experienced ones) in my program: “How am I supposed to respond to this?”

What I’ve learned from over a decade of administering composition programs is there is more, so much more, to that question. Sometimes, the instructor is searching for that perfect response method; in other moments, the question comes from instructors who are asking for the best place to start, searching for a way in to a problematic paper. But, most often, I’ve found that the question is actually a way to introduce new, often more complex questions. 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? Both experienced and novice teachers alike often walk into my office confused by what role to take for a particular student at a particular time for a particular paper.

In this article, I would like to discuss ways to help new instructors better understand and use different response identities and masks when responding to student writing. First, I summarize important scholarship on response identity over the past three decades, focusing on both the positive and negative aspects recognized in these works. Next, I reflect upon past methods I have used in my graduate level ENGL 6010 Teaching College Composition course to help new TAs better understand response identity. Then, based upon my reflections on these past experiences, I set forth a plan for envisioning student response as an act of intellectual endeavor, arguing that this perspective allows new instructors to use response identities in a

more productive way. Finally, I offer various practices to assist these new instructors in adopting a view of response as intellectual endeavor in order to help both experienced and new instructors produce stronger and more focused responses to student writing.

Discussions about possible identities used during response sessions have been a visible topic in composition research over the last three decades. Since the publication of Alan Purves' text *The Teacher as Reader: An Anatomy* (1984), in which Purves identifies the "role or roles a teacher may adopt as a reader regardless of the implied role in the student text" (p. 259)—including roles such as gatekeeper, critic, reviewer, and therapist, among others—the fascination with reading and response identities has grown in composition narratives and scholarship. For instance, John Bean (1996) suggests that when writers are drafting a paper, teachers should assume a coach identity, offering encouragement and support; when the final copy is submitted, instructors should be transformed into judges, offering final evaluation. Richard Haswell (2006) acknowledges several constant and emerging identities in composition literature, including rhetorician, coach, persuasive motivator, lawgiver, expert reader, editor, and diagnostician. In her study, Elizabeth Hodges (1992) found that teachers used many voices in debate with each other, including social scientist, cultural anthropologist, counselor, critic, teacher, historian, person. Richard Straub (1996), one of the most well-known researchers on teacher response during the 1990s, argued that

A teacher who responds as a facilitator . . . can respond as a teacher, reader, a guide, a friendly advisor, a diagnostician, a coach, a motivator, a collaborator, a fellow explorer, an inquirer, a confidant, a questioning reader, a representative reader, a common reader (or average reader or real reader), a sounding board, a subjective reader, an idiosyncratic reader, a sympathetic reader, a trusted adult, and a friend. (p. 225)

It's clear that assuming specific personas or identities while responding to student writing has become an accepted practice in both response research and pedagogy. And, for most, this has led to favorable outcomes. Purves (1984) argues that the use of multiple roles or identities can be a

benefit to students, stating that “the student as writer must learn to deal with all these kinds of readers [and learn] that the text is read variously not only by different people for different purposes, but also variously by the same reader” (p. 265). Straub (1996) insists that through the use of multiple response personas, a teacher can “support, advise, explore, engage, question, motivate, encourage, nurture, receive, interpret, and provide reader reactions,” all of which “share the basic trait of somehow engaging students in an exchange about their writing . . . each [persona] functioning in more or less the same way as the others” (p. 225).

However, other researchers acknowledge a need to question and reflect upon the effects response personas can have on both teachers and students. As Straub (1996) further argues, the field of composition has “come to pack an expanding number of roles . . . into our concept of facilitative response, without adequately defining these methods or mapping the relationships among them” (p. 225). Muriel Harris (1986) claims similar problems, arguing that “the teacher who over-grades leaps from suggestion to correction to criticism, from being an editor to a coach to a reader. In noting many things, the instructor emphasizes nothing, and many students, lost in the welter of messages, retreat” (p. 92). Finally, David Fuller (1987) offers a somewhat dismal picture in relation to research on response personas and roles:

The responder dons many masks, poses, and stances, all of which fall under the larger role of “teacher.” But few students are capable of understanding and applying the many and various reactions and directions. Many learn how to “play the game,” but others become confused and alienated when they receive responses that come from a variety of roles. (p. 312)

Three years ago, during a graduate-level course focused on preparing new teaching assistants for the classroom, I posed the question of whether any past teachers, composition or otherwise, discussed the role(s) they chose to use when responding to student papers. None of the students mentioned a conversation related to this in a past class, and most of the teaching assistants were surprised that teachers actually chose different roles when responding. With this experience fresh in my mind, I asked a

group of full-time composition lecturers the same question, modifying it to ask if they had ever spoken about this with their previous students. Silence and quizzical expressions followed; while most agreed that they frequently assume different identities when responding, some saw it as almost silly to discuss response roles with their classes, while others worried about possible problems that could emerge with opening up this hornet's nest. While only informal, these observations do imply that for some teachers, the thought of making response roles and identities a visible and discussed part of the composition classroom is a rare occurrence.

Thus, questions remain: How does assuming multiple identities when responding influence how students view teachers and their written and oral comments? How do we explain to students that, for one paper, we may act as a coach but on another we will assume a more authoritative, employer- or judge-like position? Do we explain this to students? And, what effect does this have on how students write their texts, especially if, as Straub (1997) argues, "during the time the student reads a set of comments, the image of the teacher that comes off the page becomes the teacher for that student and has an immediate impact on what those comments come to mean" (p. 100)? What image are we projecting to our students through our written comments?

### **Changing Identities: New Teachers and Response Personas**

For the past decade, I have frequently taught sections of our graduate-level ENGL 6010 Teaching College Composition class. Required for all incoming graduate students who hold a teaching assistantship, the class introduces students to both composition theory and practice through readings, discussions, and activities. Nearly three weeks of the course focuses on reading and responding to student writing, through discussions on teacher reading strategies, response best practices, peer review, and student-teacher conferencing. An often-used activity during the course is a full-class reading and response session on sample student texts from previous first-year writing courses. Each response activity will ask the graduate students to focus on a different strategy or aspect of the text (e.g. responding in only positive comments, offering both facilitative and

directive feedback; envisioning how to discuss the paper with the student during a conference setting). Most students remark in end-of-the-year surveys and evaluations that they find this sequence of the course as the most beneficial for them as future teachers.

During these discussions, I always try to incorporate the idea of response identity into the conversation. Sometimes, I do this very clearly, like assigning students to read one of the aforementioned articles and having a class discussion on the topic. At other times, I will have students approach the topic from a slightly different perspective, coercing them to take on a certain identity during a response session. For example, borrowing from an activity mentioned by Brian Huot in his book (*Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* (2002), I have students read, respond, and evaluate a student paper from different personas, including the classroom teacher, a placement reader, an administrator granting rising junior status, an employer, etc. The class discusses both their responses and evaluation along with their reflections on the different personas after the activity.

Yet, regardless of the activity, each time I ask the teaching assistants to take on an authoritative role with the text, and rarely, if ever, I offer them the chance to take on the role of an interested reader or peer. Part of the problem resided in how I may have arranged the activity, but part of the issue also seemed to be rooted in the teaching assistants' resistance towards seeing a student text as anything other than a student text. In my observations of the activity, mentioning the word "student" at any point in the discussion affected how the paper would be read, usually in a more negative way.

So, a few semesters ago, I modified the activity. I made copies of a strong student-writing sample from a past class but took off any markers that it was a student paper. I again asked the class to read the paper from different perspectives, but for one group, I gave them the following prompt: "Read the following published narrative and offer your response to it. Then, decide on if your group would have published the text." Technically, I was only stretching the truth here; the text was a narrative and it had been published, albeit to an online class website. Most importantly, I made sure that the word student did not show up at any point in the prompt.

The discussion that followed began with a similar path. The groups who had the more traditional personas of teacher, gatekeeper, editor, and employer went through and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the essays, ways to improve the text, and the overall evaluation they would offer. But I watched the new group, the published narrative readers, and noticed that they often read and discussed with a different view of the text. When it came their time to share, they started to focus more on their emotional connection to the text, talking about the “reading experience” and how this greatly assisted them in offering responses to the writer. It should be noted that, while the other three groups used the word *student* frequently (even though student markers had been removed), this final group used the word *writer* to refer to the author almost exclusively. And, the responses they offered were seen by the full class as more detailed and focused than what had been offered in the other groups.

As I left class that day, I wondered more about the experience and what it may mean to read student papers from this type of a perspective. Over the last few years, I have continued to reflect upon and discuss this experience with other teaching assistants and lecturers, and it has led me to offer a new perspective from which to view teacher response and identity. Now I encourage my teaching assistants to see response more as an intellectual endeavour.

### **Response Revisited: Response as Intellectual Endeavour**

What does it mean to see response as an intellectual endeavor? The concept stresses what I believe are the two most important aspects of response. First, the act of reading students’ papers and offering constructive criticism and suggestions needs to be viewed as an intellectual activity, one on par with other writing and reading we do in our scholarly and teaching lives. Teachers often resist reading student writing from this perspective, focusing instead on a cursory or stylistic reading; as Joseph Williams (1981) and others have pointed out, instructors, especially those new to teaching, rely on a mixture of stylistic commenting and error-hunting when responding to student papers, engaging with the content of the text on only a surface level. I believe that for most of my teaching assistants

in the above example, this was the view I was asking them to take. Yet, as we read student texts, we discover more about not only our students as writers, but also about the new and familiar topics that are the content of their papers, the success or failure of our assignments, who we are as readers and teachers, our pedagogical practices and theories, and the social and cultural issues and problems that are affecting our students today; all experiences that also occur when we read books, articles, and other forms of scholarship, all experiences that we see as a part of our intellectual lives.

But, while reading and responding to student texts can be enlightening, invigorating, and yes, even fun, it is strenuous work. Peggy O'Neill, Ellen Schendel, Michael Williamson, and Brian Huot (2007) write that “no matter how you approach it, reading, responding to drafts, conferencing, and grading final drafts and portfolios, requires time and effort. Most writing instructors enjoy teaching writing, but the complaints about the time and effort devoted to the work of assessment is universal” (p. 77). Haswell (2007) further points out that both the page length and time responding per page has increased substantially over the past 100 years and estimates

At a conservative 4 pages per essay, 7 minutes per page, and 25 students, the English or rhetoric department composition teacher is spending between eleven to twelve hours—pure labor, no breaks—bent over an initial response to just one set of papers. That leaves out of the total the time devoted to second and third drafts (para. 24).

And while teachers, researchers, and commercial companies continually offer new methods that will “dramatically reduce our response time,” most of these have had little positive effect or have promoted a view of response that goes radically against most instructors in the field (such as using computer-generated responses that focus more on grammar and mechanics than content). Response is and will continue to be a significant—and laborious—part of our teaching. With this in mind, the idea of an endeavor both acknowledges the hard work that often must be done—since endeavors are rarely easy—but also points to the rewards that will emerge after the journey is over. Endeavor acknowledges that the task

at hand is one that will take strenuous effort, concentration, and time. It involves a level of attainment that is acquired through the completion of a process or task; for a writing teacher, this attainment can become new insights, increased understanding, satisfaction in student achievement, or simple completion of the task. And, as I will argue, we can take these new insights and use them as we revise and reconstruct our future curriculum, syllabi, assignments, and even scholarly pursuits.

### Intellectual Endeavour as Practice

How then do we, as instructors and as a field, begin to help new instructors, like my teaching assistants, understand the concept of intellectual endeavor? First, teachers must begin to place increased value on arguably the most important act that occurs during teacher response: the time spent reading and reflecting on a student text. As Louise Wetherbee Phelps (1998) and Brian Huot (2002) have both pointed out, in order to respond to a text, instructors have to read it first. Richard Haswell (2007), while contending that reading is a complex act, states that “there is no discursive practice that more distinguishes the activity of teaching writing” than reading a student text (para. 33). How instructors choose to read a text and what influences them as they read will impact the responses offered to student writers. So, I work with new instructors on reading actively, not simply with some transitory identity in mind, but with the goal of enjoying and analyzing the text similar to how they enjoy and analyze published articles and novels. As they read, these instructors must search for ways to engage not only the paper’s content but also the writer, offering advice that will produce sound revisions and stronger writing.

In his book *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants*, Lad Tobin (2004) offers a method that moves instructors towards a picture of reading as intellectual endeavor. Tobin recounts receiving a problematic student essay (entitled “The Googu Manifesto”) during an in-class writing workshop. The paper, written by a student Sandeep, offered what Tobin saw as an offensive view of the Gutraty<sup>1</sup> people, inhabitants of

---

<sup>1</sup> Represents student spelling; as Tobin writes “actually, I discovered later, the region he was referring to was not Gutrat, but Gujarat” (pg. 20).

the Gutrat region of India, depicting them as cheap, seeking “everything for free or at a discount” (p. 19). Tobin acknowledges that his first response to the paper is one typical of some writing instructors, stating that “my first assumption was that all of the problems were in his writing and not in my reading. Our assumption is that if we have to work too hard as a reader, then the student has failed as a writer” (p. 20). Yet, Tobin points out that teachers rarely take this stance when confronted with a problematic published text, instead believing that “we need to educate ourselves in order to read it effectively” (p. 20). Thus, Tobin argues that a teacher needs to expand upon his or her knowledge of a problematic paper’s content and to inquire about how others may read the text. First, Tobin discussed the text with Sandeep during a weekly conference; learning more about the paper’s content allowed Tobin to rethink some of his earlier reflections; as he states, “the more I talked about this essay, the more interested I became in it and the more I wondered how other readers with different perspectives and areas of expertise would see it” (p. 23). With this new information, Tobin sought assistance from colleagues across the disciplines, asking them to read the student paper as a scholarly reader. Responses from African-American studies, Irish studies, performance theory, anthropology, creative writing, and other disciplines followed; the readers encouraged Tobin to note the writer’s complex subject position, the tension the writer feels in his own identity, and the use of self-parody in the essay. From the various responses he received (responses that, at times, spoke in support and resistance of each other), Tobin grew in his understanding of both the paper and the writer; he later finds that “by making the case for student writing as texts worthy of respect, study, interpretation, discussion, and debate, we make the case for our students as writers worth reading and for ourselves as scholars engaged in intellectually rigorous and valuable work” (p. 29).

While Tobin’s method for reading and response is noteworthy, it is also time and labor intensive and cannot be accomplished for every student paper. However, over the last few years I have introduced the practice to new teaching assistants as one to consider when focusing on more problematic or confusing texts. During our practicum course, new teaching assistants read Tobin’s chapter, then we look at a past problematic essay from one of

my first-year writing classes. In groups, the teaching assistants read the essay using their own undergraduate backgrounds as a guide; while many of the assistants come from English literature backgrounds, the program also recruits students from creative writing, communication, the fine arts, and even one student with an increased knowledge in engineering. As a class, we talk about the essay from different backgrounds and then discuss how we can use both our own experiences to read and respond to student papers while also encouraging the assistants to consider “reading groups” made up of teaching assistants from various backgrounds to routinely read over more difficult student texts.

In addition, I have begun more strongly to encourage teaching assistants to consider conferencing with students as a method of reading and responding to student texts. Conferencing with students to gain further insights into their ideas and writing processes is a useful beginning step for an instructor trying to find the right way into a problematic paper. Instructors can become more knowledgeable about student topics (especially new or confusing ones) by doing some basic online research prior to reading. As mentioned, as teachers we often approach student texts from an authoritative identity, believing that not only do we hold power in the area of writing, but often in the area of the content of the paper. But, is this always so? A few years ago, one of my students wrote a paper about the new sport of disc golf, a merger of the sports of Frisbee and golf. When I first read the paper, I realized that my stance as content expert would not work for this paper; I was unaware of the sport and had a hard time finding a way into the paper. After conducting some basic research, watching a few online videos, and reading some posts to a disc golf discussion board, I felt better prepared to engage the topic. These are all steps we sometimes take when confronted with a new novel or work of non-fiction, but rarely take for a student paper. After watching a favorite television show, many of us spend time online reading analyses about the episode in order to further our knowledge of it. How much better would our responses be to student texts if we took only 10 to 15 minutes to brush up on the topics of their papers? These are just a few ways that an instructor can increase her knowledge on a paper topic while encouraging a more intellectual reading of the student paper.

Yet, can there be ways of moving towards a response process that places more value on the act of student reading that are also less time and labor intensive than Tobin's (2004) method? One possibility occurred quite by accident during a summer second-semester research writing course. Co-teaching with a fellow instructor, she and I speculated on ways to make peer review a more substantial part of the class. We created a process where students would participate in peer-review sessions with detailed question sheets and would submit both the paper and the peer-review sheet to one of us at the end of each peer-review session (a practice similar to how both of us had conducted peer review in the past, and I believe similar to how composition teachers in general conduct peer review). The change to our practice occurred with our process for reading and responding to the text; instead of reading the peer-review sheet and then reading and responding to the paper, we first read the student paper without making any comments on the draft. We then looked at the peer-review sheet and focused our responses on the comments peers offered. Instead of simply rewriting the comment again as a marginal note or asking students to "look at the peer comments" during an endnote, we instead created a dialogue between the writer, the peer, and the teacher by placing our comments alongside what peers had written, writing statements such as "I agree with your peer reviewer here" or "Your peer reviewer offers good advice; I would add the following to it . . ."

What we discovered was twofold. First, as the semester progressed, students began to put considerably more time and energy into peer-review sessions, recognizing the importance of their peers' comments. Much like in Tobin's (2004) experience, we witnessed writers more willing to ask for advice or clarification from peers, and peers who were all too eager to offer this assistance. Students also began to "talk our language," framing comments in ways that were more productive and informative for their fellow classmates. Second, my co-instructor and I discovered that we had more time to focus on larger issues and content concerns with student papers, reading them less like novice texts and devoting more of our energy towards learning about the paper topics and our students as writers. We spent a few moments pointing out where we agreed with peer comments and devoted most of our time to those few areas that peers did

not comment on or where we needed to offer a different perspective on a peer comment. Thus, finding ways to increase productivity during peer-review sessions can enact a change in how instructors read while allowing more time for this reading to occur.

While acknowledging that theoretical and intellectual ways of reading student papers provides a starting point for changing our field's view of response and response identities, we must also begin to envision response as an activity that will lead to positive outcomes for not only our students but also for teachers. Shifting the focus from labor to endeavor acknowledges that the exertion and effort needed to respond to student papers is a purposeful activity with a tangible and important end goal. Endeavor encourages composition teachers to focus more on the purpose for responding to students' papers and the achievements or gains students—and teachers—receive through this interaction.

In order to promote a view of response as endeavor, teachers and researchers need to emphasize the ways that response can influence our classroom teaching so that instructors begin to notice the multiple ways that responding to student texts can lead to tangible positive results in all aspects of our teaching. For example, I have grown to respect the importance of the student-teacher conference after using it as a tool for responding to student papers. I write of a study (2004), conducted in one of my past first year writing classrooms, on student reactions to different response methods, including marginal comments, response letters, and conferencing. The findings of the study point to the value students discovered from having the chance to work one-on-one with an instructor on their writing during student-teacher conferences. By taking time to approach response from this scholarly perspective, I learned that conferencing was a response method that worked for both students and for myself. Since the publication of this article, students have continued to mention how valuable it is to talk with me about their papers, to seek clarification and elaboration on their ideas and, at times, to be offered the chance to challenge my thoughts on their texts. For my part, conferencing allows me to focus more specifically on particular aspects of the paper while granting the time to recognize how students understand the comments offered to them. And, perhaps as important, conferencing gives me a chance to talk with students about

various classroom practices, including small group discussion, peer review, and assignment sheets; conferencing has provided me with reflections that have allowed for different revisions to these classroom practices, something that has actually saved time and energy in later classes.

In addition, instructors must not only acknowledge how their pedagogical theories influence their response to student writing but also how their response influences their theories. Most instructors recognize individuals who have transformed the ways they respond to student papers; for example, I have been strongly influenced by Richard Straub's (1996; 1997) research on writing comments, Brian Huot (2002) and Lad Tobin's (2004) work on reading student papers, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps' (1998) focus on the surprises that occur when responding. In addition, policy statements and assessment documents have made an impression; for instance, the WPA Outcomes—and my own program's objectives created from them—have had an influence on how I read and respond to student texts. But, focusing only on how these theories, theorists, and statements have influenced our response creates a fragmented picture; we also need to consider how our individual response experiences have influenced the theories that guide our work. While the theorists mentioned above had a tremendous impact on my early response practices, it was my early experiences with reading student papers that most influenced how I respond today. And, it's not just my response theories that are influenced by reading and writing comments on student papers; these experiences have similarly affected my theories and practices in such areas as curriculum design, assignment creation, plagiarism, and grading, in addition to my relationships with students. There have been several instances when I've revised specific information or objectives for an assignment (almost always for the better) after reading a set of papers created from that assignment. Each time I encounter a plagiarized text, it influences not only how I respond to that particular student, but it also causes me to rethink plagiarism as an action and my theory towards it. Most instructors would probably agree that reading and responding to student papers has had, if not the most significant impact, one of the most significant on our relationships with students. Yet, we rarely hear in our literature about how reading and response influence other areas of our teaching lives; instead,

we hear only about response as an isolated, labor-intensive activity. As a field, more discussion in journals and at conferences needs to take place that acknowledges the impact reading and responding to student papers has on the revision of our classrooms and the makeup of our field.

The image of the teacher-responder sitting at a desk amid stacks of papers, hand arched in the ready to write a comment, with an exhausted look on his or her face while he or she contemplates which persona to take on for this particular paper has become etched into our composition history. It is an image many of us understand but do not need to accept as the sole truth. Response to student writing can and must become an intellectual endeavor, one that places emphasis on not only the work we do, but on the benefits we gain as we engage students in a dialogue about the one thing we all continually believe in: writing.

## References

- Bean, J. (1996). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Edgington A. (2004). Let them speak!: Collaborating with students on teacher response. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 31(3), 287–296.
- Fuller, D. (1987). Teacher commentary that communicates: Practicing what we preach in the writing class. *Journal of Teaching and Writing*, 6, 307–317.
- Harris, M. (1986). *Teaching one-to-one: The writing conference*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Haswell, R. (2007). The complexities of responding to student writing; Or, looking for shortcuts via the road of excess. *Across the Disciplines*, 3. Retrieved from <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/haswell2006.cfm>
- Haswell, R. (1983). Minimal marking. *College English*, 45, 600–604.
- Hodges, E. (1992). The unheard voices of our response to students' writing. *Journal of Teaching Writing*, 11(2), 203–218.
- Huot, B. (2002). *(Re) articulating writing assessment for teaching and learning*. Logan, UT: Utah State Press.
- O'Neill, P., Schendel, E., Williamson, M., & Huot, B. (2007). Assessment as labor and the labor of assessment. In P. Takayoshi and P. Sullivan (Eds.), *Labor, writing technologies, and the shaping of composition in the academy* (pp. 75–96). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

- Phelps, L.W. (1998). Surprised by response: Student, teacher, editor, reviewer. *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 18(2), 247–273.
- Purves, A. (1984). The teacher as reader: An anatomy. *College English*, 46(3), 259–265.
- Straub, R. (1996). The concept of control in teacher response: Defining the varieties of “directive” and “facilitative” commentary. *College Composition and Communication*, 47(2), 223–251.
- Straub, R. (1997). Students’ reactions to teacher comments: An exploratory study. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 31(1), 91–119.
- Tobin, L. (2004). *Reading student writing: Confessions, meditations, and rants*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Williams, J. (1981). The phenomenology of error. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(2), 152–168.

### Copyrights

© JRW & Authors.

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the Journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).