TEACHING WITH WRITING

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Pre/Views

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Responding effectively to student writing is one of the most challenging tasks involved in teaching with writing. Many faculty members recall their own experiences as student writers when papers were assigned early in the term, due at the end, and returned with just a letter grade at or most with errors marked in red. Yet research in the teaching of writing shows that simply assigning a grade and marking errors is at best ineffective and at worst detrimental to the improvement of student writing.

So what does help? In this issue of *Teaching With Writing* graduate student Jessica Mosher (06 English) reviews the latest scholarship on responding to student writing. Jessica's article, part of a larger project she completed for the course Writing for Teachers, suggests types of comments that are helpful and comments to avoid.

Responding to Student Papers: Responses to Avoid and Productive Advice to Give

By Jessica Mosher (06 English)

According to Robert Connors, early in the twentieth century a number of grading scales were proposed by which teachers rated student writing. Subsequently, many teachers only deemed it necessary to assign a letter grade to those papers, a grade scrawled out in ominous red ink. The grade did not explain what the teacher thought of the content, the mechanics, the style, or even the organization of the paper. The student was left to understand the reasoning behind the grade on his/her own, hoping to find an answer by the time the next paper was due. However, by the 1950's the manner in which teachers approached papers began to change. Teachers realized that letter grades alone were not aiding students in sharpening their writing skills. As teachers realized that rating scales truly were only serving "as instruments for administrative judgment rather than for student improvement," they gradually abandoned them (Connors, 204). Teachers began addressing students' papers with more care, viewed essays as "real audiences," and regarded marginal and end comments as the most effective ways of explaining to students what needed attention in their writing (204).

The use of marginal and end comments is still in practice today, and current research is revealing "what teachers have long suspected, hoped, or assumed: that students read and make use

of teacher comments and that well-designed teacher comments can help students develop as writers" (Straub, "Student Reactions" 91). Therefore, teacher commenting should not be undervalued because sometimes the most productive way of approaching a student's writing is through written response.

But a teacher must also be warned. While commenting is a way of guiding a student to another writing level, a teacher must be cautious in how he/she chooses to comment. Because writing teachers shape writers, a teacher needs to understand that not all commenting is useful, and some comments may even be damaging (Sperling 177). This essay reviews recent scholarhip on responding to student writing and discusses different types of responses to student writing including what types of responses teachers should avoid and what types of responses teachers should embrace.

When commenting on student papers, what appropriate guidelines, then, should a teacher follow? Richard Straub, in "Student's Reactions to Teacher Comments: An Exploratory Study," discusses what students believe is most useful in the way of teacher response. Straub introduces nine categories of teacher comments: focus, specificity, mode, criticism, imperatives, praise, questions, advice and explanations.

1. Focus. The focus of a comment usually refers to what kind of comments the teacher makes: global (ideas, development, organization) or local (wording, sentence structure, correctness) (100). Students did not prefer one over the other and believed that both were useful when reviewing their papers. One concern students did have is with the teacher commenting on the ideas of the paper, a global issue. This concern regarded "authority" and how certain comments appeared to work "against the ideas that were already down on the page" (101). Students also reacted negatively to teacher attempts to correct or revise words or sentences. The students regarded this as the teacher's attempt to claim their writing authority because they saw the corrections as a reflection of "the idiosyncratic preferences of the teacher" (101).

2. Specificity. In all cases, the students wanted the teacher's comments to be specific. Students did not "respond favorably to any comment that they saw as unclear, vague, or difficult to understand" (Straub "Students' Reactions" 102). For example, a teacher who stated "you need more evidence to support your main point" needed to state what evidence the student should have used, or at least suggest some directions the student could take in order to find more evidence. The consensus was that "comments that were specific and elaborate" were much more useful than those that were vague (102).

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>
> *--Melanie Sperling*

3. Mode. In mode, or the tone of the teacher's voice, the students preferred comments that "sounded helpful and encouraging" rather than those that were terse and seemed "harsh and critical"(103). A comment such as "Not so. See above," made the students become defensive and caused them to leave the material as it was initially written.

4. Criticism. When it came to criticism, students preferred comments that were more like reader than teacher responses: students "felt these comments had a softer tone, and they appreciated the way the comments offered an individual reader's perspective on the writing"(105). For example, while students found the comment "You've missed his point" as offensive because it came "right out and [said that the paper was] bad," they found the comment "I hear LeMoult saying something different--that drugs are so dangerous to society largely because laws make them illegal" as objective and words they could easily work with during the revision process (104). Therefore, students appreciated teacher responses that focused on what the student was trying to say, and those that helped him/her see where he/she could change the wording so that the writer's own message would become clearer (105).

The "Virtual" Valley Library
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The Valley Library's reference and instruction services have been web-enhanced to provide you and your students with 24 hour access to information and assistance. The Valley Library HomePage (http://www.orst.edu/dept/library) is the gateway to finding information, receiving reference help, and learning to use the library. Through this page, students can connect to the OASIS online catalog, electronic indexes and abstracts, full text electronic journals, encyclopedias, and web resources.

Via the "Help from Reference Librarians" page (http://www.orst.edu/dept/library/refhelp.htm), students can consult with a subject specialist, send questions to the Electronic Reference Desk, or get tips for completing class assignments. "Teach Yourself to Use the Library" (http://osu.orst.edu/dept/library/tutorial/library.htm) is a self-paced library research tutorial that includes exercises and links to electronic information sources.

The Library's web is also your web. If you've made a library assignment or your students have a research project, let us know how we can help. Subject Librarians will prepare web-based Information Bulletins or Class Assignment Help Pages or meet with your class to talk about resources or take your students on a tour. Link to the Valley Library and its resources on your course web pages. Send us your suggestions for internet resources to include in our subject guides.

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The Library's web is also your web.
--Loretta Rielly

Bonnie Avery, Extension Librarian, has included information about evaluating web resources on her webpage:

http:///www.orst.edu/-averyb/evalweb.htm
http://www.orst.edu/-averyb/bkmarks.htm

About *Teaching With Writing*

Teaching With Writing is the newsletter of the Oregon State University Writing Intensive Curriculum Program. As part of the Baccalaureate Core, all OSU students are required to take an upper division writing intensive course in their major.

The content of the WIC courses ranges from radiation safety (for Nuclear Engineering majors) to golf courses design (a Horticulture option). While subject matter differs by department, all WIC courses share certain commonalities defined by the Faculty Senate:

*Informal, ungraded or minimally graded writing is used as a mode of learning the content material.

*Students are introduced to conventions and practices of writing in their discipline, including the use of borrowed information.

*Students complete at least 5000 words of writing, of which at least 2000 words are in polished, formal assignments.

*Students are guided through the whole writing process, receive feedback on drafts, and have opportunities to revise.

For complete information on WIC guidelines, contact Vicki Collins by email at vcollins@orst.edu or consult the OSU Curricular Procedures Handbook.

5. Imperatives. The practicality of imperatives, or commands, was debated in the Straub article. While most students believed, as currently hypothesized, that imperatives were useless and suggested the teacher's attempt to control student writing, others saw imperatives as a worthwhile way of commenting. A student said that "even though it's telling [a student] how to write the paper, it's basic info that would make the paper more effective"(106).

6. Praise. Praise was always welcome in student's papers, but again they wanted the praise to be specific and to be "accompanied by an explanation of what the teacher saw as good"(106).

7. Questions. Interestingly, the efficiency regarding the use of questions in a paper was debated. While students did "appreciate the freedom and control over their writing" that questions allowed, sometimes the students were unclear on where to go with the questions (109). Students who complained about the overuse of questions stated that they "wanted more direction and a clearer sense of what the teacher wanted" (109).

8. & 9. Advice and Explanations. The overwhelming majority of students thought that advice and explanations were the key to productive revising. Students said that advice such as "in your next draft try to focus on developing more convincing arguments against legalized drugs" identified the problem "in a way that [made] the teacher seem like they cared" (107). Advice that was most favored was advice that suggested instead of commanded ways to approach revision, and advice that was followed by an explanation. The teacher would thus be praised if he/she added to the above sentence, why don't you add "point by point, your opponent's view, as clearly and objectively as you can" so that "then you can deal with each of his arguments and show the weaknesses in his position?"(109). The most productive comments thus not only gave advice, but also showed how to carry the idea of the advice throughout the paper.

In summary, although students did not appreciate comments that were sternly voiced and appeared to take control of the paper's ideas and organization, they were appreciative of comments that suggested how to restructure or add to their ideas. Generally, students realize that they need direction in their writing and understand the importance of teacher commenting, but only take heed of the teacher's suggestions if they are worded as just that--as suggestions and not commands. Straub, in another article titled "The Concept of Control," states that "all teacher comments in some way are evaluative and directive" and "in all comments, a teacher intervenes in the writing"(247). It is the way that the direction is presented, it is "how [teachers] receive and respond to the words the students put on the page that speaks loudest in our teaching"(246), and determines if the student is going to follow or ignore the comments. For example, in Straub's essay, two teachers give the same advice, yet in very different ways.

While Edward White "is more willing to tell the student what she would do best to work on through directive comments," Peter Elbow becomes the "sounding board for the writing, one who plays back his reading of the text and subtly injects evaluations and advice for revision within these reader responses"(245). Both teachers had the same message, one that stressed a strengthening of the argument, but they had different ways of approaching the reader, one less intrusive than the other. The student will be more responsive to Elbow's comments because they are friendlier and more suggestive than White's. Elbow's comments are "among the least controlling modes of response since they do little more than dramatize how the words are being understood by an individual reader, not by someone in charge of judging, criticizing, or improving the writing"(243).

Successful commenting can be explained in analyzing the ways that commenting has *not been* productive according to past research. What kinds of responses should teachers avoid on first drafts?

Summer Smith in "The Genre of the End Comment" suggests that teachers avoid the generic comment.   Examples of generic commenting are "good" or "nicely done" as an end comment, the "awkward" as a marginal comment, and the use of generalities such as, "you worked hard on planning this paper--the outline was a good idea"(Smith 254). Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford suggest that generic comments are created by the "attempts of teachers to squeeze their reactions into a few pithy phrases, to roll all their strength and all their sweetness up into one ball for student delectation" (Connors 200). Summer Smith suggests that the tendency for instructors to write "generically" stems from the fear of "authority challenges from aggressive students," and fear of damaging a student's "fragile self-esteem" (250). Moreover, "the educational institution also exerts power over the teacher's commenting by determining the focus of the teacher's curriculum . . . and by requiring that the teacher return the papers with comments within a specified period of time"(250).

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>
> --*Summer Smith*

Although teachers may think generic comments do not harm students, they do more harm than good because they do in fact offend students. In general, generic comments give students "the impression of hastiness" and are viewed as "insincere statements"(Smith 254-55). A student expects constructive criticism from a teacher and when he/she receives a general and hastily written comment,

not only is he/she insulted because the teacher appears not to have dedicated much time to reviewing his/her paper, and thus has seemingly regarded his/her ideas as insignificant, but he/she is also led to believe that revision useless. In the end, what a teacher receives is a crude final draft because the generic comments led to students putting little effort into revision (254).

Another problem is found in the way teachers present positive vs. negative feedback. In research conducted by Connors and Lunsford in 1993, negative commenting dominated teacher responses to student papers (210). While it is true that students sometimes regard negative comments as more useful than generic comments (because negative feedback at least guides the writer to correcting *something* in the paper), their usefulness largely depends on how they are phrased. In most of the papers analyzed by Connors and Lunsford, teachers spoke harshly to students, with comments like, "Learn to use subordination . . . You are still making comma splices! You must eliminate this error once and for all. Is it because you aren't able to recognize an independent clause?"(210) and, "You know better than to create comma splices at this point in the semester!"(215) While these comments undermined the student's ability to recognize errors, other comments only included a few words which insulted the intelligence of the writer: "Handwriting--learn to type"(211). These comments did not motivate the writers to revise, but only caused the writers to push the paper aside and ignore it. Again, this form of responding to papers causes the students' final drafts to be presented to the teacher in crude form.

A third type of response to avoid is one that takes away the authority from the writer. In this type of commenting, the teacher assumes control over the student's words on the page. There are several ways to do this, but one is found in the tendency for the teacher to edit the paper instead of actually responding to it. As stated previously, before the 1950s, the "most widely accepted idea was that teachers just were to correct, perhaps edit, and then grade student papers"(Connors 201). In more recent years, not

only do teachers claim authority over a student's text by their tendency to edit, but also by their tendency to be directive in their comments for the paper as a whole (organization, form, style, etc..). In "The Concept of Control in Teacher Response," Richard Straub describes the typical "directive" teacher:

> She concentrates on formal propriety, using terse, sometimes elliptical, comments that tell the student . . . in no uncertain terms what is wrong and what must be changed . . . . [This teacher] has a definite and rather narrow agenda for the writing . . . . [and] she gives little attention to the content of the writing . . . . It is a clear instance of a teacher's imposing an idealized text on the student, her own model of what counts in a piece of writing, and how that writing ought to appear, especially formally and structurally, without any real concern for the writer's purposes and meaning. (226)

Students, says Straub, can identify a directive teacher by the many imperative comments found scattered throughout the paper that attempt to "assert authority over the student"(236). Examples of these are: "Revise the opening to begin your argument," "Focus this paragraph on this argument and develop your case," "Make this into a full closing paragraph," and "Be sure you focus each paragraph on its central idea"(236).

A teacher who is directive is largely criticized by current composition theorists because in making these imperative comments, and in correcting "errors," the students do not learn from their own mistakes. Students do not "retain a greater responsibility" for their writing and tend to recommit the same errors in future papers(Straub 223). The directive teacher is also criticized because he/she does not allow the writer to have a voice. The paper's sentences and paragraphs are largely those created by the teacher. Thus, because the writing is largely the

teacher's words and voice, and not the student's, the student is not able to engage in critical thought, thought that inspires him/her to, as Peter Elbow says, "wallow in complexity." The student's writing may be superficial and remain at a novice level.

A fourth type of response to avoid is one that reflects the biases of the teacher. One specific study conducted by Melanie Sperling investigated the commenting techniques a teacher used for what she considered A to C students. The comments for the A student, Manda, were much more positive and facilitative than for the C student, Mohan, where the comments were negative and tended to be more directive. Overall, "to Manda, the teacher-as-reader often showed herself as positive, peer-like, and sympathetic to Manda's own world experience," whereas for Mohan, "the teacher-as-reader often showed herself as negative, didactic, and focused on mechanics instead of his text" (192).

Although the difference in comments had to do somewhat with the different feedback that each student required, Sperling indicates that the comments rather reflected what the teacher, valued as "interesting" writing versus "boring" writing (189-90). Throughout the evaluation of the writing, the teacher often related her own experience to the writer's experience. Interestingly, Manda's world experiences were closer to the teacher's own than Mohan's, which possibly indicates that the grade that resulted had to do with a subjective rather than objective view of the writing. The teacher was using an emotional bias to comment on and grade student's papers. Furthermore, the result of these comments did not seem to benefit Mohan in improvement of his writing. Sperling states that Mohan's grade remained a C throughout the course, and the errors that he committed never ceased (180). Therefore, this information encourages a teacher to reconsider his/her way of perceiving a student's writing, and understand that different students will write differently because of heterogeneous experiences. Just because a teacher cannot relate as well to one experience as to another, does not mean that the latter student deserves a lesser grade. As Sperling suggests, we should "be conscious of the ways in

1998 WIC Department Development Grants Call for Proposals

The Writing Intensive Curriculum Program is now accepting proposals for WIC Grants for 1998. Special consideration will be given to proposals which address writing needs beyond the boundaries of one course. Proposals may also focus on projects which will generally increase and improve the use of writing in undergraduate courses, encourage the use of writing at all levels of curriclum, and/or improve WIC course offerings. Grants range from $50 to $2,500, with preference going to grants proposed by faculty with WIC seminar training. Requests for Proposals are available from Saundra Mills at 7-2930 or smills@orst.edu. Proposals are due in the WIC office 123 Waldo, by February 16, 1998.

WIC Grant Proposals Due February 16, 1998

WIC Fall Seminar Enrolls 14

Faculty members from the colleges of Science, Engineering, Business, Health and Human Performance, Home Economics and Education, and Liberal Arts participated in the Introductory WIC Seminar during fall term. Meeting on five Wednesday afternoons, the seminar covered topics including writing as a mode of learning course content, designing good assignments, and responding to student writing.

Participants included Michelle Bothwell (Bioresource Engineering), Bob Burton (Math), Brad Cardinal (Exercise and Sport Science), Dan Conway (Naval ROTC), Steve Davis (Animal Sciences), Jon Down (Business), Shelly Dubkin-Lee (Human Development and Family Sciences), Mark Edwards (Sociology), Leonard Friedman (Public Health), Gene Korienek (Exercise and Sports Science), John Lee (Math), Brian Paul (Industrial and Manufactoring Engineering), Dwaine Plaza (Sociology), and Alexis Walker (Human Development and Family Sciences).

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Pre/Views Continued

Effective responding is also a frequent topic of discussion in the Introductory and Advanced WIC Seminars. Should response differ across disciplines? From assignment to assignment? Is the way our comments affect students' attitudes toward writing and themselves as writers as important as our comments on content, form, and conventions? I hope Jessica's article will initiate discussions among our faculty about responding to student writing. I welcome email responses to the article.

I also urge all alumni of the Introductory WIC Seminar to consider enrolling in the Advanced Seminar during winter term. Details concerning the seminar are on the back page of this issue. Advanced seminars always include lively discussions as teachers who have actually tried WIC approaches to teaching in writing intensive courses and/or in regular courses discuss their struggles and their successes and share good ideas and helpful approaches. At the end of the 1997 Advanced Seminar, comments included, "This has given me a new lease on teaching. I am excited again," and "I wish we could keep going for another five weeks." Join us. The next Introductory Seminar will be offered Fall 1998.

which our readings of and responses to student writing can vary from student to student and text to text" and realize that "as we come to understand more about our perspective as readers, we may have a touchstone for shaping different student experiences with different writing types"(201).

Overall, teachers should take into consideration different modes of response in order to reach beginning writing students in the most productive and effective manner. Although research is still needed to discover the long-term effect of marginal and end comments on student writing, it is certain that for the present time, teacher response aids a student in his/her revision, but only if it is worded carefully and concretely. Research sheds light on what "good" or "well-designed" advice may be according to beginning writing students, and teachers should understand what "good advice" entails when commenting on student papers. When advice is worded in an "appealing" way and is thorough, students acknowledge that "feedback and revision are valuable pedagogical tools" and that the improvement of their drafts is a result of these tools (Ferris 316).

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