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BARD CORRECTS FRESHMEN THEMES ON TAPE.

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A STUDY OF THE FEASIBILITY OF GRADING PAPERS FOR FRESHMEN ENGLISH COURSES BY MEANS OF TAPE RECORDINGS WAS CONDUCTED AT BARD COLLEGE IN 1966-67. IN THE PROCEDURE FOLLOWED, THE INSTRUCTOR MADE COMMENTS ON A DICTATION BELT WHICH THE STUDENT LATER LISTENED TO ON A PLAYBACK MACHINE IN THE LIBRARY. RESULTS INDICATE THAT ALTHOUGH THE USE OF MACHINES DID NOT SAVE TIME, THE CORRECTION OF THEMES WAS CONSIDERABLY MORE MEANINGFUL FOR BOTH THE STUDENT AND THE INSTRUCTOR. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "AAHE COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY BULLETIN," VOLUME 20, NUMBER 10, MARCH 1, 1968, PAGES 2-3. (BN)

Bard Corrects Freshmen Themes on Tape

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During the 1966-67 academic year, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, with the support of the Esso Education Foundation, made a study of the feasibility of grading papers for freshman English courses by means of tape recordings. The study was directed by Harold L. Hodgkinson, dean of Bard College, assisted by William Walter, associate professor of English, and Robert Coover, instructor in English.

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There were several reasons for conducting this study. It was recognized that freshman English consumes a vast amount of staff time, that little change in student writing can be consistently attributed to the course, and that many instructors' hand written scribbles on student papers are illegible (one student group reported that between 30 and 40 percent of their instructors' comments could not be read).

We found through this study that although the use of machines did not save time, they did make the correction of students' themes a more meaningful experience for both the student and the instructor.

In the procedure followed, the instructor makes his comments on a dictation belt, which is then returned, with the paper, to the student. The student takes the paper and belt to the library, where two playback machines have been installed. The student *listens* to the comments, free to go back on the tape if he doesn't understand a point. The grade is recorded near the end of the tape, thereby increasing the student's desire to listen carefully to the entire tape. Twelve minutes of dictation time are available on each belt. In 12 minutes, most people can dictate the equivalent of six to ten pages of single-spaced, typed material.

Fall Semester

During the fall semester of 1966-67 the investigators gained information about time spent in grading papers, and collected student comments about the conventional correction methods then in use. Information was gathered on both 600-word limit themes and longer papers of 1,000 to 5,000 words. The average time spent on grading each 600-word paper was 15.8 minutes; for the longer papers, 20 minutes. As the semester wore on, time spent per paper dropped. We also noticed that, in a given set of papers, more time was spent on the first few papers, with a gradual speeding up.

The following are some student comments on these conventional methods of correcting themes (these students were not aware of the impending experiment).

I don't feel that the grammatical comments touch me. They are merely necessary corrections to what exists and do not really affect what I will do in the future.

Comments on grammar are, I think, unnecessary; correction is helpful.

I become extremely bored and irritated by strictly grammatical correction. I write a paper in order to make a point, not to prove that I can construct a nice sentence.

These comments all suggest a pervasive aversion to the routine correction of mechanical faults. Much more needs to be known about this student attitude if the teaching of writing is to have any impact at all.

Other students made these remarks:

The worst crime is that of the one-sentence comment. Even a comment "very good" is disappointing. I want to know the reason.

The most annoying kind of remark by a teacher is that which is scrawled in the margins or written between the lines.

The criticisms I like to receive are detailed. They point to my mistakes and then show how I could have avoided them.

I usually find the comments too vague, or summed up at the bottom of a paper with unclear references to the work.

These comments suggest that conventional teacher corrections suffer from many of the same faults that appear on their students' papers—vagueness, brevity, illegibility, sliding through without taking the student's work at all seriously.

Another type of reaction is shown in the following:

I like to think that a teacher recalls all my past work as he views each paper. If he congratulates me on my correction of previous errors, I am not only encouraged, but pleased that he remembered.

The type of comments I find most useful are those which deal with any particular, personal problems I may have in my style of writing.

I depend on comments by my teachers for new inspiration. That is, I try to correct my mistakes to a degree determined by my teacher's interest.

These comments all suggest that students wish some recognition as a person in comments on their writing. The usual "awk." in the margin is about as depersonalized as a 12-digit IBM card number. These students seemed to want the expression of a *personal* response from the teacher; if they are supposed to get personally involved in the writing of a paper, they expect the instructor to get involved in the reading of it. Personal responses are notoriously difficult to convey on paper.

Spring Semester

Armed with student comments and times for conventional grading, work began in training students in the use of the machines. This went quite well; the "Stenocord" dictation equipment performed excellently, with only one minor repair in one semester's operation, and students and faculty seemed to overcome their uneasiness about machines quite quickly, generally within the first two weeks.

However, it soon became clear that in terms of saving time, the new system was not effective. In fact, correction times for the two paper lengths changed very little. However, what *did* happen was a marked change in what the instructors considered to be a reasonable job of marking a student paper. They were, at the least, quadrupling the amount of information of each paper. As one in-

structor reported:

The ubiquitous "K" or "awk." was replaced by an explanation in the context of the paper; sometimes with alternative ways of stating the sentence proposed. Errors of logic were not only pointed out, but explained; problems of organization were discussed in detail; sections of the textbook could be referred to for reminders; promising ideas could be developed. In short, the "new technique," expected to be largely a mechanical innovation, turned out to effect a considerable change in the main substance of theme correction. There was also an improved general relationship among the triad of student/paper/instructor.

The major change that this experiment produced was an awareness on the instructors' part of how poor their previous standards concerning theme correction had been. Here, the medium proved to be the message, as with 12 minutes of speaking time available, the instructor could not, with a clear conscience, say "good job," and go on to the next paper. Thus, even though time was not saved, teachers' attitudes about the correction of themes changed in a positive direction.

It would be pleasant to be able to report that the quality of student writing showed definite, quantitatively verifiable improvement in the spring semester beyond normal expectations. Our criteria are much too subjective to allow that sort of statement. But there was more than normal improvement in student attitudes toward writing papers, their use of critical vocabulary was improved (due perhaps to being subjected to a great deal of it being used correctly in reference to their own papers), and the usual post-midterm slump in paper quality did not occur. Most students felt that they were learning more about their writing:

My opinion of the tape method is favorable for one reason—detail.

It forced the instructor to give more pertinent, involved replies and responses to my papers.

The completeness of the comment formed a strong and forceful opinion, and the presence of the human voice gave me the knowledge that there actually was somebody behind the words and that he deserved to be listened to as much as I did.

Just the simple act of reading the paper over, something I rarely do after it has been graded, made me make criticisms of my own that I never would have otherwise.

There were, of course, some objections to the new approach. In that the tapes were returned to the instructor, erased and used again, the student had no per-

manent record of comments whereby he could appraise his semester's progress (however, little use was made of this opportunity during the fall semester). There were also those who felt that to make a special trip to the library (about 150 yards from the main classroom building; much farther from the outlying dorms) was asking too much. As one student put it:

I must drag myself down to the library—foreign ground in any case—after working up the courage to go and listen to myself get verbally pulverized.

This was clearly a minority view, expressed by one teacher as "the usual form of student grousing in response to the usual professional grousing."

One initial student reaction, in addition to feeling uncomfortable with the machines, was that they had no chance to talk back to the taped voice, no opportunity to defend themselves. However, in reassessing the usual conference procedures of the fall semester, it was discovered that when a student sat down to discuss a paper with the instructor, only a small portion of the entire paper was discussed, due to digressions, debates, etc. Both students and faculty agreed that in the new system there was possible a *complete* comment and evaluation. It was also agreed by both faculty and students that faculty evaluation of student work was much more valid than under the previous system. The faculty members felt that they had gotten to know their students much better in the new approach, and most students agreed with this.

One technique which proved to be very effective was for the instructor to *speak* back to the student a line or two of the student's own writing, just as he wrote it. The ability to detect errors with the ear seems to be much better than with the eye. Although the machines were portable, and equipped with speakers as well as earphones, little use was made of the tapes in classroom situations on the ground that this would destroy the personal, one-to-one relationship which the tapes provided.

Conclusions

Other studies, mostly done in secondary schools, have reported a considerable saving of time in the use of dictation equipment. However, use was restricted to a five- or six-line summary comment, rather than the running commentary and more extended analysis required in college-level work. Hence, this procedure is not recommended to colleges that are looking for a way to save time. However, it is recommended without reservation to those institutions which wish to make the correction and evalua-

tion of written work an intellectually valid and helpful experience for teacher and student.

Certainly its use should not be restricted to freshman composition classes. In fact, the machines make even more sense in longer papers in which the instructor wishes to make major comments of a substantive nature, such as citing bibliographic sources at the point in the paper at which they are relevant, summarizing alternative approaches to the topic, important points which the student omitted, etc. It would seem ideal for term papers.

However, any institution contemplating use of dictation equipment should expect opposition from the faculty, ranging from vague dislike of machines through a belief in mechanical ineptness, to those who think machines will destroy personal contact between students and teachers, and those who simply can't be bothered with anything new or different. It is too early to assess this problem, but certainly if the college wishes to have tapes in wide use, machines must be inexpensively available. In addition to dictation equipment, some colleges have worked with inexpensive cartridge recorders. Consideration should also be given to using the equipment already available in language laboratories for this kind of playback, particularly if the lab is open for extended periods for general student use. Certainly the student playback equipment must be conveniently located, easily handled without much need for mechanical skill, and available for use during as many hours of every day as possible.

Teachers must be prepared for the fact that the increased capability of the dictation machine compared to their handwritten comments will probably mean a marked change in their estimation of what constitutes an adequate job of theme correction and analysis. Students who become familiar with taped comments may begin to resent teachers who scrawl "very good" on the bottom of the last page. Most teachers will feel awkward the first time they talk into the box and hear their voices as their students hear them. But this is quickly eliminated, and for many teachers there may be a gain in self-awareness which will carry over into classroom performance.

Most machines save time and destroy personal and intellectual contact between human beings. In this study the machines did not have time, but by providing four to eight times as much information, they made the correction of student work a more meaningful personal and intellectual experience, relating the student, the paper, and the instructor in a much more significant way.