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ABSTRACT

To gauge students' reactions to a teacher's written comments on final drafts of their papers, a questionnaire was administered to 197 students in six sections of freshman composition. Most of the students responding to the questionnaire were majoring in engineering, computer science, or business. Their six instructors had similar criteria for their papers, but used different grading methods. The four areas investigated were clarity of comments, transfer of comments to future papers, motivation or encouragement of students by comments, and the efficiency of time spent by teachers in responding. Results indicated that students found teacher comments unclear, sometimes unreadable, and containing the same type of writing errors for which they were penalized. Other findings showed that 52% of the students found comments helpful in writing the next paper, that more critical responses were more motivating, and that (with regard to the efficiency of teacher response to student papers), protocols for student review of returned papers would more effectively determine the quality of review. (A check list used by one instructor is appended.) (CRH)

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# Students' Response to Our Response

## Part I Jill Burkland

Summary: In this paper we will take a look at how students react to teachers' written comments on the final drafts of their papers. We will discuss how well students understand their teachers' responses, how they use them and how they feel about them. Our findings are a result of a questionnaire completed by freshman composition students at Michigan Technological University.

A couple of years ago a student came to see me about my response to one of his papers. He had received a B, rather than the A he felt he deserved. He was very defensive whenever I pointed out weaknesses in his writing and chose to see my suggestions as opinions that were, in fact, no more legitimate than his own. I finally called an end to the conference and as he rose to leave, angry and frustrated, he stammered, "Well, I never knew you were going to grade our papers on our writing." Although I laughed about this student and his proclamation and shared the antecdote with my colleagues, I have since come to see him as representative of the confusion that certain students feel about the whole process of teachers' evaluation of their writing.

Both Nancy and I have, in addition to teaching, worked as tutors in Michigan Tech's Writing Skills Lab. There we have seen students struggling with their teachers' responses to their writing. They try to understand but often don't. They ask their tutors to interpret for them their teachers' comments. But when asked, "Have you talked to your instructor about this?" the response is usually "no." As teacners ourselves, we were troubled by this. If students are having trouble with their teachers' responses and if they don't tell us they are, what can we do, how can we improve this essential process?

For we as teachers believe that responding to student writing is an essential part of the learning process. We spend countless hours on the task—probably more hours than we spend on the other aspects of classroom teaching combined. The emphasis on process has added hours to that task, we respond in writing or in conference to several drafts. The most frustrating step in this process is still, for many of us, the final draft evaluation. We believe that it is essential, both practically and psychologically, but it takes us the most time, and we get almost no feedback from our students. Most of us who teach composition as process are no longer comfortable just giving a grade that we justify with comments. Rather, we feel we must look back at draft work to check on the progress of the paper and that we must respond not only as an evaluator but as a reader, suggesting, asking questions, praising as well as criticizing.

After talking about our frustrations together and sharing observations with other faculty members and tutors in our department, we felt the need to hear from more students. Maybe the problems we saw in the lab were not typical, maybe the lab students are particularly unskilled or insecure, and this causes their problems. We decided to design a survey that would give us a broader scope of student reactions to our responses.

We questioned 197 students in the Freshman Composition classes of six instructors. In our sample, as in the University as a whole, male students outnumbered female students five-to-one. The large majority of them were majoring in engineering, the remainder in computer science or business administration. Their average ACT and SAT test scores were significantly above average in both mathematical and verbal skills.

The six instructors involved used similar classroom practices,

emphasizing draftwork, editing, conferencing and peer critiquing. In evaluating final papers, all instructors took revision into consideration, looking at how well their students used peer and teacher suggestions. They all addressed content as well as development and organization in their evaluations and called attention to stylistic and mechanical strengths and weaknesses.

The teachers' methods of grading differed significantly, however. One gave no grade but used an analytic check list to rank such areas as development, organization, style, and grammar on a scale from strong to weak. (see appendix) A second instructor also used an analytic scale but assigned a numerical value to items on the scale, giving each student a percentage grade. Both teachers who used scales also wrote marginal and summary comments. The other four teachers used letter grades with marginal and summary comments. One of them included reference numbers to sections in the handbook for specific problems. Our questionnaire was designed, in part, as a measure of comparison among these different grading methods, especially to see whether students wanted a grade on their papers and if so what kind of grade seemed most helpful to them.

The four other areas we wished to investigate were Clarity: are teachers' comments, corrections, suggestions understood? Transfer: are the comments on papers being applied to future papers? Motivation: are instructors' comments encouraging? Do they assure students of their capabilities and foster a positive attitude toward writing? These first three focus on the student; our fourth area of concern Efficiency is directed at the teacher: are we giving the most instruction possible for the time spent reading and responding?

We asked seventeen questions designed to answer these questions. Some of

our questions asked students to rank or give numerical value to different methods of response, others left an opportunity for an open-ended answer. We designed questions to serve as a double check on each other. We used our questionnaire as a sampling of student opinion, a starting place in our research. It was not intended to be a definitive analysis of the evaluation process.

## Clarity

We see clarity as the most basic area of concern. If instructors' comments are not clear enough to be understood, then the rest of the questions are beside the point. We assume that our students make sense of our comments, but because this communication is generally only one way, we don't know that for sure. We asked our students, "How well do you usually understand the comments on your paper?" and "What, if anything, usually interferes with your understanding of the teacher's comments?"

Our findings confirmed what we had observed as tutors. In response to the first question, 52% of the students said they completely understood their teachers' comments. That, of course, leaves almost half who, at least some of the time, do not understand.

More important then, what are the problems, what causes this lack of understanding? To get at some of the possible technical problems we asked students whether penmanship, abbreviations, or terminology interfered with their understanding of teachers' responses. We then gave them an opportunity, in an open-ended question to say for themselves what they thought the problems were. We hoped they would name the larger issues, but they had trouble identifying the problems. Only twenty-five students responded to this question. But their responses are, we believe, worth noting.

They accused their teachers of having the same kinds of writing problems we accuse them of. They even used our terminology, "fragmented comments," "unclear point," and "unclear reference" to name the problems. In general, what they told us is that their teachers' comments are too vague. They want specifics, examples, and detailed explanations. They want more comments. This confirms Nancy Sommer's observation that students need text specific comments. The "rubber stamp" marginal note is not enough. If an introduction is good, in what way is it good? If an idea needs development, why? how? in what direction? This does not mean we write our students' papers for them, but we need to respond to each text individually and specifically.

On the technical aspects, we found that most students can emphathize with the student in Lynch and Kleman's survey (Oct. 1978 College English) who said, when asked what she did when she got her last paper back: "I sat down and cried because I couldn't read my teacher's handwriting." Over 60% of respondents said that penmanship interfered with their understanding at least some of the time. Ten percent said it always did. So that leaves a tenth of these students who never understand anything their teachers have to say simply because of hand-writing.

Over half said that abbreviations are a problem for them but most do not have any trouble with teachers' vocabulary or terminology. In other words students understand us when we talk about focus, thesis statement or audience, but teachers need to clarify what we mean by "frag," "cf," or "¶."

We know now what some of the problems are with clarity. We, ourselves, have become very self-conscious about our hand-writing. We no longer use abbreviations, having decided that if it's important, it's worth writing out. But the difficult job, of course, is making our comments specific enough for

the one paper and still broad enough to have what Richard Larson refers to as "transfer value."

## Transfer

It is the belief in the existence and importance of transfer that keeps most teachers writing formative responses on final drafts. We all assume that students use our comments to inform their future writing. As tutors in the Writing Lab we saw students doing this, pulling out old papers to reread before writing the next, but maybe this was only in response to tutors' suggestions. We decided to check into what students <u>say</u> they do with teachers' responses.

We were encouraged that over half the students questioned said that they <u>do</u> find their teacher's comments helpful in writing their next paper. When asked if instructors' comments were useful: 1) in writing next paper, 2) in understanding writing in that paper, or 3) not useful, 52% said they found it helpful in writing the next paper.

This is what they <u>say</u>, but what do they <u>do</u>, or at least <u>say</u> they <u>do</u>? We asked students what they did when their last paper, a personal narrative, was returned to them. We grouped their responses by key phrases.

% Of Students Using Key Phrases to Describe

What They Did With A Marked Paper

| Key Phrase | % Of Students | |
|---|---|---|
| Transfer: | | |
| Thought about it in terms of my next paper | 13% | |
| Studied my strong and weak points | 6% | |
| Rewrote sections for myself | 5% | |
| Rewrote sections for my instructor | 4% | 57% |
| Read my paper with comments | 11% | |
| Made mental corrections as I read | 12% | |
| Made mechanical corrections as I read | 6% | |
| No Transfer: | | |
| Read comments only | 23% | |
| Inconclusive: | | |
| Tried to understand comments | 3% | |
| Considered whether I agreed | 8% | 20% |
| Talked to teacher | 3% | |
| No response | 6% | |

We believe that the students in the first group who specifically thought about the next paper, studied strengths and weaknesses, rewrote, made corrections or even just reread the paper, re-engaged enough with their paper to get some transfer value. This represents 57% of the responses. Those who simply looked over the comments probably got little if any transfer value. We believe a person would have to reread a paper after not having seen it for a week or two to really understand the teacher's comments.

The teachers involved in this survey emphasize the importance of transfer value by having their students resubmit graded papers with ones in progress. Their assumption is that this encourages students to look back for advice and suggestions that could be transferred. We asked students,"Do you read

comments on your last paper when writing the next one?" The percentage of students who seem to be getting some transfer value goes up markedly here. 79% of those responding said that they re-read previous papers with comments before writing their next paper. This, of course, still leaves a sizable percentage, 21%, of the students who never re-read old papers.

These findings on the transfer value of our comments suggest that if we teachers believe we are giving instruction when we respond to our students' papers and if we are to continue operating under this assumption, we need to emphasize this to our students. We need to remind them, to give them time in class to read over past papers; we may wish to look at past papers in conferences or in peer critiquing sessions. Ultimately, of course, to really test this idea of transfer value, teachers must themselves re-read past papers and comments while responding to the assignment at hand.

Students' Response to Our Response

Part II--Nancy Grimm

Motivation

As a keynote for my section of this paper, I'd like to quote from something many of us read daily (whether we admit it or not), the Dear Abby column. In a recent edition of our paper, Abby responded to several people, including Frigid In Virginia, History Buff, Ticked-Off Travelers, and Grieving Son. The letter I'd like to focus on was signed very simply, "Mrs. D., Libertyville, Illinois. Mrs. D. wrote:

> Dear Abby: I've enjoyed your column for many years. It was so witty, with just the right answers to some very real problems. Will you please return to those days and skip all the lectures and sermons you've been running of late?
>
> Also, please let the Food and Drug Administration buy space in newspapers and medical journals to warn people about combining drugs with certain foods, etc.
>
> We need you as you were.

Abby responded in a fairly typical way.

> Dear Mrs. D.: To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln: You may please all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time.

But then she added: "Thanks for writing. I learn more from criticism than I do from praise."

The third purpose of our survey was to see what students could tell us about the motivational value of our comments about how they react to our criticism. Specifically, we wanted to answer two questions:

What effect do our <u>comments</u> have on students' attitudes about writing and what effect do <u>grades</u> have on students' attitude about writing.

We teachers know what effect we <u>want</u> our comments to have. We'd like to

think that what we write on student papers fosters a positive attitude about writing. We want our comments to give students a sense of themselves as able writers and capable revisors as well as a realistic sense of the amount of work it takes to write well. We recognize the value of positive reinforcement and have read articles like Paul Diederich's "In Praise of Praise," which says, "The art of the teacher--at its best--is the reinforcement of good things." In his article, Diederich suggests that student papers be dealt with like this:

> "Find in each paper at least one thing, and preferably two or three things, that the student has done well, or better than before. Then, if you must, find one thing, and preferably not more than one thing, that he should try to improve on in his next paper."

As solid as this advice may seem, I know many teachers (especially myself) have difficulty putting this into practice. I'm self-conscious about how many of my comments begin "you chose a good subject, BUT ..." or "you have many interesting quotes here, HOWEVER ..." The but and however side is always longer.

Recognizing this difficulty, we expected to find complaints about too many cut downs or requests for more positive feedback. We expected this partly because we assume that students have the same emotional stake in their writing as we have in ours and that they have even more vulnerability than we do. The response to one question on our survey challenged that assumption. We asked students: "How do instructor's comments make you feel?" Their choice of response was:

| | |
|---|---|
| No feeling in particular | 141 |
| Positive feeling | 17 |
| Negative feeling | 15 |

The majority of students who answered the question were clearly telling us that their feelings are not as closely connected to their writing as we expected. This partly explains another surprising response. We gave students a list of seven types of comments and asked them to rank them in terms of their usefulness. Three of the comments were labeled complimentary and four of the comments were labeled critical. The comments were aimed at development, organization, style, or mechanics (spelling, punctuation, usage).

Seventy-one per cent of the students chose a critical comment as most useful even though these were comments on final drafts. The type of comments most frequently ranked first were:

Critical Development Comments:

"Give example"

"Not sure what you mean here"

"Explain how this is different from point in previous paragraph"

Critical organization comments:

"Transition needed"

"Paragraph lacks unity"

"Weak conclusion"

We felt uneasy accepting these results. We suspected that the preference for criticism was perhaps because the question asked students what was most "useful" and perhaps because of the technical orientation of our students. We found, however, that the response to this question compared very closely to

another, more direct question which asked, "What types of comments make you want to improve?" The table below shows students' responses to the choices given:

What Types of Comments Make You Want to Improve?

| Teachers Comments | Students' Responses | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Always | Sometimes | Never |
| Specific Compliments | 63 | 114 | 7 |
| Personal response to my subject | 69 | 99 | 12 |
| Suggestions for improving organizations | 109 | 72 | 3 |
| Suggestions for improving my style | 101 | 65 | 17 |
| Attention called to my mechanical errors (sp., punc., etc.) | 58 | 95 | 31 |

We came to these conclusions after studying this data. First, students still want critical suggestions on a final draft. Although they may not have the time or opportunity to revise, they can see their papers as in-progress and want more than just a comment justifying the grade. Second, suggestions for revision allow students to maintain authority over the text whereas a personal response may be seen as a teacher appropriating the text. Donald Murray once wrote that his favorite response began "I like the way you ..." This response may work for Murray's students who view him as a successful published writer. We suspect it works less well for most teachers because a response beginning with "I" shifts the focus to one particular teacher. Students may not be willing to trust that what one teacher likes or dislikes is also what another teacher or another audience will like or dislike. As Elaine O. Lees has pointed out, "Comments that stop at emoting, although they

are in one sense about the paper, are more obviously about the teacher." Finally, students are not telling us that they don't like praise, but that they have trouble seeing it as "useful." As one student wrote, "Positive comments are all right, but they don't help you improve the weak parts of your paper." Their response doesn't suggest that we be even more stingy with praise, but that we make it more specific, explaining, for example, why a particular word is effective rather than just labeling it "good" or by suggesting how an effective strategy in one section of a paper may be used similarly in another section. Students are telling us that, like Dear Abby, they learn more from critical suggestions than they do from praise.

In addition to determining the effect our comments have on students' attitude about writing, we wanted to compare the response of students in classes who received grades with the students who didn't. We asked one question to check how satisfied students were with their teachers' method of grading. The question asked: "What change, if any, would you suggest in your instructor's grading system?" We tabulated the number of students who expressed satisfaction, asking for no change.

| Grading System | No Change |
|---|---|
| Analytic scale and percentage grade | 82% |
| Comments and grade | 70% |
| Analytic scale, no grade | 38% |

Clearly, the least satisfied group were those who didn't receive a grade. Most of them asked for either a letter or number grade, suggesting to us that they see the grade as the ultimate motivation for writing. One student wrote,

"We are all here to get 4.0, and if we don't know how close we are to it, there isn't enough incentive to try for it." This response is enough to make many teachers worry that students may not take the course work seriously if we don't use grades as "motivators."

However, just because students want a grade doesn't mean it's the best thing for them. Other responses on the survey suggest just the opposite. We looked at the open-ended question that asked, "Explain what you did when your personal narrative was returned." In the group that received a grade, one third of them mentioned it first. A typical response was, "I looked at the letter grade, at the comments, compared my grade with others in my group and let it go at that. I really never gave the paper much thought after that." Their primary concern seemed to be "what did I get?" rather than "what can I learn from this paper." In general, the students who didn't receive a grade described a more careful review process. The following responses were typical:

> First I looked at my analytic checklist; then I carefully read my paper with the comments. Then I looked at the checklist again and re-read the paper and comments.

> I first looked at the checklist and comments on it. Then I compared it with the previous paper's list to see my improvements. Lastly I paged through the paper looking for problems indicated and mentally corrected them, and also noted any additional comments.

Students in the groups that received a grade also expressed hostility more frequently:

> I looked at the "C," read the comments briefly, and then folded it and put it in my book. I was mad. I worked hard on the paper and the teacher gave me a "C."

> I was so disgusted with the grade that I didn't even look at it till the next day. Then I went to the professor to find out why I got what I got. She

told me and I didn't agree with her.

The graded groups also told us where they "stuck" their papers, suggesting that out-of-sight was also out-of-mind. A sense of closure is evident in these comments:

> "Looked at grade. Wasn't impressed. Looked at comments. Put it in my folder."
>
> "Read the comments and stuck it in my notebook."

This response confirmed our tutorial experience. In response to our inquiries about a paper, tutees would tell us they received a "C+" on a paper but frequently needed coaxing to find the paper and bring it in for discussion. Both of us discontinued using grades after finding the survey response confirmed the language lab experience.

## Efficiency

Our final purpose in administering the survey was to look for ways to make the process of responding more efficient in terms of our time. An informal survey of our department members indicated that most teachers spend about 15-30 minutes reading and responding to one paper. For those with 80-90 student load, this can mean 23-45 hours per assignment. To consider efficiency, we had three questions in mind:

> How much time do students spend reviewing a marked paper?
>
> What types of comments do they pay most attention to at final draft stage?
>
> How can we make our method of marking more useful to students?

No doubt most teachers have paused during a late night of reading papers to wonder how much time students spend reading their comments. In response to our question of how much time students spent reviewing a paper, only 5% said they spent less than five minutes. Twenty-five percent said they spent five

to ten minutes; 48% said 10-20 minutes, and 21% said more than twenty. We were puzzled, though, by the discrepancy between the time given and the review process described.

A student who spent less than 10 minutes wrote:

> First I looked for the grade. Then I went over the comment sheet to see what she felt my paper was not too strong in. After reading over her comments, I read over my paper myself thinking how I could mentally change it to be better.

Another student who claimed she spent half an hour described a superficial process:

> "Looked it over for style and overall effect."

We think that protocols of students reviewing a returned paper would more effectively determine the quality of review.

In response to our second question about what types of comments students pay most attention to, we found that although we expected students would be more interested in surface features by final draft stage, the message throughout the survey was that they are still interested in major issues. They ranked mechanical suggestions the least useful of seven types of response, but even though they find them least useful, they still want them marked as their response to this question shows:

When the instructor marks a punctuation or spelling error I ...

| | Always | Sometimes | Never |
|---|---|---|---|
| Like it | 112 | 59 | 12 |
| Correct it | 108 | 61 | 16 |

The final question on our survey asked students to tell us how we could make our method of marking papers more useful to them. We categorized their

responses using key phrases and in doing so noticed two things: no complaints about over-marked papers and no suggestions for making our job less time-consuming. Most students asked for more. The table showing their response follows.

How Can We Make Our Method of Marking Papers More Useful to You?

| | |
|---|---|
| No answer | 16% |
| Expresses satisfaction | 20% |
| More comments | 11% |
| More critical comments | 11% |
| More specific comments | 8% |
| Conference to discuss paper | 6% |
| Give examples | 2% |
| Grade on improvement/effort | 2% |
| More positive comments | 2% |

About 20% of the responses to this question were difficult to categorize. Because these students didn't seem to be answering our question, our first impulse was to dismiss them. Some of the answers made us chuckle, some made us feel hostile. But soon we realized there were too many to ignore. We decided to lump them all into a category we call "confusion." A sample of the responses in this category follows:

> "Read between the lines, figure out the point the author is making. If it makes sense and is logical it should be good."
>
> "Take into account if the student has the approach and possibly gets lost in the writing. He/she

shouldn't be graded down upon."

"If you get a bad grade, you might want to change your style, a style that you have developed over twelve years."

"I think writing should be one's own thoughts so how can someone put a grade on that?"

"At times the teacher could be a little less picky on the paper itself and a little more on the grammar."

Considering that these students had spent ten weeks with teachers whom we considered strong and enlightened, their comments cause us concern. Their responses suggest grave misunderstanding about the purpose of teaching and responding to writing. Unfortunately for us, the student whom Jill described in the introduction is not alone.

We conclude by offering four suggestions for what we see as needed research:

1. Students like the ones quoted above need to be identified and interviewed to find out what went wrong and when.
2. Our results suggested that students who receive grades experience greater closure and hostility. We see the need for more studies on the effect of a grade.
3. The issue of how clear our responses are to students is difficult to resolve because the survey is one-way communication. At the 1983 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Mary Hayes of Miami University presented protocols of students talking about papers that had just been returned. We see a need for more close-up work of this kind.
4. Our students expressed a strong preference for criticism and an ambivalence about personal response and compliments. We wonder

if this response is unique to our university and its technical student population. Do students elsewhere have the same preference?

We think it's about time we started asking students about this process that takes so much of our time.

Appendix:

Assignment II Narrative

Name _____
Date _____
Section Number _____
Group Number _____

| | WEAK | | | AVERAGE | | | STRONG | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | | |
| FOCUS/"THE POINT" conflict/tension/change significance/"insight into the human heart" | | | | | | | | | |
| CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT (includes self-physical and biographical details) | | | | | | | | | |
| SCENIC DEVELOPMENT showing vs. telling re-creating mental images using sensory detail | | | | | | | | | |
| ORGANIZATION/TIME HANDLED brisk pace, appropriate amt. of time, smoothness, strong start | | | | | | | | | |
| STYLE using specific words & variety of sent, pattern effective dialogue, avoiding cliches, repetition, wordiness | | | | | | | | | |
| GRAMMAR/PUNCTUATION | | | | | | | | | |
| SPELLING | | | | | | | | | |