

# Feedback on Feedback: Exploring Student Responses to Teachers' Written Commentary

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*ABSTRACT: How students respond to teacher-written commentary has been an under-researched topic, and the existing literature in L2 studies is contradictory. The present study analyzes the critical and positive commentary, mitigated and unmitigated, written by two community-college, first-year composition teachers on two drafts of two writing assignments done by 14 L1 and L2 students and addresses the students' reactions to these comments. Qualitative data was collected through interviews with the two teachers and their 14 student participants. Students indicated that they equally understand and revise following mitigated and directive comments. However, they found most helpful the commentary that provided some acknowledgment of their writing, offered specific suggestions, and gave them choices. In addition, many of the students felt discouraged by directives that didn't convey trust in their abilities to revise. The findings are compared with those of similar studies, and conclusions are drawn about implications for instructors of first-year composition classes.*

*KEYWORDS: teacher-written commentary; feedback; student response; mitigated and directive comments*

Writing is an act of confidence, as Mina Shaughnessy has reminded us in *Errors and Expectations*. L1 and L2 theories related to learning to write thus suggest that feedback be supportive to facilitate that confidence.<sup>1</sup> Although most educators agree—at least in theory—that a positive, dynamic interaction is necessary to give students the confidence to take charge of their writing (Brannon and Knoblauch; Elbow; Ferris, “Response;” Lea and Street; Straub, “The Student”), research shows that commentary practices don't always reflect that premise. As Stern and Solomon put it, overwhelmed with the number of papers to respond to and unsure of how to provide effective commentary, instructors often “scribble a few arbitrary comments and assign an obligatory grade” (24). Such comments are more likely to

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lead students to become defensive and to lose confidence rather than to encourage them to revise productively (Daiker; Ferris, "Response"; Straub, "Students' Reactions"; Weaver).

The language in which commentary is written affects the way students receive it (Hyland and Hyland; Lea and Street; Ivanic *et al.*; Weaver). For instance, the comment, "This is not clear, reword it" does not convey the same cognitive and affective impact as "I get a sense of what you want to say, yet the language could be made clearer," or "I'm confused at this point. Do you mean that . . . [comment makes reference to the text and offers an interpretation]?" Pressured by their heavy workload and limited time, and, perhaps, overstressing the principle that directness under all circumstances prevents miscommunication, writing instructors may resort to directives. Many writing educators have noted that directive commentary can potentially thwart a student writer's decision-making abilities and co-opt ownership of her or his work, and thus negatively affect the writer's confidence (Ferris, "The Influence"; Lea and Street; Probst; Sommers, "Across"; Straub, "The Student"). Hyland and Hyland conducted a case study on the use of mitigation techniques (operationally defined in Appendix A) and their effect on six L2 students and found that it's not directive but indirect or mitigated commentary that leads to miscommunication. The students in this study indicated that the mitigating technique of preceding a critical statement with a positive one was too obvious to them, and as a consequence, they didn't feel the positive part of the comment was sincere. The results of the Hyland and Hyland study, although pertaining to a small group of students, open the door to the possibility that some forms of mitigation may not only be ineffective in prompting students to revise their writing but may also cause negative affective repercussions. Investigating how L1 and L2 first-year students perceive their teachers' feedback will shed some light on this area of commentary that has scarcely been researched (Goldstein; Mutch; Perpignan; Weaver). In the study on which this article is based I looked into the impact of two first-year composition teachers' commentary on fourteen of their students' essays (Treglia). Adopting a case study approach, I categorized the comments written by the two teachers, interviewed both teachers, and interviewed the students to gain a better insight into how they perceived and felt about their teachers' mitigated and directive comments. The research focused on the following questions:

- I. What is the ratio between critical and positive comments, mitigated and unmitigated ones?

2. What are students' affective responses to their teachers' directive and mitigated comments?
  
3. What do students perceive as helpful commentary?

## **PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON TEACHER COMMENTARY**

### **The Role of the Teacher**

Certain trends in composition studies and second-language pedagogy (notably the process approach and English for academic purposes) have made teachers more aware of the complex role they play as readers of their students' papers. Research indicates, however, that to provide effective feedback, teachers may need to change both their traditional teaching approaches and their attitudes (Brannon and Knoblauch; Onore). Recognizing that a teacher's written commentary is influenced by her or his personality and background, Purves distinguishes eight major roles of the teacher as reader: the common reader, the copy editor, the proofreader, the reviewer, the gatekeeper, the critic, the linguist, and the diagnostician. A conscientious teacher will adopt each of these roles—or a combination of them—depending on the nature and situation of the writing assignment, the needs of the writer, and the stage of the writing process. Purves further suggests that teachers should discuss with their students the functions of the reader and make their students aware that not only will different readers interpret their writing differently, but also the same reader may interpret their writing differently in different situations.

Anson found that teachers' belief systems inform the way they comment on student essays. He discovered that teachers typically provide feedback to student writing in one of three ways. *Dualistic responders* (about 3/4 of the teachers who participated in Anson's study) are often guided by a clear-cut concept of right and wrong, focus mostly on surface features, and assume the tone of critical judges or evaluators. *Relativistic responders* provide feedback almost exclusively to the ideas expressed in the writing, often ignoring significant linguistic and rhetorical aspects. And *reflective responders* attend to both ideas and stylistic devices while attempting to offer options for revision without being controlling.

In addition to considering what to respond to, teachers must examine their roles as writing evaluators. Recent research on feedback in composition

classes has consistently urged teachers to abandon styles that take control of student texts, and to adopt ways of responding that allow students to retain autonomy over their writing. Over the last twenty years, a number of social-epistemic rhetoricians have advocated that knowledge is constructed by the interaction between one's "material conditions of existence" and the discourse community in which one is functioning (Berlin 19). Language is the means by which this dialectical interaction is made possible; thus it constitutes the main medium in which knowledge is generated and negotiated (Berlin). In the collaborative classroom, the teacher is expected to facilitate this same dialectic by adopting the role of leader of the class as a community that, in turn, represents a larger community, the academic discipline. The teacher initiates students into the academic world and engages them in meaning-making dialogues by negotiating with them on what they want to say and how they want to say it. Most writing experts suggest that for this to happen teachers should abandon authoritarian views (Giberson; Lea and Street; Onore; Probst) and adopt feedback styles that involve students in making their own decisions. Successful collaborative interaction is hindered if teachers authoritatively tell students what to do because students then have no or little chance to explore their own opinions or inquiries.

When Brannon and Knoblauch asked 40 teachers to assess the quality of one student's essay, none recognized "the writer's control over choices" (120). The researchers concluded that the teacher participants read the student's text from "the perspective of their own shared Ideal Text" (121). Brannon and Knoblauch acknowledge that teachers often correctly assume that their students "have not yet earned the authority" that makes readers pay serious attention to what they have to say. Yet, they argue that teachers provide little help to their students if they take on "primary control" of the choices that should be made by the writer, and if they "correct" those choices that deviate from the "Ideal Text" (118-19). Brannon and Knoblauch also observed that teachers who make extensive directive corrections tend to send a message that "the teacher's agenda is more important" (118) than what the writer is trying to say. As a consequence, students may shift their motives and try to match their writing to "expectations that lie beyond their own sense of their intention and method" (119). This may cause students to lose the incentive to communicate their ideas and, perhaps, to become disinterested in writing.

## **Tenets to Guide Responders**

Educators generally agree that to become successful in an academic environment students must ultimately become their own evaluators. This means that students need to acquire the skills to read analytically and, above all, to evaluate whether their writing expresses what they intend in a fluent, logical, and accurate manner (Ferris, “Response”; Probst). What, then, can and should teachers do to begin to encourage students’ independence as writers? Brannon and Knoblauch (see also Goldstein; Elbow; Onore; Probst) suggest the following tenets to guide teachers as responders:

- Focus on what the writer wants to say as if the text actually reflects the writer’s intention.
- Recognize that even inexperienced writers possess a sense of logic and purpose that guides their choices although it may not appear in the text.
- See feedback as a process of negotiation where writer and teacher cooperate to consider and improve, whenever possible, the relationship between intention and effect.
- Make the writer think about what he or she has said rather than tell him or her what to do.
- Acknowledge the writer’s authority, that is, give the student the right to make choices.

To abide by these tenets, teachers may need to reconceptualize their roles as responders, reassess their sense of authority, and focus on the process of negotiation of meaning. Perhaps they should also consider their audience when writing comments, just as they ask students to do when writing essays. Straub notes that directive commentary such as “rephrase,” “avoid repetition,” or “elaborate” do not engage the students in meaning negotiation but leave them wondering, what did I do wrong? These types of phrases, he states, fail to consider how comments might affect the students’ composing processes, their attitudes toward writing, and their awareness of writing as a social action (Straub, “The Concept”). Knoblauch and Brannon define directive comments as designed “either simply to label the errors in

writing or to define restrictively what a student would (or will) have to do in order to perfect it in the teacher's eyes" (125). In contrast, by providing facilitative comments, a teacher tries "to create motivation for immediate and substantive revision by describing a careful reader's uncertainties about what a writer intends to say" (126). Straub advises teachers to "resist taking over student texts" and to offer comments that "share responsibility with the writer" (130).

The reflective respondents in the Anson study mentioned earlier exemplify facilitative teachers. Their comments focus on diverse issues such as "ideas, textual decisions, personal reactions" and offer ways to improve the essay without being dictatorial or appropriative (Anson 351). Their comments also indicate that they are given between drafts or, if on final drafts, would serve as vehicles for further learning. Anson found that reflective respondents most frequently use some form of mitigation such as: "maybe you could think about . . .," "what if you . . .," and "how about seeing if there's a way to . . ." (351). These are semantic phrases that serve at least three functions: (1) expressing the teacher's tentative suggestions in revising the paper, (2) indicating that the final decisions are the student's responsibility, and (3) mitigating the potential damage of comments that may be perceived as irreversible criticism. However, the impact of such phrases on students' affective and cognitive needs has scarcely been researched. Are L1 and L2 students put off and confused by mitigated commentary as Hyland and Hyland suggest? Or do they benefit from mitigated commentary as Ferris ("Student Reactions," "The Influence") and Lea and Street have found? Which one of the two forms—directive or mitigated commentary—do students find most helpful?

## **PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION**

The site selected for the study on which this article is based is a community college that is part of a large urban university in the northeast United States. I selected two 15-week first-year English composition classes because they represented a typical classroom environment with students from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds. Fourteen students (seven from each class) agreed to participate. The instructors, Jane and Adam (pseudonyms) had excellent reputations as dedicated teachers and several years of experience in teaching first year composition classes

with mixed L1 and L2 students. They agreed to be interviewed two times, at the beginning and end of the semester, and to have their feedback on two agreed-upon assignments collected. Interviews with the instructors provided background information on their teaching methods and their commentary practices. Both Jane and Adam said that they adopted a combination of the process approach and the English for academic purposes approach. They individually indicated that they responded to student essays with the intent of assisting students to think through their ideas and express them as clearly as possible, and that one of their priorities was to foster students' ownership of their writing. Jane and Adam also said that they provided comments as they thought necessary without feeling locked in by a particular prescription or methodology.

The sample of students selected for the interview was purposive rather than randomized in order to increase the scope and range of the data collected (Guba and Lincoln). Two students in each class had an A average, two students had F, D, or C- averages, and three students in each class had an average that fluctuated from C to B+. The semi-structured, open-ended questions I used as a guideline are listed in Appendix B. In addition, I asked students questions related to comments they received on the two assignments under study. They had the original assignments with them while I had photocopies of the same. This facilitated addressing specific comments and cross-referencing student revisions. I conducted the interviews, which lasted one hour on average, before or after class in an empty room next to or in the vicinity of the classroom. The names of student participants are pseudonyms.

Following Creswell's suggestion, I gathered information through different methods; made a taxonomy of positive, mitigated, and directive comments; evaluated the student revisions; and conducted interviews with the instructors and the students. To control for variables related to the rhetorical structure and focus of the two assignments under study, the instructors gave the same two expository topics (Appendix C). The assignment on technology is referred to as Assignment A and the one on boys' toys as Assignment B. Also, to make sure that the commentary for both classes was given at the same time during the semester, Jane and Adam gave the two assignments one after the other in the middle of the semester.

I interviewed eight women and six men, from 22 to 55 years in age. For four of them English is their first language; for four of them—three West Africans and one Dominican—English is the language they received all their schooling in, and it is the language they feel most comfortable writing in if

not conversing in as well. The six remaining students represent more typical L2 students in that they may still have some problems with fluency in English even though, except for Kim, they have passed the English writing proficiency exam required by the university to register for this freshman composition class. Four of the L2 students are from the Dominican Republic, one is from Haiti, and one is from South Korea. In the transcription of the interviews, quotations within quotations are italicized to better indicate that the student or I, the interviewer, were quoting someone else.

## QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The number of comments the fourteen students received on their first, second, and (in three cases) third drafts, on the two assignments was 385. Jane wrote more comments (243) than Adam (142), and she had three of her students, Yvette, Kim, and Nancy, rewrite the assignment on boys' toys a third time (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Number of Comments Written by the Two Instructors**

	<b>1<sup>st</sup> drafts</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> drafts</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> drafts</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Jane</b>	137	87	19	243
<b>Adam</b>	82	60	0	142
<b>Total</b>	219	147	19	385

Not surprisingly, the two teachers wrote more comments on first drafts (219), which students were going to revise, than on second drafts (147). Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of the commentary categorized as praise, mitigated comments, directives, and other.



**Table 2**  
**Types of Comments Written by the Two Instructors**

	<b>Jane</b>	<b>Adam</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Praise</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> drafts 2 <sup>nd</sup> drafts 3 <sup>rd</sup> drafts	55 (22.6%) 28 21 6	29 (20%) 13 16	84 (21.8%)
<b>Mitigated Commentary</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> drafts 2 <sup>nd</sup> drafts 3 <sup>rd</sup> drafts  • lexical hedges • syntactic hedges • paired act pattern • personal attribution	43 (17.6%) 30 10 3  11 17 7 8	15 (10%) 11 4  10 0 5 0	58 (15%)    21 17 12 8
<b>Directives</b> 1 <sup>st</sup> drafts 2 <sup>nd</sup> drafts 3 <sup>rd</sup> drafts	107 (44%) 60 40 7	96 (67.6%) 57 39	203 (52.7%)
<b>Other</b> (e.g., clarification, personal note, funny remark) 1 <sup>st</sup> drafts 2 <sup>nd</sup> drafts	38 (15.6%)  19 19	2 (.01%)  1 1	40 (10%)

Almost 22% of Jane and Adam's commentary consisted of praise, a middle range when compared to similar studies (see Appendix A for definitions and examples of the different types of comments). In Dragga's L1 study merely 6% of the commentary was positive and in Daiker's L1 study praise comprised 10.6% of the comments. Studies conducted in L2 classes indicate higher praise percentages: Ferris ("The Influence") and Ferris *et al.* found that the average for praise was 24.6%, and Hyland and Hyland found that out of 495 comments 44% were positive. Hyland and Hyland's one-to-one ratio of positive and critical comments stands out among these studies, raising the following question: Could receiving as much praise as constructive criticism lead students to doubt the sincerity of the positive comments? Is there a limit to how much praise a teacher should provide before it defeats the purpose? These two questions suggest the need for further research.

Jane and Adam mitigated 15% of their commentary and wrote 52.7% directives. These data corroborate the Ferris L2 study (“The Influence”), which analyzed the commentary of one experienced teacher and revealed that mitigated commentary comprised 15% of all the comments. It also corroborates the results of the L2 study by Ferris *et al.*, where the percentage of hedged comments among marginal notes was 16.7% and among end notes was 20.4%. In Hyland and Hyland’s L2 study, however, the two teacher participants mitigated 68% of their commentary while approximately 30% were categorized as “unmitigated.” It’s possible that the very high percentage of praise and mitigated commentary may have led the students in Hyland’s and Hyland’s study to believe that their teachers’ paired-act pattern of preceding a critical comment with a positive one was too obvious and, therefore, insincere. Perhaps the two teachers in Hyland and Hyland’s study gave praise too freely. In that case, as Sommers (“Across”) points out, praise can have the opposite effect: instead of providing an incentive to improve, it stalls the interactive dialogue between teacher and student because the latter is not being challenged. In addition, praise that is perceived as being insincere has damaging repercussions on students’ confidence and self-esteem (Young).

## **QUALITATIVE FINDINGS**

The fourteen students I interviewed said they read every comment their teachers wrote and relied primarily on commentary to revise their papers. All fourteen also said that they spoke to their teachers if they had difficulty understanding a comment. Except for one, all indicated that it was as important to them to receive feedback on what they were doing well as on what needed improvement. The majority of students (nine) favored mitigated commentary, three students said they preferred “straightforward” commentary, and two said it didn’t matter to them.

### **Comments Students Find Most Helpful**

Nine of the fourteen students indicated that some form of mitigation—whether a positive phrase preceding criticism or the use of hedges such as “perhaps” or “maybe”—was helpful to them. Contrary to Hyland and Hyland’s findings, none of the students interviewed doubted the sincerity of their teachers when the “but” or “however” formula was used. The majority of students pointed out that this form of mitigation is very effective.

Anthony and Erika reflect the feelings and opinions of most. Anthony is a 32-year-old from Ghana, West Africa, and has been in the U.S. for five years. English was the mandatory language used throughout his schooling even though it is not his first language. He has a C average in his English class.

**Anthony:** Like I was saying, some comments are good; for example, like my communication professor, any time she wanna make a negative comment, she starts by saying, *it's good but you should have put it this way*. She first gives you a positive comment and then what you should have done. You know what I mean?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Anthony:** So she always goes like this, *it's good but you should have done it this way, or you should have included this*. I think those comments are very helpful.

**Interviewer:** Why are they helpful?

**Anthony:** It says that you are doing fine, that you should have to improve on it. So every time you see good comments like *you are doing good, you should have done this way*, it gives you like a sense of encouragement.

Erika is 25 and was born in this country, where she did all her schooling. She doesn't feel confident about her writing and is pleasantly surprised to have a B average in her English class.

**Interviewer:** Here your teacher writes, *you have some good ideas; you need, however, to work on your sentence structure to make your ideas clearer*. What do you think of this comment?

**Erika:** That I have good ideas. It makes me feel good . . . that I need to work harder . . . that I have some, like I understand something, but then I need more work at it.

**Interviewer:** Would you have preferred that the teacher only wrote what you needed more work on?

**Erika:** No, I think this is favorable.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Erika:** Because it makes me feel good that I have good ideas, then it makes you think that you have to work harder in order to do better.

**Interviewer:** If you were a teacher, which method do you think would work best: giving a compliment and then write what the

student needs to work on, or telling the student what's wrong?

**Erika:** No, I think I would do it like that because if you only put bad things, it puts the person down; it makes them not want to work harder

.....  
**Interviewer:** In this comment your teacher writes, *you raised some good points, but how can parents, for instance, make a difference?* How do you feel about this comment?

**Erika:** Like I felt about the last one, that I feel good that I put good points, but then also I need to work harder.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel in any way put down by this comment?

**Erika:** No. I would feel bad if like he told me I was doing good and I wasn't doing good.

**Interviewer:** Do you think your teacher is being honest?

**Erika:** Uh um. . . . [nodding]

Receiving encouragement was especially crucial for two students who were struggling in class and working on acquiring fluency in English. Nancy and Kim clearly expressed that mitigated commentary gave them a sense of acknowledgment for their hard work and motivated them to keep at it. What follows are excerpts of my respective interviews with them. Nancy is a 41-year-old single mother returning to college and clearly having a hard time balancing her schoolwork and taking care of her children. She was born in the Dominican Republic and has been in the U.S. for fifteen years.

**Nancy:** When somebody, in my case, when some professor corrects something and tells me, *this is bad, it's not good*, I feel depressed. I don't have the *fuera* [strength] to continue. For example, one day I went to tutoring to correct something. A tutor said, *this doesn't make sense, it's ridiculous*, you know. Yeah, she told me that. I closed my eyes and I felt like something on the floor, you know. Oh my God! I'm trying to do my best and when you don't understand something, and somebody tells you something mean, it's like saying *you are stupid*. I don't understand anything anymore when somebody tells me *stupid!*

**Interviewer:** I guess your mind shuts down.

**Nancy:** Yeah, I'm broken. For me that's not my thing. For some

tutor to help me to correct my paper and say *it doesn't make sense!* Read to me and try to help me fix the paper, but why go to tutoring if somebody tells me *it doesn't make sense*, you know?

.....  
**Interviewer:** Here your teacher writes, *You are improving, Nancy, but you still need some guidance in correct English translation. Take this essay to the writing lab as well.*

**Nancy:** Yeah, I continue to improve but sometimes I think in Spanish and I translate, this is what she wants to tell me.

**Interviewer:** So here she is telling you the problem, but she is also saying a positive thing.

**Nancy:** Yeah, this made me feel good and continue to do my work. If she said here, *you didn't improve, you have to correct this*, I don't have the wish to continue, you know? Because if I don't improve, why do I have to do the work?

Kim is from a small island in South Korea. He is 26, served in the navy in his country and attended the University of Seoul for two years. Kim has been in the U.S. for six months and wants to pursue a degree in accounting.

**Interviewer:** Here your teacher writes, *Kim: nice job; your best writing this semester, you've worked conscientiously and it shows!* How did you feel when you read this comment?

**Kim:** When I read this comment I felt like I can do anything. I can write, you know, something as well as American speakers. This gave me very encouragement I think. Encouragement. Encouragement very much, so I read it over and over. I need, I need to get encouragement, you know. . . . When I went to language school, the teacher said to me *your writing level is very bad*. Even though he taught English well, he never gave us any praise, encouragement. I really, really hated to enter that class.

.....  
Some days you feel good about your writing, some days you don't. Even though I have a lot of experience, I cannot write well if I feel bad. I can't.

**Interviewer:** I understand. You are saying it's important to feel encouraged.

**Kim:** Yeah, yeah, of course, of course.

While Nancy and Kim were keenly aware of and outspoken about their

need to be encouraged by their teachers, other students had difficulty recognizing such a need. Francisco, a 27-year-old “middle” student in Adam’s class, exemplified the conflict that many of the students interviewed were experiencing: As grownups they believe they should not let their teacher’s commentary personally affect them, yet they understandably feel hurt when their work or efforts are not acknowledged. During the interview, Francisco conceded he had done a rushed job in revising his paper on technology yet expressed disappointment about the grade he received (C) and said he would talk to Adam about it. He and I had read and discussed each comment on the paper when I raised the following issue:

**Interviewer:** Most of the comments your teacher gives you here are very direct, *needs a title, not clearly stated, use “and so forth”, you have used this “especially boys.”* Do you think a teacher should, at times, be less direct?

**Francisco:** What do you mean?

**Interviewer:** Should teachers occasionally write nice things on student papers?

**Francisco:** Probably he doesn’t think there are good points in it.

**Interviewer:** What do you think, are there good points?

**Francisco:** Yeah, it is my opinion, yeah, I think it is good. It is perfect to me.

**Interviewer:** What do you think would have helped you to feel better?

**Francisco:** [pause] Eh, probably a couple of good comments.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Francisco:** That would be great because that way I would feel like, okay I’m doing bad on this, but I’m doing great on this. I need to work more on that, like subject-verb agreement, probably grammar, anything like that, but my organization is good, something like that. I think I would feel better. I would feel better, yeah.

**Interviewer:** So you think it’s helpful?

**Francisco:** Yes, it would be helpful. It depends also on the person. I’m 27 years old, if we are talking about an 18-year-old kid, 20, I imagine it would be different.

**Interviewer:** How would it be different?

**Francisco:** They are more sensitive. We are talking about adult people, so . . .

**Interviewer:** But you seem disappointed?

**Francisco:** No I'm not, I'm not disappointed, I'm ready. I think I can do better.

Francisco, who was born in the Dominican Republic and has been living in the U.S. for almost nine years, acknowledged that some positive feedback would have made him feel less discouraged about his paper. At the same time he saw himself as an adult who didn't need to be patted on the back. He tried to control his discouragement by projecting self-assurance; hence he ended the conversation with an assertive statement, "I'm ready." But he soon modified it: "I think I can do better."

Bart is an ambitious 32-year-old from Sierra Leone, West Africa, who has been in the U.S. for eight years. He attended a civil engineering college in his country and plans to major in paralegal studies to pursue a degree in law. Although Bart's writing is clear and quite fluent, his essays show little or no revision, the reason why he has a C-/D+ average in the class. He stated that his full-time job and having a family leave him little time to work on the revision of his writing assignments. Bart's insistence that he did not need any positive feedback (like Francisco's) was in part related to his association of receiving praise with being a schoolchild, and in part to his disappointment at having received Cs on the two papers that were discussed.

**Interviewer:** Do you think it's important or not important that a teacher, besides writing critical comments—that is what you need more work on—also writes comments such as you are doing a good job, I like what you say here, this is an interesting idea?

**Bart:** No, no. Only what is wrong should be marked, that's what I think.

**Interviewer:** Why only what is wrong?

**Bart:** Because that's why I'm here.

**Interviewer:** Yes, but don't you think we learn from positive feedback too?

**Bart:** Yeah, but if you keep doing that, it's like dressing someone in a borrowed robe. Whatever is not marked, I know that is nice, but whenever I see comments, I know I have to make corrections there.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Bart:** I think that way is better.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so you don't need to hear any positive comments from your teacher.

**Bart:** I know all the remaining parts of the essay are good.

**Interviewer:** Are they good or excellent? [laughs]

**Bart:** Yeah, excellent, [laughs] yes.

**Interviewer:** How do you know?

**Bart:** Because there is nothing to correct. Everything is correct like this opening thesis statement, this topic sentence. I know it's correct, that's why. . . .

**Interviewer:** We are not talking about corrections; we are talking about comments on the development and organization of your ideas.

**Bart:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And how do you know this is excellent?

**Bart:** Um, [pause] because I have done too many years, that's why I was able to write like this. See, it's not a day's job. It's a gradual process.

Bart's stressing his good writing skills was clearly a defensive stance in reaction to his teacher's comments that both of his papers were logically weak. Bart appeared to be trying to come to terms with a blow to his confidence by minimizing the importance of positive feedback. Bart also had difficulty with comments like this one on his technology paper, "Passionate, but too one-sided. In your world it seems there are no negatives, but aren't there?" By failing to address this comment, he was expressing disagreement. In fact, Bart defended the logic of his paper when I asked him why he had not followed up on the comment, saying he had no time to talk it over with Adam. In the course of the interview, he indicated that because he viewed the teacher as an authority figure, he could not bring himself to challenge his teacher's comments. He also stated he would have "done a better job" if he had had more time. Bart had a full-time job and was the breadwinner of the family. One question, however, remains: Would Bart have reacted differently to Adam's commentary if it had been more carefully and specifically worded? For example, what would have been Bart's reaction if Adam had elaborated on the passionate quality of his paper and given more detailed suggestions on how to tackle the one-sided aspect?



## Students' Responses to Mitigated Comments

Two of the nine students who favored mitigated commentary referred to it as a form of politeness and respect. This is the way Rhonda, an A student who emigrated from Haiti and has been living in the U.S. for three years, put it:

**Interviewer:** Your teacher here adds a phrase to your text and writes *you may, of course, use your own words; my words here are merely a suggestion*. You said earlier that you like this comment, why?

**Rhonda:** Well, I think it's like, I think it's a sign of respect because, you know, we are not, she is not dealing with little kids, like kindergarten or high school kids. . . . We are people, most people in college have children, you know, they are grown children. The same respect they give to the professor, they expect to have the same respect, too. So you are not going to deal with us the same way you deal with the little kids, so it's like, she is respecting you, she is telling you that something is wrong but at the same time she is not imposing herself, you know, that is respect, I think, and I like it.

Ana, a “weak” student from the Dominican Republic who has been in the U.S. for 13 years, also stressed the importance of politeness:

**Interviewer:** What is the meaning of this comment, *expand this a bit more, please*?

**Ana:** That means make it better, please, you see.

**Interviewer:** What if your teacher had said, *expand this*.

**Ana:** No, that's not good.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Ana:** Because I think this is mandatory, um, not polite.

Despite the wide difference in age—Rhonda is 26 and Ana is 55—both students expect their teachers not to be authoritative or condescending but to communicate with them in a polite manner.

Four of the students who favored mitigated commentary seemed aware that their teachers used this technique to encourage and motivate students to revise, and instead of being put off by it, as the students in Hyland and Hyland's study were, they appreciated their teachers' tactfulness and expressed no doubt about the sincerity of the comments. Yvette, a “high-

middle” student from Trinidad, said it best:

**Interviewer:** Yvette, have you followed up on this comment, *maybe you need to add a second quote here, Yvette. Because the question arises, “surrounded by what?”*?

**Yvette:** I rewrote the whole thing [shows me her revision].

**Interviewer:** Why do you think your teacher said *maybe you need to . . .*?

**Yvette:** This is not the first time she wrote maybe. It’s her expertise in the field, trying to get her students, you know, to write clearer, or perhaps add a little more touch. That’s the case why she used the word maybe. That’s just my understanding, so I didn’t have to do exactly what she said by maybe, so compare it to this one, *This is an incomplete quote. It makes no sense.* This is just, this is just telling me to think about what I did wrong, how could I rewrite it? How do I use the quote in quoting my son because this is a true thing, you know, I’m trying to make it right. *But maybe you need to add a second quote here* means I don’t have to.

**Interviewer:** Is that the only reason why you think your teacher used the word maybe?

**Yvette:** She is very helpful, at the same time she uses tact [laughs].

**Interviewer:** And is it okay for a teacher to use tact?

**Yvette:** Yeah, do you know why? Because some of us are very sensitive [laughs]. Some of us are very sensitive, some of us as students.

Ken, a 23-year-old A student and one of the three who indicated that he prefers directives, made the following observation about his teacher, Adam:

**Interviewer:** Would you say your teacher has a tendency to write direct or indirect comments?

**Ken:** I think he writes moderate comments. He is in the middle. He doesn’t wanna be too harsh, he doesn’t wanna be too soft.

**Interviewer:** And what do you think about that?

**Ken:** I like that. He is a good teacher.

Ken, who was born and reared in the United States, felt somewhat

confident about his writing, and although he associated direct phrasing with being harsh and indirect phrasing with being soft, he was able to keep some emotional distance and appreciate his teacher's "middle" approach. However, for students like Nancy, who was struggling in class, it was harder to separate personal feelings from the perception that direct comments were intended as criticism. The following is one of many instances during our interview where she indicated that she found directives harsh and ineffective:

**Interviewer:** Here your teacher wrote, *confused phrasing; doesn't make sense*. She wrote something similar to what that tutor told you. How do you feel about this comment?

**Nancy:** When some professor writes to me this doesn't make sense, how can I make this to make sense because to me it makes sense?

**Interviewer:** How does it make you feel?

**Nancy:** I feel discouraged because I have to fix that, and I wanna go to the writing center and see somebody who tells me, *oh, you can do it this way so it makes sense*.

**Interviewer:** Would you have felt differently if your teacher had said, *this is not very clear to me*?

**Nancy:** Yeah, *it's not very clear to me* makes more sense than *this doesn't make sense* because it's something that the professor says but doesn't say directly, you know?

**Interviewer:** And why do you prefer the indirect way of saying it?

**Nancy:** It makes me feel better.

In the dialogue, Nancy indicated that the most helpful comments were those that told her why something didn't make sense and suggested how she could revise it. She also expressed the need for indirect (mitigated) criticism because it was not as discouraging as the direct approach.

Five of the students who preferred the mitigation technique indicated that one aspect they found helpful was that they were being given a choice. In one instance, Jane added the following phrase and comment to the ending of a student's text, ". . . if they want to encourage their sons to make the right choices in life. (Completes your analysis; you may, of course, use your own words; my words here are merely a suggestion of how to sum up your conclusion)." This is how Rhonda responded to the comment:

**Interviewer:** What do you think of this comment?

**Rhonda:** I think it's good because first of all she is not telling me that was bad, you need to do it that way. She is telling me that, you know, if you want to, you can use the example I gave you. And I just like the way she puts the, how do you say, the comment. She is not telling me, you have to do this, you have to do that, she is telling me if you want to make it better, do it like that—do it like that—so I'm like, okay, so I don't feel she is like after me, so I like the way she puts the comments.

Rhonda is a “strong” student and here she was indicating that she welcomed the sense of being in control of her writing that the comment implied. Kim, a “weak” student in Jane's class also appreciated being given a sense of intellectual independence. This is how he put it:

**Interviewer:** Your teacher here writes, *I think “separate” is a more precise word*. What do you think of this comment?

**Kim:** Oh, yes, this is a translation problem.

**Interviewer:** How do you feel about it?

**Kim:** Professor Jane is a very nice professor, nice teacher, because, you know, she thinks about, she worries about me because, you know, if she said *this is separate not part*, oh my God! But she advised me first that I have to know the difference between separate and part. If I think that separate is better than part, that's a very good idea, then that encourages me to revise. But some professors say *no, this is incorrect, use separate*. So if that's it, then I am not thinking.

**Interviewer:** You mean you are not putting effort into the revision?

**Kim:** Right, right, I lost motivation.

**Interviewer:** Do you think she knows that separate is a better word, but she writes *I think “separate” is a better word*?

**Kim:** Yeah, yeah. Really she is, she is professional, you know. Also, she doesn't want to hurt you. She understands, you know, students, the situation, what kind of background they come from.

It was clear that Kim felt intellectually engaged by comments that involved him in the decision-making process. He was also implying that his weak English skills should not interfere with the interactive communication with his teacher. He was grateful that Jane was attentive to his need to be addressed as an adult and suggested—instead of telling him—what to

do. Kim was also aware that Jane was sensitive to students' affective needs, their circumstances, and backgrounds. Most students, like Rhonda and Kim, indicated that although they carefully addressed both their teachers' directive as well as mitigated commentary, they preferred mitigated commentary because it made them feel they were treated with respect; it provided an intellectual interaction; and it gave them the freedom to make choices about their revisions.

### **Students' Responses to Directive Comments**

The three students who said they found directives most helpful held a common belief that revision involved a right-wrong judgment. Bart's preference for directives was in part influenced by his disappointment with his teacher's comments, and by his defensive posture of an I-can-handle-it attitude. The other two students who said they preferred directive comments were both 23-year-olds and were also in Adam's class. Joann and Ken are native speakers of English, were doing well in class, and seemed fairly confident about their writing. However, they both seemed to have a one-direction approach to revision. The following dialogue with Ken exemplified this view:

**Interviewer:** Do you prefer comments that say *do this, fix this, change this*, or comments that say, *maybe you should fix this, or try to fix this*?

**Ken:** I like the straightforward, straightforward, the one that says, fix this, I like that.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Ken:** Because it's blunt. It's right to the point. You don't have to go around it. The purpose of school is for the teacher to show you the correct way. If he is telling you straight, *you got to fix this*, you'll fix it, but if he says, *maybe*, I might just leave it there, you know, maybe.

**Interviewer:** What about *try to fix this*?

**Ken:** It's still too soft.

**Interviewer:** What if your teacher writes, *I like this but you need to fix it*?

**Ken:** That sounds good . . . but then again that *but* in it kind of negates the whole sentence, you know what I mean?

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Ken:** Like I said, I think you should be straightforward . . . it's like, it's one thing or the other, you know.

Ken was not opposed to receiving positive comments (he made that even clearer later in the interview), but he didn't completely trust himself when comments gave him a choice. Also, he expressed little tolerance for ambiguities. His concept of writing is that things are either correct or incorrect, thus, the "but" negated the positive part of the comment. He was the only student who questioned the purpose of "but" commentary, not because he thought his teacher was insincere but because his concept of revision is rigid and one-dimensional.

Like Ken, Joann said she preferred directives yet was not opposed to receiving positive feedback:

**Interviewer:** Do you prefer comments that say, *work on this, change this, expand on this*, or do you prefer comments that say, for example, *I like what you wrote, but you should expand it a little more?*

**Joann:** More like *do this, do that*.

**Interviewer:** You seem to prefer direct comments.

**Joann:** Yeah, tell me what to do, and I'll do it.

**Interviewer:** What if your teacher combines it with a compliment like in this case where he wrote, *You have done a good job, check the corrections and edit for the 2nd draft?*

**Joann:** But he is right.

**Interviewer:** What do you mean?

**Joann:** I think that it's important to let a person know how they are doing in the class. It's important to me because if he just put *check corrections and edit for 2nd draft*, it's like that's it . . . I think it's better to let me know, is it good or is it bad? You know, so if it's bad, I would expect him to say this is bad, I need you to do this to make it better.

**Interviewer:** Do you think your teacher wrote this to make you feel better?

**Joann:** No, no, that was his opinion . . . his opinion is important to me.

In the discussion, Joann indicated an eagerness to do well in class, "tell me what to do and I'll do it," and although she seemed to imply that she didn't need to be reassured by her teacher, she expected him to point

out what she was doing well. Like Ken, Joann had a mind-set that she was as capable to handle criticism as she was to accept compliments, and she was not going to let criticism discourage her. While both Ken and Joann's self-assurance and determination are admirable, their traditional concept of the teacher as an authority figure whose job is to tell them "what's good and what's bad" may do them disservice. Neither of them seemed aware that revision isn't always a clear cut, one-dimensional process, and that often a teacher's job is to provide responses, suggestions, and guidance on a tentative ("let's see if this will work") basis that involves students in the decision-making process.

Juan is one of two students who said it didn't matter to him whether he received mitigated or directive commentary. He is 23, the same age as Ken and Joann, and has been in the U.S. for five years. He comes from the Dominican Republic. Here he addresses some of Jane's indirect comments:

**Interviewer:** What is your instructor trying to tell you by writing this comment, *I'm not sure that you are on the subject here*?

**Juan:** That I'm not staying on the subject, that I'm not talking about values. On this, on that one, on superman, I wasn't talking about what she was expecting, so.

**Interviewer:** What if instead of saying *I'm not sure*, your instructor had written *you are off the topic*, would that have been clearer?

**Juan:** For me it's the same because she is not sure, she just, she is not saying that it's correct, so it's the same.

**Interviewer:** Do you think she is really not sure or is she trying to be kind?

**Juan:** Probably.

**Interviewer:** Does the way it's written make a difference to you?

**Juan:** I'm telling you, for me it's the same because she didn't say that it's right, so this is right or wrong, in the middle, so for me it's wrong. I'm off the topic.

Like Ken and Joann, Juan has a narrow concept of what revision consists of—"so this is right or wrong, in the middle, so for me it's wrong." And when asked if the comment would have been clearer if it had been phrased as a directive, he replied that it was the same to him. Throughout the interview, Juan's response to comments appeared to be tied to larger issues such as an insufficient understanding of academic discourse, and therefore, a difficulty

in interpreting commentary accurately. Nevertheless, when asked to react to some of the positive comments Jane had written on his papers, he said they made him “feel good” because they gave him “motivation.”

Vanessa is the other student who said that it didn’t matter whether comments were delivered in a direct or an indirect way. She is an outstanding, 30-year-old student from Nigeria and a gifted writer who got A+ on her papers in Jane’s class. She didn’t represent the average two-year-college student, yet she indicated that she appreciated receiving Jane’s “personal note” comments because they made her feel acknowledged and gave her the notion she was carrying on a conversation with her teacher. She also stressed the value of receiving praise because, as she put it, “it makes me feel that there is a good part of me that she sees. There is something good in what I did. . . . it’s a kind of encouragement.”

### **CONCLUSION: A TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION**

While mitigation, or hedging, does not appear to have a noticeable impact on the extent and quality of student revisions (Treglia), it plays a critical role as a “face-saving” technique and as a tool to motivate and engage students to take an active part in revision as my findings have shown: To most students indirectness or mitigation was a way to minimize hurt feelings. This was especially crucial for L2 students like Nancy and Kim who are still in the process of becoming fluent in English. It was compelling to hear them candidly describe how discouraged they felt by comments such as “makes no sense,” “say what you mean,” or “this is off the subject.” They repeatedly said that such comments not only made them feel unmotivated to revise but also diminished their capacity to think. Even those students who felt they didn’t need to be patted on the back indicated, throughout the course of the interviews, that they were unknowingly reacting to their teachers’ feedback. Although they were trying to keep a certain emotional distance from their teachers’ commentary, they could not help but be affected by it as the defensive stances of Juan, Francisco, and Bart demonstrated. Out of deference to authoritative figures and hurt pride, students like Bart may not approach their teachers about what they perceive as unfair comments. However, these incidents sever the student-teacher dialogue, leaving students wondering “what did I do wrong?” or, even worse, convincing them that the teacher has misjudged their papers.

Many of the students felt that, as adults, they appreciated communicating with their teachers on an equal basis. They welcomed comments that



didn't restrict them but let them make their own decisions, such as comments with lexical hedges, e.g., "maybe," "perhaps," "might." This was true for weak, middle, and strong students alike. They all indicated that they found most helpful specific comments that gave them a sense of direction but left it up to them to make the final call. They expressed enthusiasm at being drawn in by their instructors to become active participants in the decision-making process of revision. Students who had been exposed for the most part to directive forms of communication in previous classes seemed particularly appreciative when Jane and Adam wrote commentary that conveyed trust in their abilities to revise. This is not surprising since teacher expectation is a significant factor in student achievement. Only a few students—those who seemed not to have grasped the concept that revision is a non-linear, non-unidirectional decision-making process—said they found directives most helpful.

In sum, students found most helpful the commentary that, in addition to indicating some acknowledgment of their work, offered specific suggestions and provided choices. In other words, the overwhelming majority of students wanted to be guided and shown how to, instead of simply being told what they needed to do. Most of them appreciated the choices that mitigated commentary provided. This came across not only through what students said during their interviews but also through their enthusiastic recollection of what they understood their teachers' comments to mean, and how they went about revising their work. Their faces lit up when they explained how they interpreted their teacher's mitigated commentary and revised their papers following the teacher's lead but coming up with their own solutions.

It was beyond the purpose of this study to probe into the long-term emotional and cognitive damage that students might experience when they feel hurt by their teachers' commentary. However, the interviews indicate that students care about their teachers' comments and take them more to heart than they are even aware of. The majority of the students, in fact, said that direct commentary could potentially be counterproductive because it might be perceived as lack of respect. A longitudinal study that addresses the emotional and cognitive repercussions students experience over time when they feel offended by their teachers' commentary would provide insight into this issue. A long-term study of this type could also explore the extent to which commentary impacts students' revisions of future writing.

My findings about student responses support the approaches and recommendations of such writing scholars as Anson, Brannon and Knoblauch,

Elbow, Ferris (“Response”), Probst, Sommers (“Responding” and “Across”), and Straub (“The Concept”) that to encourage students to be responsible and develop a sense of ownership over their writing, teachers do well to avoid authoritative communication. This group of students was willing to take responsibility for revising if given a chance. Are teachers as receptive as students to mitigated commentary? If not, what are the factors that hold them back? A survey of teachers on their use or avoidance of mitigation would be pedagogically informative.

The findings of this study dispute Hyland and Hyland’s conclusion that the use of mitigation can be a source of significant misunderstanding between L2 students and their teachers. Similarly, the findings do not support Ferris’ hypothesis (“The Influence”) that the favorable L2 student responses to mitigated comments in her study were attributable primarily to the advanced English-language proficiency of the students and to their having become aware that the use of mitigation is a form of politeness in English. My study reveals that L2 students, including those who had been living in the U.S. for only a few years, were very sensitive about comments they perceived as impolite. Also, the L2 students seemed to appreciate mitigated commentary even more than the native speakers. Although the study didn’t formally explore the role that mitigation plays in the native languages and cultures of these students, in many cultures certain kinds of directness are considered rude, particularly in Asia and Latin American countries. Thus the association of politeness with indirectness is not necessarily a new concept to L2 students. Although L2 students may not be fully fluent in English, teachers should not assume that they are not capable of engaging in a mature dialogue about their writing with responders—teacher and peers (Zamel). Teachers should also be aware that politeness interacts with issues of class and social status as well as issues of self-perception. Since students’ self-esteem and view of their place in society can affect the way they interact with others, including peers and teachers, it certainly can have an impact on their reaction to and interpretation of feedback.

A larger study would be required to validate the findings of this study, particularly with regard to the long-term effects of directives on students’ motivation and self-esteem. Nevertheless, the data, which has been triangulated by the multi-method approach and correlated by previous studies, supports the use of mitigated commentary. A teacher does not have to mitigate every comment but should be aware that comments that combine praise with constructive criticism are an effective tool to provide students with the confidence and motivation they need to actively engage in the

revision process.

## Note

1. L1 refers to students who are native speakers of English; L2 refers to students, most of whom were born and raised in a non-English speaking country, who learned English as a second or third language.

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## APPENDIX A

### Operational Definition of Mitigated Commentary

Mitigation is a form of politeness intended to buffer and mediate the emotional involvement and possible sense of inadequacy related to receiving critical responses to one's writing (Rubin). Criticism can be softened by the use of praise (compliments), paired act patterns, lexical and syntactic hedges, and personal attributions (adapted from Ferris ["The Influence"]; Hyland and Hyland).

#### Praise

Make a positive comment, statement, or exclamation

Examples: *A very nice start to your essay!*

*You have done an impressive job of finding facts and quotes to support your argument.*

#### Paired act patterns

1. Preceding a negative comment with a positive one (praise-criticism)

Example: *Vocabulary is good but grammar is not accurate and often makes your ideas difficult to understand.*

2. Combining critical remark with a suggestion (criticism-suggestion)

Example: *This is a very sudden start. You need a more general statement to introduce the topic.*

3. Praise-criticism-suggestion triad

Example: *References very good. Two small problems: (1) Bibliography (at end of essay) include initials of authors. (2) Be careful about referencing inside the essay.*

## Hedges

1. Lexical hedges (e.g., maybe, please, might, a little)

Examples: *You might want to expand your introduction.*

*Some of the material seemed a little long-winded and I wonder if it could have been compressed a little.*

2. Syntactic hedges (construct criticism in interrogative form)

Examples: *Can you add an example here?*

*The first two paragraphs—do they need joining?*

## Personal attribution

Express commentary as a personal response

Examples: *I'm sorry, but when reading the essay, I couldn't see any evidence of this really.*

*Perhaps you should have given me the outline to look at with the essay.*

*My concern in this essay is that you introduce several terms in the introduction but do not provide a definition for any.*

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Protocol for Interview with Students**

1. When your teacher returns your essay, do you read all of the written comments or just some of them?
  
2. During the process of revision how much do you rely on the teacher's comments? Do you go back to your teacher and ask her or him to clarify a comment you may not have understood?
  
3. How do you usually feel after reading your teacher's comments?  

Encouraged	Same as before	Discouraged
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4. How do you feel when you finish writing a draft? Are you optimistic about having done a good job or do you usually feel you could have done better?
  
5. What are some types of comments you find helpful? (Student will point them out in the copies of her or his essays that I bring to the interview.)
  
6. Now show me in the essays any comments you didn't find useful and tell me why.
  
7. Do you prefer that your teacher write a lot of comments, a moderate number, or very few? Explain the reason for your preference.
  
8. Do you feel you have learned from your teacher's comments? Could you give me some examples?
  
9. What is one thing that a teacher can do to help you improve your writ-



ing?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Student Assignments**

The instructors assigned students two reading selections, “Is Technology Making Us Intimate Strangers?” by Jonathan Coleman and “The Ugly Truth About Beauty” by Dave Barry. The two assignments under study were based on the following prompts:

Coleman believes that technology “enables us to avoid others.” Focusing on one or two specific technologies, write an essay in which you argue against this view. Show instead that technology can enhance interpersonal relations. Acknowledge Coleman’s viewpoint near the beginning of the essay. Like Coleman, support your position with vigorous images, heartfelt commentary, and lively examples.

Barry blames Barbie dolls for setting up “a difficult appearance standard” for girls to emulate. Many would argue that the toys that boys play with also teach negative, ultimately damaging values. Write an essay exploring the values that are conveyed to boys through their toys. Brainstorm with others, especially males, about the toys of their youth or the toys that boys have today. Identify two to three key negative values to write about, illustrating each with several examples of toys.