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## Marginal Commentary: Are Students and Instructors on the Same Page?

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As writing teachers are well aware, a key component of a successful writing class is interactive feedback to support the writer through the revision process. Students rely on feedback--more than instruction on technique--to complete their writing assignments. In the words of a first-year college student, "It must be tough looking at a very large stack of papers, but it's the most helpful part of the essay process, because without a reader, the whole process is diminished" (Alexandra Hays, DVD). Alexandra was part of a longitudinal study spearheaded by Nancy Sommers who concludes that feedback is a powerful vehicle for encouraging students to pursue their fields of study, yet "we too often neglect the role of the student...and the vital partnership between teacher and student" (249). Those of us who have been teaching developmental and first-year writing for years recognize the truth in these words.

Giving and receiving written feedback is a complex process shaped by many factors. Foremost among these are the institution's approach to writing and its program requirements; the type of assignment—genre, content, purpose, and audience; the focus, structure, and tone of commentary; the teacher's commenting philosophy, pedagogy, and attitude toward individual students; and the student's personality, proficiency, content knowledge, and time constraints (Eisenstein Ebsworth 211; Goldstein 10; Straub 24). While we have a substantial body of research on teachers' written commentary in composition studies (Anson; Ferris, *Response to Student Writing*; Koblauch and Brannon; Probst; Purves), the focus has been on teachers' perspectives. We need research that includes the students' viewpoints (Awad Scrocco; Bailey and Garner; Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest). This study purports to bridge the gap between how first-year college students perceive teacher feedback and how teachers believe their commentaries are received. Specifically, do first-year students' expectations and preferences align with their teachers' commenting practices in an urban community college setting?

### **Redefining the Role of the Teacher as Feedback Giver**

The writing assigned in first-year composition classes is rather personal—ideally students are expected to express their own opinions—which requires that writing be taught in an environment where students’ confidence and trust is nurtured. For teachers to provide effective commentary and for students to be receptive, teachers must be aware of students’ reactions to and preferences for feedback (Goldstein 47; Straub 43). This approach to feedback as social interaction has its origin in the work of Lev Vygotsky who observed that we use speech and writing as cultural tools to mediate our interactions. It implies that feedback shapes—for better or worse—students’ learning and self-confidence, which may be boosted or potentially damaged by the tone or wording of the commentary (Johnson-Shull and Rysdam; Sommers; Treglia; Young). So given that teachers want their students to do well emotionally and intellectually, they cannot overlook their students’ beliefs and reactions to feedback. Teachers who comment without such insight, and claim that students don’t know what works best, are walking away from the possibility of building a productive relationship with their students.

Studies in writing classes have long indicated that the effectiveness of feedback highly correlates with students’ perceptions of their teachers as respectful individuals as well as experts in the field (Poulos and Mahony 152). In an early study Alan 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 (261). A conscientious teacher will adopt each of these roles depending on the writing assignment, the needs of the writer, and the stage of the writing process. Purves suggests that teachers discuss with their students the roles of the reader and make their students aware that not only will different readers interpret their writing differently, but also that the same reader may interpret their writing differently in different situations (265). Chris Anson further elaborates on teacher belief systems informing the type of commentary on student essays. In a study examining 91 essays by inner city students preparing for first-year college work and the commentary written by eight basic writing teachers, he discovered a pattern: *Dualistic responders* (about 75% of the teachers who participated in the 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 on 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. Anson concludes that responding well to student texts is not a matter of gaining expertise in the ‘mechanics’ of teaching writing, but it’s a matter of social—and collaborative—interaction between student and teacher (354).

Research, however, indicates that teachers continue to adopt an authoritative stance. Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch asked 40 teachers to assess the quality of one student's essay. Their findings show that none of the teachers "recognized the writer's control over choices" (120) and that they read the student's text from "the perspective of their own shared Ideal Text" (121). The researchers also found that teachers repeatedly assume that their first-year students have not yet earned the authority that makes readers pay serious attention to what they have to say, and end up taking on control of the choices that should be made by the students. Teachers who make such extensive directive corrections send a message that their agenda is more important than that of the student writer (Lea and Street; Onore; Probst). The repercussions can be catastrophic: Students may lose the incentive to communicate their own ideas and, consequently, disengage from pursuing writing-related projects.

The literature suggests that teachers reconceptualize their roles as feedback givers, reassess their background experience and sense of authority, and focus on students as individuals. While much of recent research focuses on teacher approaches to commenting styles and their evaluation of student revisions, very few studies examine the needs and preferences of students: What types of comments are more likely to motivate them? What types of commentary turns them off?

### **Student Perspective**

The scarce research on student evaluation of teacher commentary goes back a few decades. In a 1978 study, Catherine Lynch and Patricia Klemans administered an open-ended questionnaire to 154 college students in basic English courses of whom the majority, 142, said that teacher comments were helpful, and only 13 did not find them useful. The authors conclude that effective comments need to be 1) detailed and, if possible, include examples, 2) clearly phrased so that students can understand them, 3) factual, "avoiding remarks which could be interpreted as mere differences of opinion" (180), and 4) positive and encouraging rather than sarcastic. In another ground-laying study also consisting of a questionnaire, Patricia Radecki and John Swales found that the students they surveyed fell into three categories: *receptors* (46%), *semi-receptors* (41%), and *resistors* (13%). Most students were positive, or neutral, about their teachers' written commentary; however, the goals and expectations of the teachers and those of the students did not match: Students expected their instructors to correct all of their surface errors, leading to the conclusion that teachers' credibility may suffer if their comments do not meet students' expectations.

Richard Straub's survey ("Students' Reactions to Teacher Comments") among 142 college writing students echoes the results obtained by Lynch and Klemans and Radecki and Swales. He found that students hoped to receive

feedback on global issues such as content, organization, and purpose as well as on local matters of sentence structure, word choice, and grammar. The students mostly preferred comments that offered advice, explanations, and open-ended questions (91). Another study by Cohen and Cavalcanti, consisting of teacher and student questionnaires and think-aloud responses of nine college students, also found that especially weak students look forward to receiving feedback that acknowledges what they are doing right in addition to what needs to be revised.

While these research studies confirm that students rely on their teachers' comments to improve their papers, are generally aware of the tone the comments may connote, and are appreciative of engaging commentary, they don't reveal how college students react to their teachers' written commentary. To fill in the gap, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What are first-year college students' preferences and expectations of teacher-written commentary?
2. Have student preferences changed since research done nearly 40 years ago?
3. Are teachers aware of the impact of their feedback?

Students' attitudes and preferences are explored by means of a questionnaire, and qualitative data about teachers' feedback practices and their views of students' responses to written commentary is collected using semi-structured interviews.

### **Study Description**

The research took place in a community college that is part of a large urban university in New York. It consisted of administering a questionnaire to 141 students in six first-year composition classes and interviewing their teachers. There were about 15-20 students in each class. Because the surveys were taken anonymously, it was not possible to collect specific data about the students' linguistic backgrounds; however, according to the institution's demographic data, 70% of their students are of Caribbean background, 14% are West African and 6% Latin American. The majority of the students had taken at least one previous developmental writing course at the college. Most of them were academically underprepared first-generation college students who worked to help out their family while attending college.

The six full-time instructors who were asked to be part of this study were chosen randomly among the faculty. They all had had 10 or more years of experience in teaching writing. After briefly explaining that I was conducting a study on student perceptions of teacher commentary, I asked the teachers permission to administer the questionnaire to their students. Teachers left the room

during the 15-20 minutes it took for their students to complete the questionnaire. Students were assured that their answers could not affect their status in the class because the questionnaire was anonymous and because their teachers would not see the questionnaire or know the results at least until the semester was over. They were reminded to be as honest as possible and to write as much as they wanted in the spaces provided or use the other side of the page. All of the classes were given the questionnaire towards the end of the semester.

The questionnaire, adapted from a survey conducted by Ferris (“Student Reactions” 52-3), comprised of closed, open-ended, and hypothetical questions on how students felt about their own writing skills, how they responded to marginal commentaries, and how they preferred to be addressed (APPENDIX A). It was intended to serve a dual purpose: It functioned as an assessment instrument on the assumptions about writing that students may have brought to their first-year composition class, and it elicited student feelings, attitudes, and preferences about teacher marginal and summative commentary.

The interviews with the six instructors took place either on the same day I handed out the questionnaire or within a week in the instructors’ offices. The semi-structured questions, adapted from a study by Richard Bailey and Mark Garner (190) were intended to encourage openness and allow space for reflection in respondents. The questions aimed to get a sense of the teachers’ approach to teaching writing, if they received any training or guidance in addressing feedback, what they hoped to achieve through their written comments, and how they felt students received and interpreted their comments (APPENDIX B). The interviews were on average one hour long.

## **Findings**

### **Student Reliance on Commentary**

The first two questions of the survey sought to find out how students felt about and rated their own writing skills. Sixty-seven percent of the students responded that they enjoy writing, and an overwhelming majority, 95%, rated their skills “excellent,” “good,” or “fair” in the second question as shown in table 1.

**TABLE 1. Q2: How would you rate your skills in writing compositions?**

| Response  | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Excellent | 11        | 7.8        |
| Good      | 78        | 55.3       |
| Fair      | 45        | 31.9       |
| Poor      | 7         | 5.0        |
| Total     | 141       | 100.0      |

The results suggest that the majority of the student participants did not walk into their first-year composition class feeling a particular aversion for the subject and that they did not overwhelmingly harbor negative views of themselves as writers. This was important because their negative views about writing could have unfavorably skewed their evaluation of their teachers' commentary. The students indicated that they read their teachers' commentary: 68.8% said that they read and paid attention to all of their teacher's commentary, 22.7% paid attention to "most of them," 8.5% checked off "some of them," and no one said "none of them" (table 2).

**TABLE 2. Q3: Do you usually read and pay attention to the comments instructors write on your essay?**

| Response     | N   | %     |
|--------------|-----|-------|
| All of them  | 97  | 68.8  |
| Most of them | 32  | 22.7  |
| Some of them | 12  | 8.5   |
| None of them | 0   | 0     |
| Total        | 141 | 100.0 |

When asked what they did after they read their teachers' comments in Question 4, 94% wrote that they "go over the comments and rewrite the paper based on the comments" or "apply the feedback to future essays." Similarly, 91% of the students replied that they "understand all" or "almost all" of the comments in spite of the fact that 14% reported having difficulty reading their teacher's handwriting (table 3). When asked about how they handle comments they don't understand in Question 6, 88% replied that they ask the instructor for clarification, another confirmation that the instructors are their primary go-to person.

**TABLE 3. Q5: Are there any comments or corrections that you do not understand? If so, can you give an example?**

| Responses                                       | N            | %    | Can you give an example?<br>(not all students replied)  | N           | %                |
|---|--------------|------|---|-------------|------------------|
| Understand all comments                         | 84           | 59%  | Understand all comments but teacher's handwriting is sometimes difficult to read                              | 10          | 7%               |
| Understand most comments                        | 45           | 32%  | Have difficulty with abbreviations<br>Have difficulty with punctuation<br>Have difficulty with handwriting    | 1<br>1<br>9 | .7%<br>.7%<br>6% |
| Have difficulty understanding comments          | 9            | 6%   | Have difficulty with rationale<br>Have difficulty with correction symbols<br>Have difficulty with handwriting | 2<br>1<br>1 | 1%<br>.7%<br>.7% |
| Sometimes have difficulty understanding symbols | 2            | 1%   |   |             |                  |
|   | Total<br>141 | 100% |   | Total<br>25 | 18%              |

These findings about students' reliance on teacher feedback to revise their papers echo the results of two very different studies: a four-year longitudinal study of 400 Harvard students and a pilot study of developmental students in a two-year college in an economically challenged area of Washington State. The Harvard researchers found that students cared deeply about the commentary they received and that it helped shape their writing experiences (Sommers 251). Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt and Dodie Forrest found that 93% of their pool of 86 students consistently agreed that they read and used their teacher's comments (235). My study reveals very similar results, 90% of the participants responded that comments definitely help to improve their writing skills; 7% said that comments are helpful sometimes—especially when they are honest, positive, and specific; and only 1% (two students) replied that comments don't help them improve their writing. These findings also correlate with the results of the study by Lynch and Klemans in which 92% of 154 students found their teachers' commentary helpful and 8% did not (179). Data comparison answers one of my research questions: in spite of innovations in the writing classroom such as the introduction of online teaching

since 1978—40 years ago—students continue to value and rely primarily on their teachers' commentary to revise their papers.

### **Student Perceptions of Positive Commentary**

Most students, 63%, indicated that they received a considerable number of positive comments while 4% claimed that they received no positive feedback (Question 7). These results are higher compared to other studies. Sam Dragga analyzed 40 first-year L1 students' essays and found that of 864 comments, only 51 (6%) were comments of praise. Donald Daiker's study revealed a percentage of 10.6 positive commentary. Ferris et al found that the average praise commentary was higher, 25%, among 1500 teacher comments written on a sample of 111 essays by 47 students. The difference in data is in part attributable to different data collection approaches, text analysis versus student questionnaire. Yet, the 63% obtained from my study needs to be confirmed through other methods of data collection, and if a similar questionnaire is used, it should include a definition of positive commentary. It seems students had individual concepts of what constitutes a positive comment and when asked to provide an example, about half of them either misread the question or couldn't think of one. Others wrote what they felt about positive feedback such as, "Yes, once that they [my instructors] let me know that I'm heading to the right direction, I feel good about keeping on writing," or "I think all comments are positive because it's put there to improve myself. Sometimes 'it's a good job' or 'keep up the good work' that pushes me to do better." Some of the examples given by the students who recalled positive feedback are: "You have some good, clear sections here," "Great Job!" "This paragraph is great, but it will be even better if you express your idea on a wider scale," or "Need to add more details, but you have a great introduction. I like where you're heading." Interestingly, the interviews with the instructors reveal that their students' eagerness to receiving supportive feedback was unbeknown to their teachers.

### **Student Suggestions for Improvement**

In Question 9 students were asked to give one or two suggestions on how instructors could improve their written comments, and four recommendations stood out: 25% asked for more clearly detailed, specific comments; 16% asked for more positive comments that point out "the strong as well as the weak areas;" 13% requested that the teacher's handwriting be more legible; and 9% asked for straightforward, direct commentary (table 4).

**TABLE 4. Q7: Give one or two suggestions to instructors on how they could improve their written comments on students' compositions.**

| Students | Percentage | Responses  |
|----------|------------|--|
| 36       | 25%        | Be clear and specific/give directions or suggestions                                     |
| 22       | 16%        | Give more positive comments/point out the good and the bad                               |
| 18       | 13%        | Print the comments or make handwriting legible   |
| 13       | 9%         | Be straightforward, direct   |
| 11       | 8%         | Made no suggestions but said that they felt satisfied with their instructors' commentary |
| 11       | 8%         | Have one-on-one conferences  |
| 6        | 4%         | Did not reply  |
| 5        | 3%         | Be truthful/honest   |
| 4        | 3%         | Do not use correction symbols  |
| 3        | 2%         | Give a lot of comments   |
| 2        | 1%         | Dedicate more time to weak students  |
| 2        | 1%         | Provide feedback from an instructor's perspective not a common reader                    |
| 2        | 1%         | Focus on basic grammar   |
| 1        | .7%        | Provide a summative comment  |
| 1        | .7%        | Cover specific errors in class   |
| 1        | .7%        | If symbols are used, explain them carefully  |
| 1        | .7%        | Provide long comments  |
| 1        | .7%        | No summative comment but short specific ones   |
| 1        | .7%        | Put percentages to show how well someone is doing  |
| 141      | 100%       |  |

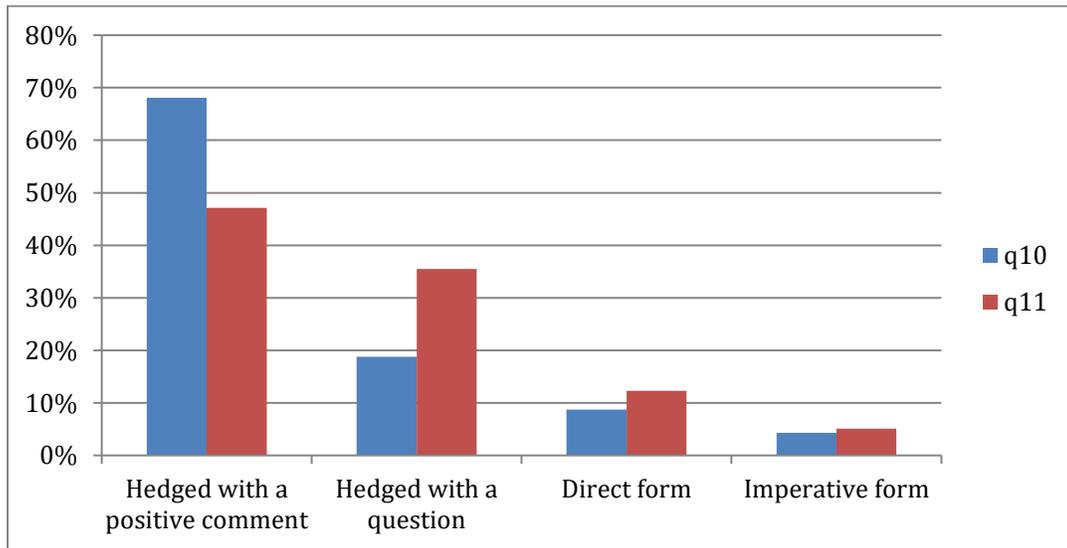
These responses corroborate the results of a survey led by Straub (“Students’ Reactions to Teacher Comments”) in which students responded that they preferred commentary that provided advice and included explanations. The findings also confirm Lynch and Klemans’s results that students prefer detailed, clearly phrased, factual, and positive commentary versus comments that sacrifice clarity over brevity, make remarks that could be interpreted as irrelevant to the paper, and tend to be sarcastic rather than encouraging. Legible handwriting, which didn’t appear in similar studies, is a significant concern (13%) of the student participants in my study. This is a reminder that teachers should not assume that students understand their handwriting.

### Student Preferences

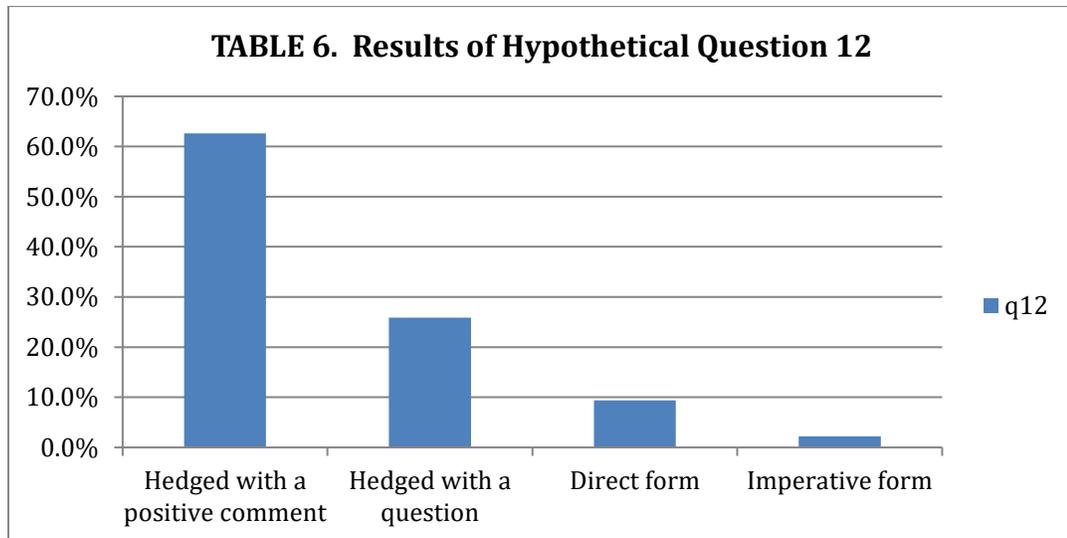
Questions 10, 11, and 12 posed three hypothetical areas for improvement: lack of specificity of thesis statement, organization issues, and lack of supporting details. Students were offered a choice of four teacher comments and were asked to choose the one they thought would help them the most if they were to revise such issue. The four comments required the same type of intervention but were phrased

differently. The choices were: a short comment in imperative form, a direct comment, a hedged comment in question form, and a combined praise-suggestion comment. The student responses for the first two hypothetical questions show an overwhelming preference for commentary hedged with praise, 68% for Question 10 and 47% for Question 11 followed by the question form, 18% and 35% (Table 5).

**TABLE 5. Results of Hypothetical Questions 10 and 11**



Question 12 had the same choices as in Questions 10 and 11 except that all four comments offered specific suggestions, so they communicated exactly the same message in four different ways. Again, student responses followed the same pattern as in the other two hypothetical questions: the hedged comment with a positive statement was by far the most chosen comment, 63%, followed by the question form, 26%, the direct form, 9%, and the imperative form, 2%, (table 6).



The cumulative percentage of the three hypothetical questions shows that 59% of the students chose the combined praise-suggestion comment, 27% preferred the question form, 10% preferred the direct form, and 4% chose the imperative form. This data, which is consistent with students' responses to Questions 3, 7, and 8, underscores how valuable teacher comments—especially positive ones—are to them. A qualitative study I led in the same institution corroborates these results. Individual interviews with 14 first-year students revealed that they eagerly looked forward to their teachers' commentary and relied on it to revise their papers. While the extent and quality of their revisions correlated with the difficulty of the task itself, the impact of the tone and phrasing of the commentary profoundly affected the students. They felt that directives had the power to demotivate them and to upset their capacity to think (128). The results of the questionnaire leave no doubt that teacher feedback is more effective if embedded in words of encouragement.

### Teacher Interviews

Except for one, the six instructors interviewed stated that they had had no training on how to provide feedback, and the one who had received some training felt it had not prepared her to respond to student writing. Two of the teachers gave unlimited chances to the students to rewrite their essays. All of the teachers stated that they

use the process approach and the clarity, fluency, and proficiency approach to writing as guidelines to giving feedback. They all indicated that they comment and evaluate their students' writing holistically and try to find at least one positive thing to say about a paper.

### **Gender Differences**

Although I had not planned to interview an equal number of female and male instructors, the interview transcripts reveal that the three male teachers felt more confident (or expressed fewer doubts) than the three females about their feedback practices. The three women instructors vocalized more openly their concerns about students being able to understand their comments and if their commenting style was as helpful as they had intended. In the words of one of the female instructors, "I worry that I give them too much, too much feedback, but there is more to do...maybe I'm too demanding. There are maybe more effective ways to do this." Another female instructor put it this way, "I worry they are going to think either nothing is wrong or everything is wrong. I worry about the psychological impact: What I say, how I say it, when I say it, who am I saying it to." On the other hand, the male instructors expressed less self-doubt and emphasized the responsibilities and circumstances of individual students as a male instructor put it:

Some students are very enigmatic. I would take that on an individual basis. I have one student and I haven't managed to get through to him. I just think it would be better if I let him have his own space. He will pass the class; he just seems unhappy in the class, so I don't know what to do. I often feel unsure if this is the right approach for this student. We have students who have busy, complicated lives. So you can't really talk to her in the same way that you can to a student who has the time to do what we are asking. Because she didn't pay her bill, she is not able to see her grade. That's a different student from the one who is living at home. I do the best I can.

He echoes the viewpoint of the three male instructors: We do our best considering the individual needs of our students. The female instructors, instead, put the onus on themselves when they felt that students were not engaged in the revision process and spoke passionately about trying to reach out to these students.

Time spent commenting a student paper is another difference between the women and men among the teacher-participants. The women said that it took them about 15-20 minutes while the men stated that they spent, on average, 10 minutes to comment on a student's paper. The male instructors indicated that they didn't "fuss about" the phrasing of their commentary, whereas the female instructors said that they preferred to write in full sentences to make sure the students understood the comments and as one instructor put it, "to set a good example." These findings corroborate the results of a study by Shelly Stagg Peterson and Kerrie Kennedy

who examined the influence of genre and gender on comments written by 108 sixth-grade teachers. The researchers found that female teachers wrote significantly more comments and made more corrections than male teachers (36). Further research of male and female commenting practices is needed at the college level to confirm these results. It would be interesting to find out if female instructors are more inclined to use hedged feedback such as pairing a request with praise as my study seems to hint. It would also be informative to know if teachers provide more criticism, explanations and suggestions when the work is attributed to a male writer as the Stagg Peterson and Kennedy study indicates.

### **A Missing Link**

The six instructors indicated that they avoided the “don’ts” of written commentary such as the use of abbreviations, cramming too many comments in a single draft, and being critical or sarcastic. They genuinely wanted their students to do well and worked hard to prepare them to pass the class and possibly move on to a four-year college. However, all of them expressed—in various degrees—that they weren’t sure how much their students cared about receiving written feedback and if they even read their commentaries as these two instructors put it, “I tell them, I spend hours reading your papers. I really want you to read them...but who knows, do they look at them?” and “I don’t know how they react to my comments. They never come to me and say, I’m so glad you wrote that. I don’t analyze what I do...One thing I think about is that I want them to do better. That’s my only aim.” These reflections are in sharp contrast with their students’ responses to the questionnaire where an overwhelming majority, 91%, said that they read and pay attention to all (69%) or most (23%) of their teachers’ commentary; 91% understand all of the commentary; and 90% find the commentary very helpful. Lack of awareness on the part of the teachers can and should be taken care of to maximize the benefits of hours spent on writing comments. As the student responses suggest, failure to address teacher commentay is most likely a result of the analytical challenges the tasks entail rather than lack of interest in feedback. This points to the usefulness of dedicating class time to discuss the revision process and focus on those types of revision requests that students either fail to address or do a poor job.

### **Conclusion**

First-year composition stands as the portal to college experience as it introduces students to college writing, a skill they will need to master to successfully complete any degree henceforth. This skill is best cultivated through teacher feedback that is deliberately supportive and detailed. Although the teachers I interviewed were concerned about their students and worked hard to encourage them to revise their work, they were unaware of how valuable their written comments were to their

students. These teachers interpreted their students' failure to address challenging analytical tasks as lack of time or interest in revising their essays. Such misconceptions may lead to doubts such as "I'm not sure my students even read my comments" and frustration, "they are not understanding the comments but just following them." The results of my study reveal that if this group of teachers were better informed about their students' appreciation and reliance on their comments, their communication would be smoother and more effective.

The complex task of feedback giving is especially challenging in an institution where most of the students are first-generation college learners balancing work, family, and taking classes. These students' academic skills may be rusty or, depending on their previous schooling, marginally adequate for college-level work. Nevertheless, my study shows that these first-year students were very receptive to their teachers' commentary and had clear preferences about how they'd like to be addressed on the margins. They preferred commentary that is personable and engaging such as "Your first sentence really grabs my attention, but you should work on..." versus "Make the main idea more specific" or "Please fix your main idea." It would be helpful for teachers to dedicate class time to explaining the purpose of commentary, including extensive examples of the types of revisions students have most difficulty with. These sessions should be open forums for teachers and students to acquaint themselves with the expectations and challenges about the complex task of giving and receiving feedback.

The need to prepare future teachers in graduate programs to respond to student writing has been put forth by scholars such as Ferris and Stern and Solomon. The results of my study support such proposition that graduate programs design a course on giving feedback. Important topics in such course would include the historical background of feedback approaches; tenets that can be used as guidance; phrasing possibilities; and the implications for the students. The course can help dispel doubts among teachers such as those that surfaced during the interviews: "Do my students understand my comments?" and "Do they benefit from it?" Also, the outcomes of studies that examine student perceptions and reactions to their teachers' written feedback should be shared in such course to continue to find ways to better align the students' cognitive and affective needs with their teachers' commenting practices.

Although teachers' written feedback is shaped by many variables such as the personality of the teacher and student, the individual needs and abilities of the students, and the experiences the teacher and the student bring to the classroom, a significant truth emerged in my study as well as in studies by Johnson-Shull and Rysdam, Sommers, and Young, that teachers' words hold power over their students. This power has the potential to help students discover their voices as writers and, at the same time, to undermine their efforts (Treglia). A redoubled

focus on understanding the repercussions of the phrasing and tone of teacher commentary will help improve the dialogue between teachers and students.

Finally, it is particularly crucial to empower first-year community college students in a time when open admission is being reconsidered and instructors are under pressure to improve retention rates. The student population at this institution is especially vulnerable, juggling going to college, work, and family obligations. These students decided to come to college motivated by their aspirations to improve their lives, but if their needs are not addressed, they end up dropping out. Writing teachers can make a difference!

## APPENDIX A: Student Questionnaire

1. Do you enjoy—or not enjoy—writing in your English classes? Why or why not
2. How would you rate your skills in writing compositions?  
Excellent\_\_\_\_\_ Good\_\_\_\_\_ Fair\_\_\_\_\_ Poor\_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you usually read and pay attention to the comments instructors write on your essay?  
  
All of them\_\_\_\_\_ Most of them\_\_\_\_\_ Some of them\_\_\_\_\_ None of them\_\_\_\_\_
4. Describe what you do after you read your instructors' comments and corrections.
5. Are there ever any comments or corrections that you do not understand? If so, can you give an example?
6. What do you do about those comments or corrections that you do not understand?
7. Are any of your instructors' comments positive? If so, can you provide an example?
8. Do you ever feel that your instructors' written comments help you to improve your composition writing skills? Why or why not?
9. Give one or two suggestions to instructors on how they could improve their written comments on students' compositions.
10. If the thesis statement of your composition was not specific enough, which of the following possible teacher comments, do you think would be most helpful? (pick only one)  
  
\_\_\_\_A. Please fix your main idea  
\_\_\_\_B. Your first sentence really grabs my attention, but you should work on making the main idea more specific.  
\_\_\_\_C. Could you be more specific in stating your main idea?  
\_\_\_\_D. Make the main idea more specific.
11. If there were a problem with the organization of your composition, which teacher comment would be most helpful to you? (pick only one)  
  
\_\_\_\_A. Although I was able to follow your ideas, I feel you can do a better job at reorganizing your paragraphs.  
\_\_\_\_B. Reorganize your paragraphs.  
\_\_\_\_C. Your ideas need to be reorganized  
\_\_\_\_D. Are you sure your essay is well organized? Check the logical sequence of your ideas and come to see me if you are having problems rearranging your paragraphs.
12. If a paragraph in your composition doesn't have enough supporting details, which one of the following teacher comments would be the most helpful to you? (pick only one)  
  
\_\_\_\_A. This paragraph lacks development, work on adding details (the instructor names two areas you could expand on).  
\_\_\_\_B. Don't you think you need to give more details on...(the instructor names two areas you could expand on)?  
\_\_\_\_C. This paragraph is well written, but I feel you could tell me more about...(the instructor names two areas you could expand on)  
\_\_\_\_D. Add details in the following two areas... (the instructor names two areas you could expand on).

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire.

**APPENDIX B: Protocol for semi-structured interviews with teachers**

1. Could you describe your approach to teaching writing?
2. Have you received any training or instruction on how to teach writing or have you learned through practice alone?
3. How long does it usually take you to comment on a student's essay?
4. What are some of the techniques or criteria you use in providing written feedback?
5. What have you found to be successful written commentary?
6. What are some types of comments or ways of phrasing comments you think don't work with your students?
7. Do you ever feel unsure of the way your comments will be perceived by your students?
8. What do you think are some of the reasons why students sometimes don't follow up on your comments?

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