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Introducing Feedforward: Renaming and Reframing Our Repertoire for Written Response

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TEACHING & LEARNING

Introducing Feedforward: Renaming and Reframing Our Repertoire for Written Response

Sheri Rysdam and Lisa Johnson-Shull

In a paraphrase of Kenneth Burke, William Covino writes, “Language creates, and so every utterance is always a magical decree” (91). It is no mystery to composition professionals that words matter: they can create and they can destroy, and wielding them effectively is the centerpiece of our work. As composition teachers, our task is to demystify the writing process for students and invite them to appreciate and manage the many-layered complexities of written discourse. Doing it well deserves our full attention. One of the many ways we inspire our students and demystify the writing process is in how we respond to what they say when they write. Another way we demystify the process is in addressing how what they say might be better crafted for improved audience reception. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that teacher response to student writing is not as impactful or inspirational as we might like. In fact, it may be so negative as to be harmful. In a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Don’t Be Cruel,” Thomas Batt writes,

To be sure, many students do not work hard on our assignments or listen carefully to our instructions. But antipathy is unlikely to motivate them to do better; on the contrary, it may convince them to give up. What’s more, mangled syntax, disordered thinking, and frequent error happen to be hallmarks of a novice writer learning a new discourse. If we incorrectly assume they reflect a lack of effort or character—and base our feedback on that assumption—we do our students a disservice and risk inflicting real damage.

In the article’s side bar, Batt adds this conjecture about his experience: “The power of negativity may explain why students entering my first-year composition course have such a bleak attitude toward writing.” This conjecture is consistent with what we have both wondered and what we have found in our research on responding to student writing: response is not only frequently negative, it is frequently cruel. Like Batt, we agree that we can expect better outcomes when we are impeccable in this process and more intentional with our words (“From Cruel to Collegial” and “Taken at Our Word”).

However, providing guidance for the complex endeavor of writing is, like writing itself, a many-tiered and multi-layered process. Writing a good essay is intensely complicated. It requires the ability to integrate several skills and cognitive processes simultaneously (Bean; Stiggins). In order to write a successful essay (particularly at the college-level), a writer needs to:

- Comprehend information about an (ideally) inspiring and challenging topic
- Narrow the focus of the topic relative to the length of the essay
- Grab the reader’s attention

- Organize the information in a way that is logical and coherent to the culture of the readership
- Wield a substantial and varied (and properly spelled) vocabulary
- Summarize and synthesize pertinent information
- Understand the implied warrants operating in audience expectations for what constitutes convincing evidence
- Identify the need for (and have the ability to apply) citation conventions
- Construct solid, sensible and correctly punctuated sentences

Depending on the challenges of comprehending a particular concept, and of the limits or possibilities for expressing that understanding in various forms or genres for various constituents, audiences or stake-holders, writing *always* has the potential to be a challenge regardless of how experienced a writer is (Bereiter and Scardamalia; Colyar).

Teaching someone to integrate these tasks well requires a significant investment of time, patience, intelligence and creativity. It requires a response repertoire that reaches across a broad spectrum of conventions and concerns. It requires a teacher to exercise both a spirit of growth and encouragement as well as brandish an attitude of discipline and pruning. And it requires the wisdom to know when to do each or either of these things.

Unfortunately, despite the magnitude of its difficulty and importance, conversation about teacher response to student work has gotten short shrift in our scholarly discussions about writing instruction. Practical discussions that demonstrate agreement about what works and what doesn't in writing response are sparse, if not entirely absent. Data reporting what teachers actually do when they respond to student work is scant, and there is little theoretical continuity enabling us to position the conversation beneath a pedagogical North Star. Referring to the assessment work of Brian Huot, Asao Inoue writes, "Through a look at the literature on response, he [Huot] notes that the field has no formal theory of response" (20). If teacher comments help transform the lead of student prose into the gold of publicly suitable discourse, this alchemical potential is entirely compromised if we have no processes that ensure agreement on best practice, provide no administrative support for the adherence to best practices, and offer no legitimized places for teacher comments to be viewed and assessed as public performances (as student work is).

In order to navigate for ourselves this disorienting landscape, and perhaps clarify some of this confusion in the form of general protocols for practice, we set out to do four daunting tasks:

1. Gather information illuminating "real" teacher commenting practice in action (including conducting our own research)
2. Compare that information to best practice ideals
3. Develop some guiding principles for a sound pedagogy of response that unifies the disparity between the real and the ideal
4. Map our way to a theoretical North Star from which to steer future best practice behaviors

In the spirit of this journey, we offer our discovery of the concept of *feedforward*, hidden in the discourse of other disciplines and in UK conversations about composition.

We suggest “feedforward” as a staple in our vocabulary and a fundamental principle in our repertoire of response. Complementing the time-honored practice of feedback, feedforward is a response practice aimed at moving past an obsession with error or awkwardness to provide articulate guidance for future performance. In the service of bringing the concept of *feedforward* into our disciplinary discourse, we first explore some of the historical, pedagogical, and theoretical contexts that both support and problematize the potential of putting the approach into practice.

Response Matters

In her 1987 book on responding to student writing, Sarah Freedman opens with a quote from a 1903 English textbook: “The...question, How shall written work be criticized? is one of the most important in the whole problem of teaching English. *Upon the value of the criticism success in teaching composition finally depend*” (142, our emphasis).

Freedman suggests that how we respond to what students write is what matters most in teaching writing. The fact that she uses a turn-of-the-century textbook quote to say this suggests that it has mattered for a very long time. Tackling the same topic in 2001, Fife and O’Neill agree, stating, “The important response, the response that counts, is the written comment to the student draft” (302).

Yet despite the fact that these scholars suggest that the teacher’s comment on the student draft is the *most important* act in the teaching of writing, little in the professional literature consistently confirms this, or gives good guidance about what those comments should say (or what effect they have on student performance). Lynn Goldstein writes, “There is relatively little research that has examined the relationship between comment form and the effectiveness of student revision, and the results of such research are mixed” (76). Goldstein’s assertion is supported by the results of a 2014 Turnitin-sponsored student and faculty perception survey about feedback practices. Turnitin’s study shows little agreement among teachers, or between students and teachers, about what constitutes effective feedback for improvement (“Instructor Feedback”).

There is also no professional consensus that the conversation about teacher comments is even a central concern of the discipline. While Fife and O’Neill claim that “Improving the effectiveness of teachers’ comments on student papers has been a continuing conversation in composition studies for decades,” (300), Lunsford and Connors say that they see the conversation has been neglected. They write, “Given that writing evaluative commentary is one of the great tasks we share, one might think it would have been one of the central areas of examination in composition studies” (200). Our exploration supports Lunsford and Connor’s perception that the conversation has been neglected. A prime example of this neglect is the list of instructional interventions found in Graham and Perin’s oft-cited *Meta-Analysis of Writing Instruction for Adolescent Students*. Although the central question of their analysis is “What instructional practices improve the quality of adolescent students’ writing?” only two out of the fifteen investigated classroom teaching interventions even glance off the subject of teacher or peer response (452-453). Applebee and Langer’s 2013 book *Writing Instruction That Works* doesn’t even mention teacher response as an instructional strategy. In the “faculty should” section of “Writing Assessment: A Position Statement” (*College Composition and Communication* 1995),

nothing specific relative to good teacher commenting practice is mentioned, despite the fact that the statement suggests that listening carefully and responding thoughtfully to student words is important (435).

Dana Ferris has appealed to the profession for more studies that consider the effects of feedback within the total context of teaching; her appeal is but one out of many from scholars who lament the thin body of research in this area (315). However, contextualizing commenting practices, while vital, is also problematic. Fife and O’Neill found in their study that the interpretation of teacher commentary on portfolio papers was confounded by the fact they had “little information on how the comment functioned as part of the class” (301). In addition to the comprehension of context issues, the problem of access to teacher comments on student papers compounds the research. Teacher comments are found only in one place—on papers that belong to students. Ironically, even this assertion is contested as there is no professional agreement about who actually owns teacher comments—the student or the teacher. Consult your local Institutional Review Board for their opinion on this matter.

Claiming that teacher comments are the “most hermetic of academic genres,” Thomas Batt further complicates the conundrum of accessibility by reminding us that not only do practices of teacher commentary generally remain hidden, but the people making most of the comments [adjuncts and graduate students] are also the most isolated from the professional conversation, and consequently the most under-trained in writing response (207). Nancy Sommers notes that many writing teachers admit that “they had been trained in various prewriting techniques, in constructing assignments, and in evaluating papers for grades, but rarely in the process of reading a student text for meaning or in offering commentary to motivate revision” (154).

The flimsily demarcated genre of teacher comments and the lack of any training in providing feedback results in little usable information to package and present to those who most often assign and respond to student writing (graduate students and faculty who may not yet be specialists in composition, Patchan 125). Teacher commenting practices remain unregulated and largely invisible to everyone but students, Writing Center practitioners, and the rare researcher who studies commenting practices. Therefore, few authoritative places exist from which to notice and influence the mishandlings that might occur in the genre.

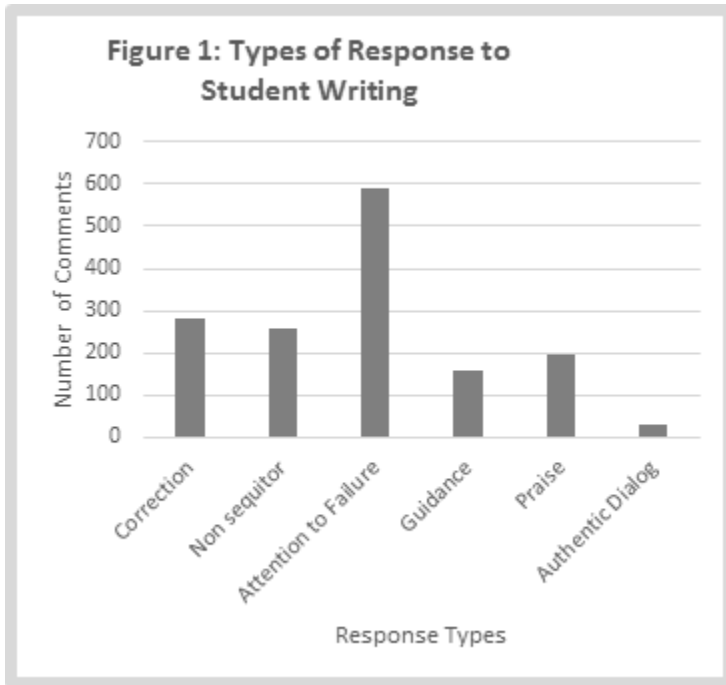
The time is ripe to introduce new terms, define old terms more precisely, create a clearer set of rules for engagement (a sort of Geneva Convention for writing response), and blend an aligned theoretical perspective into the conversation on response. Having a solid theoretical frame, some premises about use and abuse, and a more nuanced response vocabulary can help us create a stable foundation for research on teacher comments.

Best Practice in Response

The scholarship on writing response in English Composition suggests that best practice is governed by magnanimous rhetorical values: praise-oriented; dialogic (i.e., asking genuine questions); aware of strengths and weaknesses; aligned with assignment expectations; dependent on a hierarchy of concerns that are focused, organized, and evidence-based (see Daiker, Haswell, Straub, Speck.) Yet our experiences as tutors and administra-

tors in writing centers tell a different story about what teachers actually value when they write comments to their students.

Inspired by our 30 collective years of working in writing centers where we regularly see written teacher commentary on student papers (and the ways that students interpret that commentary), we set out to determine if what we were seeing in the writing center met status quo for teachers across our institution. We first wanted to establish, quantitatively, the incidence of certain kinds of comments that teachers made on student papers, so we might later compare our findings to what we knew about professional best practice. In 2006, we conducted an IRB-approved content analysis looking at almost 1000 student papers to see if the patterns we saw as writing center practitioners were born out in a more systematic study. We filed papers approved for research in our institution's required Junior Writing Portfolios. We used a six-feature code (six main types of teacher response) to look at patterns of teacher commentary. Our results revealed teachers to be three to four times more inclined to use corrections and nonsense markings in their written responses than they were to offer students praise or guidance for improvement (see Figure 1).



As a follow up to this study, in 2010, we conducted a related study in which we took six response types—Assignment, Focus, Organization, Support, Proofreading (AFOSP) and coded them for use in a peer-feedback situation, whereby students, after having been taught a response rubric (see Table 1), provided written feedback to the essay of an anonymous peer—much like a blind review.

Table 1: AFOSP Assessment Criteria (Writing Center Hierarchy of Values for Responding to Writing)

Assignment

- Your writing demonstrates that you have understood and addressed the expectations of the assignment.

Focus:

- Your essay sets a clear context for the development of your main point.
- The introduction clearly explains your purpose; the body “flows” logically in support of that purpose; the conclusion provides a sense of closure
- Your essay continues to tie back to the main point throughout.

Organization:

- Your essay is structured with transitions and cohesive paragraphs.
- Your essay has a clear structure (e.g., beginning- middle – end) and the strength of the components is consistent.
- Transitions connect thoughts and paragraphs consistently and carefully.
- Paragraphs function consistently as units of thought and advance argument.
- You avoid redundancy or unnecessary repetition of ideas and information.

Support:

- The paper provides evidence of search, selection, and source evaluation and the relationship of the evidence to the main point is clear and convincing.
- Adequate story or anecdote is provided and supports main point.

Proofreading:

- Your essay uses proper word choice, syntactically and grammatically correct sentences, proper spelling, format and citation.
- Word choice is precise and manages to express ideas clearly.
- Clauses and sentences are grammatically and syntactically correct and comprehensible.
- A rare mistake or typo may be present. Spelling is largely correct and provides little or no distraction to the reader
- Expected format is followed.
- Citation is present and used correctly.

The results of the research demonstrated that despite sustained instruction in a rubric over the course of a semester, students inclined toward using mean, punitive, and even incorrect comments when giving feedback to their peer (Rysdam and Johnson-Shull “The Ink We Leave Behind”). Had the students over-learned this kind of response from teachers? While we felt validated that our systematic studies reinforced our anecdotes from our writing center experience, our main concerns had to do with the bad news our results heralded. If the results of our content analysis were representative of standard practice (if, in fact, most of teacher commentary is fixing mistakes or offering fragmentary snippets of un-prioritized and under-explained abbreviations of information), how were we to help faculty see and change those entrenched practices? And, in our peer-review study, if students have the idea that taking personal, picky potshots at an anonymous peer is acceptable behavior in the genre of the written comment, what interventions into the negative trajectory of their commenting behaviors might we suggest?

Realizing the limitations of our studies, we inquired into the work of other scholars to see if there were similar studies that obtained analogous results. We found that Stern and Solomon had conducted a similarly-timed content analysis investigating the use of

three primary “best practice” principles of effective feedback: feedback that was positive; feedback that addressed only select areas directly tied to the assignment’s learning goals; and feedback that was revelatory of patterns of strength, error and weakness. By and large, Stern and Solomon unearthed comparably depressing data as our own studies revealed. They conclude in their study that faculty they studied did not provide feedback consistent with effective best practice principles (38). In their study, Stern and Solomon also noticed that while faculty might tend to provide ample feedback on mechanical writing components such as spelling, grammar, and word choice, they were often deficient in providing more meaningful feedback. They write: “The lack of written comments (either positive or negative) for the students’ support/evidence for claims, paper structure/organization, voice and creativity, was perplexing at least. For the most part, students needed to improve in these areas, yet there were no comments telling them so” (38).

In her 1982 article “Responding to Student Writing,” Joyce MacAllister writes about the need to eradicate three beliefs that create common inconsistencies in written response practice:

One is the belief that instructors should write a lot in the margins and between the lines. Another is that instructors ought to know and use a lot of specific grammatical rules and grammatical terms if they want to comment effectively. A third is that the most effective responses to student writing are instructor-written comments on the final copy. All three beliefs are false. (59)

Haswell, in the same era, also argues for a reduction in the amount of grammar-focused commentary traditionally written on student texts. He writes, “In reducing the amount of teacher comment on the page, it helps to avoid the mental dazzle of information overload” (601). Haswell encourages a re-thinking of traditional notions of response noting, “It is a disturbing fact of the profession that many teachers still look toward the marking of a set of compositions with distaste and discouragement. Reasons are obvious, not the least being the intuition that hours must be put in with little return in terms of effect on the students and their writing” (600).

Lunsford and Connors discovered in their 1993 study that teacher editing marks and corrections on student papers were so prevalent that it all but derailed their research from its original intention of focusing on rhetorical comments. The readers they employed in the review claimed that it was impossible for them to ignore the propensity of teachers to correct student mistakes. They write, “There was, they [the readers] said, a pervasive tendency [for teachers] to isolate problems and errors and individually ‘correct’ them without any corresponding attempt to analyze error patterns in any larger way” (217).

Two decades after the Lunsford and Connors study, Lunsford and Lunsford conducted a repeat study that “confirms that the rate of student error is not increasing precipitously but, in fact, has stayed stable for nearly one hundred years” (801). They also found that while students still made mistakes with similar frequency, the types of mistakes had changed over the years (801). The most notable aspect of both the original study and the follow-up is how clearly the focus of the studies reinforces the persistent trend to define students in terms of the mistakes they make rather than in terms of the feats they accomplish.

These studies, in conjunction with extant literature on commenting best-practice, illustrate a long-standing disconnect between what scholars have historically suggested as best practice, and what teachers seem to continue to do. Perhaps the most conspicuous thing we noticed is despite consistent pleas in late 20th century composition scholarship to praise and offer guidance to better motivate student improvement (Daiker and Straub) and to moderate the correction of mistakes as a central emphasis (Haswell, McCallister), writing instruction seems to be stuck in a rut of negativity and correction. In other words, despite more lofty intentions, evidence suggests that composition specialists are habituated to pointing out mistakes, correcting them, and defining students largely in terms of their shortcomings (Durst 55).

As we have suggested from our own experience, perhaps nowhere is this culture of negativity more glaring than to practitioners who work in writing centers and have front row seats to the genre of teacher commentary. As Batt suggests, unless you work in a writing center you might not realize the prime location it is for noticing teacher commenting practices (207). Unfortunately, because of the ethics of taking comments out of context, and because writing center practitioners are usually sensitive to the public nature of what teachers perceive as a private correspondence between themselves and their students, writing center practitioners are limited in their capacity to make many empirical or critical assertions that would prove useful to the academic conversation. It cannot be disputed, however, that writing centers provide a unique place where tutors and administrators have the opportunity to eavesdrop on the institution (to use the language of Krista Ratcliffe), and to take note of teacher values as they are illustrated on the pages of student work.

Our collective years in writing center work, in tandem with our more systematic investigations, confirm a discomfiting amount of nonsense, illegible scribble and negativity routinely splattered across the pages of student work. While perhaps not indicative of every institution, this element of teacher practice is rarely owned up to in our professional conversations. Yet unless we are willing to admit, as a profession, that this habituated style of response is a problem that warrants our focused attentions, students will continue to suffer the indignities and inadequacies of unconsciously crafted or reflexively habituated writing responses from teachers, and they will continue to struggle to learn to write well.

Krista Ratcliffe's work on rhetorical listening helps compositionists recognize how we can better facilitate cross-cultural communication by considering listening as fundamental to our repertoire of skills (78). Not only does rhetorical listening assist in communicating across cross-cultural constructions of identity; the concept also allows for an entire paradigm shift in the way we listen to students and their texts—regardless of the positions or locations from which they write to us. While the concept is instrumental in helping us to be more aware of the needs of students who have been historically marginalized by higher education, the concept has profound implications for all students and makes solid sense as a theoretical north star for writing response.

Ratcliffe writes,

[U]nderstanding means more than simply listening *for* a speaker/writer's intent. It also means more than simply listening *for* our own self-interested readerly intent, which may range from appropriation (employing a text for one's own ends), to Burkean

identification (smoothing over differences to achieve common ground), to agreement (affirming only one's own view of reality). Instead, *understanding* means listening to discourses not *for* intent but *with* intent—with the intent to understand not just claims but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well. (28)

Listening *with* intent rather than *for* intent, alters the reader's role from one of expecting the writer to always be proving himself or herself in a scripted enterprise of normalized public conventions to one of withholding judgment in favor of understanding. While it is true that (in most schools) the teacher needs to step in at some point in time and make a summative determination of quality, rhetorical listening extends the space for "interpretive invention," prior to wrapping up (or shutting down) dialog with concerns for excellence and the "prettification" of student prose (196).

Reading is like hearing; it can be done with or without truly listening. Only when we listen to student intentions, and not just to their struggles with conventions, can we better motivate students to keep *writing to us*. It is through encouraging students to keep writing to us that we can come to understand what they think, how they think, and how to point to ways in which they might recognize their own need for further study or contemplation. Only through listening in our reading can we model for students how to listen to themselves.

This process of listening and asking good questions enables us to help students become *authorities* of knowledge and the authors of texts (the basic philosophy behind writing center pedagogy). If student words are always marked up or corrected and replaced with better teacher words or better teacher phrasing (or left alone to hang in the air with only a letter or a number slapped on them to establish their overall worth), we will continue to subordinate and silence the development of writer expertise with our own—and no wonder that students won't improve. It is within this professional context that we appeal to our field to break the silence on teacher commenting practices and let in the air of innovation, supervision, and rhetorical reciprocity.

Reframing and Renaming

Let's agree that obsessive editing corrections, snide commentary, nonsensical circles, squiggles, and marginal comments scattered in no prioritized order are not respectful strategies. While we work to create systems whereby the people teaching writing are valued for what they do enough to receive ample training and mentoring, we can heed the simple directive: "If you can't help, don't hurt."

In the spirit of doing no harm in our responses to student writing, and with the intention of transforming our response methods so they are more instructive for students, we suggest teachers consider the work of Marshall Rosenberg on Non-Violent Communication (NVC).

According to Rosenberg, "The first component of NVC entails the separation of observation from evaluation" (26). While there is no reason that teachers need to refrain from evaluating, observation and evaluation provide two very different, important types of information, so they should be separated. Richie Neil Hao establishes the work of Rosenberg as central to the practice of Critical Compassionate Pedagogy, an approach nicely aligned with the social justice intentions of Ratcliff's work on rhetorical listening.

Listening to Observe and Describe

The synthesis, analysis, and critique of information all rely on a foundation of identification and description. Prior to drawing conclusions or predicting implications, we first need to observe. In terms of student writing, what teachers observe in order to later assess is only instructive if students can be shown what teachers see. In many cases description can help students see their work clearly enough to make their own evaluation. An example might be, “I noticed that your opening paragraph has three potential thesis statements in it.” Or, “Out of the seven sentences in your second paragraph, six of them are simple sentences and one of them is compound.” Other observations might have to do with noticing the ratio of facts to opinions or the presence or absence of certain kinds of evidence. Non-evaluative observation is not intended as a passive-aggressive posture to get students to see their mistakes; it is intended to get students to notice their own patterns and habits and, when possible, to adjust those patterns and habits to best address their purpose. It is also intended to position the teacher as someone who notices language usage and can talk about it in descriptive ways without always making a correction or leveling a criticism.

Making detailed observations requires a vocabulary complete enough to accurately describe what is noticed. Wine-tasting offers a good example. Prior to an aficionado deciding whether or not the Chardonnay or Gewürztraminer is “good” or “bad,” the taster must have the language to name the experience of taste (spice, fruit, flowers, wood etc.). In the genre of the teacher comment, we need to be able to describe rhetorical moves rather than smells and flavors—yet a vocabulary rich enough for this complex and nuanced endeavor is currently lacking in our professional repertoire. We need more concept and vocabulary building (and more of a concerted effort to share this vocabulary) in an effort to move faculty away from the deeply entrenched and shallow shorthand of “awk,” “frag,” “huh?” and “confusing.”

In lieu of any large scale and immediate solution to improving our professional lexicon and its distribution to the teachers who need it, the language of non-evaluative observation and description can be rehearsed by individual teachers and peer reviewers using a practice called “Deep Reading” (see Table 2).

Deep Reading asks readers to read for observable features prior to making any evaluative judgment based on those observations. The primary intention of the Deep Reading is to focus the reader on what is present in the text rather than what is missing, and it also challenges readers to find the language to describe the observations they make of a text’s constituent parts. When asked to describe what someone is wearing or how they are ornamented (describing, for example, an artifactual text), we rarely struggle with our descriptions. To describe what one notices in a written text is much more challenging—a reality we have seen over and over again when asking faculty to participate in this exercise. This descriptive naming process is nonetheless crucial to creating and implementing good rubrics as well as designing good comments. It is also vital to teaching students what texts are made of, so they can study the parts and the rhetorical moves they can use to improve their writing.

Table 2: Deep Reading

NOTE: Deep reading is an approach to written response that integrates non-evaluative observation and description. (Handout by Carmen Werder of Western Washington University, 1997)

Instructions

Read the paper, article or document thoroughly. Write down as many objective features about the paper, article or document as you can. What do you notice?

Examples:

- Long or short or varied sentences?
- Types of words chosen—short and concise or flowery?
- Use of jargon or acronyms?
- Multiple or few paragraphs?
- Amounts of verbs, adjectives, adverbs or nouns?
- What is the mode or genre?
- Does it use facts and/or anecdotes?
- What are the intellectual activities employed (memorization, comprehension, application, synthesis, analysis, evaluation, creation)?
- Are there headings or transitions?
- Thesis or hypothesis driven?
- Is it organized chronologically or by topic?
- Lots of quotes?
- Does it deal with a process or a concept?
- Does it show or tell (or both)?
- Is the writing expressive or transactional?

(These observations are to be non-judgmental observations; they are descriptions that record the features or traits of the writing; they do not evaluate those features.)

Discuss the features of the paper, article or document with your group.

SEPARATE PROCESS: Create a metaphor for what the writer seems to be doing with this piece of writing. For example, does this paper, article or document read like the writer is a tour guide showing you the sights of a popular tourist attraction? Does it read like the writer is a commuter driver and is just trying to get the reader from one place to the next in the most expedient fashion?

Listening with Evaluation: Feedback and Feedforward

One of the standard issue terms we use to describe writing response is “feedback.” Writing teachers at our institutions have even begun re-tooling this common noun to emphasize its more active calling as a verb and can be regularly heard saying things like, “I am going to my office to do some feedbacking.” However, in its most literal and limited definition, feedback labels the success or failure of actions that have occurred in the *past*. In our 2006 content analysis, it was clear that the majority of teacher comments across all disciplines focused on locating and fixing mistakes that had already happened, rather than focusing on and offering strategies and solutions for avoiding those mistakes *in the future* (Figure 2).

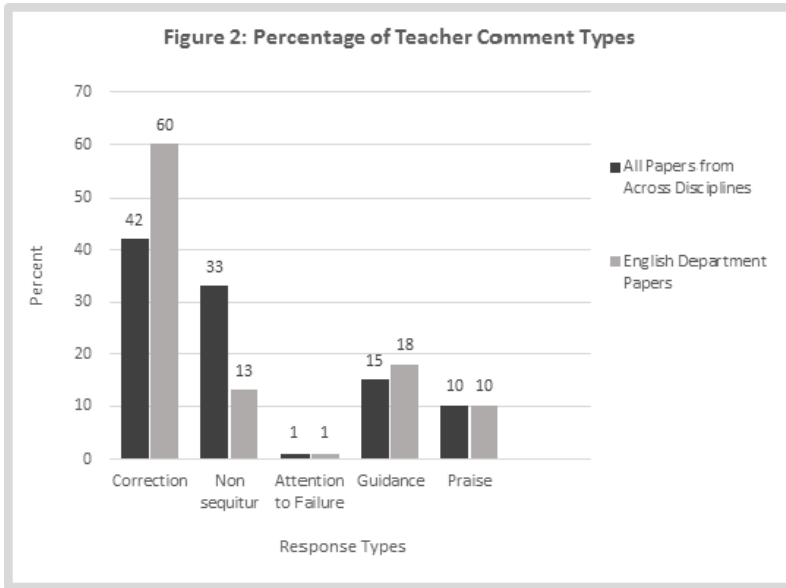


Figure 2

This past-centric tendency to mark mistakes (as compared to referencing handbook pages on grammar rules that should be consulted), confirms what Winifred Hall Harris found in her 1977 study of teacher comments—that a majority (66%) of the 7,855 teacher corrections she catalogued pertained just to mechanics and usage. Interestingly, the data in her study also illustrated an inverse relationship between what teachers claimed to value in student work and the types of evaluative comments they made on student drafts (179). Harris’s unearthing of this inverse relationship conjures up a story we have about a graduate student training session conducted with an interdisciplinary audience of teaching assistants. When asked to brainstorm and prioritize their teaching values, the TAs unanimously agreed that the improvement of critical thinking, an active future-focused endeavor, predominated as a teaching goal for each of them. However, when asked about the hierarchy of values they used in responding to and assessing student writing, their top two values were enforcing grammar rules and making sure students were following directions.

While we wish this incongruity between articulated values and practice added up to just a fluke born of unique instances, our experience has shown us otherwise. But whether we are praising or penalizing, what strikes us as most out of alignment with the values of composition studies is that despite the revision-focus clearly valued in our field, a majority of teacher commentary attends to short-comings in what students have already written and not to what possibilities exist for what they could write next to improve. So while it is a given that feedback is a major staple of our practice, it should surprise us that *feedforward* is not. It is time we establish feedforward a stock term in our professional vocabulary.

Feedforward in Theory and Practice

Jean Piaget used the term “feed-forward” in the field of developmental psychology to identify a child’s ability to master formally similar tasks at different ages, and in cybernetics feedforward is used in “describing a kind of system which reacts to changes in its environment, usually to maintain some desired state of the system” (“Feed-forward”). In management, Marshall Goldsmith offers feedforward as a means to encourage positive future behavior, opposed to focusing primarily on negative past behavior. Although used in other academic fields and contexts in the U.S. (namely management, computer science and human development), the term feedforward has not yet taken hold in U.S. education or in English Composition—even though academic institutions abroad are beginning to use the concept quite regularly (Lunsford, K.). Virtually every article we found on the concept of feedforward in educational assessment was published in the U.K. and Europe (Conaghan and Lockey; Duncan et al.; “Enhancing Feedback”; Murtagh and Baker).

Feedforward is about phrasing our commentary so that it gives students the information they need to take the next steps toward improvement: “Using feedforward, we can concentrate on what the candidate can do to improve their performance rather than focusing on their past performance or their personality” (Conaghan and Lockey 48).

Feedforward does not deny the reality of past or present performance; it simply suggests a direction toward greater success. Feedforward is not about praise (praise is actually feedback since it labels the past), but it sends a positive message because it assumes opportunity and capacity for improvement. With feedforward as a key component in our lexicon, we reduce the possibility that revision will be ignored as a foundational principle of good writing instruction.

The following chart provides examples of how feedforward can be used respond to student writing:

Feedback	Feedforward
“This paper lacks adequate description.”	This paper would be stronger with more sensory vocabulary. When you describe your hometown, I ask myself, “What does it look like? What does it sound like?” I could better experience the place if you described these things more fully.
“This essay is confusing.”	Connecting the sub-points in each paragraph directly to your main thesis will make the focus of this essay clearer.
“This introduction is not very exciting.”	Consider using a hook or a lead that includes more action and storytelling to draw in the reader. Perhaps draw on personal experiences to connect the reader to your topic.
“Too many short sentences.”	Add more sentence variety.
“Voice is too informal.”	Since this is an academic paper, using a more scholarly vocabulary will improve the tone.
“You’ve missed the point of this assignment in that you’ve failed to discover anything interesting or universal.”	Reread the assignment. It asks you to make connections between the class reading and your own experience. Draw more of these connections.

Feedforward and non-evaluative observation offer us new exemplars for commenting effectively. Situated within Ratcliffe's concept of "rhetorical listening" these practices suggest a position of teacher respect for student work that values truly hearing what the student is trying to say, and choosing our words carefully as we offer them guidance. While this process can be time-consuming and labor intensive, we must make the effort to do it if we expect students to understand and accomplish excellence in their own work.

Conclusion

If teachers are truly dedicated to helping students develop authorial voices, some rules that govern teacher response are warranted. While many right ways to respond to student work exist, we need to clearly agree upon the *wrong* ways to do it. We advocate for guidelines that insist teachers not waste precious time on nonsense comments that are only cryptic externalizations of our own thinking. Teachers should refrain from writing mean, petty and humiliating things on student papers (e.g., "This is boring"). Marginal comments should be minimized; and, if other technology is unavailable, comments should be written legibly—never hand scribbled. Comments should rarely be written in anything other than complete sentences, and those sentences should be organized logically by priority and supported with evidence from the text. Perhaps most notably, we need to agree upon who owns the comments on student papers. Many times in our investigation we arrived at an impasse of information gathering because the genre of the teacher comment is, as Batt, suggests, *hermetic*. It is sealed in a space that renders it invisible, impermeable and therefore, protected from change. If, as a profession, we became more overt about the public performance of commentary, teachers might make their rhetorical choices more carefully.

People spend time doing what they love. If we want students to spend enough time practicing writing to improve (and to improve the thinking it ostensibly demonstrates), we must cultivate in them a love for it. This cultivation does not happen through trivial, careless, corrective, and obedience-obsessed commentary. Encouragement comes from careful deep listening. It comes from a desire to understand. We show this understanding by how thoughtfully we respond to what students say and to the evolution of their saying it, *no matter how much time it takes us to do this*. According to the CCC Position Statement on Writing Assessment,

Students who take pleasure and pride in using written language effectively are increasingly valuable in a world in which communication across space and a variety of cultures has become routine. Writing assessment that alienates students from writing is counter-productive Writing assessment that encourages students to improve their facility with the written word, to appreciate their power with that word and the responsibilities that accompany such power, and that salutes students' achievements as well as guides them, should serve as a crucially important educational force. (434)

As teachers and scholars we need to pay attention to the places where we may be unwittingly creating the very problems we have been hired to solve. Only then we can adjust our practices and meet our teaching goals. When we respond effectively to students who are mired in the mess and magic of this complex, challenging practice we call writing, we engage in potentially transformative, world-changing work.



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