Across the Drafts

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For the past thirty years, I have been a teacher of writing—work that I love, especially teaching first-year students. I have always been curious about the ways in which students read and interpret my comments—why they find some responses useful, others distracting, and how these comments work together with the lessons of the classroom. In 1982, I published an article in CCC on this very topic, but rereading this essay twenty-four years later, I feel the absence of any “real” students who, through voice, expertise, and years of being responded to, could offer their teachers valuable lessons. In returning to a topic that has captured my imagination for over a quarter of a century, I’m also returning to a topic that is part of our collective imagination, with so much scholarly attention paid to it that if you search “responding to student writing” on Google, you arrive in 2.7 seconds at the first of about 230,000 entries (Harvey 44). Our collective interest in responding, I suspect, is deeply professional and personal. We feel a weighty responsibility when we respond to our students’ words, knowing that we, too, have received comments that have given us hope—and sometimes made us despair—in our abilities as writers. The words teachers scribbled on our papers, inscribed in memory, are often the same words we scribble in the margins or at the bottom of our own students’ pages—well-intended, most often written with great care, though sometimes carelessly, often caffeine-induced, usually late at night. These words, we hope, our students will take with them as they move from our class to the next, from one paper assignment to another, across the drafts. We don’t take this responsibility lightly. The work of entering into our students’ minds and composing humane, thoughtful, even inspiring responses is serious business. Given the enormous amount of time it takes to comment fairly upon a single paper, let alone twenty or thirty, we often wonder whether our students actually read our comments and what, if anything, they take from them.

As I look back across a quarter of a century of my own drafts, I remember that my first impulse when researching the topic of response was to imagine a hierarchy of effective and ineffective comments that could be isolated, identified, even memorized by new writing teachers. I quickly learned the limits of such research when I tried to separate comments from the context in which they were written—that is, the language established in the classroom. There is
a story behind each effective comment that animates it for a student, making it more than mere marks on a page. But in our professional literature about responding, we too often neglect the role of the student in this transaction, and the vital partnership between teacher and student, by focusing, almost exclusively, on the role of the teacher. We offer prescriptions to new teachers that imply a hierarchy of comments: offering praise, for instance, is more constructive than criticism; posing questions is better than issuing commands; and using green or blue ink is always preferable to red.

The new perspective I bring to this topic today comes from the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, which followed four hundred students for four years to see college writing through their eyes. With the leisurely perspective of time, and with the collection of over six hundred pounds of student writing, five hundred hours of taped interviews, and countless megabytes of survey data, my fellow researchers and I have witnessed the wide range of comments that students receive, not just in one course or from one teacher, but over four years and across the disciplines. To see these comments through the eyes of college students is a kaleidoscopic experience: papers never returned; papers returned with bewildering hieroglyphics—dots, check marks, squiggly or straight lines; papers with responses that treat students like apprentice scholars, engaging with their ideas, seriously and thoughtfully. That students might benefit from a decoding ring to determine whether the check marks and squiggles are a good or bad thing will not surprise us. That students might find comments useful throughout the process—before and between drafts, not just at the end—will also not surprise us. What did surprise us, though, is the role feedback plays in the complex story of why some students prosper as college writers while others lag.

It would be comforting to think that those fortunate students who receive the most useful comments make the greatest leaps in writing development. And it would be equally comforting to think we could link the lack of writing development to a student’s scorecard of useful and useless comments. But in the matter of writing development, nothing is straightforward. The movement from first-year writing to senior, from novice to expert, if it happens at all, looks more like one step forward, two steps back, isolated progress within paragraphs, one compositional element mastered while other elements fall away. For some students, progress is uneven but continuous. Other students stall and become stuck writing the same kind of formulaic paper, again and again, no matter what assignment they receive. We wondered—would more or better comments have made a difference to these stalled writers? And what
relationship could we perceive between those who progressed as writers and the comments they received?

A quarter of a century ago, I wouldn’t have known how to ask such questions, let alone answer them. At that point, I focused entirely upon comments written in first-year composition courses to prompt revisions. And I concluded, “We do not know in any definitive way what constitutes thoughtful commentary or what effect, if any, our comments have on helping our students become more effective writers” (148). In the Harvard Study, though, we looked at all comments students received over four years. Outside the first-year or upper-division writing courses, we learned, students rarely receive writing instruction and are rarely required to revise. Consequently, instructors’ comments on final drafts take on an even greater role; they often become the only place for writing instruction. After following four hundred students for four years, I now challenge my earlier conclusion by arguing that feedback plays a leading role in undergraduate writing development when, but only when, students and teachers create a partnership through feedback—a transaction in which teachers engage with their students by treating them as apprentice scholars, offering honest critique paired with instruction. The role of the student in this exchange is to be open to an instructor’s comments, reading and hearing their responses not as personal attacks or as isolated moments in a college writing career but, rather, as instructive and portable words to take with them to the next assignment, across the drafts.

Colleges have great expectations for their students. But if we understand how slow writing development is—that is, how long it takes to learn how to write a college paper, to have something to say to a reader who wants to hear it—we become rather humble about the enterprise of commenting. If our comments move students forward as writers, they do so because such comments resonate with some aspect of their writing that our students are already thinking about. As we learned from the students we followed, most comments, unfortunately, do not move students forward as writers because they underwhelm or overwhelm them, going unread and unused. As one student suggested, “Too often comments are written to the paper, not to the student.” The overwhelming comments look a lot like check marks and squiggles, or papers returned with the most cryptic of comments like “B+; your style needs improvement; otherwise, a good treatment of the topic.” The overwhelming comments assume too much on the part of a student, as if instructors imagine their job is to comment on every compositional element all at once, and as if
they believe that pointing out such errors will prevent students from ever making them again.

What emerged in every conversation we had with students about their college writing is the power of feedback, its absence or presence, to shape their writing experiences. As one student told me, “Without a reader, the whole process is diminished.” That students care deeply about the comments they receive was revealed in our survey of four hundred students, who were asked as juniors to offer one piece of advice to improve writing instruction at Harvard. Overwhelmingly—almost 90 percent—they responded: urge faculty to give more specific comments. And when we asked students each year to describe their best writing experiences, two overriding characteristics emerged: the opportunity to write about something that matters to the student, and the opportunity to engage with an instructor through feedback. What became clear from students’ testimonials is that feedback plays a much larger role than we might expect from mere words scribbled in the margins or at the end of a paper; feedback plays an important social role, especially in large lecture classes, to help students feel less anonymous and to give them a sense of academic belonging. As we learned from the students we followed, it isn’t just that without a reader “the whole process is diminished”; rather, it is with a thoughtful reader that the whole process is enriched, deepened, and inscribed in memory.

One might easily imagine that this partnership around feedback is so valuable to students because it affirms them as writers. And, yes, affirmation is often the end result, but a key finding is that constructive criticism, more than encouraging praise, often pushes students forward with their writing; constructive criticism more than praise reveals instructors’ investments in their students’ untapped potential. In the case of praise, the messages it contains—you belong at this college; you are not the admissions committee’s one mistake—are vitally important to propel first-year students forward with their writing and to inspire them to work harder. But over a college career, when such praise is not paired with constructive criticism, when it doesn’t involve a back-and-forth exchange between student and teacher, writer and reader, it has the opposite effect. Instead, undeserved praise neglects to offer students an incentive to improve, nor does it provide any alternative approaches for future papers. Students who repeatedly receive comments from their instructors such as “I have nothing to say about this well-written paper,” often stall as writers because they are never asked to do anything differently, never shown what skills they need to develop, nor are they engaged in a dialogue that challenges their own thinking.
The surprise was watching so many students make great leaps in their writing development after receiving what they identified as tough and honest assessment of their work. For one student, Ellery, the harsh critique he received as a junior was the only thing that could shake him from his gibbousness. His political science instructor wrote: “Ellery, this is supposed to be an essay, not a rush-hour radio talk show. What you write is a good piece of entertainment, but it is not the kind of writing that goes under the label of academic.” Though blunt, this response was written not as a pronouncement, but in the context of a lengthy comment in which the instructor engaged with Ellery and his ideas. She goes on to model the kind of questions he might have asked and to model the way in which skeptical readers might look at the same evidence. Although tough in her assessment, Ellery’s instructor treated him as a colleague, someone capable of great things, even if not yet achieved. This kind of intellectual partnership created through feedback showed Ellery that he was part of an academic community, made up of thinkers sorting out ideas, arguing with each other, and questioning each other’s thinking. Criticism is not enough; like praise, it has to be paired with instruction. But in the call and response of feedback, when instructors model for their students a live, listening person, they offer students an image of a reader at the other end of the writing process, someone willing to listen and comment, critically yet constructively.

The success of this partnership has as much to do with students’ willingness to hear and accept honest assessment of their work as it does with instructors’ willingness to offer such responses. Ellery, for instance, received honest assessments of his writing his first and second years, but these assessments didn’t help him become a stronger writer because he dismissed these responses as his instructors’ idiosyncrasies. Or, in the case of Jackson, another student in our study, who, when asked as a junior how he might use his instructors’ comments in future assignments, responded: “I don’t think I can use these comments since each paper is a different assignment and a different kind of paper to work through.” Jackson intuited the great challenge of undergraduate writing: to move from discipline to discipline, writing about Confucius in a philosophy course one semester, a Haydn piano sonata in a music course the next. But on another level, Jackson’s observation makes clear that it will be difficult for him to apply even the best comments to future writing assignments since he believes that each essay assignment is defined by its topic, a discrete unit. In Jackson’s view of writing, comments are tailored to each essay but also isolated from all other essays, and their purpose is, simply, to show students what they did wrong on a particular assignment.
We learn from Jackson’s undergraduate writing career that part of becoming a good writer involves learning to receive criticism, both in understanding what an instructor intends and in the practical sense of knowing how to put that advice into effect in other courses and contexts. Jackson is correct that his essay on Confucius is a text onto itself, but part of Jackson’s stasis as a writer stems from his belief that there is no continuity from one assignment to another. Because he sees no way to transport lessons from one paper to the next, he reads his instructors’ comments as isolated moments in his college writing career, not as bridges between assignments. Even the best, most thoughtful comments will not move students like Jackson forward as writers.

But for any writer learning how to receive and accept critique, how to read comments not as judgment about one’s limitations as a human being, or about one’s failings as a writer, is not simple, especially for beginners who are quick to dismiss or deflect feedback. For first-year students, feedback is monumental, their most personal, most intimate and direct interaction with their college writing culture. And feedback comes, implicitly or explicitly, with messages of hope or despair about who they are and who they might become as students. While one student will respond, “My greatest reaction to all that red ink is gratitude,” another first-year will shrug and say, “I guess all these comments mean he didn’t really like my paper.” Or, if a first-year student believes, as one told me, that the purpose of her composition course was to teach her how to “write quickly, adequately, and painlessly,” we understand why such an attitude might prevent her from being open to comments that ask her to slow down, read texts closely and carefully, and, in a word, change. The differences among first-year students, we found, are less about ability and more about an openness and receptivity to comments, a way of seeing their writing experiences as something under their control, not random and outside of themselves. We found that one of the important predictors of undergraduate writing development is a first-year student’s willingness to accept and benefit from feedback, to see it as instruction, not merely as judgment.

At its best, feedback comes out of an exchange in which instructors explain to their students what is expected of them as college writers, and students are open to learning about these expectations. By giving students a generalized sense of the expectations of academic writing, teaching one lesson at a time, and not overwhelming them by asking them to improve all aspects of their writing at once, instructors show their students how to do something differently the next time. The comments that students identify as
the most helpful are responses that straddle the present world of the paper at hand with a glance to the next paper, articulating one lesson for the future. Consider, for instance, the feedback Louisa, another student in our study, received in response to her weak thesis and introduction. Here is her instructor's comment: “Louisa, a technique that can work well for opening a paper is to begin with an intriguing detail, especially one you find difficult to account for. Beginning in this manner not only draws in your reader, but also forces you as a writer to grapple with a troubling aspect of the text, which can often be a key aspect that you had previously set aside. This, in turn, can focus your thesis and argument.”

As a sophomore, Louisa had complained in an interview: “It's tough getting better as a writer when nobody is showing you how.” But as a junior, she was fortunate to work with an instructor who didn’t assume that she arrived in his class as a fully formed writer. Instead, the instructor treated Louisa as an apprentice, an evolving writer. The tone of his comment is phrased, respectfully, as a writing lesson on how to arrive at a thesis, and how to engage a reader with an arguable claim. By giving Louisa a generalized sense of what academic writing calls for—write about what you don’t understand; those things you have dismissed might be more important than you first imagined; start with details because they engage readers—Louisa’s instructor composes his comment to offer a bridge for her to cross to future writing assignments. We concluded that when students have been taken seriously as apprentice writers, when instructors model the role of an attentive reader, such comments function to anchor students in their academic lives and, ultimately, make a vast difference in their college writing.

Writing development is painstakingly slow because academic writing is not a mother tongue; its conventions require instruction and practice, years of imitation and experimentation in rehearsing other people’s arguments before being able to articulate one’s own. The conclusion from the Harvard Study is that feedback shapes the way students learn to write, but feedback alone, even the best feedback, doesn’t move students forward as writers if they are not open to its instruction and critique, or if they don’t understand how to use their instructors’ comments as bridges to future writing assignments. For students to improve as writers, a number of factors are necessary: in addition to honest comments, they need plenty of opportunities to practice writing throughout their college careers, not merely in one course or in one year, and plenty of opportunities to receive writing instruction in and beyond the first year, especially instruction in one discipline’s method.
Feedback is rooted in the partnership between student and teacher, and as in any relationship, it develops its own language and meaning. That this relationship provides students their most direct contact with their college writing culture seems simple enough. But what isn’t simple is the profound influence the relationship created through feedback has, not only upon students’ writing development, but also upon students’ sense of themselves as thinkers. When students receive feedback telling them they have “great insights” that their instructors have “never seen the topic discussed this way before,” or that there might be “a whole level of other questions” for them to imagine, students understand that their teachers view them as people “with things to say,” thinkers capable of insight and asking other levels of questions. Or, when a student tells us that he will always hear his instructor’s voice telling him to change his ideas, revise his thinking, it is not just the instructor’s words the student hears and carries with him across the drafts; it is also the instructor’s belief in the student as a thinker, someone capable of doing good work, even if as a first-year student he is not yet accomplishing it. When students respond to feedback as an invitation to contribute something of their own to an academic conversation, they do so because students imagine their instructors as readers waiting to learn from their contributions, not readers waiting to report what they’ve done wrong on a given paper.

I once read a definition of a “true gift” not just as a possession passed from giver to receiver but, rather, something that is kept in motion, moving back and forth between giver and receiver, and outward into the world. One college senior, reflecting on the role of feedback in his undergraduate writing career, told me about such a gift: “If I bumped into one of my professors twenty years from now, I would know what this professor thought of my work; our minds connected at this juncture of my paper, and I will always be indebted.” The word indebted caught me off guard. Indebtedness, after all, carries with it a connotation of obligation, of being beholden. But indebtedness also carries with it a feeling of appreciation and gratitude, a legacy of connectedness. And indebtedness goes two ways, like any bridge. As teachers, we respond to our students’ great insights because we are grateful for the insights they have given us. And in encouraging our students to imagine other levels of questions, we, too, are inspired to think more widely and deeply. Feedback doesn’t need to be monumental, but its influence often is.

As our students teach us, their papers don’t end when they turn them in for a grade, nor do our comments end when we write them. The partnership between writer and reader, between student and teacher, creates something
new—a collection of ideas that are larger than the paper itself, ideas milling around, moving forth into the world, across the drafts.

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Notes
1. A rich and abundant literature exists on the topic of responding to student writing. In particular, I would mention the important work of Chris Anson, Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch, Summer Smith, Richard Straub and Ronald Lunsford, and Kathleen Blake Yancey.

2. To learn more about the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, see http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos. To date, scholars in our field—Marilyn Sternglass, Anne Herrington, Marcia Curtis, Lee Ann Carroll, and Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford and colleagues have demonstrated the value of longitudinal studies to provide a wider perspective than research focused upon one college course or one undergraduate year.

3. To bring the voices of undergraduates into a larger pedagogical discussion about responding, my colleague, Jane Rosenzweig, and I created a film, Across the Drafts: Students and Teachers Talk about Feedback. In this film, we follow one student, Jon Stona, and his writing teacher, Tom Jehn, as they move through the process of composing the last assignment in Jon’s first-year writing course. The film also features a wide range of students, first-years through seniors, as well as their professors, speaking about the challenges and rewards of receiving and giving feedback. The film can be viewed on the Harvard Study Web site, http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos; copies of the film can be obtained by writing to wrstudy@fas.harvard.edu.

Works Cited

Recovering the Conversation: A Response to “Responding to Student Writing” via “Across the Drafts”

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Nancy Sommers and I agree on her assessment of her 1982 essay, “Responding to Student Writing”—that it reflects “the absence of any ‘real’ students.” Even though Sommers and her colleagues conducted interviews of student writers in connection with their research, the thrust of the 1982 essay is textual criticism, using both the student text and teacher comments as the sites for analysis and critique. As Sommers points out, the “language established in the classroom” is missing—and, with it, the context for the relationship between student and teacher in a given classroom. Without that context, both the atmospherics of the classroom and the local meanings established in that climate vanish, leaving textual artifacts that reveal only part of the communicative story.

Sommers is not alone in paying insufficient attention to the classroom context in her early research on student writing. Other thoughtful studies by prestigious scholars have produced impressive analyses of teacher comments.