

REWRITING OUR COMMENTS AND REVISITING REVISION PRACTICES:
NEW CONCEPTS FOR SUSTAINABLE INSTRUCTION IN THE WRITING
CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Rewriting Our Comments and Revisiting Revision Practices:
New Concepts for Sustainable Instruction in The Writing Classroom

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The driving instructional tool in the majority of writing classrooms, comments, is failing students and instructors because comments are a tool, and not a technique. The utility of comments within the writing classroom is only as strong as its pairing with other instructional techniques. Using comments to teach comments is a flawed method of instruction, and if instructors want to properly use comments within their classes, they must first show their students how to use these techniques in improving their writing. Thus far, the focus of facilitating student revision and student growth within writing classrooms has been on the study of specific comments written by instructors on student papers. The study of such comments reveals the differences in styles, modes, and voices projected from those instructors, but it does reveal much about the intended goal of such comments, the advancement of student writing. Looking back on previous research and incorporating a multifaceted approach to revision helps to build sustainable writing instruction. A review of literature of comments suggests placing students in the center of the classroom by enabling students to take control over the revisions of their own work. This process cannot be done without teaching students how to do things with comments and how to use comments to their advantage. Starting from Joseph Harris' *Rewriting*, the

same steps toward revision which Harris suggests of students should be copied and applied to the way in which instructors facilitate such revision within the classroom. The improvement of student writing requires several steps which target particular issues with the status quo of commenting, and the use of Harris' text will enable us to identify the steps. Incorporating revision into the classroom, inviting students into conversation about their text, and opening the lines of communication can help improve revision practices in writing classrooms.

Through incorporating a new mastery model within the writing classroom, a technique that begins to show students how comments are made and what to do with them, students can begin to internalize the many processes which they can apply to any writing. The teacher's goal is to help the student internalize the concepts and apply without the direct instruction of the teacher; however, many writing classrooms have lost this focus. If teachers refocus the classroom on the process of writing and even the process of editing and revising, students will become not just stronger students but writers.

Adjustments in the writing classroom cannot occur overnight, but incorporating revision techniques into the course will eventually pay off as students learn to revise their work. These techniques, although not new, can prepare students for writing outside the composition classroom.

Introduction

The scene is typical, English teachers with heads turned down to a pile of untouched papers which are waiting for the first act of response. The act of response which occurs during these scenes are not the acts of response that propel students to become stronger writers. There is no doubt to the role of teachers in the instruction of writing, but the question must be posed whether the interactions between teachers and student papers in the rooms in which comments are composed are the best conditions for helping students excel as writers. If instructors want students to do things with comments, they need to teach students how to respond to comments.

Comments are instructional tools, but they must be combined with instruction in order to help facilitate learning. Commenting practices alone do not teach students how to utilize comments, respond to multiple types of feedback, or negotiate the meaning of their texts. The many strategies used by successful writers are not taught by commenting practices although commenting has become the instructional tool of choice for some composition teachers. As I learned when I began teaching, my students did not have the necessary tools to respond to comments or to revise their work. The writing strategies that I took for granted needed to be made accessible to my students so that they, too, could use these techniques during their development as writers.

Students require the support of properly equipped teachers, and the use of comments alone may not be enough to reach and support students; instead instructional methods which focus on the how to teach revision. To fuel good revision, different

instructional models, such as a mastery model, coupled with commenting are necessary. Without proper instruction on how to use comments, miscommunication can occur.

Although much research has been done to understand the use, style, and effectiveness of comments on student papers, research which focuses on bridging the gap between pedagogy and practice, while also removing the barrier between instructor and student understanding, is rare. Changing “pedagogical practices have the potential to re-envision response as a more complex dynamic, but most recent research on response hasn't begun the needed investigation of whether/how these practices realize this potential for restructuring response practices that may have become routine” (Fife and O’Neill 307). There is a separation between the comments which teachers make and the way in which revision is introduced within the classroom. Comments do not lead to revision. By teachers not talking about commenting, students are not gaining the skills they need to know in order to improve their craft. Without teachers more closely examining multiple ways to reach students, the intentions of their comments may never be recognized by students.

Through each comment a teacher makes on a student paper, a dialogue is occurring between the student and teacher. However, what should be a dialogue sometimes never extends beyond the paper nor becomes productive towards reimagining the paper and remains for the most part a like a monologue. The comments used to engage students in dialogue are sometimes left by students as artifacts which support a grade and not actionable advice. The markings which teachers make on student papers sometimes do not make their way into the consideration of the final draft. The intention

of the instructor is often ignored on the rough draft, separated and unconsidered for the final draft. The lack of connection between the comments and the classroom discussions can prevent well-intentioned comments from having the desired effect. The connection between comments and the classroom can be eliminated by showing students how to do things with comments; therefore, instruction on and discussions about comments need to be conducted in the classroom.

The same questions that we ask of our students we should be asking of ourselves. What do we want to accomplish? How we intend to build on the strengths of the project? How do we acknowledge other views and possibilities? What are the implications of what we have to say? These can be helpful to us and students as we examine our work for effectiveness and quality. We want our students to put together the pieces of the puzzle in order to create a strong paper. These concerns are not always considered by teachers when examining the comments they produce for students. At times, teachers fail to appreciate the implication of their words to an individual student's development and create comments that can be seen as nothing more than just words.

As an instructor at a two year college, I am concerned about my students' performance in and out of my classroom. When students enter my classroom either as remedial skills students or advanced writers, it is my job to teach them the current curriculum and to propel them beyond my course. It can be argued that changes are difficult to make within the confines of some departments as curricula and textbooks limit the instructor; however, it is up to the instructor to change the direction of the class and to bend the given guidelines to ensure the students walk away engaged, educated, and

motivated. Understandably, most curricula in composition courses have veered away from focusing on the product, but the attention on process has been less than productive as it has been taught in a way that does not adequately show how to apply particular steps of the process to texts. The goals of “enhancing student learning and self-evaluation skills that [new] practices share, like the goals of improving teacher response, are difficult to enact,” according to Fife and O’Neill (307). The control over a text shifts frequently through response in the writing classroom, and these shifts can be uncomfortable for students and teachers who are unfamiliar with these practices (Fife and O’Neill 307).

Using suggestions to students in Joseph Harris’ *Rewriting*, teachers should evaluate their own methodology, goals, and effectiveness when it comes to commenting practices to foster a more sustainable model which places the student at the center of learning in the classroom. Teachers should revisit Joseph Harris’s *Rewriting* as not only a guide for students to revise their own work but as a pathway for instructors to reimagine their instruction. As described by FitzGerald, Harris’ sourcebook notes “a momentous shift toward notions of practice in the teaching of writing,” in that it focuses on how writing is a “habituated, socially mediated activity” (4). Harris changes the dynamic of the conversation between how students interact with scholarly texts. In utilizing Harris’ method of critical analysis, instructors can change the conversations they have with students about their texts. Harris not only addresses writers’ concerns in *Rewriting*, but addresses how teachers may use such a text within their classrooms as a sourcebook for students and as an instructional evaluation method for instructors.

Joseph Harris' *Rewriting* focuses on helping students analyze other texts and include these secondary texts successfully in their academic writing. A how-to guide for establishing a conversation between texts, including students' texts, *Rewriting* breaks down the process of interpreting sources, citing critics, and establishing conversation with them for the first four chapters of the book: "Coming to Terms," "Forwarding," "Countering," and "Taking an Approach." The last section, "Revising," concentrates on the discussion of revising as opposed to editing. The aim of the book is to aid writers in creating and maintaining an academic discourse between secondary sources and themselves.

Harris' model in *Rewriting* can also be used to reimagine the conversation between teachers and students through the texts they exchange with each other. *Rewriting* can help instructors move beyond just commenting practices to form a more student-centered, unified style of instruction. Instructors can use Harris' steps in critical analysis to uncover new and more effective strategies to teach writing beyond comments. Coming to terms with students can enable students to meet the expectations of teachers by utilizing clear a clear vocabulary for response. Meanwhile forwarding the meaning of comments ensures clear communication between teachers and students. Coming to terms and forwarding are not enough to change how comments are used in the writing classroom. Countering and evaluating past techniques, taking an approach to implement new strategies, and revising how revision and not just commenting practices are used within the classroom are the last crucial stages to implementing new ways to us comments in a more productive way.. Together, all these components will improve

student/teacher communication and will improve student writing. To revisit commenting practices is not to argue that commenting does not affect the outcome of student performance. Commenting practices are an important pedagogical tool used to instruct students about writing, but the instruction of writing cannot simply end with an end comment. When Summer Smith argues that “some researchers have argued that comment fail to achieve their pedagogical purposes because they are poorly written,” there is absolutely some truth to that; however, the failure of commenting practices first comes from a failure of instructors to integrate the teaching and discussion of comments into the classroom (251). Students should be instructed on how to interact with comments, and through this instruction students can become more independent writers. Using Harris’ model to conceptualize an analytical paper, I will introduce, evaluate, and incorporate new methods which can lead to more sustainable writing instruction. As reflective practitioners, teachers need to use the same methods which we impose on our students to critical analyze and conceptualize a paper to improve our own craft. In the same steps which students use, as Harris suggests in *Rewriting*, I will show how Harris’ model can be applied to reevaluate and then offer new ways to use comments in the classroom.

Coming to Terms: A Vocabulary of Response

According to Harris, “coming to terms” involves not only reading and interpreting other sources, but being able to define the argument of the other author, note key terms in the text, and evaluate the author’s argument (15). More specifically, before even assessing how the argument of the author or work fits within a text, the student writer must first assess the argument on its own merit. As Harris identifies, writers need to “understand a text...in a way, to rewrite it, to take the ideas and phrasings of its author and them into [their] own” (15). Coming to terms requires what Harris calls the “settling of accounts,” a negotiation of the reader and writer which allows the reader show what use he or she can make of it (15). As Harris states, “texts don’t simply reveal their meanings to us; we need to make sense of them” (15). However, in order to “make sense” of texts, or in this case comments, Harris recommends noting “keywords” in the text (15). After noting the keywords presented in a text, readers can then begin to assess the “uses and limits” of the approach (Harris *Rewriting* 15). Reviewing the uses and limits of an approach offers potential pathways to coming into conversation with the text. In responding to texts, one must understand the message of those texts, a point crucial to both academic writing and revisiting commenting practices. To “make sense” of commenting practices, a review of key terms is necessary in order to find the uses and limits of available practices for composition instructors. Identifying key terms enables investigation into whether commenting practices can be a standalone technique in the composition classroom.

When the dialogue between teachers and students about student texts occurs mostly through written comments, students should be gaining an insight from instructors through comments. However, without instructing students how to engage in the act of response, or how to do things with comments, it is uncertain whether the insight through comments given to students was left untouched. When students receive comments, it is up to the student to use such comments to improve their writing. If students do not understand the advice given within comments, students too often opt out of the exercise of revision. Students use the excuse that they do not understand the comments as to why the revisions they make may be inadequate. Instructors should remove reasons students can use to opt out of the practice of revision from comments, and building an accessible vocabulary of response for students is the first step to providing students the tools they need to succeed.

According to earlier studies in the analysis of teacher comments, the tone, rationale, and location in which the comments occur are critical to how such comments are understood by students. Landmark research into the study of comments was conducted by Summer Smith in "The Genre of the End Comment." Not only does Smith give a comprehensive view of commenting styles, she also defines specific words which help to categorize and target specific types of comments and issues within commenting practices. Smith recognizes that teachers possess "the institutional power in the relations and can use comments to motivate, educate, or chastise her students" (250). Smith's awareness of the relationship between instructor comments and student outcomes led her to work out clear vocabulary which can be used by instructors to evaluate their own

comments. Smith identifies different types of end comments and defines the purpose and effect of each. According to Smith, there are judging comments, response comments, identification comments, reading comments, coaching comments, suggestion comments, and assistance comments. However, the terminology used in comments must be made transparent so that students too can join the conversation about their texts and become, according to Huot, active rather than passive participants in the writing classroom (69).

To continue on the research of Smith, Medzerian, in “Style and the Pedagogy of Response,” urges teachers to take advantage of comments to teach students about writing. Using the same genres identified in Smith’s research, such as the judging, response, identification, reading, coaching, and suggestion genres, Medzerian pushes beyond identifying genres and shows how to teach writing conventions through the use of comments. She suggests that instructors should “take advantage of assessment’s pedagogical function in our responses” to teach about writing (187). Assessment and comments can be powerful educational tools if used constructively in the classroom; otherwise, they may be overlooked by students and therefore ineffective. Medzerian suggests that teachers should build a language platform to talk about writing, the first step to taking full advantage of our comments.

The first step to ensuring success for the instructor and the student is creating a platform with transparent and accessible vocabulary for the instructor and student to use when discussing revision practices. A workable classroom vocabulary expands a student’s lexicon of response and includes students in the sometimes mysterious ways in which instructors respond to student writing. Students should be aware of terms that

describe the writing and responding processes and their definitions, including comments, response, the writing process, and revision.

A Glossary of Terms

Comments: Comments are the teacher's reactions to student texts. Students can use comments to improve their texts or leave the comments untouched. Typically, comments help the student advance the text. However, these comments may not always be written, as they can also be discussed through a conference. Comments are primarily used to help clarify issues presented within the text to help the student propel the work further.

According to Straub, "the way [in which] a teacher frames a comment... establishes some relationship with the student" (98). In "Students' Reactions to Teacher Comments," Straub first identifies types of comments and then conducts a survey to establish a relationship between the types of comments and the corresponding reactions from students. Of the many types of commentary, the most controlling types are those which "correct," "criticize," or "command" (Straub 98). An example of a correction as supplied by Straub is a teacher adding in "'recreational' before 'drugs' in the student's sentence in order to clarify the meaning" (98). Meanwhile, an example of a command is the instructor asking the student to "explain why drugs are wrong" (Straub 98). The controlling comments illustrate the instructor's control over the student's paper, in that the instructor is leading the student on where the paper should go. Comments which

assume less control over student texts are “qualified evaluations” and “advice” (Straub 98). A qualified evaluation can identify an argument as less than convincing but does not point specifically as to why it is not. The least controlling types of comments are “interpretations,” “reader-responses,” “lessons,” and “explanations” (Straub 99). An interpretation states the gist of the student text, meanwhile a lesson points to an instructional mode as a way to address an issue within the text. For example, in a lesson comment such as “In academic writing, the trick is to express your opinion with authority,” the comment implies that the opinion is not clearly stated and that the student should state his or her opinion more directly (Straub 99).

Through Straub’s study, “Students’ Reactions to Teacher Comments,” it was identified that students respond differently according to the way in which comments are constructed on their papers. According to the study, students were more receptive to global comments on content, purpose, and organization and also on specific sentence level issues. However, students did not respond well to negative comments regarding the content of their papers. Negative comments were perceived as controlling and were not considered for further growth in the student’s writing ability. The results of this study were collected from a forty-question survey given to over one hundred first year writing students. According to Straub, the majority of the students preferred comments that were “specific and elaborate” (102). Longer explanations, such as “Your paper might be clearer if you state, point by point, your opponent’s view, as clearly and objectively as you can. Then you can deal with each of his arguments and show the weaknesses in his

position,” give insight into the perspective of the reader and identify ways in which the issues can be addressed (Straub 102).

Response: Response is the reaction from readers who encounter any text.

Response does not always come from the instructor, although it primarily does within the composition classroom. Response can be given from instructors, tutors, and peers.

Although the response from the instructor is important, other forms of response are also valuable and can assist the student writer in building a relationship with readers. A response to a student text in a classroom can be a comment or a grade. Depending on the draft of the text, the comment will provoke a different reaction from the student. On the student side, a response could be the subsequent editing of a text guided by the direction of the instructor comments. Simply put, response is a reaction to a text, whether it is the student’s or instructor’s text.

At times, response can inspire students to think critically about their work as they incorporate comments from the instructor. When students begin to understand how their edits respond to instructor comments, they will understand the volley of response. Once a student can begin to see his or her work from the perspective of the reader, he or she can begin to view his or her work more objectively. Within my own classes, I try to offer my students different kinds of response. They use peer review, the tutoring center, and feedback from me.

Writing Process: Some students misunderstand the writing process and how a well-crafted paper is formed into a finished product. Writing is a process which requires several steps, such as pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing. Pre-writing, or brainstorming, involves laying down the strategic groundwork necessary to begin actually writing a text. According to Ed White, “[actively engaging] with an assignment before writing begins is immensely valuable; prewriting not only improves the quality of the work...but also trains students in a crucial part of the writing process” (9).

Drafting is the longest and sometimes most confusing of stage as it involves writing the text and editing the text simultaneously. According to Richard Dehardt, “composition research suggests that editing also means changing in the midst of drafting” (81). “What happens in drafting (stage two, usually) and editing (stage three) get presented as separate things,” when they are actually done in both stages (Dehardt 81). Drafting contains more writing and less editing than the editing stage, and editing contains more editing and less writing than the drafting stage. Through practice, students will feel more comfortable with the process and will become more confident writers. Podis and Podis, in “Improving Our Responses to Student Writing: A Process-Oriented Approach,” discuss how drafting difficulties can be deconstructed to show the student’s intention as a way to help students find their intention in their work. Teachers should view issues in writing not as failures, but as “healthy difficulty” towards creation of a finished paper (92). Writing is a process of discovery and the drafting process is only the beginning of the entire process of the creation of the paper.

Although most students would like to believe that their texts are complete after the first draft, “the first draft is only the beginning of the writing process, not the end of it” (White 2). The final and sometimes reoccurring step of the writing process is editing. Editing occurs as a response to feedback; it is correction of a student text. “Editing is the last phase of writing, a matter of tidying up the mechanics so that readers will not be distracted by errors or inconsistencies” (White 41). Editing can be a painful and difficult process which forces the writer to question particular pathways and evidence toward the formulation of a clear argument or goal. Presenting the writing process to students before distributing writing assignments can help students navigate the different steps deliberately and with success.

Revision: Revision is the self-induced and self-imposed practice of change in the text, the act separate from influence of the instructor. Meanwhile, editing is a step in the drafting process and is used to address suggestions in comments. Revision uses large scale changes to adjust the meaning of a text. According to White, “During revision, we move paragraphs about, insert new pages, discard whole chunks of prose, reorganize, and come up with new ideas” (41). Although instructors can suggest to students to make these large scale changes to improve the text similar to editing, students are more likely to make small changes as opposed to larger changes. To make substantial changes to a text, the student must be able to identify issues in the text. A holistic understanding of the text is necessary in order to make what would be considered revisions to a text.

Revision encompasses not only the spur of innovation and inspiration from the self.

Students need to recognize that writing is a process and embrace this process with larger scale changes to the text.

Insight and Recommendations

After I started teaching remedial writing, I realized that my students were having difficult reading my comments on their papers. This was mostly because my students did not know what to do with most of the comments. Unprepared to engage in a conversation about their work through comments, my students silently struggled as I grew frustrated. At that time I did not understand why they were encountering such difficulty with an activity that felt natural to me as the instructor. The language of response, the processes of writing, and the forwarding of ideas were difficult concepts that I needed to instruct my students on before they could engage in response.

During my first semester, I did not teach what comments were or how to do things with them. My students at times grumbled at the comments and felt as if I was personally attacking them and their work. I did not take into account the diverse backgrounds of my students which greatly impacted their base knowledge about writing. The student ages ranged from 17-18 year old students who came straight from high school to 40 year old students who returned to school after being in the work force for many years. Not all students in the class had relevant writing experience prior to walking into class the first day. When I started to discuss with them how I mark papers and write

comments, the process felt less painful to them. My students needed to become more aware of how the writing process works. To my students, the writing process comprised of only one step, drafting. In my composition classes, I required students to engage in all stages of the writing process through small assignments to familiarize them with the multiple stages.

A platform for communication between instructors and students is central before engaging in commenting or editing practices. Knowledge and usage of these terms will enable students to fully engage in the writing process, including how to understand comments. A classroom conversation requires that all parties share a vocabulary. Without the knowledge to understand key principles within the classroom, students will not have the tools necessary to improve their texts. Students need to recognize the difference between editing and revision and the respective benefits. Editing entails small changes to syntax and grammar, while revision entails much larger scale changes to paragraphs and pages in a text. As stated by White, “editing is a humble cousin of revision, though it may sometimes lead to revision” (41). In order for students to engage in the writing process, students not only need to know about the process, but need to be actively using such stages in constructing their texts.

Forwarding: Engaging in Conversations with Students

A workable vocabulary is necessary so that instructors and students can begin to engage in conversations about student texts. The concepts introduced in the previous section can help instructors build a platform to discuss writing more effectively within the classroom. Accessible terms when discussing the objectives within the writing classroom give a platform for instructors and students to discuss comments and revision. Writing is a conversation which engages a writer and a reader. More specifically, within the writing classroom, the conversations instructors initiate with students transfer knowledge to the students. The writing classroom must be a platform for continual discourse regarding writing, and maintaining conversations with students can assist instructors in sustaining discourse. The forwarding techniques provided in Harris' *Rewriting* provide an avenue to investigate the conversations which occur between instructors and students through commenting practices. After establishing a vocabulary, conversation is possible about a student's text.

According to Harris, "academic writing is often described as a kind of conversation" (34). "Forwarding" is engaging in conversation about academic writing. Academic writing "responds" to the ideas of others and is shaped by the stylistics of the genre and subject (Harris 35). The metaphor of academic writing as a conversation highlights the "social aspect of intellectual work," specifically the "ways in which academic writing responds to the texts and ideas of others" (Harris 35). According to Harris, in forwarding a text, a writer can illustrate, authorize, borrow, or extend ideas

presented in a text. The exchange of ideas between writers is a conversation which propels academic writing. As the student forwards the arguments of a text, the student uses the arguments of others in new ways.

Forwarding within the writing classroom is the ability of the reader to understand a text and respond to the text. Understanding and responding to writing in the classroom is similar to the verbal discussions or dialogue which can occur in the classroom. Students, though, are more comfortable engaging in conversation with others via verbal discussion as opposed to textual discussion. Commenting is a type of conversation, similar to the conversation which Harris describes as forwarding. Instructors forward in the classroom by reading and then responding to student texts. As instructors, we try to capture the point of view and argument of the student text and respond to that point of view in our comments. On the other hand, students forward to instructors by responding to the instructor's response to the student text. In that, the edits which students make to their texts with aid from the comments by instructors is an act of forwarding. The student reads the comments given and applies the suggestions to the text. The student's ability to forward in edits and engage in conversations about his or her text rests on the student's awareness of the interactions between instructor and student through the act of forwarding.

The conversations between instructors and students within the classroom about writing can be seen as a volley between two players. For both parties to be able to forward ideas to each other, each needs to meet the needs of the other. In that, the force

used on the ball from one side of the court must not overpower that which is used on the opposite end. The instructor must volley to the student and not over the student, and the student must be able to volley back to the instructor and not fall short. A proper volley reaches both players, however this volley is not possible without practice between the two. At its best, the volley serves the needs of both players, and at its worst the volley is miscalculated. Within this exchange, there must be understanding as where the ball should go and how to get the ball there.

Miscommunication

When the instructor and student forward ideas while engaging in conversation about the student text, miscommunication is possible on both sides and can disrupt the progress of the student text. Every draft passed between an instructor and a student is a conversation which can be interpreted in many ways. Forwarding between the instructor and the student occurs through commenting and editing during the drafting process and miscommunication can disrupt this conversation. Unfortunately, not every conversation that occurs between instructors and students yields the desired response. Instructors can misread student intent, which then makes instructors incapable of forwarding in their comments, and students can misunderstand instructors' comments, which can then make the students incapable of forwarding in their edits. Students can miscommunicate when they are not given the skills needed to forward the responses given on papers by instructors.

Whether the instructor misunderstands the student or the student misunderstands the instructor, miscommunication can derail the progress of the student text. If an instructor responds through his or her reading of the text and not how the student intended the text to be read, the instructor can respond by giving comments in the opposite direction of the student's intent. Alternatively, students can miscommunicate by inappropriately editing the text using comments given by the instructor. This type of miscommunication can occur when students do not know how to engage in conversations about their work.

Commenting is not in itself a learning lesson for the student if comments are not discussed during class time. We need to make sure that the comments we forward to our students are accessible to them. As Elizabeth Hodges suggests in "Negotiating the Margins," by allowing students to know how teachers read students' papers, the mysterious ways in which teachers comment on papers will become more accessible to students so that they will be able to evaluate their own writing more critically. More specifically, Hodges points out that instructors try to have conversations with their students through comments, but these are conversations that "their students never engage or become engaged in" (77). While investigating the conversations in the margins, Hodges notes that the conversations in the margins most often "misfire" (78). She sees "teachers fail, in myriad ways, to articulate what they observe in their students' work so that their students can understand and respond... Students ignore important messages in our feedback, sometimes because teachers have framed these messages so that they seem idiosyncratic, matters of personal choice" (78). According to Hodges, in order for the

students to join the conversation in negotiating the meaning of their texts, they need to have tools in order to understand the comments left by readers. Demonstrating how we read and respond, teachers should take time to help students incorporate our answers to prevent misfires in these crucial conversations (Hodges 84-5).

The miscommunication between what teachers intend to share with students through comments and how students interpret those comments is the reason why comments may lack the power to positively impact student papers. Although this may seem obvious, the solution to solving this issue may not be so obvious. Unveiling the act of commenting by introducing strategies which can help students forward the advice offered by comments is one way to address miscommunication. Unfortunately, if students are not given the skills to understand comments, student work cannot progress. Simply, students need to be instructed in how to read instructor comments and be given tools which can help them edit their work given the suggestions in the comments. Instruction about comments should be built on a foundation within classroom instruction.

If instructors are aware of students' difficulties interpreting comments, instructors should tackle those difficulties during class time. At times, the miscommunication can occur because of over commenting or complicated vocabulary. Ziv discovered that students were more receptive to explicit cues on both a conceptual and sentential level, "specific suggestions about how they could strengthen or reorganize the ideas they had already formulated in their papers" (18). Implicit cues, questioning "the participants about the ideas they had presented or suggested alternative direction for them to pursue," helped the participants in Ziv's study discover their direction in their work (18).

However, Ziv notes that if participants already had a direction in mind for their work, implicit cues “were not effective in helping them to make major conceptual changes in their papers” (18). As for implicit sentential cues, students failed to adequately improve texts in response to comments such as “Can you rephrase this?” and “Rewrite this sentence” (18). Ziv notes that the students either deleted the sentences in question or attempted to correct them, only making the rewrite more awkward and wordy than the preceding sentence. Following Ziv’s findings, beginning writers should be more supported in the revision process or be given explicit cues on sentential level issues. On this note, the miscommunication between the teacher and student occurs due to the teacher’s inability to properly engage the student in a productive conversation through the comments. Because the student does not understand the meaning behind comments such as “awkward working,” the message given by the instructor is misunderstood. Although some students are able to revise their work given this response, not all are.

While commenting, the instructor forwards the student’s text by responding to the text. Once the instructor returns text with comments, the student needs to know how to forward the comments to improve, not to simply spot fix, the text. Students need to be given tools within composition courses so that they can best address issues present in earlier drafts identified through comments.

Talking Over the Student: Taking Over the Paper

When instructors and students volley back and forth on a text, the instructor needs to not overpower the student. In that, instructors should volley to the student and not

over his or her head. The exchange between the instructor and student needs to be accessible to the student and it also needs to not take over the direction of the volley. To learn how to communicate effectively, the teacher and student need to learn how to participate together to understand each other. The teacher needs to understand what the student is saying without being overly critical, and the student needs the tools to decipher advice from the teacher to improve the text.

Forwarding is the dialogue of response; it is not a one-sided conversation in which the instructor speaks and the student merely listens. The instructor forwards by commenting on a student paper, and the student forwards by making appropriate adjustments to the paper after understanding the comments. For students to build, establish, and assume control over their writing, they must first feel a sense of agency to write confidently as if what they have to say is worth saying. Otherwise, they will lack ambition to continue improving their writing.

Several issues come to light when teachers take control in dictating the direction of student texts. One of these issues is the role of the instructor as the primary facilitator of editing. Simply spot fixing papers in response to instructor's comments is not an act of forwarding. Students who participated in Dohrer's study, in which he analyzed the effect of comments on students' succeeding papers, failed to demonstrate ownership over their work and ideas. According to Dohrer, the teachers maintained authority over the papers studied (53). On top of students feeling "fearful of inserting" their own ideas, some remarked that they did not feel comfortable with their own ability to revise (53).

As Dohrer explains, “Believing themselves incapable of determining what was worth retaining and what should be eliminated from their texts, they overworked their papers when revising on their own. Therefore, they came to rely on teachers’ comments to determine what was needed for correcting their work” (53). Reactions from students such as “I disagree, but he’s grading the paper,” as Dohrer notes, strongly suggest that the students were “consciously revis[ing] to obtain higher grades on their papers through meeting teachers’ expectations” (51). In an effort to combat the perception of the teacher as the ultimate authority in the writing classroom, Dohrer suggests that teachers need to discuss writing with students to establish a “mutually agreed upon and understood value system” (53). Along with discussing writing, “teachers need to seek ways to separate [themselves] from evaluation during the process of writing and the feedback they offer students,” and according to Dohrer, peer response is one way to accomplish this (54).

Within my classes my students often deferred to my advice rather than relying on their own judgment. When my students placed more importance on my words than their own, they were not forwarding my advice. At times when I have offered students an alternative perspective to consider in the creation of their own arguments, the students took my alternative perspective in lieu of the one in which they were originally working on. Although it never was my intention to take control of the student work, students fell back on my words because I was the teacher, not because my argument fit within their own argument. It can take students years to feel confident with their ideas, especially when their ideas are commented on by the instructor.

Students fail to understand how to forward, and they also fail to understand the actual comments we write on their papers. Miscommunication can block any productive conversation between instructors and students by preventing the student from understanding the messages which the instructors send. Classroom discussions can bridge the gap between what the instructor writes and what the student understands. To begin ensuring that students learn how to forward the comments we give them, we need to go beyond just writing the comments and begin talking about the comments during class time. Comments cannot solve issues of misunderstanding comments; in that, in order for students who struggle to understand comments and the act of forwarding the comments to learn, those students need to be taught the skills necessary to do so. For example, at times when I returned papers to my students at the end of class, the majority of students shoved the papers into their bags and left for the day. Most of my students walked out the door and reviewed the comments later, and the students often encountered difficulty while doing so. When the students sat down to construct a new draft of the text, they then began to read the comments. It was at this point, away from the class, that the student began to read through the comments and tried to make necessary changes to the text. If the student at that moment did not understand a comment, he or she was not able to receive the support that could have helped to understand what the comment was suggesting.

Countering: Moving Beyond the Written Comment

Beyond identifying how important forwarding is within the classroom, instructors should push to find new ways to help students learn how to forward in their papers.

“Countering,” as Harris describes, is an outlet to investigating new techniques.

According to Harris, countering develops “a new line of thinking in response to the limits of other texts” (57). As opposed to forwarding where the writer tries to connect ideas to others’ texts, countering seeks to connect less to the ideas of others and more to “separate” them; as explained by Harris, “forwarding aligns; countering individuates” (57). Countering does not just identify disagreement, instead countering “argues the other side,” “uncovers values,” and “dissents” (57). In countering current practices in commenting, the best approach is to “uncover values” hidden within different instructional techniques within the writing classroom. In other words, instructional models geared toward different learning outcomes can be reworked to help teach students how to do things with comments.

For teachers to properly instruct students on how to improve their writing, less focus is needed in evaluating what teachers write and more attention needs to be paid toward what happens after the comments are created. It is just as unfair to penalize students who do not know how to forward comments as it is to penalize students for a test for which they have not been given the material. Students should be taught how to use comments as they are taught how to analyze works of literature. Students need to engage

in a conversation about their own texts similar to how they engage with other texts through academic discourse.

While teaching composition at a community college, it became evident that my students were not inclined to ask about the mysterious marks on their papers. I wanted to give my students transferable skills that can be used within any classroom, but I also wanted to help them become more independent writers and thinkers. This motivated me to change my style of teaching writing so that my students could walk away with more than just completed papers but transferable skills which they can carry through the rest of their college careers. I ask myself, “Can comments make a difference?” Yes, if the classroom and the comments are not separated; the classroom must be the place where instructors teach the students about comments.

When evaluating the quality of teacher comments on student papers, teachers should be concerned with the overall effectiveness of the comments. According to Fife and O’Neill, a “problem with recent response studies is the tendency to view comments from the researcher's perspective alone, analyzing the comments as text apart from the classroom context that gave rise to them” (301). When Fife and O’Neill began their own research they found “an impressive body of literature on responding to student writing and many research studies about teacher commentary; however, [they] soon realized that most of the work provided textual analysis of comments with little information about how the comments functioned as part of the class” (301). The real conversation, a conversation between instructors and students about comments which can propel student abilities, that Fife and O’Neill suggest has yet to occur but this could be due to the

inability to synthesize multiple techniques which together can produce fruitful outcomes toward overall improvement of student learning. Fife and O'Neill urge the use of more reflective writing practices for the student which will spark true discussions by students beginning the conversations about their own work. In order to counter techniques of commenting practices, strategies which include little to no written comments from instructors can improve student writing.

Separating the Assignments

Responding to student work can take many forms, including private conferences between student and teacher, written comments in the margins or at the end of a paper, reactions from small group conferences with peers, suggestions provided by revision guides, or audio-recorded commentaries. After written commentary has been provided to the student, it is up to the student to interpret the commentary. The student can either take the commentary into consideration or ignore it in frustration. Similar to other subjects, such art, dance, or even math, English needs to be taught through applying the material and supported practice. Writing students also need practice and increased opportunities to hone the skills which they are learning so that they can know how to use comments to improve their written work. The more opportunities students have to build on revision methods, the more successful students will be later on without the guidance of the instructor. Students need to learn how to take the conversations they have with instructors and use them to improve their texts.

One way to teach students to use comments effectively is to separate assignments over time. Assignments which encourage the use of multiple drafts or utilize smaller writing assignments that together create a larger project separate the stages of writing. By separating assignments into smaller projects or through drafts, instructors increase the incidence of instructor-student communication about the student text. According to Herrington, these checks along the way help the student feel connected with the teacher through guided research and writing. With the final draft of the paper, Herrington advises that students include a cover note which teachers can use in their response to student papers. The teacher through this technique is present at every stage, but not a driving force; the teacher acts as a bumper to help guide the student along the journey. Similar to bumper bowling, the student will still have to propel the writing through force, but the instructor will ensure the student reaches the end goal by giving support along the way. Writing teachers need to guide students on how to improve their writing through comments.

Students need to know several things before making necessary changes to their papers from the suggestions given by the teacher. Students need to know how to interpret the markings in order to responsibly respond to the instructors' suggestions through editing. Instructors who give only two or three high stakes assignments to give feedback do not give students enough exposure to commenting. If practice leads to mastery, students need to be provided ample practice in order to master the conversations borne from comments. Through the writing process, smaller assignments should be

constructed to help the instructor guide the student through any issues the student may be encountering.

In my classes, before my students created their essays out of all their paragraphs, they received feedback multiple times on their work. I know where they are on their progress, and they become more familiar with the act of editing. These checks along the way help the student feel connected to the teacher. The teacher should be present at every stage of the writing process to help guide the student. Writing in small steps to aid instruction increases the opportunities for intervention and commenting practice, but these small steps also build student confidence. Together, all these techniques are crucial to establishing the kind of teaching that “fosters engaged, inquiry-based learning” (Herrington 67). This type of learning should be focused enough so that students has workable boundaries and restrictions, but yet open enough so that students can explore their own interests and angles.

Writing Conferences

Students cannot learn how we read student texts without us explaining our methods to them. If students could understand our how we read text without discussion, then students would understand our evaluations, identify the problems, and then revise their texts. However, students do not possess the tools to address issues in their writing when they enter our classrooms. In “Showing Students How to Assess,” Beach recognizes the need to teach students skills which will help them in becoming confident, effective writers, and he identifies the writing conference as a great opportunity to teach

self-assessment. The conference is a tool, similar to commenting practices, which can be used as a venue for conversations between teachers and students about the course. The writing conference gives students the ability to practice techniques with the guidance of the teacher to help when needed. Depending on the length of the conference, the conference can become more of a workshop which enables students to assess their struggles as opposed to the teacher telling the student how to fix it what is wrong with the paper. Weaning students from the instructor-centered evaluation of their work is no small feat; however, such a transition is possible with careful construction of writing conferences and workshops.

Writing conferences can be between just the instructor and student or it can involve more students to be more of a workshop. The workshop conferences can address more student issues at once and still provide each student with more individualized assistance on work. Although one-on-one instruction with the student would help improve student writing, it is not always possible within the scope of a class. Small-group writing conferences could help fill supplement instruction by giving students more personalized attention. According to Thomas and Thomas, small-group conferences help to break the isolation associated with writing. Thomas and Thomas recommend that writing teachers apply the principles of Rogerian Reflection in responding to student writing. In teaching the principles of Rogerian Reflection, students will be able to function in groups to respond to peers' work. Small-group conferences can make

students consciously aware of their audience and can help students conceptualize the relationship between themselves, their text, and the reader (120).

Students in the writing conference also have the benefit of gaining more readers. Students in this conference act as both writers and readers, occupying both roles, which helps them recognize the importance of the reader in creation of their work. I have used this model within my classes and my students responded well to this type of instruction. Some students felt uncomfortable having their work discussed by others, so starting the workshop with an open discussion of writer concerns helped to ease anxieties as each student understood that his or her concerns may have been the same as others in the group.

Taking an Approach: Moving Toward a Mastery Model

Through “taking an approach,” writers should be able to apply other texts and frameworks to support their arguments and ideas. According to Harris, taking an approach is using the framework provided by another text to make an argument (74). When ideas are combined to create a different perspective, the new perspective propels discussion instead of simply restating old ideas. While taking an approach, writers should “adapt” and not “adopt” the viewpoints of others, using the insight of others to propel their arguments and ideas (74). Taking an approach to commenting practices uses the framework of commenting practices and previous research to create a new plan of

action for composition courses. Because of the separation between where comments are composed and where students interpret them, a new method which lifts the veil of mystery for students surrounding comments is necessary. A mastery model, or studio model, shows students how instructors comment on student writing. By giving students an insight into how instructors comment and what instructors look for in revisions, students can arm themselves with self-reflective questions to use to improve their writing.

Creating a Criterion

One of the first steps to taking an approach in the composition classroom is providing a clear criterion for assignments so that students are aware of the expectations of the assignment before they begin working. Students should be included in setting the criterion for essays in their course. Including students in creating the criterion gives them an insight into what their instructors will look for when reading their work and it will give students a voice in the classroom. This is not an activity which allows students to take the reins in the course, but instead it includes students in the justification for specific guidelines. Reading though a sample student essay and assessing its strengths and weaknesses, followed by discussion of criteria to help avoid the weaknesses, gives students both a voice in assessment and a clearer perspective on the assessment. By altering the atmosphere of the writing classroom into a studio setting where guided moves with the teacher are paired with individual help if necessary, a new environment mutually beneficial to teachers and students can be formed. The students need to see the

instructor show his or her craft and the instructor needs to give much needed insight into the art of commenting and assessment. Often we forget as instructors that it is the reciprocal relationships which we build with our students which make us effective.

Teachers and students should be aware of the criterion to help keep consistency within the classroom; all parties understand the expectations of the assignment and are therefore able to meet those expectations.

Making criterion will help the student meet expectations. Students will know what is expected of them while they are working on their text. When instructors grade with criterion created with the students, students will understand the expectations placed on their work and will be able to assess their work. When actually reading and assessing the completed product, Newkirk suggests defining a set criterion for the papers and read for one type of issue at time, because reading for a multitude of issues leads to little help on any issues. Coming armed with questions for investigating student papers helps create workable material to present at a writing conference with the student. Making a plan and sticking to it will also help the student understand expectations and may view the issues present in the writing as more manageable and therefore lends it toward changing student writing. In doing so, the student begins the act of assessment before the instructor begins the conversation about the student text. Students can check to see if they have completed what has been asked of them through reviewing the criterion. Interactive techniques such as creating criterion with the students should be incorporated into the teaching of writing because the techniques give the students a tool to apply to their own writing.

Addressing Grammar

The issue of unclear assessment within the classroom is not the only problem present within the composition classroom. Too often students fail to direct enough attention towards the structure of their sentences, grammatical devices, and form. Although a student's argument within a paper is important, it is also important for the student to be able to use prescriptive grammatical rules effectively. I have found that teaching grammar is difficult as most lessons which target grammar are not applied directly to student work. Without direct application to student work, students are unable to internalize and practice identifying patterns of errors present in their writing.

Drost offers a unique approach to force students to become more active in identifying grammatical errors and reduce the frequency of occurrence in their papers. A method called error analysis is designed to help students identify and fix errors in their own writing because most students are able to find fragments and subject/verb agreement issues on dittos and quizzes but fail to apply such techniques to their own writing. In error analysis, students explain in their own words the errors in their papers, correct the error, and then find a similar correct sentence in their papers (Drost 57). Error analysis, according to Drost, proved to be more effective in improving student writing than incorporating more writing assignments. Between drafts, students are required to review and research their mistakes and write reflective explanations as to how the error occurred in the text. The analysis of the errors would be collected with the following draft. Although time consuming in the beginning, the time grading essays will begin to

decrease as students become more aware of issues before handing in their papers. The incentive for students to assess their writing more carefully lies in the decrease of work associated with fewer error analysis assignments. As students have fewer errors, time spent on writing error analysis reflections also decreases. Error analysis helps to increase student self-assessment, and allows the student to identify grammatical issues independently of the instructor (Drost 59).

Student Self-Assessment

Error analysis is only one way to encourage self-assessment in the writing classroom. Self-assessment should be encouraged on each draft of a paper. If students are given a set of three questions to assess their work, the instructor can respond to those reflections in individualized responses. A simple plus, minus, delta (one strength, one weakness, and one thing that can be changed) is a great way to introduce self-assessment. The assessment should focus on positive and negative aspects of the text and should help the student plan how to make the text stronger. Instead of the teacher commenting on sentence errors, subject/verb agreements, cohesiveness, correctness, and structure, the reflective response gives the teacher some concerns to address. The personalization of the comments helps the student feel connected to the content of the writing. Student self-assessment is most productive during the drafting process and can be used to begin the conversation about the student's text. Shadiow, frustrated with the ineffectiveness of writing stray comments on student papers, switched her mode of attack to student papers by requiring students to reflect on their own papers before handing them in for grading.

Because she had too many student papers, Shadiow could not use one-on-one conferencing as much as she wanted. However, she developed four questions students responded to before turning in their papers. The four questions gave students an opportunity to develop a “‘teacher sense’ about their papers” (66). Shadiow’s self-evaluation questionnaires forced her students to focus closely on their texts, to assess goals, and to question the effectiveness of their texts. Asking students to read their texts from the perspective of the reader helps to create a distance between themselves and their texts and makes assessment easier through practice.

Revising: Sustainable Instruction through Mastery

According to Harris, “revising” is the critical assessment of one’s text.

Rethinking what has been said to strengthen the argument is crucial to transforming a text between drafts. The act of revising calls into action the previous steps which Harris outlines-- coming to terms, forwarding, countering, and taking an approach--and applies them not in the discussion of other texts but toward the writer’s own text. Revising can be one of the most difficult steps in the creation of a more finalized text. Harris suggests that student difficulty in understanding revision may be due to lack of practice with such acts during high school. Harris states that some students have been trained “in how to find and fix mistakes, and perhaps even...respond to specific questions...posed by the

teacher...but their final drafts are essentially the same as their first ones” (103). Often times these students have been “taught how to edit but not how to revise” (Harris 103).

Through changing the way we facilitate classroom discussion on comments, we enable students to engage more effectively in conversations and to reflect on their work. Engagement, reflection, and practice will eventually lead to the student’s ability to revise his or her work independently. Revision is the independent act of changing one’s text through reflection and review. We want to enable our students to eventually become self-assessors who keep in mind the needs of their readers. When students are given the tools to assess their work and engage in productive conversations about their work, they will be able to engage in conversations which change the dynamic of the writing classroom. In order to introduce these skills, a studio or mastery model can be used to teach the skills necessary for students to become engaged and empowered writers. Chris Anson, in “Reflective Reading: Developing Thoughtful Ways to Respond to Students' Writing,” reflects on the commenting and grading practices of teachers and suggests that reflective analysis of commenting should start with the instructor. The modeling of the teacher’s practices will enable our students to think critically in order to use reflective analysis on their work. In what he calls “authentic workshops,” Anson suggests that instructors should develop response workshops. During these workshops, teachers bring in actual samples of students’ writing from a class and use the sample to write formative and summative evaluative comments (317). Students need to be explicitly taught how to do things with comments if they are expected to do something

with them after instructors write them. These authentic workshops call into play many different facets of the writing classroom, including “the student assignment, curriculum, preceding classroom work and school” (Anson 317). According to Anson, the workshops can “help us to talk about and analyze our methods for responses and evaluation” (317). The workshops which Anson endorses is the basis of a mastery model, a workshop created with students to expose the way in which instructors do things with student texts and how students can improve their texts through response.

A mastery model unveils the way in which instructors comment on student writing and empowers students to do the same to their own work. Most importantly, though, the lessons about commenting, editing, and responding should be done through demonstrations provided by the instructor. Simply talking about the issues which prevent papers from reaching their full potential does not make the same impact as showing students how to identify issues highlighted by comments. Instructors should focus on why comments occur where they do on texts. Reviewing sample or real student texts together is the first step. Going through the text paragraph by paragraph, I first allow my students opportunities to find weak points in the argument presented in the text. After giving my students the floor to speak about the text, I then go through the text on an overhead and go line by line to assess each sentence. First, we address large order issues such as the main argument, evidence, and order of ideas, and then we revisit the text to address any sentence level concerns such as grammatical errors or unclear statements. By instructors presenting the assessment of a text as objective, students begin to realize

that the assessments which instructors give are more objective and less personal than they had at first believed.

The mastery model strategy teaches the students how to assess their work independently and how to address issues presented by the comments of others. Calling attention to the ways in which teachers interact with student texts enables students to mirror those actions to interact with their own texts more productively. Thus far, the large majority of the research has been focused on how teachers write comments and how students interpret those comments. Refocusing the energy in the course less on what style we use to write comments and more on helping students learn how to do things with our comments will help students.

Conclusion

Adjusting classrooms to be more focused on the students benefits the students because the adjustment creates a more sustainable type of writing instruction. The classroom becomes sustainable as it is fueled by the invention of the students and not solely by the advice from the instructor. When students take control over their own texts, they will continue to make progress with or without a teacher present. The benefit of instructing students in a way which prepares them to become independent writers is that they begin to see their work through a holistic point of view. Students should be able to see how their work interacts with readers and recognize how such relations need to be

acknowledged in order to improve the text. When students can see their text from the perspective of the reader, they are more able to assess and then strengthen their work independently. This should be our end goal, preparing the students for when we are not there to correct their work and giving them transferable skills in writing which can help them in the future.

We need to imagine our students' work after they have left our classroom and imagine what acquired skills they are taking with them. We will not always be with our students and the biggest impact we can have is to help build productive writing habits, and revision is a crucial step to improving student writing. Changing the structure of the classroom makes the difference between coddling dependent students and preparing students to become independent writers.

Making the transition to using more sustainable learning moments for students through integrated editing practices can be a difficult switch for some teachers as it may require more work upfront. I have made such changes in my own composition classes and have already started to see a change in my students' abilities to revise their work. Although seeing large scale change in the matter of a fifteen week course is unlikely, students should be given the basic skills which they can refine later. The most important factors in improving student writing in the long term are the way in which the assignments are structured, the pattern of revision, and the communication between students and teachers. Before handing out any writing assignments, teachers should begin the conversation regarding criterion, commenting, and the writing process with students.

Starting with an open dialogue in the beginning of the course leaves the lines of communication open for students who later may have questions or concerns. Students should be introduced as to how each stage of the writing process relates to the totality of their papers. Also, large writing assignments should be broken down into smaller assignments. The smaller assignments allow students to interact more frequently with the instructor in the creation of the final work. Within the smaller assignments, reflective responses encourage students to focus more closely with their work. On final drafts, instructors can use error analysis to encourage students to review finished work to decrease the occurrence of grammatical errors in upcoming papers. Creating criterion for assignments and essays with the students, including their decisions in the process of editing will help clarify misunderstandings of guidelines and it will also help in building the students' ability to identify productive strategies in writing. All these techniques together can help to create a sustainable classroom that uses more than just commenting practices to build student confidence or ability.

Changes in any course must be built into its structure, starting with how the syllabus is designed and the way in which revision is discussed. Revision needs to be at the forefront of writing instruction. Building revision practice and strategies into the course will enable the instructor to spend less time grading essays and more time preparing organized lessons which teach students transferable skills. Separating drafts, including self-assessment questions, discussing revision in the classroom, and giving grammar exercises geared toward the student's own work such as error analysis begin to

help the students build good habits in revision. These habits can be used toward any course of study in the students' education and afterward.

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