WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM NEWSLETTER

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BMCC

ISSUE THEME: **FEEDBACK**

This WAC newsletter focuses on the subject of _feedback_: How do students perceive the feedback we as teachers of writing give them? Do students _even read_ the feedback we give? How do we educators understand the role of feedback in our writing pedagogy? What are different approaches and theories? These are the questions this issue pursues!

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HOW TO GET STUDENTS TO READ YOUR COMMENTS

BY DANIELA CASTILLO

In my experience as a Graduate Teaching Fellow and an adjunct across various CUNY Colleges, I have faced the challenge that many other instructors and faculty have faced, too: having students read the comments on their writing assignments. Whether one is teaching Fundamentals of Journalism, Abnormal Psychology, or Linear Algebra, when students receive their papers back, they crave feedback in the shape of a numeric value or letter grade. Instructors' carefully crafted comments and suggestions on how to improve a writing piece are frequently ignored. This issue is rooted in how the education system has conditioned students to be motivated to score high grades at the expense of meaningful learning, which has resulted in students only knowing how to care for a grade. How can instructors, then, turn this futile behavior into a meaningful and learning experience? Below I discuss three strategies that will have students engage with feedback:

Strategy I: Return Papers with Feedback (But No Grade!)

By giving back an ungraded paper first and a grade later, students are more likely to be paying attention to feedback, and it is also more probable that they reread their papers. An instructor may ask students to write answers for each feedback point, explaining how they would improve their paper, thus allowing students to process the comments in a proactive way without having to resubmit the assignment. By delaying the grade, instructors can help break the grade-driven satisfaction habit and inspire students to see the learning value of feedback.

Strategy II: Two-Stage Assignments

In the spirit of encouraging revision and providing scaffolding, some courses may incorporate two-stage assignments that call for a first ungraded attempt that receives comments and allow students to improve the quality of their writing. Feedback may be paired with a descriptive rating (e..g, poor, fair, satisfactory) which will give the student a sense of where their writing stands. Because the second submission must reflect the suggested changes, students are given the opportunity to continue developing their ideas and arguments while also revising their own writing.

Strategy III

Recently, I have opted for a technique that works well with repeated assignments that follow a specific template such as article summaries for experimental-based courses in Psychology or research/performance reports in Business courses. Considering that students will have to submit the same assignment type multiple times during the semester, the grading on later submissions can depend on whether the students have implemented the feedback given on earlier submissions. That way, students have a purpose for reading the instructor's responses and a reason to implement the suggestions in future assignments. Breaking the grade-priority cycle in either end of the teaching-learning spectrum can certainly be challenging. Starting small, with medium- or even low-stakes writing assignments may be less daunting for students in that it will help them get accustomed to the process of interpreting and responding to comments, until eventually they embrace the surpassing value of feedback.

BY DANIELA CASTILLO

TWO COMMENTS ON STUDENT COMMENTING
BY ALEX MENDEZ

As a PhD student and someone who, compared to more senior faculty, is relatively new at teaching, I've been given the opportunity as a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Fellow to reflect on some of my pedagogical practices. I have been a WAC fellow for the past two years at BMCC, and I've used the time in order to reflect, and even break, some of my intuitions about instruction in higher education. In this short reflection, I'll be writing about certain presuppositions, and accepted practices, of commenting on student writing. Through this reflection I hope to motivate all of us to think about why we comment on student work, and how we can employ it strategically in order to motivate learning goals.

- **Sommers** (1982) writes, "We have observed an overwhelming similarity in the generalities and abstract commands given to students. There seems to be among teachers an accepted, albeit unwritten canon for commenting on student texts. This uniform code of commands, requests, and pleadings demonstrates that the teacher holds a license for vagueness while the student is commanded to be specific" (153).

I think about this quote when commenting on my own students' work. I get flashbacks to my undergraduate career where I often saw comments in the margins of my paper that read "unclear," "irrelevant detail," "okay, but how?" It was frustrating—what was unclear? How do you decipher relevant from irrelevant details? The paradoxical demands that Sommers points out is a prevalent one—instructors believe that efficiency, clarity, and organization are virtues of good writing, and yet in our attempt to communicate these ideas, we subsequently undermine ourselves by doing quite the opposite. I believe it's important to remember that the clearer we are in requesting what we want from our students via their writing, the more attentive they will be in trying to answer this request. One way to easily diffuse this worry is to simply remind oneself to be specific—and this might be done by drawing a student's attention to certain aspects of their writing. Why is a paragraph unclear? Is it the lack of transition sentences? Does their topic sentence not conform to the content of the body paragraph? Prompting students in a way that directly engages with their work will facilitate a deeper understanding of not only the nature of your comments, but also the unique ways in which they can resolve your concerns.

- **Bean** (1996) writes, "From a teacher's standpoint, commenting to prompt revision, as opposed to justifying a grade or pointing out errors, may also change one's whole orientation toward reading student writing... You begin looking for the promise of a draft rather than its mistakes. You begin seeing yourself as responding to rather than correcting a set of papers" (322).

Here, Bean expresses a practice that I believe is reinforced by our conception of revision and student expectations. A few weeks ago, I gave comments on an assignment that I sequenced (i.e., I assigned the same assignment over the course of the semester to have students build upon particular skills). The student came to me after class and asked what their grade was. I reassured them, pointed to the syllabus, and explained that if the work was completed and of sufficient quality, they received full credit; I included comments on their work so they could improve the quality of their next assignment. There was a pause and the student asked, "Okay, but what's my letter grade." Students have been socialized into believing that comments exist to justify their grade. It's not uncommon to flip toward the back of an essay and read something like the following: "You lack logical structure, and the organization of the ideas hindered the meaning of the text—B+." I find instructors often do this, in part, to clarify for themselves the basis for assigning a letter grade (a perfectly reasonable and fair practice). However, Bean encourages us to reorient our thinking about commenting, seeing it as a tool to promote student learning, rather than one which simply functions as a heuristic for assigning grades. Commenting on papers earlier in the writing process will aid in drawing out the potential of a student's work. What this means is that faculty can design assignments which allow students to improve or build upon their work in light of comments over the course of the semester and cultivate a sense of academic progress. Ultimately, the writing process between student and teacher is a unique form of dialogical communication, and Bean captures a very important sentiment: that commenting, revision, and student learning happen not because students learn from mistakes outlined by red ink, but rather by the expertise of instructors who guide them there.

1. Sommers, Nancy. (1982). "Responding to Student Writing." *College and Communication*, 33(2), 148-156.
2. Bean, John C. (2011). Engaging Ideas: *The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. John Wiley & Sons.

BY ALEX MENDEZ

WHAT DO THE STUDENTS THINK?

SURVEY BY DANIEL PISARI

How do students feel about the feedback they receive? I posted a survey for BMCC students in student-run social media communities on Discord, Reddit, and Facebook to get a look into their perceptions of instructor and peer comments about their writing. Seven anonymous students responded to Likert-type items in which they rated their writing self-efficacy and strategy use, experiences with instructor feedback, and the perceived usefulness of a variety of comment forms and content. Across the responses from this small sample of BMCC students, the emergence of the following themes may be worth further thought:

Perceptions of Utility

Of the students surveyed, those who indicated they were more likely to incorporate instructors' feedback to improve their next writing assignment also reported a preference to receive suggestions for specific edits to improve their writing—but did not necessarily show any preference for specificity when those comments were about spelling, grammar, or formatting. Students may be likely to find it unhelpful when comments are **(1)** too general, **(2)** offering no guidance for improvement, **(3)** perceived by students as too negative, or **(4)** seen as unrelated to the criteria used for assessment (e.g., Weaver, 2006).

Peer Feedback

Though most students who took this survey said they do not regularly critique their own writing, those few who reported frequently drafting and revising their own work prior to submission also found peer feedback less helpful. Could some of the benefits of peer feedback overlap with those of self-critique for these students? Both student and instructor comments can be useful. Students often use more praise and downplay critique, while instructors may be more likely to identify problems previously unknown to the author (Patchan et al., 2009). Critiquing their own work may also be as beneficial to student writing as receiving feedback from peers and instructors (Stellmack et al., 2012).
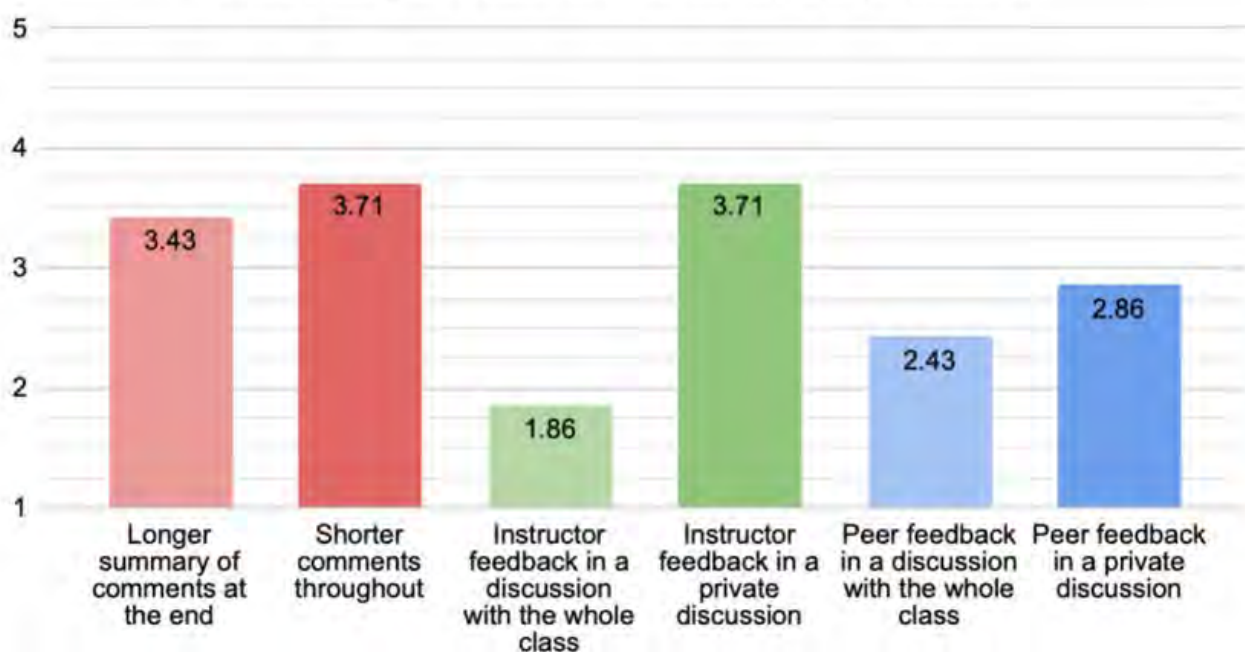
General Preferences

The group of students surveyed showed a consistent preference for instructor (vs. peer) feedback, private (vs. group) discussions, and written (vs. verbal) comments—more specifically, they showed preference for shorter comments throughout (vs. a longer summary of comments at the end).

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Many studies have similarly shown students' general preference for written comments, but note students also highly value verbal feedback (e.g., Ferguson, 2011). While any singular preference would not dismiss the value of variety (or even the efficacy of non-preferred options), general awareness of students' preferences may help instructors choose an effective approach to reach students based on their prior experiences with feedback.

While this specific survey sample is much too small to generalize these perspectives to all BMCC students, classroom discussions with students about preferences and the perceived utility of different kinds of comments could positively inform instructors' feedback strategies. Further investigation with a representative sample of BMCC students' reactions, preferences, and strategies when it comes to interacting with feedback may help better direct faculty to make the kinds of comments that students value.

Students' Perceived Utility of Comment Characteristics
Average rating on a scale of 1 (not useful) to 5 (very useful)

- Longer summary of comments at the end: 3.43
- Shorter comments throughout: 3.71
- Instructor feedback in a discussion with the whole class: 1.86
- Instructor feedback in a private discussion: 3.71
- Peer feedback in a discussion with the whole class: 2.43
- Peer feedback in a private discussion: 2.86

- Ferguson, P. (2011). Student perceptions of quality feedback in teacher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(1), 51–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930903197883
- Patchan, M. M., Charney, D., & Schunn, C. D. (2009). A validation study of students' end comments: Comparing comments by students, a writing instructor, and a content instructor. *Journal of Writing Research*, 1(2), 124–152. https://doi.org/10.17239/jowr-2009.01.02.2
- Stellmack, M. A., Keenan, N. K., Sandidge, R. R., Sippl, A. L., & Konheim-Kalkstein, Y. L. (2012). Review, revise, and resubmit. *Teaching of Psychology*, 39(4), 235–244. https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628312456589
- Weaver, M. R. (2006). Do students value feedback? student perceptions of tutors' written responses. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(3), 379–394. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930500353061

BY DANIEL PISARI

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AND WHAT DO THE FACULTY THINK?

INTERVIEWS BY JACKIE EDWARDS

We asked BMCC Writing Intensive faculty to share their experiences and advice about responding to student work and encouraging revision. Interviews were conducted over email and are edited here for length.

Faculty include:

- Holly Messitt (**HM**), Associate Professor, English
- Yan Yang (**YY**), Assistant Professor (Art History), Music and Art
- Laura Kujo (**LK**), Adjunct Instructor, Teacher Education

1. *What are the biggest challenges you face in providing feedback and encouraging revision? What are your most successful strategies?*

- **HM**: One of the biggest challenges is getting students to do the scaffolded assignments on time. Then when they do get the assignments done on time, another challenge is to get them to understand that the earlier assignments feed into the larger assignment. They tend to silo off their assignments, so I have to keep reminding them how the overall structure fits together.

- **YY**: Sometimes a student doesn't flesh out their argument when they turn in the first draft. This poses a hurdle to the quality of my feedback; however, when it happens, I use my experience to list things the student should watch out for in a "checklist of frequently committed writing mistakes" to guide the student in their revision. I also ask the students to check their papers to see if they have answered "Why should I spend time reading this? What's the major takeaway point I should know after reading this?"

- **LK**: My primary challenge in providing feedback is time management - time to revise, time to talk with students, pacing the assignments that follow so that they can incorporate the feedback and guidance in their follow up. The most successful strategy that I have learned is to read, revise, consult + recap - the final step in the cycle. I will write a list on the board in class of themes that emerged once essays are revised - strengths and areas for development, across the class. I find that this bookends each revision cycle in an informal but meaningful way. That aspect of it emerged organically, as the level of revision in any course could potentially feel oddly isolated/isolating as an instructor, and I wanted it to be a collective, positive process. I am so very grateful that WAC supported my capacity to perceive and implement revision in this way.

2. How do you provide feedback on your students' writing? Why is this your preferred method or form?

- **HM**: My goal is to make mostly developmental comments within the document using the Comments feature and then to include a summary comment at the end, which may include notes about grammatical issues occurring within the essay, and the grade. I also include a rubric explaining the qualities of each grade level A-F.
- **YY**: I do it in the text box on Blackboard if a PDF is uploaded. For Word documents, I do track changes in the file itself. It is easier for the students to see comments to specific sections by using track changes.
- **LK**: In my ECE 211 course, feedback on students' writing is provided primarily in hardcopy printouts, with some use of track changes and grading notes on Blackboard. I find that students are uniquely accountable when they are submitting work in hardcopy - as opposed to being able to email it or post it on Blackboard - so in that respect it scaffolds engagement as well. The review process also supports relationship building, as they embrace my efforts to revise as guidance and a means of supporting growth (vs correction), and I can observe what they each need.

3. What kinds of writing assignments are your students most excited to do? What are the most challenging writing assignments for them? Why do you think this is the case?

- **HM**: I've found that students like assignments that connect them closely with their life outside of school. One of the most successful writing assignments I have given my students is an oral history project where they interviewed a person in their family, neighborhood, or other significant group. They presented their interviews to each other in class and then wrote a reflection. Students learned a lot about themselves and the people close to them. They also loved sharing their experience with the class.
- **YY**: The most challenging assignments are the argument-based writing since many students are used to doing summary-based writing that doesn't have a thesis. When they are writing about art history, it is easy to fall into the information-sharing type of writing and forget to tell the audience why the reader should care about the work of art.
- **LK**: Students are very receptive to informal writing about identity, personal experience, memories of early learning and cultural identity. They also warm up to the notion of what teaching means to them, and who teachers should be; they write about their interest in teaching

and the kinds of experiences that they want to provide for their future students. I believe that most struggle because open ended inquiry may be new to them; it almost feels a new role for them in the classroom. I have addressed this in variety of ways, including scaling back reading, doing a reading review in class small group discussion with the aid of guided questions before we come together as a whole class, looking critically at the reading to ensure that it is not layered in academic jargon and language is both essential and accessible, assigning pre-class discussion board posts, creating a handout with notetaking strategies, and modeling or charting theory/ideas in flow chart format. We will often "mind map" ways in which to make their own thinking visible through use of visual tools when notetaking.

4. What kinds of feedback do you provide? Do you tend to be more "macro" (big picture ideas) or "micro" (line editing)? Why do you choose to do it this way?

HM: My feedback is always geared toward what a student could do to revise the essay. I teach toward ARMS (Add, Remove, Move, Substitute), so my comments are geared toward getting them to see where they could do the adding, removing, and moving. My comments are generally focused on the structure of the essay overall, as well as the structure of individual paragraphs. If I'm picking up on a major grammatical issue, I will point out instances of it within the essay and then comment on the grammatical rules in my summary comments.

YY: I prefer to be more macro on earlier drafts, guiding students' papers towards the general direction they should be heading. But by the second draft, I am more micro because the argument is clearer.

LK: I elect to offer feedback on both the micro and the macro level aspects of their work, most of the time. This feels essential for both individual reasons (what students need) and professional ones. I may write notes on each line and also ask questions in the margins to extend their ideas. I usually conclude with a summary paragraph on the final page of their work, starting with a celebratory sentence and sharing detailed "suggestions" that ideally scaffolds their work. I want them to see and seek this level of attention as well – to engage with learning as a nuanced, exciting and complex process. It is a conversation.

INTERVIEWS BY JACKIE EDWARDS

CONFERENCES OVER EVERYTHING
BY HOLDEN TAYLOR

The question of feedback plagues writing teachers and any educator whose classes involve a significant writing component. In a recent WAC workshop meeting, a collective sigh permeated the room as teachers and graduate students alike shared their frustrations about students who seem to overlook the painstakingly crafted feedback provided, fixating solely on grades and evaluations. Amid this shared lament, the author of this short article champions a simple yet transformative solution–one that involves embracing conferences with students, either as a supplement to or, in certain instances, a replacement for traditional feedback methods.

Within our under-resourced and often overcrowded CUNY classrooms, the feasibility of dedicating entire classes to conferences may appear daunting. However, the conviction behind my stance stems from a belief in the profound impact that such personalized interactions can have on the learning experience and how they can be a haven amidst really unfortunate circumstances on both ends of the pedagogical relationship. A shift towards prioritizing conferences offers an invaluable opportunity to engage with students on a deeper level and to be respectful of all parties' time, energy, labor, conditions, and circumstances. Amidst the time and resource constraints faced by us in the CUNY system, we need efficient, effective, and respectful educational strategies–both for our students and as a labor concern for ourselves as workers. In such an environment, conferences stand as a means for fostering meaningful connections between students and teachers. These conferences are not merely a means to disseminate feedback but as a conduit for establishing relationships and creating a context wherein the processes of feedback, revision, writing, and reading are comprehended as inherently dialogical and social.

I believe it is worth dedicating full classes to conferences with students! I think the earlier (and maybe even more frequently) that you as a teacher can employ these, the better. We in the CUNY system–both students and teachers–are strapped for time and resources; and are under-supported and overworked. Establishing relationships with students, creating a context in which feedback and revision, writing and reading, are understood dialogically and socially–these are but some of the reasons that I believe conferences are so fundamental.

This makes for a classroom where students are not passive recipients of feedback, but active participants in a dynamic exchange of ideas and insights, opinions, and worldviews. Conferences provide a platform for this shift, possibly even (though idealistic) reorienting the conventional teacher-student dynamic. Investing time in one-on-one conferences not only enhances the quality and actual reception of feedback but, maybe most importantly, forces students to talk about what they are doing. Which, I really think, otherwise they don't have the opportunity to do. Compelling students to soberly appraise what they are doing, why, how, and for what purpose is a wonderful pedagogical device.

Conferences offer a space to explore the nuances of student writing and student learning. Beyond the tangible benefits of improved writing skills, conferences cultivate an atmosphere where the learning process becomes a shared project. This communal approach to learning is particularly crucial in the CUNY system broadly and at BMCC specifically, where students and teachers alike grapple with the relentless demands on our time and energy.

BY HOLDEN TAYLOR

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