

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COMMENTS ON THEIR WRITING

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As conscientious writing instructors, we spend countless hours commenting on our students' papers. We assume that our students will understand what we mean when we write "how does this point support your claim" and "this point belongs in the body" and "needs more synthesis in the conclusion." In short, we give students all the information they need to fix their writing, right? The truth of the matter is that students typically spend only a few moments skimming our words, especially if we return papers at the end of a class and don't give them time to read our pearls of wisdom. They don't always grasp our comments the way we intend them. Compounding the problem is that students rarely try to clarify their misunderstandings of comments because they don't think they've misunderstood anything. Students jump into the next revision, and we bristle when we get to spend another fifty hours reading and responding to their papers.

The purpose of this study was to understand how students perceive the comments I write on their papers. I wanted to alleviate problems caused by miscommunications and the potentially lost learning opportunities that unwittingly crop up in the commenting process. To understand students' perceptions, I asked the following research questions:

- How do students perceive my comments on their writing?
- How prevalent is the assumption that writing instructors write comments well?

- How can I be sure that my comments help students improve their writing?

Instructors generally do not stop often enough to consider how students perceive their comments, but my findings support the value in pursuing such inquiries. Eliciting feedback from students on their own learning enhances their education and should find its way into any classroom (Fritz, Wice). Just as good writers request feedback from their readers, we should ask students how they perceive our comments and not make assumptions about them. Their responses, coupled with the findings of this study, will contribute to the future of our professional conversations about response theory and teaching writing. Most research in writing response theory examines the different types of comments that instructors write but falls short of understanding students' perceptions of those comments.

Literature Review

Responding to writing has been a prevalent topic in the literature on teaching writing for many years, but researchers have analyzed revisions instead of students' perceptions in the writing process. Unfortunately, this body of research does not give us adequate information about how students perceive the different kinds of comments we write. The goal of most researchers in lower division English and writing classes has been to examine which kinds of comments teach students to improve their writing most effectively (Straub and Lunsford 42). Researchers have analyzed countless styles of written commentaries, from questions to imperatives (Fife and O'Neill 316). Clearly, instructors should think about how the forms of their comments influence how students understand their intent (Goldstein 70). Although a common thread in response theory has explored the effectiveness of direct versus indirect comments, analyzing types of comments in light of students' individual views is sporadic.

Much research in responding to writing is rooted in its effects on revisions (Faigley, Witte), not on the instructor's reasons for

writing the comments. While revision analysis can be an effective way to understand how students perceive our comments (408), it doesn't examine students' interpretations of teacher-comments. Sommers centered much of her research on the comments that teachers write to encourage revision (152). The consensus is that longer, text-specific comments effect more revisions than shorter, more general comments (Straub, Lunsford 88). Comments can be directly instructive or indirectly suggestive to motivate and encourage different developing writers (Sullivan 52). Ferris found that positive comments rarely produce significant revisions, but they are not always intended to affect revisions directly, either (326). In addition, they can inspire students to attempt the revision and instill constructive self-esteem and confidence, but not always. Negative and vague comments should also be avoided, as they rarely enhance revisions (Weaver 384). These studies lend valuable, yet limited, insight into the revision process.

Research suggests that our feedback should support students' pursuit of their own ideas (Thomeczek, Knowlton, Sharp 74). We should not violate students' ownership of their writing by rewriting their work for them. Students can feel unmotivated when they see their work being challenged by their teacher's comments (Bruno, Santos 114). Even when teachers acknowledge that they should consider students' perspectives in the responding process, some still tend to assert their authority as the expert writers who share tricks of the trade (Horvath 146). They assume students will learn from their rewrites and still own the content, but we don't know that for sure unless we ask students to share their perceptions, which have yet to be documented in the research. Even though we do not intend to control students' writing, most of our comments tend to be directive (Bizarro 269), and such comments shortchange students' opportunity to think for themselves, according to Straub.

Despite our best efforts to enrich students' writing processes, our feedback may confuse students (Zamel 28) if we make inaccurate assumptions about the students' intended meaning. Some teachers see their comments as initiating a dialogue, as if

they were talking to the writers (Zeiser 593), but students don't always see them this way because they rarely have the chance to respond to their instructors about the comments. So our remarks remain mystifying. Research also suggests that fundamental improvement in student writing lies in the degree to which students understand the assignment and engage with the topic more than with the quality or quantity of commentary (Hass, Osborn 76). When students perceive an assignment's objectives as bewildering, they are probably baffled by the comments, too. Further complications in the commenting process arise when instructors bring their value-laden attitudes to their evaluation of students' texts (Zawacki 18).

In spite of the extensive research base, comments on drafts alone, regardless of how intentionally they are worded, do not always lead to better revisions. Without adequate evidence of the student's perceptions, we cannot be sure how comments affect revisions. For example, instructors can deliberately explain how to use comments on early drafts to improve revisions (Bruno, Santos 116), but not necessarily know how students receive their explanations. Support in the writing classroom is almost always necessary for students to improve their revisions (Knoblauch, Brannon 2). Exploring the inherent confusions in interpreting comments requires further research in students' perceptions of our comments (Ford 40; Fritz, Wice 30; Hawthorne 50; Nielson, Rocco).

As past research posits and seasoned writing instructors know, students may or may not respond to comments for different reasons, and we don't always know what these reasons are, when they affect students, or why they influence writing the way they do. Some students are not interested in writing or examining another perspective in an argument. Others may not have the time to revise, or "write it again," as they begrudgingly claim. Many students confuse revision with editing, resulting in substandard revisions. Some students don't trust the instructor's qualifications or feel a mismatch between their needs and their instructor's needs in the writing classroom (Goldstein 72). Students majoring

in science, math, engineering, or technology don't always see the benefit of taking a writing class, so they resent having to spend time deciphering comments.

Regardless of the reasons students may not engage in purposeful revision, response theory research does not amply address students' perceptions of our copious comments. We cannot afford to guess how our students read us. Furthermore, non-writing instructors find detailed comments on higher-order thinking demanding and time-consuming, discouraging multiple drafts of their assignments. Many of them also feel unequipped to diagnose and explain students' writing errors (Zawacki 102). Instructors who recognize the value of writing in the learning process are likely to make erroneous assumptions about how students are interpreting their comments that can detract from the benefits of asking their students to write in the first place. This review of literature in response theory identifies the importance of understanding the commenting process as a reading and writing cycle.

The Writing Response Cycle

The Writing Response Cycle (below) illustrates how teachers read, write, and give feedback to students during the commenting process and where students' perceptions of comments occur:

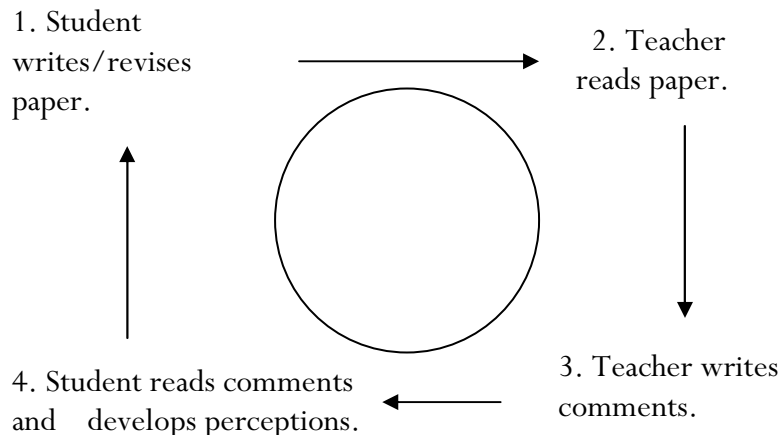


Figure 1: Writing Response Cycle

The first stage of the Writing Response Cycle entails the student writing or revising a draft. In the second stage, the teacher reads the draft; this is where our perceptions of students' writing begin. In the third stage, teachers write comments based on their perceptions of the paper. Sometimes we read an entire paper before writing comments, sometimes we write as we read, and sometimes we don't even read the whole paper. The final stage of the Writing Response Cycle occurs when students read their teachers' comments. This is the stage that is often neglected by teachers, students, and researchers and precipitated the reason for this study.

Outside forces also influence each phase of the Writing Response Cycle, reflecting the collaborative nature of teaching writing. That is, students workshop with their peers to develop topics and arguments, edit mechanics, and translate instructors' comments. Students may have the chance to conference individually with their teacher to improve their writing and discuss the comments. Some instructors encourage students to write personal reflections for yet another perspective to developing their ideas and decoding the comments they've already received. The point is that the Writing Response Cycle is non-linear and exists within a larger context of external factors that influence how instructors write comments and how students read them.

The Writing Response Cycle provides insight into the context of the writing and commenting processes. It illustrates the nature of the dissonance between our intentions behind comments and our students' perceptions of them, which can gravely interfere with teaching and learning to write well. Moreover, the Writing Response Cycle guided the research methodology of collecting relevant data to inform the questions for this study.

Method

The primary method of collecting data concerning students' perceptions on comments was to create a survey tool. After receiving exempt status from the Institutional Review Board

(IRB), I asked approximately 200 undergraduate writing students in first year and upper division writing classes to respond to a survey I created, the Revision Analysis. I offered it for extra credit, making their participation voluntary. At the suggestion of the IRB, I offered other extra credit opportunities to students who declined to complete the Revision Analysis to decrease bias in the self-reporting.

The 200 students consisted of my entire student rosters during two 15-week semesters, in online and face-to-face classes, freshmen through seniors. They were chosen because they represented a significant sampling of all writing students at a large, research one university.

Response rate to the Revision Analysis was 91 percent (181 respondents completed the survey). Reliability was increased by the high response rate and high sample representation of parent population (all writing students at the university).

Students analyzed comments written on their first and final drafts of various essays as their first response to the Revision Analysis. Because they were in different classes, the essays were on different topics and addressed different rhetorical situations. Even so, the genre was consistent (all essays), making the nature of the comments comparable. I intentionally write comments on a sentential level, in margins, and as summative end notes. They are in the form of questions, imperatives, and statements. Online and face-to-face students could have been discerned in the analyses. However, the intention of this study was to collect and scrutinize a significant, inclusive sampling of perceptions to inform the research questions.

The first part of the Revision Analysis asks for qualitative responses to questions that ask students to scrutinize the nature of the comments they received on their writing (see Appendix A). It also asks why they decided to respond to these comments the way they did. The second part of the Analysis asks for quantitative responses that also require students to examine effectiveness of the comments. Note that the questions inquired about the nature

of perceptions, not necessarily how comments affect the revision process or the students' progress in their class.

Limitations reside mainly in the survey method of self-reporting. To validate the findings here, methods such as read-alouds of students' understanding of comments, comparing first drafts to revisions, factor analyses, and construct validations could have increased reliability. Participants could have also misreported their perceptions because of a perceived threat from the questions, but the IRB didn't find significant threats in this survey. Further studies could, however, differentiate between types of comments, genres of writing, or levels of students in different classes. These variables would lend an interesting dimension to this study.

Results

Quantitative data collected from the Revision Analysis were analyzed first, even though the quantitative section was not first in the survey. Qualitative data were then analyzed. Quantitative analyses consisted of mean scores and bivariate correlations for each of the items. To manage the volume of qualitative responses, I organized all discursive responses from 181 surveys into 28 trends, which were then pared down to a more manageable 10 trends so I could analyze them even further.

Quantitative Findings

Mean scores of each of the seven quantitative items were calculated to gain insight into students' perceptions of comments by comparing the average scores for each item; Table 1 contains these mean scores. The average of these seven mean scores is 3.2, meaning that most students agreed with each of the items. There were no notable outliers in the mean scores.

Bivariate correlations were then conducted to measure the strength in relationship between each of the seven quantitative items on the survey. The only significant correlation ($r = .587$) lies between items E ("The comments encouraged me to revise higher order concerns") and A ("The comments challenged me to think about the quality of my writing"). We discussed the meaning

of “higher order concerns” in class, so this correlation is logical and not surprising. No other significant correlations emerged in this analysis.

Table 1: Mean scores for each item.

ITEM	MEAN SCORE ON LIKERT SCALE (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree)
A. The comments challenged me to think about the quality of my writing.	3.31
B. I would have liked more comments on my paper.	2.86
C. I was comfortable revising this paper based on the comments I received.	3.35
D. The grade reflected the comments accurately.	2.91
E. The comments encouraged me to revise higher order concerns.	3.16
F. The comments encouraged me to correct mechanical concerns.	3.26
G. My revision was the best it could be.	3.24

Qualitative Findings

After correlating items, I scrutinized the data set of 181 cases, looking for trends in responses to be able to understand the large amount of data collected in the surveys. Some comments reflected unique perceptions including the following requests from students: wanting more discursive, explanatory comments; wanting comments as correct directives because they come from the instructor; and wanting more positive comments to know

what they did right. See a complete list of trends from the comment section in Appendix B.

After assessing the list of 28 trends, I realized that I needed an even more manageable number of categories, so I gleaned ten representative comments to recognize categories of data further; these ten comments and their frequencies are shown in Table 2. Although this text analysis was somewhat subjective, it was based on explicit wording. For example, when a student indicated in the qualitative responses that he or she would have preferred comments on ideas instead of punctuation, it was rated as the first comment in the survey, “Request for content over mechanical comments.” When a student commented about the revision process, for instance, it was coded as the comment, “Valued the revision process and shared personal learning reflections.” Coding and categorizing complex written text can lead to limitations in the study because of its potential subjectivity. However, the ten categories of comments used in this survey were carefully worded to decrease such subjectivity in analysis. Because of the nature of textual analysis, not all cases contained an example of each comment. Likewise, some cases did not clearly illustrate any of the ten specific comments.

Table 2: Frequency of comments

COMMENT	N (181)	%
1. Agreed with most/all comments.	77	43
2. Valued the revision process and shared personal learning reflections.	58	32
3. Request for content over mechanical comments.	51	28
4. Requested instruction of how to fix errors and/or didn't know how to proceed.	44	24
5. Disagreed with feedback	42	23
6. Appreciation or request for positive comments.	33	18

7. Request for mechanical over content comments.	32	18
8. Requested more explanation of the comment.	24	13
9. Mentioned desire for higher grade.	23	13
10. Mentioned instructor as authority.	16	9

Note: Numbers and percentages do not total 100% because not all students responded to all comments.

Some students chose to elaborate on the qualitative items in the survey and provided additional comments. They reflected on higher orders of thinking, revising, and learning that provided fascinating insight into their perceptions of the comments. These reflections were introspective, contemplative responses and worthy of special note. See Figure 2 for some of these responses.

- Comments are made to give you more ideas. They are not given in order for you to change everything commented on. If you feel strongly about a certain point and it benefits the writing then keeping it is fine.
- I wouldn't say any comment would be unhelpful because if you disagree with one then you are still deciding more about your paper and the direction you want it. I found especially helpful that the comments pointed out areas that needed improvement but did not say how to fix them exactly. I like this because it gave me the opportunity to be creative and still feel like the author and use my style.
- I didn't change a few of the comments made because I did not agree with them. But the comments that you do not agree with can still be beneficial. If someone writes a comment that you don't agree with, change the sentence or paragraph to read another way so the reader can understand it better.

- When I was revising, I was not revising to please you and your opinions about writing. I was revising to make my paper more comprehensive and credible.
- I have found that when the comments get too specific I do exactly what they say rather than thinking through and doing the work myself.
- The most helpful comments were the questions asking about the topic because it forced me to think about what I was arguing and what I wanted the reader to get out of the paper. The questions made me think about how to better organize and word the paper in order for the reader to understand my point. The questions provided an alternative angle that I had not thought about yet.

Figure 2: Contemplative responses from student surveys

To gain even more insight into students’ perceptions of comments, I looked for combinations of the ten most frequent comments. Table 3 shows the highest frequencies of these combinations.

Table 3: Highest frequencies of comment combinations

COMMENT COMBINATIONS	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS WITH THIS COMBINATION
#2. Request for mechanical over content comments #7. Agreed with most/all comments.	8
#6. Disagreed with feedback #9. Requested instruction of how to fix errors and/or didn’t know how to proceed.	5
#1. Request for content over mechanical comments.	5

#10. Valued the revision process and shared personal learning reflections.	
#1. Request for content over mechanical comments. #7. Agreed with most/all comments.	5
#1. Request for content over mechanical comments. #6. Disagreed with feedback	5
#1. Request for content over mechanical comments. #6. Disagreed with feedback #10. Valued the revision process and shared personal learning reflections.	4
#7. Agreed with most/all comments. #10. Valued the revision process and shared personal learning reflections.	4

Note: These numbers reflect the most frequent combinations of comments.

Results from these analyses were significant and alluring. They were certainly enough to merit thorough, provocative, valuable discussion in this analysis of students' perceptions of comments on writing.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how students perceive the comments they receive on their papers. I wanted to investigate the assumption that writing instructors inherently write effective comments. Finally, I wanted to know how comments inspire writing, revisions, and thinking. I learned that students perceive comments in endless ways, that the assumption that writing instructors write comments well is prevalent and the main reason we don't ask our students for their perceptions, and when we dialogue with students frequently, we'll begin to understand how comments influence their writing. Ultimately,

the value of the data collected in this study provides evidence that students' and instructors' perceptions, expectations, and assumptions about comments frequently clash. Such disparities reflect inherent inferences we make when we read and write, potentially interfering with the learning process intrinsic in writing instruction (Auten 88).

Analysis of Mean Scores

To start, the mean scores for each item in the Revision Analysis (Appendix A) show little variation, in that most students agreed with each item. This consistency, for example in item G that states that the student believes her revision is the best it can be, clashes with any writing instructor who believes that almost any revision can be better. The Likert scale was based on a scale of 4, where 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 4 meant "strongly agree." The lowest mean, 2.86 for "I would have liked more comments on my paper," showed slight disagreement and could mean that no matter the quantity of comments, students don't necessarily want their teacher's writing to overpower their own writing. Such an attitude clashes with instructors who believe in the quantity of comments they write. Students' perceptions of too many comments could imply that they see the instructor assuming ownership of their writing. The highest mean, 3.35 for "I was comfortable revising this paper based on the comments I received," could mean that the quantity or quality of comments students received gave them enough guidance to revise confidently, but if the instructor is not satisfied with the revision, then an underlying discord in perceptions exists. Since most writing students want to learn how to increase their confidence as writers, though, the thought that students can revise comfortably is heartening.

The remaining five items received mean scores ranging from 2.91 to 3.31, which clearly show overwhelming agreement from students. These items, in order of increasing means, are "The grade reflected the comments accurately," "The comments encouraged me to revise higher order concerns," "My revision was

the best it could be,” “The comments encouraged me to correct mechanical concerns,” and “The comments challenged me to think about the quality of my writing.” While writing instructors want to think that all of our comments are clear and inspiring, we find that they are not always as good as we believe them to be. At least we now know that students did not *disagree* with these statements, at least not according to the mean scores evident in the Revision Analysis, which carries provocative interpretations.

Mean scores lower than 2.5 would have shown a completely different picture of students’ perceptions. They could have disagreed with their grade based on the comments they received, showing a disconnection between the formative nature of comments on the first draft and final grade. They could have felt *discouraged* from considering higher order concerns in their writing. They could have shown little confidence in their revisions. They could have felt *discouraged* to correct mechanical concerns, either out of ignorance or apathy. Finally, students could have felt *uninspired* to think about the quality of their writing, or to have ignored the metacognitive quotient evident in effective writing. These situations would have been the result of mean scores being low. However, means were consistently high, showing that students’ perceptions of wanting more guidance and wanting to improve the intellectual and mechanical aspects of their writing and revisions were consistent.

The next quantitative analysis was the bivariate correlation. The lack of more than one slightly significant correlation between survey items can be interpreted in several ways. It could show a limitation in the study because a factor analysis was not conducted on the items, but this decision was made because of the high respondent and sample population rates. The lack of correlations could also have been the result of the tremendous diversity in responses. That is, when 200 students are asked to self-report their perceptions of their reading, the resulting highly subjective, abstract responses do not lend themselves to dependable, statistical correlations. A construct analysis may have alleviated

this discrepancy. Even so, the lack of correlations piqued my curiosity, precipitating in-depth qualitative data analyses.

Analysis of Comments

Qualitative data, as shown in Table 2, shows that the most frequent comment was that students agreed with most of the comments made on their papers (43%). This could indicate that most of the comments were on target. However, it could also mean that students trusted me to always write appropriate comments. If this is the case, the responsibility we have as teachers and commenters could be more than we ever imagined. We must remember, however, that reading is an intellectual skill open to misinterpretations, making our comments equally vulnerable to misunderstandings. Furthermore, students who agree with most comments could mean that they may not understand the real intent of the comment, but think they do (Bardine, Bardine, Deegan 95; Lawson 24). When our students trust us to be accurate in our reading and commenting, we owe it to them to read their work conscientiously and write meticulous comments to advance their writing (Ziv 377). The mere fact that analysis reveals an array of interpretations supports the notion that students' and their instructors' perceptions, expectations, and assumptions may differ to some degree.

The second most frequent comment, valuing the revision process and sharing personal learning reflections (32%), also lends salient insight into students' perceptions. Seeing evidence of students thinking about their writing as writers, as witnessed in Figure 2, is heartwarming and inspiring for any writing teacher. Students really can see revisions as opportunities to rethink their arguments. They see the value in comments, whether or not they make all the changes that comments suggest. Students recognize value in our questioning comments as an attempt to engage them with their writing. Some students like sentential comments, some like marginal comments, and some like summary comments. Whatever the type of comment, they appreciate the attention we pay to their writing and the dialogues our comments can generate

with them (Zeiser 593). Encouraging students to revise is another way to encourage students to challenge and respond to the comments we write on their papers, which also promotes their ownership and voice (Ziv 368). On the other hand, instructors who believe their comments are flawless probably do not value dialogue with students about their meaning.

Returning to the analysis of comment frequencies in Table 2, the third most frequent comment was the request for content over mechanical comments (28%). Is this a message from insecure or secure writers? When students admit they are not confident writers, they may request comments on their content to confirm their theses with their teachers, giving them the impression that they are “correct”; the request from an insecure writer, then, could be one of validation. On the other hand, secure writers could ask for feedback on content because they want to develop their ideas in light of their instructor’s perspective. They also might care more about the intellectual development of their writing than the mechanics. Graduate students, for example, realize that the process of giving and receiving feedback during the writing process is essential to create a worthwhile document (Nielsen, Rocco). The important point here is that students’ requests for content over mechanical comments mean they care about their writing. As their teachers, we should likewise care enough about their content to give them feedback that demonstrates our respect for their topics and thorough reading of their work.

Analysis of Comment Combinations

In addition to the wealth of information evident in the frequencies of comments, I looked at combinations of comments to see if any meaningful trends warranted analysis. In other words, did a significant number of students rate particular pairs of comments frequently? The results in Table 3 show that they did. The most common combination of comments was the request for mechanical over content comments coupled with agreement on most of the comments written on the papers. Comment

combinations that appeared less than three times were determined to be insignificant and did not merit mention in the data analysis.

The highest single frequency of comment combinations was the request for mechanical over content comments along with agreement with most/all comments. Eight students mentioned these two responses, meaning that while they agreed with most of the feedback on their writing, they also wanted more comments on mechanics instead of content (18%). Almost half of the students claimed they agreed with most of the comments they received (43%), but only 18 percent of the students said they wanted more comments on mechanics over content. Could this combination of perceptions show that students are not thinking critically about the ideas in their writing and are instead depending on their teachers' direct instruction to correct mechanics? Some students want their teachers to play editor and tell them the errors they've made and how to correct them. The question remains, though, regarding the degree to which we should be editor or coach, for which this study supports the notion that students want us to be editors, possibly because mechanics is the most objective aspect of writing. Some instructors agree and tend to pay more attention to mechanics than content, but certainly not all.

Furthermore, five students responded that they disagreed with the feedback and requested instruction on how to fix errors. Students commonly believe that their teachers' job is to help them fix their mistakes (Auten 87), but why would anyone disagree with someone's feedback and then turn around and ask them how to correct their mistakes? Perhaps some students believe most of their teachers' opinions but not all of them? This could be another sign of high confidence in writers, that they are actually able to evaluate the effectiveness of their teachers' comments. If so, then these students are scrutinizing our comments closely enough to agree with some and disagree with others. Such reading on their part demands constructive feedback on our part.

Another noteworthy combination of comments showed up in five students' responses when they requested content over mechanical comments while they valued the revision process and

shared personal learning reflections. Most likely, these students have a relatively high sense of ownership of the message they want to convey in their writing. Requesting feedback on content could indicate either a desire to know if their ideas are in line with their teachers' ideas, as mentioned earlier, or a need for feedback to develop their thinking. When we make the assumption that our students care about their writing, we tend to treat them with more respect than when we doubt their ownership. Respecting students' voices and content requires our respect that they can easily perceive (Hawthorne 50; Schwegler 212).

Another common combination of comments showed that five students prefer content over mechanical comments while agreeing with most of their teacher's comments. The ones who requested comments on their content agree with their teachers and probably feel comfortable with their mechanical skills, making them confident writers. It is probable, then, that confident writers want to develop their content and thinking and can request content comments while trusting their teachers' comments.

Interestingly, five other students requested content over mechanical comments while *disagreeing* with most of the comments. This could mean that confident students are comfortable disagreeing with their teachers' comments. How surprising is this? In essence, writing teachers need to remember that students can perceive their teachers' comments as appropriate or not and still request input on the ideas they are trying to convey in their writing. This is reminiscent of an authentic writer's workshop, where professional writers request feedback on their work and then decide how they will use it. They decide for themselves which comments will benefit their writing and how.

Based on how inferences affect the way we read and write, this discussion shows some inevitable variations in how teachers' and students' perceptions, expectations, and assumptions about the meaning of comments can clash. After carefully analyzing possible interpretations of the data provided in this study, it is easy to see how writing instructors may or may not be surprised when they

discover that their students perceive comments differently from them.

Conclusions

The more instructors care about the quality of their comments and how students perceive them, the more aware they will become of the differences between how they intend their feedback and how students respond to it. These are the revelations that enrich the quality of teaching writing.

Investigating students' perceptions enhances writing instruction for teachers and learners. As students read and think about our comments, they hone their self-assessment skills. How could they criticize their teachers' written comments without self-reflecting to improve their own writing? "Unless we teach students how to assess, we fail to provide them with the authority inherent in assessment, continuing the disjuncture between the competing roles of student and writer" (Huot 67). If, for example, a student charges her teacher with writing vague comments, she will likely be more aware of vague writing in her own work. Zamel claims that while we fault student writing for being too general, we can be just as guilty and vague in the nature of our comments (90). Instructors should not commit the same fault that we find in our students' writing. For students to notice our vague comments requires that they read them critically, improving their self-assessment skills.

Transferability in critical thinking requires students to reflect about their own writing in the same terms that they think about their teachers' writing (Hillocks 34). Such self-assessment and reflection strategies build self-directing skills in our student writers. A critical learning objective in any writing classroom is for students to become confident, self-directed learners and writers. In effect, then, as teachers explore students' perceptions of their comments, they are also encouraging their students to be discerning critical thinkers who can transfer learning across situations.

Likewise, a valuable purpose for our quest to understand students' perceptions of our comments is to cultivate their spoken and written voices in the writing classroom. Teachers acknowledge students' genuine opinions and voices when they ask for their students' feedback on written comments. When we do not attempt to understand or respect students' perceptions, we impose a counterproductive, instructor-based culture in the classroom that doesn't value how students perceive our feedback. A learner without a voice typically does not learn critically. Instead, a more democratic culture is necessary in writing classrooms to encourage and strengthen authentic voice and ownership in students' writing.

Students' reading skills also benefit from our efforts to understand their perceptions of our comments. Asking students for their feedback on our comments requires them to read deliberately, focusing on our word and content choices. They must make inferences and be accountable for explanations of their perceptions. Because reading effectiveness depends on context and culture, every reading experience is a unique, meaning-making process (Huot 6). Comprehending reading successfully depends on lucid writing (Smith 224). We should be aware of the individual factors students bring to the process of reading and interpreting (Goldstein 201). These are only a few reasons why we must write coherent, logical comments, because after the commenting hours, days, and weeks are behind us, the onus lies on students to read them critically and understand their intentions.

Yet another reason for writing instructors to explore how students perceive our comments is the collaborative and reciprocal roles we can encourage for learners and teachers in the writing classroom. The teacher's role is not to tell students explicitly what to do, but to point out opportunities to improve their writing and offer suggestions on how to clarify them. Treglia found that most students want their teachers to guide them in how to improve their writing, not to the point to be told exactly what they need to do, but to appreciate the choices offered to them

(112). Final revision decisions should belong to the writer (Brannon, Knoblauch 158). Figure 3 illustrates a continuum of authority and interaction that exists in writing classrooms (Straub, Lunsford 148).

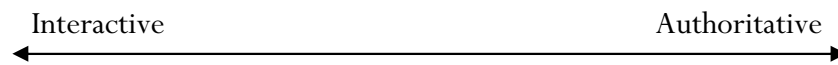


Figure 3: Continuum of responding and teaching styles

More interactive styles are dialectic and analytical, while more authoritative responding styles tend to be directive and advisory. In essence, our teaching philosophies dictate what we expect of ourselves and our students throughout the writing and commenting cycle. Interestingly, though, the way we see our roles as instructor doesn't always reflect our response style and perspectives (Bardine, Bardine, Deegan 96).

My perspective shifted during the course of this study: I began to see myself more as a writer than a reader in my instructional role. I realized that the instructional writing process follows a cycle depicted in the Writing Response Cycle illustrated above. We can gain great insight into how students perceive our comments when we see the relationship between the process of students' reading and writing and their teachers' reading and writing process. Analyzing data and developing the Writing Response Cycle, however, revealed enlightening idiosyncrasies in the commenting process on several levels.

Compounding the question of how students read comments is our assumption as writing instructors that students understand our comments because we are good writers. This is a faulty assumption because we don't always act as conscientious writers in the classroom; instead, we see our main role as readers. But the assumption prevails—how could someone who teaches writing possibly craft a poorly written comment? Regardless of how much time and effort I invest in my comments, I realize now that they can be cryptic, depending on the reader. When they are, students don't know what to do with them. Their struggles to interpret

and act on them precipitate our need to understand the nature of perceptions (Bardine, Bardine, Deegan 99; Ferris 330; Huot 98).

Another concern for writing instructors is that we *want* to believe that our comments inspire brilliant revisions. We don't honestly know, however, if our comments inspired the changes or if our students would have discovered them on their own from repeated reflections of their work or other influences. When we convince ourselves that our comments create great revisions, we could be overlooking the fact that we're controlling our students' thinking to the point of telling them what to write. Of course, the revision is brilliant if it's our words. Teachers who are confident in their comments' value would be hard pressed to provide credible evidence to prove it. In short, our desire to believe that our comments inspired wonderful revisions can interfere with us knowing whether or not they really did.

Implications for Teaching

Vital implications for teaching writing surfaced in this study: (1) dialoguing with students throughout the commenting process is imperative, (2) writing comments tailored to individual students' needs is critical, and (3) shifting our role from reader to writer is an effective way for writing instructors to understand how students perceive our written commentaries. One provocative trend in students' perceptions of comments on their writing is that there are no trends. No trends, however, means that their perceptions of our comments are as rich and contextual and individual as can possibly be. Not being able to unearth significant trends in this study stirred the following key implications for teaching:

1. Dialogue with Students.

Dialoguing with students takes many shapes. The attitudes and relationships between teacher and students can support constructive conversation (Chandler 273). In-class, informal, non-graded writing activities that ask students to reflect on the comments they've received allow them to discover and share their

perceptions. A relaxed, respectful whole class discussion about the comments they've received and what they mean is also helpful because it allows students to learn from each other by sharing and discussing the comments on their papers. If whole class discussions intimidate some students, small groups of three or four, or pairs, can encourage students to share their perceptions with each other. Discussions online in emails are another safe place for students to discuss the comments on their papers. In each of these venues, the instructor's role is to listen and encourage thoughtful discussion, and never to squelch their perceptions.

2. *Customize Comments.*

Comments on students' papers should be tailored, constructive, and inspiring. Our students are unique, their writing is unique, and so our comments should be unique. The problem here is that we read hundreds of drafts every semester that display the same basic errors, resulting in the same comments on each paper. However, the content and thinking are distinct in each paper. One solution is to address the mechanical concerns in brief writer-based lectures in class and write reader-based comments on the content in individuals' papers. This may require awareness of our changing roles as writing instructors. The key to successful commenting, according to Sommers, is to have what is said in the comments and what is done in the classroom reinforce and enrich each other (154). This applies to giving custom feedback.

3. *Switch Roles.*

The teaching implication of shifting our role from readers to writers shapes our roles and attitudes as writing teachers. We read papers and we write comments, so why shouldn't we model conscientious writing for our students? This can best happen in a student-centered, constructive, self-directed learning classroom. When we perceive our work from this perspective, we can understand how our students are reading us.

As writing instructors and researchers, our concern in the past has centered on how we respond to student writing, not how

students respond to our writing. Typically, theories that explain writing response emphasize the instructor's role as reader more than writer. We teach writing because we love to write. So why not capitalize on our writing identities while serving as reader, coach, and evaluator in the classroom? Respecting students as readers of our writing will begin to reveal how they perceive the comments we write and improve the efficacy of writing instruction.

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APPENDIX A SURVEY TOOL

REVISION ANALYSIS

To make the revision process most educational for all of us, I am giving you the opportunity to earn extra credit by analyzing comments on your final revisions. Submit the following to me VIA EMAIL ONLY to Rosalyn.Zigmond@xxx.edu. Each of these revision analyses must be 250-300 words and is worth 2 points. Respond to the following questions:

1. Name of assignment?
2. What trends do you see in the comments?
3. What type of comments did you expect to see but were not noted?
4. Why did you make the changes you made?
5. Why did you decide *not* to make changes suggested by the comments?
6. What was the most helpful comment? Why?
7. What was the least helpful comment? Why?

Indicate, on a scale of 1-4 (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree), your response to the following statements. In your email, write the letter and the number, such as A-3, B-2, etc.

- A. The comments challenged me to think about the quality of my writing.
- B. I would have liked more comments on my paper.
- C. I was comfortable revising this paper based on the comments I received.
- D. The grade reflected the comments accurately.
- E. The comments encouraged me to revise higher order concerns.
- F. The comments encouraged me to correct mechanical concerns.
- G. My revision was the best it could be.

Additional Comments:

APPENDIX B TRENDS IN COMMENTS

1. Want more explanatory comments
2. See my comments as correct directives because I'm the teacher and trusted as such
3. Want more positive comments to know what they did right
4. Want full explanations of the problem/weakness
5. Want suggestions how to fix concerns
6. Afraid of being disciplined with low grade if they disagree with comments
7. Simply not sure what I meant in some comments
8. Desire a high grade
9. Want a polished product
10. Appreciate revision process
11. Some comfortable disagreeing and explaining why
12. Request more guidance because they're not confident writers
13. Don't like single words or question marks
14. Most are content with quantity of comments
15. Lack of motivation to revise high order concerns
16. Some like reminders to proofread or other issues they know
17. Some want content over mechanical comments
18. Simply not sure what had to be changed and why
19. Want concrete examples and models
20. Made changes because they agreed with the comments
21. Easy to make mechanical changes
22. Most made all changes noted in comments
23. Some decided not to make changes because of other changes they had made
24. Don't like 100% criticism
25. Like the summative comments on trends in the paper
26. Repeated comments detract from other comments (hierarchy?)
27. Want help on style
28. Many were pleased with their final revisions