

Revisions:

A Zine on Writing at Queens College

Feedback: Responding to Student Writing

Issue 3, Spring 2006

From the Editors

For this issue of *Revisions*, we have invited faculty and students to join our inquiry and to share their reflections about the feedback faculty offer students in response to their writing. The series of reflections that follow were written in response to the following call for contributions, which we sent to faculty and students during the Fall 2005 semester:

“The teacher returns a batch of writing to students, complete with marginal comments, a written response, and a grade. Students scurry out of class to read in private, or they leaf through the pages in class. Some—maybe most—go straight to the end, looking for the grade. It’s a loaded moment for students and teachers. What grade did I get, students wonder? How tough is this teacher? What do the comments mean? Teachers wonder too: Will my students read my comments? Will they understand how I’m assessing their work? Will they see connections between my response, the grade, and the learning goals of the course? Will they think my grades are too tough? Too easy? Will this affect class dynamics? Will students understand my efforts to make suggestions applicable to their next writing project? Though loaded, this moment is just one important exchange within a larger conversation about learning goals—one that takes place in the classroom, via e-mail, during office hours, on Blackboard discussion boards, and through teacher responses to students’ informal writing. In addition, feedback goes both ways: teachers respond to students, and students respond to teachers.”

Through dialogue among instructors, students and writing fellows, the current issue of *Revisions* investigates the various facets of the conversations feedback stimulates, its common and problematic elements, and above all, the chances we have to make it more successful and fruitful.

Our purpose is to let all the representative voices be heard in order to examine the subject from multiple perspectives. Although faculty and students disagree on many issues, the contributions to this issue of *Revisions* show a surprising area of consensus: feedback on writing is helpful, indeed critical, for effective teaching and learning. In addition to faculty and student “shorts,” the CUNY Writing Fellows’ reflections focus on specific issues: teacher response to ESL student writing (Angelo R. Dicuonzo), feedback and handwriting (Angelique C. Harris), the evaluations of teachers provided by students in an extra-academic website (Fatmir Haskaj), a comparison

between response styles in different academic cultures (Tsai-Shiou Hsieh), the role of feedback in the student’s acquisition of personal authority (Jungchun Roslyn Ko), a case study that illustrates a miscommunication between teacher and student in reference to a key concept of a discipline (Jacob Kramer), an exploration of a personal response experience in the light of the insights provided by some of the most prominent scholars in Composition Studies (Mehmet Kucukozer). Finally, the “views” section stages a debate about feedback and student literacies, between a faculty member (Dr. Constance Tagopoulos) and the Coordinator of the QC WAC Program (Dr. Jason Tougaw).

We hope to encourage and stimulate the “response” of other voices and viewpoints. With that in mind, we invite readers to visit our website at <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/Writing>, to find out about upcoming events and take a look at—and contribute to—our collection of resources for students and faculty.

—A.H. and A.D.



QC CUNY Writing Fellows at work proofreading *Revisions* (left to right: Jacob Kramer, Mehmet Kucukozer, Angelique Harris, Roslyn Ko, Tsai-Shiou Hsieh, and Angelo Dicuonzo)

Revisions: shorts

John Yoon

Student

I have found that talking with my professors about my writing yields the best revisions. This semester I have learned how to keep my focus on the theme of my paper at all times. For instance, my professor asked me to present the initial outline of my paper to the class. After the presentation, the professor and my classmates critiqued my paper. My professor felt that it lacked focus and urged me to adhere to the thesis as much as possible. My original outline contained a lot of information about the topic at hand, but it lacked a unifying theme. Her advice was invaluable to the eventual success of my research paper on North Korea.

I have also found the writing fellows to be quite helpful. The writing fellows can review papers on an individual basis and give helpful comments on how to improve student writing. They are also quite knowledgeable about the technicalities of writing such as annotation and citation styles. For instance, Jacob Kramer noticed that I used the MLA citation style incorrectly. He advised me on how to use citation by showing me the MLA style book. His advice helped me hone the technicalities of my paper and he gave my paper an overall professional look. Prior to his comments, my footnotes were short and looked scrawny. After subsequent revisions, however, my footnotes had more information and gave weight to the bottom of each page.

Robert H. Cowen

Mathematics

In the Spring of 2003, I was chosen to receive a Faculty Writing Fellowship and to participate in a Faculty Writing Seminar conducted by Hugh English, then Coordinator of the Writing Across the Curriculum program at Queens College. My project was to construct a writer's manual for Math 503, a course that uses powerful computer software to enable students to make mathematical discoveries and then write papers based on their results. I started by searching for other guides to writing mathematics papers for novices but came up empty-handed.

I wasn't interested in producing a complete guide to writing papers, or even a complete guide to writing mathematics papers, but rather a specific guide that would help my students in Math 503 write better papers in this particular course. Of course, it contains advice that is more general, such as, how to select a project, make good definitions, select an audience, etc. One of the main decisions I made was to have the manual model the preparation of a paper for

a math journal. I give specific advice on choosing a title, preparing an abstract and journal numbering schemes, referencing other works, etc. While I don't demand the students writers adhere to all these conventions, I thought they should be aware of what the conventions are and the reasons for them. As good results are obtained using these conventions, I noted that the students could then be prepared to submit their article to a journal. In any case, the students would become more effective readers of journal articles they came across in the future.

Working with Hugh English and the other participants of the seminar was a very satisfying experience. I strongly recommend that others in math and science seek support from the Writing Across the Curriculum program to prepare writer's manuals for their courses. It will give you an opportunity to think deeply about writing in your discipline and will provide your students with the discipline-specific help they need.

In order to make Math 503 eligible for "W" course credit, a version specifically intended for undergraduates, Math 213W was created.

Vanesa Katz

MA student, Queens College, and instructor, LaGuardia CC

As a student, I am grateful to teachers who have pointed out missing words, lapses in logic, a word choice error, a spelling mistake. I am also grateful to the teacher who engages with my writing by jotting questions in the margins, indicating where I should cut out a paragraph, poking at my writing here and prodding it along there. I assume that it is for my own good, and that my writing will ultimately improve. I think it is my teacher's job. It is with this knowledge that I grip my pen when I sit down with a stack of papers. I comment on everything I see wrong and right in my students' essays.

I am an unpopular traditionalist, a purist, a "grammar goddess." I am retrograde even, but only until a student returns to my office after the semester has ended and thanks me. I am aware that markings and symbols are detrimental because they confuse the students. Squiggles and circles are "friendlier," "less invasive," "less inhibiting." Students are afraid of symbols. The truth is this: marking up a paper is time-consuming. Therefore, why not spend an hour of class time reviewing grading symbols and explain, for instance, that "WC" means word choice, and that word choice means the student has to choose another word? Then photocopy the handout and pass it on.

The question that I as a teacher always struggle with is "how much feedback is too

much?" On the one hand, I understand that pointing out every spelling mistake, awkward phrasing error and misplaced preposition is overwhelming for students. This is the reason I soften the comments by not using red pens. It is almost as if, I think, I hope really, getting back a paper marked in neat green lettering will soften the blow to the ego of the student writer whose work I evaluate. As for the crippling pain of writing for an audience—writing is always for an audience. At the same time that I am terrorized by the thought of being judged, I am exhilarated by the notion that I am sharing ideas with a reader on the other side of the page.

So, I carry this knowledge with me into the classroom. When I sit down to grade a stack of papers, I remind myself that my turquoise/pink/orange/purple ink is not in my hand to point out errors, but to prod (gently) because ultimately, if I don't do this for my students, who will? Correcting the paper does nothing for the writer—it gives answers, it implies the paper is riddled with errors and it provides a quick fix. Granted, I know that that is sometimes what students are looking for—a quick fix after hours of slaving over an essay, frustrated by the effort it takes, by the carefully and painfully crafted sentences. I am a student and I feel the pain now, as I write this word and this one and wonder, "Should I place a comma before 'and'?" Wait, does the quotation mark go before or after the question mark. See? Instead, I rebel by using the passive voice and I end my sentences with prepositions.

This is all to say that as a student, as a teacher, and as a student of teaching, I think more is more. I want my writing to improve / I want my

Table of Contents

The Joy of Writing Constance Tagopoulos	7
The Joy of Teaching Writing: A Response to Constance Tagopoulos Jason Tougaw	8
In Our Library	9
A Reflection on Diverse Feedback Cultures Tsai-Shiou Hsieh	10
The Role of Feedback in Reconsidering Course Design Mehmet Kucukozer	11
Surfing Between Languages Angelo R. Dicuonzo	12
Myprofessor.com: Useful Reviews or Exploitation? Fatmir Haskaj	14
Engaging Students in the Academic Ballroom Junchun Roslyn Ko	15
Ill Communication Jacob Kramer	17
Handwritten Feedback: Confessions of a Scribbler Angelique C. Harris	18

students' writing to improve. I want my teachers to tell me how I should revise / I want to be able to tell my students the same so that when they do revise, they, and I, see improvement. If writing is a process, and revision is part of that process, then in order to revise, one must be able to see mistakes. It is, of course, a delicate balance between the ego and the desire to learn.

It might be too judgmental and too jarring to mark up essays, and it might be better to overlook mistakes so long as a student's argument "works." For instant, how much bathos does writing or reading "instant" instead of "instance" inspire? Let's be honest about this—in the real world context of professional emails, memos, resumes, essays, even blogs, we are judged based on our writing skills. So, if it isn't the teacher's job, whose job is it?

William K. Tabb
Economics

Over the years I have found that a term paper, or any single writing assignment, does not build skills as satisfactorily as a series of exercises over the term. In the first two exercises of the semester, students bring to class the essay(s) they have read, underlined, and made notes on. Then, they have the period to write on a question they are given at the start of class. These exercises are graded using a check, check plus or check minus. These in-class projects give both me and the students a sense of where they are. I get a sense of who needs what kind of help and their expectations. The next two assignments are done at home. Students have more time to read and think about the question. These papers get letter grades as well as extensive comments. I encourage my students to be better writers by sending them to writing fellows with their papers and my comments. These sessions are central to the success of students in improving their writing. I make it clear I am interested in improvement, and adequate work is justifiably praised. For these papers students receive a class style sheet indicating among other basics: how to reference articles, do a cover sheet, proper margins, font size, and page numbering in precise detail. I instruct some students to rewrite and resubmit after visiting a writing fellow. The writing fellows are asked to email me reports. These reports are often very helpful, and I know the students have made the visit. As a result of this work, the final papers tend to be pretty good. They are better organized, proofread and, hopefully, have gone through more than one draft.

This 15-page paper is based on a broader question in which students have to draw upon 5 to 6 assigned readings. All articles are current, many from sites such as the World Bank, the IMF, and NGO researchers such as Oxfam. Final exams (essays) are also much better as a result of these writing exercises.

professional career. Thanks to my experiences in school, I have learned that writing good papers is a learning process that will continue throughout the rest of my life as long as I put my best effort into it.

ANNOUNCING
Writing Across the Curriculum's
New Faculty Partners Program

We are pleased to announce a new initiative: *Writing Across the Curriculum's Faculty Partners program*. Beginning in the fall of 2006, Faculty Partners will work with the WAC Coordinator and CUNY Writing Fellows to develop goals for student writing in their divisions and to create resources to help faculty teaching W courses enhance their writing pedagogies.

2006-07 Faculty Partners

- Alyson Cole (Political Science)
- Eva Fernandez (Linguistics)
- David Gagné (Aaron Copland School of Music)
- David Gerwin (Secondary Education and Youth Services)
- Robert Goldberg (Computer Science)
- Sarit Golub (Psychology)
- Tarry Hum (Urban Studies)
- Mandana Limbert (Anthropology)

Dimitri Coupet
Student

I appreciate the feedback I get from my professors because it helps me see where I need improvements in my writing skills. When I get a good grade, I usually get comments from my professor stating that I did a good job. However, there were times when I did not do so well and I had difficulty in understanding the comments my professor left on my papers. There were times when the comments said that I wrote a good paper but I did not do what had been asked for. In those situations, I really struggled to understand what went wrong, especially when I thought I had done a great job. Many times I had to meet with my professor during office hours so that s/he could clarify what the problem was. I find this ironic because the purpose of writing papers in college is to learn how to effectively communicate our thoughts and ideas to others, yet obviously that isn't always the easiest thing to do. Writing papers has not always been easy for me, but I really do appreciate the feedback I get from my professors because I know that it will ultimately help me out in the long run as I prepare for my

Arthur Costigan

Secondary Education

I occasionally shock my colleagues by disclosing that English Education professors do not grade student writing. Usually they respond, "But how do the students know how they are doing?" My answer is that extensive written comments provide enough feedback for students to assess what they actually produced in writing, as well as how to develop their papers. I take the radical position that evaluative symbols add nothing to a reader's comments and do little to help writers.

Commenting extensively on papers, however, is a time consuming and challenging process, much harder than providing symbolic evaluation. **To give proper feedback, the reader must first of all give back to the writer what is perceived in the paper:** "You seem here to be saying..."; "You seem to be trying to..." The second is to question: "How do you know this to be true?"; "Why do you say this here?" The third is to

give specific feedback on how to improve this or future papers: "You should try to..."; "You could focus more on..." Of course, this is easier to describe than to do. But is it enough? My answer is "Yes." Is this problematic given the fact that eventually course grades must be given? The answer is also, "Yes." However, giving symbols on student writing does surprisingly little to assist writers. Engendering a dialogue between reader and writer through comments provide the writer with her/his primary needs: as to what should be paid attention to, questions to be asked, and the kind of assistance required. What can a grade add to that?

Maria E. Murillo
Student

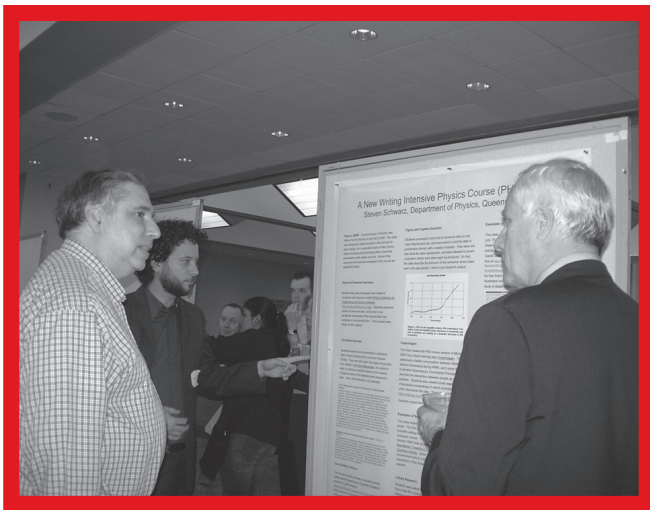
I believe that all the comments I have received on my papers have been effective in the development of my ability to write papers with substance, and not just papers whose only value is that they are neatly typed with footnotes in the proper form.

One of my first classes at Queens College was English Composition, which was more dif-

difficult than I had imagined. When I received my first graded papers, I was completely frustrated since they were filled with my instructor's comments: he had corrected so many errors in grammar, usage, style, sentence and paragraph structure, etc., and my papers bled because they had more red ink than black. As time went on, I realized that my instructor's comments were there to help me see my mistakes. By the end of the semester, my papers began showing improvement because the comments showed encouragement, and my instructor recognized that his comments had not been written in vain.

Besides comments, the criticisms and discussions I have had with my instructors and classmates in the classroom have also helped me understand both my weak points on the assignments and my grades. I recall that in another class I had to write a criticism of an article written by an art scholar. Since we read our assignments in class, I realized that I had written a summary but not a critical analysis of the article. I had misunderstood the assignment and the low grade I had received said it all.

"Get a D, get a degree" is an expression



Steven Schwarz (Chair, Physics) discusses a poster describing his Physics 213W course with Jason Tougaw (WAC Coordinator) and Tom Strekas (Dean, Division of Social Sciences) at QC's Scientific Writing Conference.

that is not unfamiliar to me, because I hear it many times during the course of a semester. But because I struggle for the right thought, the right word, or the right sentence while trying to write a paper, not just the grades, but feedback is important, as well as the discussions I have with my teachers on a one-on-one basis. My instructor's criticism and answers are directly applied to my work. In this way, I can see more clearly my mistakes, and I can have a better understanding of the instructor's directions, which will improve my future writing.

Lois Craft Student

I feel that professors' comments on students'

writing is the most helpful part in the development of writing skills. Unfortunately there are many professors who do not take the time to leave any criticism at all, and they do not realize their negative effect on students.

"Good job" or "This is terrible" are not adequate responses by themselves. How is one expected to improve based on these comments? Students that write well need to know why their writing is effective, and could be given ideas on fine-tuning. Those who have difficulty in producing essays and papers are totally reliant on the comments that are returned to them. To read that your paper "needs improvement" and/or to receive a letter grade is extremely disappointing when one writes a paper and tries one's hardest. I have received sentence-fragment comments that are vague, unfair and disheartening.

Giving constructive criticism should not be a burden. It is the professors' responsibility to help students. I have noticed that students are not encouraged to ask for help, and when they do, the professor is not available for whatever reason. I think that instructors need to stress the fact that writing is not an easily acquired skill and there is always room for improvement.

A professor's evaluation of my writing is more important to me than the actual grade because these comments help to improve future projects. I prefer to read marginalia, good or bad, as I review the piece. Students would find it easier to produce well-written papers if professors took more time to leave insightful and conscious remarks.

Nardia Lawrence Student

Some professors are horrible when it comes to giving grades for papers. The grades they give are based on criteria that only they can understand. This leaves students in the dark about ways to improve their writing and what the professor expects from them.

I had a professor who gave me two grades on my papers. I received a paper with a grade of B+ / A-. This confused me. It makes a huge difference for me if my grade is a B+ or an A-. Along with the grade there were also notes in the margin which commented on the mistakes I made, not ways of fixing them. After class I asked my professor what my final grade was, a B+ or an A-? His response was, "Well, your paper was between a B+ and an A-." This made no sense to me, so I asked him why it wasn't a solid A-. He said because it came close to it but it had some flaws that dropped it down to a B+.

I never received a definite answer from that

professor about my grade, and to make it worse my other two papers were both given double grades. I never went back to ask him about the other papers. I just took it for whichever grade was higher.

I would have liked for my professor to give me a solid letter grade and not be indecisive. This would have helped me much more because I would know where I stood at the end of the semester. Because of his inability to choose a solid grade, it was hard for me to trust his judgment.

Tom Pope Continuing Education

Think about the big picture. Then bring the big scene into the specifics. That's one way to bring a teacher's responses into the class so students linger with conversations. In my Prepare to Write course in Continuing Ed, one section deals with ways fiction writers handle details of plots and conflicts. Nevertheless, if the big picture demands that we search for selected details, then a system of outlining can help find those details. I have used a blending of what I call a *bounce-back outline* and a *world-building* exercise that prompts students to have ongoing conversations to take them to the larger canvass.

One form of engaging students to seek information is a bounce-back outline that can work beyond plot development. The bounce-back sets up a character's actions in the left-hand column, while the world of the character produces a cause or effect in the right-hand column. Students can then see the character acting and responding to the world. For example, a character in the cold woods might start a fire, but the nature around the tree could cause the ice on the branches to melt on the flame. A series of the actions allows students to think about a larger part of that world.

However, what are the details in that large world? The student is drawn to discover more about the type of world the character lives in. Does the character reside in a northern climate, or a society that lacks fur clothing? How does the character obtain what he needs through currency, barter, or stealing? As the student responds to these questions, s/he finds details about the larger picture.

When we teach, we always seek ways to engage students to delve further. If we can think of the big picture, whether it is political, social, or scientific, we can design outlines that gravitate beyond to other parts of the whole topic. The bounce-back or world-building techniques help us use a friendly structure that isn't dry. These approaches can move the student to explore aspects of any topic.

Caroline Rupprecht Comparative Literature

When it comes to student papers, there is no one-size-fits-all. Of course, there are guidelines to help students in the process, but in the end, a good paper conveys a strong point of view. If a draft doesn't seem to have that, I search for moments that reveal a more passionate engagement on the part of the author. I sit down with students to discuss their work,

to tease out what seems really important to them. Often, I find that students have a preconceived notion of what they think I want to hear, so I encourage them to write what they really think. I certainly do not judge the quality of a paper by whether or not I personally agree with the author's statements. In fact, my own views of a given subject have, at times, changed as a result of my students' insights. My sense is that, often, students are afraid to make their voices heard. However, I tell them that no one wants to read writing that does not reflect a genuine engagement with the topic. If someone is just trying to fulfil a requirement—without being connected to what they write, it usually results in an uninteresting paper. As long as the person is committed to making something happen, the outcome will be original.

Kelly Gates Media Studies

When contemplating my feedback strategies, I realized that I hadn't given much deliberate thought to how my responses relate to the learning goals of my courses. Thus I thought that the most useful way to begin to remedy this shortcoming would be to have a frank discussion with some of my current students. I posed the question to my Media Criticism class: what kind of instructor feedback to papers have they found most helpful, and what kinds of comments have they found most stifling? Three themes emerged. First, a general consensus revolved around confusion about the relationship between an instructor's comments and the assigned grade. What do these two things have to do with each other? A second, related theme concerned the ambiguity of much of the feedback that students receive. For example, why do instructors waffle, from insisting that a paper has too many quotations, to taking students to task for missing key citations? Or, how exactly does one narrow one's focus, while at the same time adequately covering a topic? I'll sum the third theme up in a word: balance. While too many negative comments (or what one student referred to as "slaughtering" a paper) are unhelpful, most students feel slighted when an instructor fails to offer any constructive criticism at all.

As writing instructors, rather than carefully processing every comment we write on a paper to determine how it relates to the learning goals of our courses, it may be more helpful to take seriously these concerns. There is no one correct way of resolving these issues, but they do require an ongoing dialogue with students about their writing. Giving students opportunities to talk about the feedback they receive might help them begin to interpret it.

Darshanand Ramdass Tutor, The Writing Center

As a Ph.D. student and a tutor, I have seen elaborate guidelines from instructors for writing topics. At the same time, there were instances

when there were no guidelines or they were scanty apart from the essay topic. As a student, I resolved this issue by approaching instructors and posing questions and getting appropriate feedback. My instructors were always welcoming and supportive. However, this approach can pose problems for students who feel intimidated by professors, especially ESL students, who may be unable to communicate their ideas efficiently.

Feedback is a communicative device that enables students to learn the strengths and weaknesses of their papers. Communication is a bi-directional process between instructors and students. To obtain the best performance from students and enhance their learning, instructors should have writing guidelines that are clear and understandable. At the beginning of the class, it is a worthwhile idea to go over the instructions with the entire class and encourage students to clarify with the instructor the difficulties in their writing whenever they arise. This collaborative process would allow instructors to improve the skills of good writers and help struggling writers by identifying their difficulties and tailoring feedback to facilitate improvement. Students are always taught to think about their writing and learning processes; likewise, instructors should always reflect on their instructional model.

Meta-cognitive instruction occurs when instructors reflect on what has worked and what needs improvement. Poor or inadequate instruction can lead to poor responses. Feedback is an aspect of instruction. It should match writing guidelines and be meaningful. The language of feedback should be simple and succinct. Feedback that confuses students will impair their writing abilities.

It sounds very elementary, but if a student turns in a rough draft in advance for feedback, 9 times out of 10 the final product is significantly better.

Lindsay S. Krasnoff History

One of the best methods for grading and responding to student writing is the art of the rough draft. It sounds very elementary, but if a student turns in a rough draft in advance for feedback, 9 times out of 10 the final product is significantly better. Improvements that I generally see are twofold: content-wise, in terms of fine-tuning some of the arguments or details that the original lacked; and also stylistical, evening out some sentences or phrasing that initially come across as rather awkward.

Why the rough draft? Though more time-

consuming for both the student and teacher, it allows for greater feedback. I will make general comments about the style of the student's writing so that they can fix some of the repeated offenses (should they exist). I strive to provide more in-depth feedback as to what areas the student should go back and spend time improving. The comments that I offer at the rough draft stage also focus upon fleshing out the story; this is the stage where I can give critical pointers as to what details are missing and how to form a more complete story or argument.

Lastly, in submitting a rough draft students also become more familiar with how I grade. Overall, I find that, as trite as it sounds, submitting a rough draft is usually the best way to give a preview of how a student's paper will be received and critiqued, and a good way of communicating with the professor.

Steven A. Schwarz Physics

Feedback is a profound and essential concept in the Sciences, and by coincidence is the topic du jour in my Circuit Theory course. In a feedback circuit, the output signal is modified and fed back to the input. As I emphasize in my course, a circuit diagram is often employed to mathematically model a complex system: a resistor can represent a water pipe or a hallway, while a capacitor might represent an oven or even a bank account balance. It is therefore tempting to see if the technical characteristics of a feedback circuit can apply to that complex system known as the classroom.

The benefits imparted to a circuit or a system by feedback, according to one of my embarrassingly old college texts (DiStefano et al. 1967), are increased accuracy, reduced sensitivity of the output to input variations, an increase in the range of inputs that the system can accommodate, and an unfortunate tendency to break into oscillation or instability. The latter effect sometimes occurs when the feedback can't keep up with changes at the input. The reader is invited to draw his or her own analogies to the classroom system.

The tendency toward oscillations (or overcompensation), and the consequent need for quick feedback, brings to mind an exercise I tried in my writing intensive course last semester (Physics 220W, Current Issues in Physics). The students were challenged to produce a winning résumé for John Smith, a Physics major. The details of John Smith's academic career, job experience, family background, and hobbies were provided in a wordy and cumbersome paragraph, which I had no trouble producing. Students were also given an employment ad from *The New York Times*, and were asked to attach a cover letter for the employer. Each student came to class with fifteen unsigned copies of his or her résumé and letter, which were distributed to all class members. Students then

spent half an hour reviewing these materials (two minutes per résumé is all one can expect from an employer), voted on which John Smith was most likely to be hired, and orally defended their votes in class. The advantage of this approach, aside from reducing the grading effort required from me, was that students quickly honed in on the proper technique, and were less likely to overshoot in their response to any cryptic remarks I might scrawl in the margins.

Quick feedback, the feedback that occurs in the classroom, differentiates the classroom experience from recorded lectures and on-line instruction. The latter may present large amounts of information very effectively, but feedback is slower than the pace of normal conversation. This is a significant disadvantage.

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Divine Varghese

Student

When I was a student at Nassau Community College, I took an Advanced Writing class. The professor who taught the course was one of the toughest I had ever encountered. He analyzed every line and word I wrote and returned my paper with detailed comments. Since I was not used to this type of feedback, I felt like I had failed miserably in my attempt to write the paper. Needless to say, I got a C on the paper. But my professors helped me rewrite the paper and improve upon it. I had to rewrite the paper at least four times to meet the teacher's expectations and finally get an A. Each time I rewrote that paper, I focused on making wise use of the words and on the contents itself. Since it was a paper on how and why I got into the field of writing, I became too personal at times and wandered off. What my professor wanted was something that answered his question, involved personal element, and yet followed all the conventions of an academic essay. This experience was definitely frustrating and made me paranoid about everything I put down on the paper. But the final result was worth it, because in the end my professor taught me to be accountable for every word that I used and every idea I expressed. What started out as an annoying experience turned out to be something positive for me! That's why now I look forward to receiving feedback—positive or negative—from my professors: I feel that it makes me a stronger writer.

John P. Weir

English

I mainly teach Creative Writing and my students often ask me, "How can you grade someone's creativity?" I urge them to forget

about the word "creative" and think instead in terms of "craft." "Writing a sentence is like building an engine," I say. "It's about putting parts together in the right order, and it doesn't matter how 'creative' you are if you can't get the thing to work." The final product will never be complete if the proper form is not achieved. This reminds me of my older brother and the cassette player I got for Christmas in 1972. Hours after I unwrapped it, my brother took it apart, and then he put it back together wrong. It still played, but everything was blurry and slow. As far as I know, there were no up-tempo songs in the '70s. If I had been a college professor when I was thirteen, I would have given my brother an A for curiosity, an A for willingness and audacity, and an A for getting the job done. Then, of course, I would have had to point out to him that the thing didn't actually run.

That's my job in Creative Writing classes: to help my students take apart their sentences and put them back together in a way that works. I don't find grades to be an especially useful part of this process, precisely because I think a letter grade scrawled across a short story raises the question, "How dare you judge my work of art?" I don't want students to think of their writing as a product of "artistic genius," but rather as the result of a careful exploration and application of issues of craft. Instead of grading their writing, I write plenty of comments. I like to reflect back to them exactly what it seems to me their stories are doing. For example, I may write, "Here is a story narrated in first person by a woman who wants to get to the train on time. It's told in present tense, the diction is simple, the

tone is humorous."

Students don't always know what their writing is doing. So I try to tell them. Then I point out where it seems to me that their work is not having the effect they intend, and, of course, where it is having that effect. In other words, I write pages and pages of comments on their work. This is, I admit, a problematic strategy, because it is often hard for me to keep up with my students' writing; and my students sometimes can't keep up with my comments. "Professor Weir," they say, looking abashed, "your comments are twice as long as my story."

On the other hand, I know I have helped some of my students to write more effective sentences. And it seems to me that, in helping a student get more engaged in the practice of writing, a teacher's written comments are crucial. Talking to students about their writing, out loud, in front of their classmates, is one way to help them learn how sentences work. I have discovered, however, that my most motivated students respond very positively to the private dialogue that is generated between a student's writing and a teacher's written response. That unvoiced dialogue strikes me as essential, though I have not yet solved the difficulty of being unable to devote the necessary amount of time and attention to every single one of my students, in every class, every semester.

Take a Look at WAC's New Web Site

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Revisions: views

The Joy of Writing

Constance Tagopoulos, European Languages and Literatures

During the years I've been teaching writing intensive literature courses, I have often wondered whether the act of writing affords any pleasure to the student. Except for a few cases, my impression is that for the student the writing experience is today closer to torture than it is to joy.

Unless the student possesses writing skills that need only refinement, the journey is perilous, and the struggle toward building the lacking basic needs not always successful. It's difficult to respond to the substance of student writing, when the writer lacks proficiency in basic skills.

The mastering of basic writing skills is the most serious problem plaguing the writing program. Our students – in fact today's students everywhere – are deficient in writing, reading, and comprehension. This assessment is confirmed again in *The New York Times* (2/26/06):

The most recent findings from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy revealed distressing declines in literacy, especially among those with the most education. For example, fewer than a third of college graduates—down from 40 percent a decade ago—were deemed “proficient” in terms of literacy as defined by the ability to read and understand lengthy passages placed before them. A small but still alarming percentage of college graduates scored “below basic,” meaning that they were incapable of all but the simplest tasks.

“Alarming,” “below basic” are words that illustrate exactly what we see in our classes. Yet, we must recognize that trying to write an essay is torture if a student does not have the grammar, the syntax, and an acceptable vocabulary. This does not apply solely to the majority—the culturally diverse students—but also to the native speakers of the English language. Today's average student cannot read literature, retain abstract ideas, or even distinguish and remember plots and characters; cannot compare or draw conclusions. To deal with the problem, we are forced to backtrack, slow down, and start from scratch, fighting all the time the resulting need to lower our standards. No wonder why there is little joy in writing, no pleasure in using creatively this great tool of self expression and practical utility. More than once, students have come to me in despair because they could not understand the straight forward plot of a novel. The students' attention span is steadily shrinking. The teacher ends up telling stories rather than leading a critical exchange of ideas. Plagiarism and academic dishonesty, especially in literature courses, is a consequence of students' inability to comprehend. Like their notes, the teacher's annotations are but another incomprehensible text which the student ignores. Downloading a text from websites like “Need-a-Paper.com” comes as an easy and fast solution.

Besides the absence of basic skills, grammar and syntax, students suffer from another confusion. *Why do we need an essay to learn how to write? Why is an essay useful to a professional?* (“Essay” becomes an exotic, fear-inspiring word for the student). Why spend so much time learning what a thesis is? How long will the concept of “genre” be remembered by a non-liberal arts student? A student I remember, ignoring the title of the assignment, wrote a paper in which she expressed “poetically” her inner personal feelings. She responded to my criticism by saying: “I have seen this writing in books by famous authors and poets.” I observed that “creative” writing is not our purpose here and that there are different kinds of writing. I cited Milton who begins a new paragraph in *Areopagitica* with the phrase “Which although...” followed by all parts of speech except a main verb, and added that she was not Milton, who, anyway, was writing a speech. Her paper had serious errors of grammar and syntax and an affected, unnatural language. Writing clearly in a direct and simple language is something this student had unfortunately learned to avoid.

Under the circumstances, teaching writing in conjunction with literature becomes frustrating. The gaps to be filled are too many—and too many are also the students in a writing class. Grading approaches, assignments, and what kind of feedback to give to the student vary in different departments and even among

different instructors. We are told that we should not correct grammar, just read and grade; that too many explanations discourage our students, whereas too few make them think they deserved a higher grade. My students accept without protest my comments and grades because I return their papers with so much feedback and detailed notes that they are grateful for the grade they receive. In their evaluations they admit that the instructor's comments were helpful. I also keep track of the progress they make (repetition of the same mistakes if remembered by the teacher impresses them) and I make it clear from the beginning that I will be grading progress rather than effort. I discuss all problems with my students in person. They understand that keeping in contact with the teacher is important and works in their favor. For the sake of justice, I must say that there are always the good, sometimes excellent students. An honors freshman course I taught last semester will be remembered with pleasure, but also with sadness because the difference from the norm throws into sharp relief a paradise that is constantly receding in the distance, while the teacher relives the tortures of Tartarus.

In this context, let me share with you some thoughts – for whatever they are worth.

1. Reading should be taught as part of writing—but not at the expense of the material a course must cover. Such classes should be offered before the three hundred level courses. Entering students with a non-liberal arts background should not take advanced literature courses with a writing component.
2. Students should not be allowed to enroll for a writing course before taking English 110. Although this is an established requirement, it is not always observed. Students are sometimes allowed to take English 110 simultaneously with a writing intensive literature course. The student's writing ability is thus graded before s/he is given the opportunity to benefit from this basic writing course.
3. The size of a writing class should be reduced. Too many students drain the teacher and induce invisibility and anonymity.
4. Science departments should follow writing policies compatible with those of a humanities class in teaching writing. Last summer I had a graduating student from a science discipline who confessed that the paper he wrote for my class was the first he ever wrote during his entire college life!
5. Plagiarism should be revisited in terms of the weakness of our students to respond otherwise to the demands of their studies. The problem should be faced not only by punishing the plagiarists, but also by stopping those students before they arrive at this point. A more demanding, higher-level reading and writing entry examination should, for example, be considered.
6. Articulation with high schools with respect to the student's preparation for college is imperative. Reading and writing must be emphasized and prioritized in the High School curriculum.

Is there actually hope that knowledge can still bring joy to a student's life? How can we resist excessive, dehumanizing practicality? With our burgeoning cultural diversity, the fast pace of proliferating technological achievements, and the rising cost of education, the need to shorten a student's journey through college seems logical. In the haste of our lives, Cavafy's suggestion may sound foolish today: “When you set out for the voyage to Ithaca/ pray that your journey may be long/ full of adventure, full of knowledge.” Yet the loss must be recovered. How can we rekindle the forgotten excitement of intellectual discovery and of the adventure of learning if not by fighting the extreme passion for practical, fast-food solutions? To turn torture to joy, our students deserve a longer journey.

The Joy of Teaching Writing: A Response to Constance Tagopoulos

Jason Tougaw, Coordinator, Writing Across the Curriculum

Constance Tagopoulos's "The Joy of Writing" reads like a manifesto. Like all the best manifestos, it begins by observing a flaw with the status quo—"for the student the writing experience is today closer to torture than it is to joy"—and asserting a cause: a scarcity of basic writing skills.

Like the best manifestos, Tagopoulos's is demanding and insistent but also exuberant and exploratory. It demands faculty to consider the status of writing at Queens College; it insists that we take stock of this status before we enter into a discussion of the more particular question of how to respond most productively to our students' writing; it voices a collective frustration with sentence-level error. Like so many of the most influential manifestos, it concludes with a list of proposals for transformation, of both beliefs and practices. Even its ironic title, "The Joy of Writing," which laments the obstacles that come between our students and the writer's elusive joy, is characteristic of manifestos in its cutting tone and its longing for a better, more joyful and productive world.

Manifestos are borne out of acute frustration and passionate commitment. If Tagopoulos's frustration is representative of Queens College faculty, so is her commitment. Her initial observation, that writing is like torture for students, may be chalked up to the hyperbole of the manifesto style. But her assertion that students can't write deftly enough will seem realistic to many faculty. This is a commonly held belief that yields a commonly held fear: that we need "to lower our standards." We really have two questions here: 1) What does it mean to say students don't write well enough?, and 2) What can their teachers do to help?

Tagopoulos begins her essay by establishing "distressing declines in literacy" as a national crisis, citing an apocalyptic *New York Times* article reporting results from a study conducted by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. The article suggests that "fewer than a third of college graduates [...] were deemed 'proficient' in terms of literacy as defined by the ability to read and understand lengthy passages placed before them." The study jibes with the sense of many faculty at Queens College, who tell me they are frustrated because they don't know what to do when their students struggle with reading comprehension or articulating ideas in clear, readable prose.

The frustration is genuine: teaching reading and writing is hard work. Students don't follow an easy or linear path from illiteracy to literacy, even if we can agree on a definition of literacy. It's my intention as WAC Coordinator to offer faculty the resources they need to overcome the frustration. One of these resources, it seems to me, is a historical context for understanding the challenge.

The present is like the past. Historical studies of literacy make it clear that teachers—and political leaders and school administrators and journalists and parents—have worried a literacy apocalypse was at hand as long as reading and writing have been taught in institutional settings. (If you're interested in the subject, I recommend David Russell's essay "American Origins of the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Movement" or Lucille Schultz's book *The Young Composers*.) Literacy is difficult to measure. Like language, it evolves constantly. Students inevitably possess forms of literacy that elude their teachers. Literacy, as Tagopoulos suggests, means reading comprehension and the ability to write cogent sentences; but, as she also suggests, it involves the ability to draw inferences, make productive comparisons, analyze details, assess generalizations, transfer ideas from one medium or discipline to the next.

The question will remain controversial, but whether or not we are in the midst of a literacy crisis, it remains our job to help our students develop the skills, strategies, and ways of thinking they need to get the jobs they want, thrive in their relationships, reflect on their lives, understand the social and natural crises we all face, and contribute to—rather than simply consume—the various media through which we all do all of the above. It remains our job to resist the impulse to panic or throw up our hands. As Tagopoulos illustrates through example, it remains our

job to work with our students.

The single most effective response to the challenge will be to establish clear connections between our students' literacy development and the goals we have for them in our courses. To make this work, we need to articulate those goals for ourselves, communicate them with our students, give them opportunities to practice strategies for meeting those goals, and respond to their work in ways that help them understand their progress on particular assignments in relation to the larger goals of our courses and the college curriculum. In more concrete terms, we need to find ways to help students see, through experience, that explaining the solution to a proof or the ambiguity of a poem requires clear syntax, and that to achieve clear syntax a writer must write with intention. We must be able to make connections between discrete practices like these and the values inherent in the degrees conferred by the college. Finally, we need to help students recognize the value of their coursework in the world outside the university. With a new General Education proposal on the table, we at Queens College have an opportunity before us: to design curriculum with these practices embedded in it, a curriculum that gives students the opportunities to develop literacy in its many forms through an engagement with the contents and methods of our disciplines.

But first we need to take a collective deep breath. I've noticed a stand-off on campus, between those who believe that students can't do real thinking in our courses until they can craft graceful sentences and those who dismiss the teaching of grammar and mechanics as nothing more than an instrumentalist and ineffective hobby horse ridden by faculty uncomfortable with a generation of students who don't conform to their ideals. I'm oversimplifying the debate, but I hope it will be a productive oversimplification. Our students need to be able to write graceful sentences; they need to be able to read with genuine insight. They need this and much more—to be able to identify unresolved questions, ambiguities, and controversies as opportunities to join conversations; identify and evaluate evidence; analyze that evidence effectively; reflect on the implications of their ideas; wrestle with counter-arguments and others' points of view. Teaching them to do all this is hard work, but we are here to teach. That is our commitment.

I admire Constance Tagopoulos's commitment, and I understand her frustration. But I also wonder how students will respond to her characterization of them. She writes: "Today's average student cannot read literature, retain abstract ideas, or even distinguish and remember plots and characters; students cannot compare or draw conclusions." I wonder whether students would agree that "we must recognize that trying to write an essay is torture if a student does not have the grammar, the syntax, and an acceptable vocabulary." I've taught at a range of educational institutions, from an urban community college to the Ivy League, and faculty at all these institutions have expressed similar concerns. It's difficult to know what constitutes "the grammar, the syntax, and an acceptable vocabulary" that makes nuanced thinking possible, but there is quite a bit of compelling evidence to demonstrate that literacy develops on an as-needed basis. That means it is most fruitfully taught in context, as part of the process through which students learn to read analytically, retain abstractions, make productive comparisons, and draw conclusions. (If you're interested in reading more about this, I recommend Mina Shaughnessy's landmark CUNY-based study *Errors and Expectations* and Patrick Hartwell's "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar.")

As Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum, I have the particular responsibility to offer faculty some of the resources they need to pull

off the admittedly very hard work I am describing. These resources take many forms—the lesson plans, handouts, and readings on our web site; the workshops, roundtables, and conferences we host; and the Faculty Partners and CUNY Writing Fellows available to consult with departments, individual faculty, and students. No resource is ever more than a partial solution. The only long-term solution is for students and faculty to work hard and reflect on that work. With that in mind, let me borrow Tagopoulos’s manifesto style and end with a list, not of demands for change, but of suggestions for easing what sometimes feels like a tension between fostering literacy development and the contents and methods we want students to learn in our courses:

1. Spend some time examining the writerly or rhetorical strategies of course readings. Engage students in discussion of the relationship between these strategies and those they need to be successful in their writing for the course.
2. Break up big writing projects into a series of smaller stages—proposals, outlines, annotated bibliographies, partial drafts, fuller drafts, etc.—and offer feedback at key moments along the way. Hold off on sentence-level issues until the later phases of the process, unless a student is really in trouble. Take advantage of the Writing Center tutors and CUNY Writing Fellows available to work one-on-one with students throughout the process. Then, work out a plan with that student to assist him or her in getting the help s/he needs.
3. Work with students on grammar, mechanics, and syntax—but do it strategically. Work with individuals who are struggling, helping them set manageable goals and identify the extra work they need to do to achieve these goals. Work with students as a group when you notice that a significant number of them are struggling with a particular problem;

but do this in the context of the reading and writing of the course, so you send the message that the problems you’re identifying need to be addressed in order for students to succeed in the work you assign.

4. Be frank with students about their status in relation to your course goals and the larger goals of the curriculum. Let them know where they stand and give them opportunities to improve.
5. Find the pleasure where you can. Reading student writing can be a chore. It’s not always graceful or inspired, but more often than not it is evidence of human beings demonstrating the commitment and patience to sit down and use language to work through ideas. Broadcast your enjoyment in your responses to student writing.
6. Don’t expect easy solutions; do expect a collegial campus culture in which students and faculty articulate values and expectations, discuss their frustrations, and work collectively to find solutions.
7. Experiment. Share ideas with colleagues—classroom activities, handouts, assignments, etc. Share the complaints and horror stories too, but keep your eye on solutions.

*Note: All the readings I mention are available in the Writing Across the Curriculum Teaching Resource Library, located in 305 Delany Hall.

In Our Library

We have a growing library of books and articles on a range of topics related to writing, teaching, and learning—all available for faculty to borrow in the Writing Across the Curriculum Resource Library. The list here represents material from our collection that includes discussions of feedback, or responding to student writing. If you’re interested in a particular title, you can find our drop-in hours on the WAC web site <<http://www.qc.edu/Writing>>. Please stop by, borrow a book, photocopy an article, and see what else we have. If you’re looking for books or articles on a particular subject, contact us through the web site, and we’ll help you track it down.

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ReVisions: reflections

A Reflection on Diverse Feedback Cultures

Tsai-Shiou Hsieh

CUNY Writing Fellow

Most students are aware of instructors' different styles in grading and commenting on their writing: brief or detailed, encouraging or critical. But we have little knowledge about how students accustom themselves to diverse feedback patterns when moving from one classroom to another, or when progressing from a freshman to a senior. For the past decade, I have experienced radically different feedback environments across different disciplines and institutions. These experiences motivated me to take a closer look at different feedback cultures rooted in the minds of faculty, students' learning histories, and various classroom dynamics.

Before coming to CUNY several years ago, I majored in Zoology in Taiwan. Like most of my classmates, I once squeezed five different lab courses within the same semester. After the long lab hours and often frustrating experiment processes, my classmates and I usually had little energy left for writing up nice reports. We did nothing more than filling in numbers in a set of rather standard sentences. We also sensed from the professor and Teaching Assistants that the numbers counted most in the reports. Our grades usually depended upon whether we produced the desired results or not, and revisions were only needed when you blew up the experiment. Even when I occasionally got comments, I considered them more like corrections to my report than discussion about it. In general, there was almost no feedback system in the science departments, especially for younger undergraduates. I never linked feedback with learning at that time.

I carried this "no feedback" culture with me when I became an Urban Planning master's student in the same university. What differed most was my gradually developing enthusiasm for writing. My excitement reached the climax in a class called "Gender and Environment," in which the professor asked us to write ten reflection papers throughout the semester. Although I never articulated it, I started to expect comments on my writing; however, I never got anything back. Instead of being part of a lively conversation outside the classroom, my writings became monologues. I didn't know whether my papers were read, or even whether they were supposed to be commented upon. Despite being somewhat disappointed with the situation, I never approached the professor and asked for feedback. After all, I was happy about my grades, which I checked some time after the semester ended. My desire for comments did not blossom, but instead remained a hibernating seed.

When I look back on this story, I can't help but wonder: what kind of nourishment would a seed need to bud? Would it have been different if I had experienced plentiful, helpful feedback in my undergraduate studies? How could I have learned to discuss my thoughts with other classmates, or directly with the professor? What if I had suggested a peer review process? I was certainly curious about what other classmates wrote. Now I recognize that I pursued none of the above because I did not have a model demonstrating how to request feedback. Was that also the case for other students? What about the professor himself? Did he consciously choose not to comment on those papers? Or was it simply that he did not see feedback as an option or necessity? To what extent would my learning process have changed if this class had fostered a dynamic feedback culture?

These questions did not become visible until long after I learned

more about feedback. The way I understand how feedback works changed significantly after I left my home country and started studying in the United States. It was foreign to me how to interpret and respond to a professor's comments, and eventually incorporate them into the next writing assignment. I still remember vividly how frustrated I was when I got a B on the first paper in my third semester. The professor wrote at the end: "Your descriptions of the individual theorists are weak, but your integration is excellent." I did not understand this comment at all: How could I not be clear in parts but good as a whole? Was it because I had some strong ideas, but my words just couldn't carry them effectively? Again, my previous experience in Taiwan, where professors were more authoritative and less engaged with student writing, did not enable me to actively follow up. Surprisingly but fortunately, the professor encouraged me to talk about the paper with her after class. Intimidating at the beginning, this discussion turned out to be a great lesson for me in transforming critical comments into improvements of my writing. The professor's comments became much clearer after the meeting: she thought I had grasped the basic idea of each theorist but hadn't described them in detailed and precise language. I learned not only how to revise this paper, but how communication beyond written comments works. It was this face-to-face conversation that clarified some mysteries.

Although my story seems to have a happy ending, I wonder what would have happened if the professor had not invited me to discuss the paper. What if she thought it was my responsibility to actively seek further communication? My silence was due to lack of experience with feedback, but the same silence could be easily misunderstood as indifference. How can faculty be more sensitive to possible discrepancies between the feedback cultures in their minds, in the classroom dynamics, and in different students' experiences? It may be helpful to create a space where professors talk about their styles of giving feedback, and encourage students to share their previous experiences in receiving feedback and the ways of responding to their instructors' comments.

Students from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds may have different understandings of feedback, but they are by no means fixed. Different classroom experiences may have planted different seeds in their garden of knowledge; which seeds grow depends on the range of writing assignments, feedback styles, and revision requirements the student experiences in a given course. Those various nourishments are determined not only by faculty but also other students in the classroom. Students' expectations and responses to feedback are likely to be shaped by the dynamics in and outside the classroom. The same statement applies to the faculty: students' diverse responses to feedback may stimulate faculty to adjust the patterns of giving comments.

If we agree that a strong feedback culture helps students achieve educational goals, maybe we should start to think of ways to make feedback part of the curriculum, as an articulated knowledge that both faculty and students can cultivate together. The first step is to think about feedback in the context of the educational environments and draw closer connections to their learning goals. It is all too easy for both the instructors and the students to take their established feedback cultures for granted, and overlook that they might not be as effective in the current educational settings. My various experiences have made me believe that consistent communication between faculty and students throughout the course will facilitate better understanding. Faculty should express their expectations and evaluation criteria upfront, and students should be encouraged to question the feedback they get, and to discuss the ways of improvement with

Students from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds may have different understandings of feedback, but they are by no means fixed.

the professors—that is where professors and students begin to co-create an effective feedback culture that helps students achieve the learning goals of a course.

The Role of Feedback in Reconsidering Course Design

Mehmet Kucukozer
CUNY Writing Fellow

In the Summer of 2003 I began my first adjunct job at Hunter College, teaching an upper-level sociology course on development and modernization. In terms of writing, I had assigned only a final paper in which the students had to analyze the phenomenon of globalization among “Third World” countries through the lens of theories on social change we had covered. I remember being disappointed overall with the quality of the work: there was a lack of serious thesis-building as well as a general failure to follow the conventions of formal academic writing. In addition, citation of sources and a formal academic discourse seemed to be alien concepts. This was an upper-level Sociology course; why hadn’t students developed the methods of argument formulation? My instinctive reaction was to blame undergraduate English courses. I failed to ask, “What is my role as a teacher in the kind of work my students produce?”

Working as a CUNY Writing Fellow at Queens College for a year and a half has led me to reflect further on my practices as a teacher. The problem was that I had not sufficiently considered the goals of my course and, therefore, my role as a teacher. Implicitly, however, by blaming the English Department for “failing” to have my students sufficiently engage in academic writing, I was saying that it is up to English to deal exclusively with academic writing development while the rest of us can focus on having our students accumulate knowledge in the area we’re teaching.¹

Having read some of the literature on writing practices as part of Writing Fellow work, I realized that I needed to re-reflect and reconnect with the reasons I felt writing should be assigned, of how and why I should read my students’ written work. I needed to become more aware of some of the bad habits I could fall into when providing feedback on their writing. Reconnecting starts fundamentally with reflecting on what we do as scholars in a particular discipline, which is to write articles for conferences and journals, and reformulate and strengthen our ideas through feedback and revision. Shouldn’t we expect the same kind of work from our students? The feedback students receive from their teachers and peers forces them to revise and strengthen their ideas continuously.² The process of feedback is how students make disciplinary knowledge their own; this is how students can insert and assert themselves within the discussions and debates of the various disciplines. Helping students tackle the debates in a field, by making reference to the ideas already out there, also opens their eyes to the utility of such conventions as citation. Feedback is also a way to tackle some of the stylistic and grammar issues evident in student writings.

Consequently, I have come to strongly agree with Kerry Walk, Director of the Princeton University Writing Program, who states, “Comments and grades on student writing arguably constitute the most serious, sustained teaching intervention you can make in a student’s writing career.”³ Feedback, because of its importance, needs to be approached systematically.

Students need to be shown that writing consists of a series of interconnected steps that culminates in a thoughtful paper. An important part of this pedagogy is highlighting for the student the importance of seeking, obtaining, and responding to teacher and peer feedback. Short and related writing assignments of about 2 to 3 pages are one way of helping

students become more conscious of what the writing process entails, in addition to leading them to engage disciplinary knowledge (see Zeiser).

Teachers can make the task of providing feedback more meaningful and efficient by establishing clear guidelines for their assignments: What is the purpose of the assignment? What are the criteria for success? Is this assignment designed to aid in the completion of a later and larger assignment? (See also Zeiser.) These considerations will aid in determining the kinds of feedback required and the amount of time that the instructor needs to invest in reviewing papers. For example, a paper assignment can be broken down into smaller assignments, such as handing in an introduction or proposal as a first step. In this case the instructor would grade on whether there is a thesis statement and whether a method for how the thesis will be defended is put forth.

All too often, however, the way we respond to student writing reveals the incongruities between what we want our student-writers to learn and what the style of our comments indicate to them. We tend to employ two forms of responses simultaneously: interlinear comments—focusing on sentence-level or word-level stylistic errors—and marginal notes—which focus more on the meaning and ideas of the text. According to Nancy Sommers, interlinear comments encourage students to see their writing as static—where the meaning is already set and minor editing or attention to grammar issues will complete the project—while marginal notes suggest that the meaning of the text is still under development, that more research and the reformulation of ideas are required. Consequently, students are left wondering as to what is more important. Interlinear comments move students to see their work as an arrangement

The time invested in providing interlinear comments leads to a tradeoff; we often fail to respond adequately to the specific aspects of each student’s work—such as whether evidence supports a thesis effectively, information is accurately interpreted, or the paper speaks to the debates and issues in a particular field.

of fragments rather than as a whole text, the first draft as the definitive draft, and writing as a one-shot deal rather than a process.

Sommers adds that interlinear comments also promote overly broad and vague responses from teachers: “not clear,” the ubiquitous question mark, “avoid the passive voice,” “word choice,” etc. The time invested in providing interlinear comments leads to a tradeoff; we often fail to respond adequately to the specific aspects of each student’s work—such as whether evidence supports a thesis effectively, information is accurately interpreted, or the paper speaks to the debates and issues in a particular field. The proper use of the passive voice, as an example, is important, but it should not trump the student’s own struggle to create meaning through his/her personal interaction with information and ideas.

Vivian Zamel, in her study of “responding behaviors” by teachers of English as second language, discovered that students in this area were subjected to more surface-level interlinear style comments than typical undergraduates. Again, it is a question of tradeoffs: language learning naturally calls attention to grammar usage, which lessens the amount of time that can be invested by ESL teachers in aiding in the meaning construction process of the student. Is it possible that we as faculty in the

different disciplines revert to being language instructors when reviewing the writing of our many immigrant and international students? If so, our students, in turn, fall into thinking that writing is only a question of fixing stylistic issues.

Improving grammar usage and style have to do in large part with practicing writing. As students write more, they reflect more on writing. A constant series of informal, low-stakes writing exercises can certainly help in this regard. One example is having students regularly write their personal reflections on the material they read for homework in the form of a journal. This has the double advantage of ensuring that students are reading, and it helps them prepare for their more formal written assignments.

Instructors also have the right to insist that they will not accept work that is egregious in the level of usage errors, and that it is mainly the responsibility of the student to address these problems before handing in work. It should be made clear to students that grammar and stylistic questions are important elements in the meaning making process, which is the primary function of their writings, and that they are responsible for investing sufficient time in such matters if they want credit for their courses. Students should be informed of what useful written sources are available on grammar and what resources are available on campus. The emphasis should be on the importance of having various sets of eyes review their work in terms of both meaning-building and style.

Ultimately, our role as instructors is to prepare students intellectually in analyzing and evaluating information and ideas. After all, this is what we do as teachers in our respective disciplines. We need to reconnect our practices with our students—that is, our methods for engaging knowledge, forming conclusions based on this knowledge, and seeking out feedback from peers in devising and revising our written drafts. In doing so, we will discover effective clues for designing our courses.

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¹ As a QC Writing Fellow I discovered I was not alone in making a scapegoat of the English Department. A similar question has been posed to me on various occasions by faculty frustrated by the quality of their students' written work. Also, a professor of English pointed out at a recent faculty workshop that teachers of other departments often unrealistically expect students to learn everything about writing in a three-month introduction to composition.

² A four-year longitudinal study, carried out by Nancy Sommers, Laura Saltz, and a team of researchers surveying the Harvard class of 2001 from the moment of their matriculation in 1997 certainly confirms Walk's point of view. The article points to the important psycho-social role that feedback plays in helping entering students successfully transition to college-level academic work. Feedback also plays an important role in the cognitive development of students as they proceed

and pursue their intellectual interests.

³ I am using Walk's definition of feedback: "Responding to a student's paper involves (1) reading it carefully while making marginal comments, (2) writing a final comment in which you sum up the paper's strengths and weaknesses, the (3) deciding on a grade."

Surfing Between Languages

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Linguistic signs—Walter Benjamin once wrote—are bound to get mixed up when things get complicated. With regard to ESL student writing in the babel of voices of American academia, the assertion could be legitimately reversed: things are bound to get complicated when linguistic signs get mixed up. Yet, my purpose is not to stress the distinctiveness of international students in order to plead for the need of a special response strategy; on the contrary, as scholars remark, the kinds of responses ESL students receive function as a litmus test to show what teachers' responses to all students actually are or should be.

An anecdote: A middle-aged Italian professor of General Linguistics has been inaugurating his recent courses at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" by presenting a couple of terms familiar to his generation and asking his Italian students what those expressions mean. The result of the inquiry is usually discouraging, for the majority of the students ignore the words or provide inappropriate answers. The anecdote serves to prove that even our mother tongue is neither a simple repertoire of abstract prescriptions, nor a homogeneous entity, but—as linguistics has been teaching us since the early 1900s—it is a code comprised of multiple layers, characterized by regional, age-related, social, stylistic, and genre inflections. It does

not come as a surprise then, especially in the era of globalization and so-called "digital culture," that the professor and his younger audience do not share the same encyclopedia—that is to say, the same cognitive background as well as the same vocabulary (Simone). A centrifugal and "situational" force stratifies and pluralizes any language, transforming it into a multiplicity of languages which interfere—dialogue or conflict—with one another.

If it is true that a dimension of strangeness characterizes each national language, the case of the ESL students does not represent an exception confirming linguistic uniformity as a fixed rule; ESL students simply reflect the interdependence of diverse languages and cultures, those of the minority and those of the larger society. Languages are never neutral. They are always interwoven with culture and carry with them world-views irreducible to a comprehensive or uniform discourse.

In the "immense body" of a country like the United States (as Alexis de Tocqueville defined the U.S. in 1831 because of its massive immigration), the institutions of higher education mirror the multilingualism and multiculturalism of the nation at large, attended as they are by a population formed by an increasing number of students who are non-native users of English. For example, according to the approximate statistics¹ provided by the Office of Institutional Research at Queens College for

Senior Colleges		Comprehensive Colleges		Community Colleges	
Language	%	Language	%	Language	%
Spanish	27.5	Spanish	42.1	Spanish	49.7
Russian	14.9	Russian	9.4	Russian	7.0
Chinese	12.9	Chinese	7.7	Chinese	5.0
Cantonese	6.1	Creole	5.0	Creole	3.7
Bengali	4.6	Cantonese	3.9	Bengali	3.1
Korean	3.2	Polish	3.5	Urdu	2.4
Urdu	3.0	Urdu	3.2	French	2.4
Polish	2.6	Bengali	3.0	Polish	2.4
Creole	2.2	Arabic	2.5	Korean	2.0
Arabic	2.0	Albanian	2.3	Cantonese	1.7
Other	21.0	Other	17.4	Other	20.5
Number of Languages Spoken (121 Total)		80	81	102	

*Based on students whose native language is not English.

CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment

the Fall 2005 semester, only 31% of the undergraduates declare English as their native language, whereas 7% speak Spanish, 3.5% Chinese, 3% Russian, etc.

We should proceed, however, without simplistic generalizations. As Dr. Howard Kleinmann, Director of the Academic Support Center at Queens College, pointed out to me, “the term ‘ESL’ encompasses a wide range of skill levels in English.” So, what kind of ESL students do we have in mind? Certainly not those students who are perfectly skilled in the spoken and written target language as a result of having received a high level of education in their countries of origin, but those who encounter difficulties in communicating fluently in English, and surely need comfortable learning environments and effective instruction which could facilitate their transition and adjustment to a different world. It is the latter kind of second language students who, struggling to voice their own experiences and viewpoints, and often seen as low-achieving students, are often silenced and placed in remedial courses, frequently on the basis of an outdated deficit model of cognitive evaluation that focuses primarily on their problems with English (see Hull et al.).

Let us look at the concrete case of “Coral,” a student who majors in History and Art History at Queens and whose first language is Spanish. She sincerely values her teachers’ responses, which she has generally found “beneficial in the development of [her] ability to write in an unfamiliar language.” What is more relevant is what Coral recalls below about the evaluation of her papers: “My papers had more red ink than black, and my professor had so many things to say about my errors in grammar, sentence structure, misuse of words, topic sentences, punctuation, etc.” No wonder Coral felt “completely discouraged.” That in her writing only the surface errors were marked (and significantly there is no reference to cycles of drafting and revising practices) can lead us to think that Coral’s papers were used to measure her language proficiency only, rather than being employed as an opportunity for both the teacher and the student to discuss and exchange perspectives related to the topic and the content of the paper.

Did Coral’s teachers value her lived experiences, diverse cultural affiliation and literacy, personal voice and authority? Did they take into account the nature of her arguments and their texture? Did they question their own perhaps preconceived assumptions about the writing process, or overlook the meaning in words, perhaps rubber-stamping an “unreliable” and “uncommunicative” letter grade on the paper (Elbow 188-90)? I also wonder if they misled her with an erroneous and de-contextualizing separation between language and progressive discovery of new significance through writing. Even expert scholars experience a condition of “infantilization” (etymologically: “inability to speak”) when dealing with the virgin territory of a new approach or meaning for which a traditional or conventional vocabulary is not yet available. Finally, provided that it is not Coral’s omission, the absence of references to any link between the writing of a formal essay and the class activities is also noteworthy. In the case of the ESL students, such activities—both oral and written, evaluated or not—are indispensable not simply to encourage the students’ academic growth, but also to foster and soften their existential and intellectual negotiation between two cultures. On the other hand, in the attempt to be an active participant in her own development, Coral did not hesitate to solicit face-to-face conferences with her teachers, which can result in a better and deeper understanding between student and teacher, both individually and culturally.

It has become quite common for teachers to value and emphasize the richness of experience and the challenges the ESL students bring into their classrooms. Yet, it is not rare to encounter composition scholars who uncritically or unintentionally promote a discriminatory vision of authority: such a vision requires students to passively accommodate and conform to an imperative set of rules and codes of academic behavior

established by those who are institutionally empowered, rather than giving learners the help, methods and tools needed to articulate their own voices, in particular when the latter are voices bearing an “alien” discourse. I am thinking here, for example, of how questionable David Bartholomae’s statement is, because of its conservative bent, when he writes: “To speak with authority [the student writers] have to speak not only in another’s voice but through another’s code; [...] they have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom; [...] they have to do it before they know what they are doing, before they have a project to participate in, and before [...] they have

anything to say” (644).² What rouses my disagreement with Bartholomae’s approach is its peremptory tone and subsequent deference to an established authority, as well as the alienation and reification it enacts in its pronouncements. We should, instead, keep firmly in mind the Latin etymology of “author,” an *actor* (literally: “one who causes to grow”)

being not an individual who sets out the only sanctioned cognition and conventions, but an individual who enhances knowledge through her/his personal contribution.

Thanks to their “cross-border” condition, ESL students can make significant contributions to classroom inquiry. They bring with them a range of unique perspectives, experiences, and forms of knowledge. What teachers can do is provide them with effective research methodologies, thoughtful assignments, and well-targeted feedback. To do this, teachers must cultivate an ethical disposition that involves listening to ESL students, reading beyond superficial impressions, and focusing something more profound: the writer’s engagement with ideas.

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¹ The survey shows a percentage of 39.5 constituted by missing/unknown data, which stands for the students who did not respond.

² Bartholomae’s view is founded on the premise that educational communities are institutions where the dominant culture tends inevitably to impose and perpetuate its own discourse. Nevertheless, one can notice a subtle shift from an objective and realistic description to a resigned acceptance. Moreover, although the author asserts that the students must at some point work against the conventions of academic discourse, he fails to point out how they should engage in this process of re-invention of the university. For a critique on Bartholomae’s position see also Zamel (515-16).

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They are always interwoven with culture and
carry with them worldviews irreducible to a
comprehensive or uniform discourse.**

Myprofessor.com: Useful Reviews or Exploitation?

Fatmir Haskaj
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Feedback, for both students and teachers, is an essential aspect of the learning process. It is through the loop of information that adjustments, variations and transformations in teaching styles and materials are made possible. Traditionally, it is the teacher who provides feedback to the students. Recently, evaluations of teachers by students in the university have become part of the institutional practices of higher education. But what happens when the loop excludes the teacher and is oriented toward a student-consumer?

When I started teaching, someone forgot to tell me that my students would be giving me detailed reviews that would be accessible for eternity to anyone with an internet connection. The website that makes all this possible, www.ratemyprofessor.com, has 5,013,202 anonymous reviews on professors throughout the U.S. and Canada and gets over 9 million visits a year, as opposed to the Queens College student-run faculty review site (qcstudents.com), which is sorely underused. Professors are rated on a 1 to 5 scale in four categories. The categories are easiness, helpfulness, clarity and rater interest. There is also a small box allowing for comments such as “Bring a pillow for your pillow” or “She hates you already.” Along with emblems such as the smiley face or sad face there is the much coveted “chili pepper” that occasionally appears, indicating the ‘hotness’ factor of the instructor.

I guess professors might get excited at the prospect of fame or infamy, depending of course on the whim of their students. When I first heard of the site, I thought, “Great, another useless review site.” But I have to say I am somewhat impressed by what appears to be relatively genuine and informative reviews—which used to be free. Ah, here is the rub: *used* to be free. If you want the complete skinny on Professor X you will have to pay for it. Viewers can still access up to ten reviews free of charge, but full access is now only available through a subscription. If students had been paying attention during my classes on political economy then they may have caught on to the catch, not in the reading but in the writing. Thousands of students have donated their time, thought and experience to the enrichment of others. Their feedback is for sale, but they’re not getting a penny.

Writing is a form of work. Students know this better than most, judging from the moans and groans when papers are assigned. Intellectual labor has already been integrated into the market system in the form of copyright laws, publishing houses, and expensive journals. While we all begrudge having to write papers, there is at least some personal gain. There is the sense of accomplishment, learning, and most importantly, the college credits that lead to a college degree and higher lifetime earning potential. What’s more is that the paper is yours. You own it. Yet, the online reviews, while helpful to students shopping for teachers, provide nothing for the writer monetarily and benefit the host quite a bit.

The Internet is big business. Online sales in the U.S. reached \$69 billion in 2004. While the United States represents 5.1% of the world’s population, it accounts for 23% of online usage. It is estimated that by 2007 89% of Americans will be online, spending an average of 3 hours a day (Minniwatts International). This comes to a total of 21 hours a

week or 2 ½ work days of free labor (Terranove) for the “Social Factory.”¹ It turns out that Americans are truly a generous people since they apparently enjoy working for free. But how has it come to this? Why are we spending precious time and energy on the Internet when we have our own work, lives and relationships that need attention?

In order to answer the question we have to go back to 1963 when the internet was a cold war fantasy for a post-nuclear apocalypse communications system. In that year President John F. Kennedy declared that consumer rights were an extension and supplement of human rights. This integration of two liberal market principles, humanism and consumerism, focused on the individuality and conscious rational nature of actors in market driven societies. We as members of a society are presumed to be equal in a legal sense as well as in a rational sense. Essentially we all have the right to know, since we are all people with the capacity to the think and make decisions that are in our best interest. Following in the tradition of thinkers such as Adam Smith, the selfish decisions we make as consumers benefit the collective by producing equilibrium of power through competition. According to this logic, democracy is only possible in a free market society that has collapsed

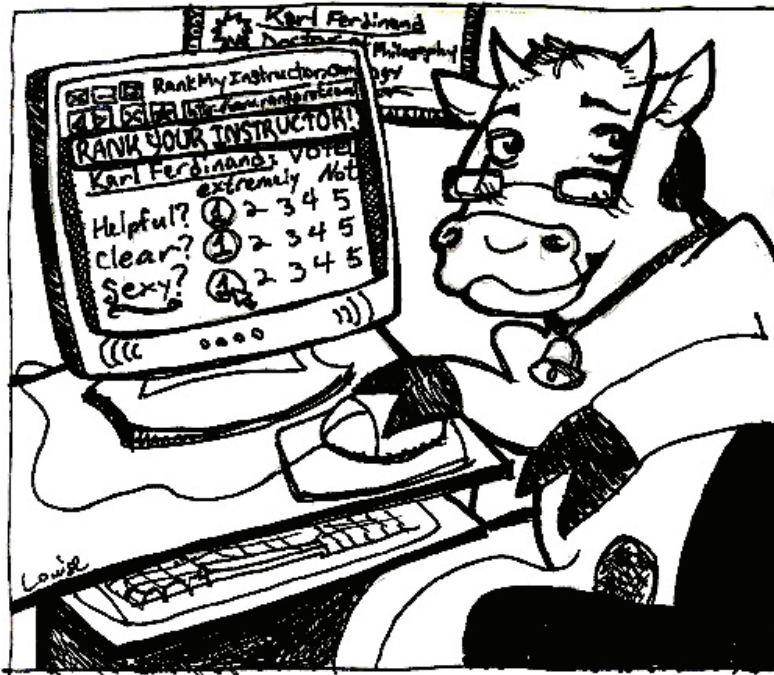
the human into the consumer since choice, whether political or economic, becomes a selection process of universally commodified forms. What becomes paramount in the association of humanism and consumerism is knowledge. To be an effective shopper, of political candidates, DVDs or professors, one must know something about the commodities in question. JFK’s instantiation of consumer rights marks the beginning of the age of the educated consumer.

The educated consumer is also the charitable free-laborer of the digital age. Historically, the consumption of knowledge is embedded within the norm of universal human rights. The argument is that in order to be fully human in the modern sense, one must be socialized and developed, imbued with the

principles, values and instrumental reason of the society of which one is a member. Competition, the hallmark of capitalism, is best served by an equal playing field. The City University of New York was founded upon these principles and its recent embattlement indicates more than a neo-conservative push for privatization. The attacks upon CUNY’s funding and progressive tuition hikes are based upon the ‘quality’ of a commodity. The rational free actor presumed in Adam Smith’s free-market economy deserves to select from the highest possible quality commodities.

As internet connections have become ubiquitous and necessary as the digital age comes into its own, many of us turn to online review sites to guide us in our consumption. The referencing to the net is an integral ingredient of mass consumption in the digital age. America has become populated by the “educated consumer.” We want to know everything about the products we are thinking of purchasing and an education has also become a commodity which is subject to the same logic as durable goods. Schools are ranked by such widely read and controversial magazines as *U.S. News and World Report*.

It seems only inevitable that the professor too would become commodified. Despite the historical protections of the university system, knowledge and its modes of transmission have become subject to the same regulating forces of the market. While I think it tragic and ultimately detrimental to the students that education and educators are being turned into commodities of the privileged, what is even more inexcusable is the double exploitation of the students. In the first instance



students are forced to negotiate the preestablished hierarchy of value in the educational system. They must acquire the highest valued commodity, a college degree from a prestigious school. Of course this value is set by those who have the means and power to do so. As Ralf Miliband noted, this creates a self-selecting and replicating system. Any rational actor will value her own assets highest in order to increase and preserve their worth. So elites will continually value elite institutions and markers. The Ivy League will continue to dominate the upper ranks of schools as long as Ivy Leaguers continue to decide which are the best schools. In the second instance, students pay tuition, attend classes, and

While I think students deserve to be an active part of the educational process, and the educational system can benefit from their response and active involvement, the for-profit review phenomenon is just another instance of free labor and exploitation that has become endemic to the digitized mass consumption age.

then write a review for ratemyprofessor.com for free. The student has just shelled out thousands of dollars in tuition and lost earnings, spent precious time and energy to create a product, the review, that is then sold back to the students. The student is not compensated for his work and investment. The value created by the students is extracted in the process of commodity circulation. [Ratemyprofessor.com](http://ratemyprofessor.com) skims the fat of the milk and passes it around.

While I think students deserve to be an active part of the educational process, and the educational system can benefit from their response and active involvement, the for-profit review phenomenon is just another instance of free labor and exploitation that has become endemic to the digitized mass consumption age. We are all becoming netslaves as we pay for access and then write and produce knowledge which is circulated as commodities without ever compensating the creators. Every time we publish on the net, we increase its value. Whether it is the ubiquitous blog, homepage or forums that many of us spend hours on, we are all contributing to a great reservoir of knowledge and thought, a truly collective process that becomes the legal property of the few.

Being a digi-junky, I had high hopes for the liberating potential of the Internet. Yet, it seems to be haunted by the same specter that made the 20th century a bloody conflict-riven century. When I think of ratemyprofessor.com the anarchist Proudhon comes to mind... well he said it better than I ever could: "No extended argument would be required to show that the power to take from a man his thought, his will, his personality, is a power of life and death; and that to enslave a man is to kill him." In this case we are giving away our thought instead of using it as feedback in the circuit of education and knowledge to enrich ourselves.

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¹"Work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine" (Negri).

Engaging Students in the Academic Ballroom

Jungchun Roslyn Ko
CUNY Writing Fellow

Mark Gaipa uses a brilliant image to illustrate his students' engagement with sources in an argument-based essay about Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises*: he proposes that students see themselves entering a conference ballroom where critics have already gathered and heated debates are underway. Students, then, are faced with the following challenges: *where* do they see themselves in this metaphorical ballroom—a space where criticism is taking place and operating as conversation? Should they position themselves, for instance, at the center of the room where the most prestigious and authoritative critics congregate, or should they move toward the margins of the arena and let themselves drop out of the conversation? After finding a place in the ballroom, *how* can they enter the preexisting conversation and even learn to contribute to the ongoing debates? Gaipa intends this image to serve as a starting point at which his student-writers will begin to visualize their engagement with sources and criticism as part of academic writing practice and, eventually, of academic culture itself. Here, I would like to borrow and push the use of this image one step further in framing and discussing the aims of teacher response to student writing.

Let's return to Gaipa's image of a conference ballroom. This time, we will try to visualize academia as a huge ballroom, where we find not only critics of disciplinary traditions but also ourselves as teachers. We would like to ask ourselves: what roles do we play and how do we function in this room? How do we see our students in this space, or, in other words, how do we see their relation to us and to those who came before them into the room? Perhaps the last questions can be answered first. As teachers, we would like to see our students as qualified members who can access the ballroom. Better, we would like our students to feel included and confident in the room, to remain self-possessed, and to engage in meaningful (and enjoyable) conversations with those around them. Teacher response to student writing, then, plays a pivotal role in facilitating this process in which student-writers learn to see and position themselves, through effective writing, as part of the academic community—as players in the ballroom. Seen in this light, teacher response to student writing becomes a conversation about conversation: it functions as a local conversation between teachers, as facilitators or mediators, and students. It is an engagement that aims at generating more engagement between student-writers and disciplinary traditions and debates.

Thus, when we respond to student writing, we do not simply respond to written products as students' idiosyncratic answers to the requirements of single assignments. We respond to a process—not only our students' writing process, but, perhaps more significantly, a process in which our student-writers grope their ways into the big ballroom and try to find room for themselves. Moreover, in our response to student writing, we would like our student-writers to engage disciplinary debates. As facilitators and mediators, we should aim our response and commentary at fostering student awareness of an ongoing engagement with the respective disciplinary community, and at aiding the formation of our student-writers' self-perceptions as active and confident members of the ballroom, who possess both presence and voice.

In my teaching in the past and my present service as a writing fellow, I have often met with students who, for instance, learned that the use of evidence and sources are "musts" in writing their course requirements but never understood why and, to say the least, how. To frame teacher response as local conversation about global conversation will help student-writers better understand the nature of academic writing and the goal of their writing projects. It will help our student-writers see why, in this case, it is never enough for them to simply insert quotations into their writing without sufficiently interacting with their sources. It will even help clarify the roles of evidence and sources in academic

writing in the first place; students will learn to see evidence and sources as more than inert, mechanistic, or tangential elements of writing, but instead as catalytic agents that serve to construct their own authority or credibility and to bring forth or build upon conversation with others. And if in our response we encourage our student-writers to perceive themselves as legitimate and respectful participants in the ballroom, they will come to understand the seriousness of plagiarism and the importance of tone and stance during their engagement with other participants in the arena.

To frame teacher response as facilitation in student-writers' entrance to and participation in the academic ballroom will help re-focus our students' attention—for, as Nancy Sommers points out, students tend to write and revise in accordance with the desire of the teacher. Hence, responding to student writing as facilitation, rather than critique, and thereby having students visualize themselves as members and participants of the academic ballroom can help them comprehend that writing,

as conversation or engagement within the academic space, is not about teachers but about themselves. Writing as such is about how student-writers, not teachers, construct their voices, stances and personae in order to make room for themselves in academic conversations. If we direct our responses not only at sentences or contents, but at the larger conversations of the academic community, we will help students develop a genuine engagement with ideas and a sense of how these ideas contribute to their personal development.

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A Writer Responds to Feedback

The Comments feature in Microsoft Word, which you can find (for both PCs and Macs) under the "Insert" menu, allows readers to insert feedback electronically. The "Track Changes" feature, located in the "Tools" menu allows you to see comments and compare stages or versions of a single document. The comments here focus on the final stages of editing, but you can also use them earlier, for more "global" feedback on ideas and structure.

I guess professors can be excited at the prospect of fame or infamy depending of course on the whim of their students. When I first heard of the site I thought, "Great, another useless review site." But I have to say, I am impressed by what appear to be relatively genuine and informative reviews, which used to be free. Ah, here is the rub, they used to be free. If you want the skinny on professor X you will have to pay for it. Viewers can still access up to ten reviews free of charge but full access is now only available through a subscription. If students had been paying attention during my classes on political economy then they may have caught on to the catch, not in the reading but in the writing. Millions of students have donated their time, thoughts, and experiences for the enrichment of others. Their feedback is for sale, but they're not getting a penny.

Writing is a form of labor. Students know this better than most judging from the moans and groans when papers are assigned. Intellectual labor has already been integrated into the market system in the form of copyright laws, publishing houses and expensive journals. While we all begrudge having to write papers there is at least some personal gain. There is the sense of accomplishment, learning and most importantly there are the college credits that lead to a college degree and higher lifetime earning potential. What's more is that that the paper is yours. You own it. Yet, the online reviews, while helpful to students shopping for teachers, provide nothing for the writer monetarily and benefit the host quite a bit.

The screenshot shows the 'Comments' pane in Microsoft Word, listing various feedback comments on the document. The comments are as follows:

- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 3:05 PM: Comment: What's the topic of the ...
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 3:06 PM: Comment: ...
- Queens College 4/11/06 1:08 PM: Comment: Might a stronger verb make ...
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 2:51 PM: Comment: Transition not clear ...
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 2:58 PM: Deleted: great
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 2:58 PM: Deleted: .
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 2:58 PM: Deleted: but
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 2:53 PM: Deleted: s
- Queens College 4/11/06 1:13 PM: Comment: "the complete skinny"?
- Queens College 4/11/06 1:15 PM: Comment: capital "P"
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 2:58 PM: Deleted: that
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 3:02 PM: Formatted: ...
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 2:59 PM: Deleted: - not anymore my eager friends
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 3:00 PM: Comment: Sentence not clear ...
- Queens College 4/11/06 1:14 PM: Comment: This phrasing is really effecti...
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 3:00 PM: Deleted: to
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 2:50 PM: Comment: Add a sentence here to expl...
- Queens College 4/11/06 1:14 PM: Comment: Nicely succinct ...
- Angelique Harris 4/7/06 2:49 PM: Comment: How does this square with yo...

Ill Communication

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Last October a student I will call “James” came into the Writing Fellows’ office visibly distraught. He showed me a paper he was working on for a writing-intensive social science course, for which he had received no grade but several handwritten comments. The professor he had written “Resubmit” on the paper, said that it was not an analysis, and asked “Where is your supply and demand graph?” Finally, the professor suggested a visit to a writing fellow—me—with a request that I send him a report about the meeting afterwards.

I asked James what the assignment was. He did not have a written assignment with him, but he said he was asked to examine the evidence in two reports on the World Wide Web. I read James’s paper, which consisted of some summary of the articles and a few comments disagreeing with their contents. I asked him why he did not analyze the evidence, and he said there was “no evidence” in the reports, just a lot of complaining about the United States. James then told me that he knew that the professor was an important scholar in his field, so he did not expect him to accept his own ideas about the subject. James felt he had done an analysis, and that the professor reacted as he had because James disagreed with the reports.

This incident now strikes me as a case of miscommunication between the professor and the student. James clearly had not done the assignment, and the professor had told him so. Nonetheless James perceived the problem to be that the professor did not accept opinions that differed from his own.

I assured James that there was evidence in the reports, and pointed it out to him. I then asked him if he knew how to do a supply and demand graph. As he explained to me how a supply and demand graph could demonstrate the effect of government subsidies on the profitability of producing cotton in other countries, his manner became contrite. At this point we concluded that what the professor must have meant by an analysis was not an opinion about the topic, but a supply and demand graph and a critique of the evidence.

I then e-mailed the professor a description of the session. Very quickly, the professor responded, “I have a sense that [James] wants to write what he wants to write rather than doing what he is asked to do.” I wrote back that James seemed to feel he was being asked to agree with the research reports, but that I told him that whether he agreed or not he should complete the requirements of the assignment. The professor then wrote, “I don’t care what his views are so long as he supports them, but he was asked about an analysis and what was being said. It did not call for an opinion.”

The professor believed that this was a case of a student resisting doing an assignment, while the student thought that it was a case of the professor not accepting disagreement with his point of view. Perhaps the crux of the miscommunication was the distinction between analysis and opinion, familiar to the professor as a convention within his discipline, that he was implicitly asking the student to understand. In the professor’s field, an analysis consists of tools such as supply and demand curves for modeling behavior and statistics such as those in the reports to test that behavior. James was being asked to practice this method of analysis, rather than give an opinion about the topic using other modes

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of understanding he brought to the class. James, on the other hand, when presented with other written opinions, was accustomed to parsing or summarizing them and then giving his own reaction. This sort of debate, or one-off quip, is common in web-based discussion, so that the use of web-based documents may have set such thought processes in motion. In addition, James may have been inclined to revert to this opinion mode because it was in fact less work than the modeling and analysis of evidence requested by the professor. The rather punitive tone of the feedback, though understandable, may also have provoked

a defensive reaction. James therefore interpreted the professor’s criticism to be directed at the substance of his opinion rather than the mode of his analysis.

Later in the term, the student and the professor agreed that it would be best for the student to drop the course. The questions they were dealing with about the authority of the teacher and the space for students to express their

own views are integral to college work and have no easy answers.

I have certainly had students who reacted the way James did to my comments on their papers, and I have reacted the same way to professors’ criticisms of my own work. But I wonder if it is possible to think about this instance of miscommunication in a way that is useful from the perspective of giving feedback and teaching student writing. How can a student approach a new subject in a way that begins to develop the kind of authority that writers within the discipline have? According to Mark Gaipa, the writer’s authority is “less a characteristic than a relationship that a writer has with other authors, measuring how powerfully his or her work affects theirs” (419). Gaipa explains that in teaching criticism of a well-known novel, the initial reaction of students is that they cannot possibly add to what has already been said. But through a series of simplified diagrams using a metaphor of a ballroom gathering, he is able to offer students various approaches for “breaking into the conversation.”

Perhaps it was this quality of authority that James felt he was unable to acquire in this case. How might the assignment have been approached differently to avoid this reaction? It may be helpful to convey clearly, perhaps through an in-class writing exercise, any disciplinary terms that are integral to an assignment. A step such as this might be especially useful if an assignment involves terms, such as “analysis,” that are open to multiple colloquial meanings. The moment of giving feedback is an additional opportunity to help the student understand how s/he can acquire authority by using the same methods as professionals within the discipline. If feedback is thought of as an integral part of the process, then writing can be approached as a tool for teaching how to do the work of the discipline, rather than a product to be evaluated.

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Handwritten Feedback: Confessions of a Scribbler

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In the writing process, feedback is invaluable. It can help shape the direction of research projects, offer illuminating suggestions as well as basic edits, and help in the writer's process of discovery. That is why many faculty take responding to student writing seriously—carefully reading and reflecting on student work. For those who teach writing, Nancy Sommers contends, “Most teachers estimate that it takes them at least 20 to 40 minutes to comment on an individual student paper, and those 20 to 40 minutes times 20 students per class, times 8 papers, more or less, during the course of a semester add up to an enormous amount of time” (148). Of course, faculty at various institutions have different course loads and class sizes, but any way you count it, written feedback, and the time invested in providing it, mean nothing if the student can't read the handwriting.

Colleagues, students, friends, family, teachers, and professors have told me that I have horrible handwriting. This problem of mine goes

Of course, faculty at various institutions have different course loads and class sizes, but any way you count it, written feedback, and the time invested in providing it, mean nothing if the student can't read the handwriting.

way back. When I was in elementary school, I can clearly remember my mom (who is a first grade teacher) working with me on my handwriting, my “special problem” as my second grade teacher used to call it. It was so bad that in high school (before the technology boom that ushered in mandatory typed assignments) there were many classes where I was the only student in class who would have to hand in typewritten papers. Fortunately, as an undergraduate student at The University of Massachusetts, Boston, I was rarely obligated to use the little blue book during in-class exams; I usually opted or sometimes even requested to write a research paper instead, and on several occasions I was allowed to bring my laptop into class to type my written exams. Within the past several years, my handwriting has gotten increasingly worse, and now resembles that of the Graffiti print found on the Palm Pilot. My handwriting usually starts off pretty neat if I really concentrate, but after a few lines it trails off into what has been described as scribble. So, with all of this focus on my handwriting throughout my academic career, I have developed an interest in handwriting.

There are hundreds of books on handwriting, most ranging from those teaching children how to write, to others that analyze how people write. Graphologists, those who study and analyze handwriting, can tell a lot about people from the way they write—such as how they hold their writing instrument, their mood, or even how the writer is seated (Saudek; Sonnemann). Tamara Thornton's *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* is a great read that provides a history of the development of handwriting within the United States, describing the scores of different styles of handwriting from the colonial era to the present. She explains the reasons behind these different types of handwriting and how often class and social status and even one's gender dictates them. Sometimes those of a higher social class or great importance, were

expected to have messy handwriting – think doctors' handwriting – for “a naturally flowing handwriting, running swiftly over the paper [...] gained preference [...] showing that the writer was more engrossed in the contents of his letter than in the formation of the written symbols” (Saudek 10). This could be a reason why illegible professor handwriting is considered acceptable while that of the student is not. In fact, these days, within academe, student handwriting is often forbidden.

When I teach, I require my students to type all of their assignments, with the exception of in-class assignments. I provide lots of instructions as to how the paper should be formatted: 1-inch margins all around, 12 point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, pages numbered—everything necessary for me read and comment on the paper. I really want to be able to read their paper clearly so that I can comment on it. I never gave much thought to the legibility of my handwriting so that they could respond to it. When I first began to teach several years ago, I would provide handwritten responses to my students' assignments. I would try to write as neatly as possible, but I always ended up with a line of students after class asking me what my comments actually said. I would always hear, “Um, professor? I can't read what you wrote here.” Or more often, “What does this say?”

But a couple of years ago a student recommended that I type my responses to their work. I was amazed that it had never occurred to me before. I would try to indicate any grammatical errors directly on their work, and then type out my comments and feedback. At first I primarily noticed the disadvantages, such as the cost of paper and ink, having to refer to certain lines and passages, and the sheer impersonal nature of a typewritten response. There is also the time factor involved. However, I have found a happy medium: I provide both marginal handwritten and typewritten comments to their work, indicating their grammatical errors on the paper itself and providing type-written feedback.

Professors can learn so much from students when they give us feedback on our feedback. One of the best things about being a Writing Fellow is working directly with students and helping them make sense of and assimilate the comments they receive from their professors. Most often they take the feedback to heart and try their best to apply it to their work. Sometimes, however, a professor's handwriting can be an obstacle and a source of stress for a student looking to improve his or her coursework. Consequently, grades may suffer as well. Don't get me wrong, not every professor writes as illegibly as I do. Some handwriting is very neat and sometimes these professors don't even use the dreaded red ink, but something more friendly like green, purple, or even a pencil. In the end, handwriting is not the most important thing in the world; it is the content and not the form of the writing that has value. But clear, legible handwriting enhances students' understanding of and possibly even openness to the messages professors want to get across. The legibility of a professor's handwriting is crucial not only to the understanding and application of the feedback, but to opening up continued dialogue between student and teacher.

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Can You Decipher This Professor's Handwriting?

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 ① [Working as a CUNY writing fellow at Queens College for a year and a half
 has led me to reflect further on my practices as a teacher and to deal more directly
 with the above question.] The problem was that I had not sufficiently considered
 the goals of my course and, therefore, my role as a teacher. Implicitly, however,
 by blaming the English department for "failing" to have my students sufficiently
 engage in academic writing. [I was saying that it is up to English to deal
 exclusively with academic writing development while the rest of us can focus on
 having our students accumulate knowledge in the area we're teaching.]

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Good start!
 That I had in the past -
 Vague
 Expand
 Sounds awkward
 Insert: "implicitly"
 gain/acquire
 be specific
 Great! So many people think that way!
 Good job - I like your reflection on past attitude - contrast to later realizations
 Think about how this will impact your future teaching.

I like your reflection on past attitude - contrast to later realizations.

I post people
 I really think that way.

Key

1. The brackets mean that I am talking about this particular sentence.
2. "Good start!"
3. The squiggled lines mean Capitalize.
4. Insert: "that I had in the past"
5. "Vague"
6. "Expand"
7. "Sounds awkward"
8. Insert: "implicitly"
9. "was"
10. "Could"
11. "gain/acquire"
12. "be specific"
13. "Great! So many people think that way!"
14. "Good job - I like your reflection on past attitude - contrast to later realizations"
15. "Think about how this will impact your future teaching"

Thanks!

The staff of *Revisions* would like to acknowledge the founder of the publication, Professor Hugh English, without whom there would be no zine. Thanks, Hugh! We hope you will enjoy the latest issue, and we look forward to your future contributions. We would also like to acknowledge the support of June Bobb, Assistant Provost, and Marten denBoer, Associate Provost, whose efforts to foster a culture of writing at Queens College make all our work possible, including this publication.

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