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A Teacher's Response to Response

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by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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This study is an examination of instructional practices teachers implement during the drafting and revision process and contends that armed with knowledge of how a student responds emotionally and intellectually to these comments, a teacher can have a lasting impact on a writer's development. To that end, it is critical for the teacher to possess deep knowledge of response protocols and conferencing techniques in order for students to generate and refine their ideas. Areas of investigation include the relationship between response methods and writing improvement, the type and mode of comments that facilitate improvement, measurement of the effect of response on student writing, and issues related to product-oriented grading procedures.

A number of sources were reviewed based on their lasting endurance and relevance in the field of composition and rhetoric. The approach focused on studying the researchers' methods and objectives and comparing and contrasting their ideas to reinforce key principles of response.

A consistent finding in the research is that negative comments discourage writers, especially younger ones, so teachers must find a balance in their communication with writers that is both nonjudgmental and instructive. Teachers must also experiment with strategies that motivate a student to deeply revise rather than singularly focus on surface corrections. This includes strategies that develop in students the ability to extend a teacher's comment to other areas of the paper that is in need of similar revision. A great deficit in this vast body of research is the lack of quantifiable evidence to support the effect of teacher commentary on a writer's growth and achievement. However, the large majority of studies provide evidence to suggest that teacher response is most influential during the drafting process. Finally, a teacher's comments may exert the most influence within an educational community that provides support for a process-based writing approach and suggests several deficiencies within school cultures that undermine the potential benefits of these programs.

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"The process of response is so fundamental to human interaction that when it is short circuited, whether by accident or design, the result can hardly be interpreted as anything but a loss of humanity" (Anson 2).

Introduction

Much to my dismay, my students have politely informed me that students in general do not read the comments of their teachers, and if they do, they are often unclear about the teacher's intended meaning. Having been cognizant of this throughout my years of teaching writing, I have tried just about every strategy to make my comments to students more meaningful and relevant to the unique personalities of each writer. I have heeded the recommendations of leading writing teachers in the field and have molded my practices accordingly. Of one thing I am certain – research in the field of composition is plentiful and decidedly supportive of best practices in teacher response. There is ample research describing effective methods of teacher commentary that positively influences student writers as well as cautionary anecdotes of the inhibitive powers of less favorable methods. As Chris Anson reminds us, this exchange is vital for the student writer and is corroborated by Knoblauch's and Brannon's assertion that "arguably, nothing we do as writing teachers is more valuable than our commenting on individual student texts in order to facilitate improvement" ("Teacher Commentary" 69).

As valid as this statement is, much of the research on teacher response is inconclusive in terms of the degree to which a writer's improvement may be attributable to the type and manner of teacher comments. By their own admission, Knoblauch and Brannon go on to say that "we have scarcely a shred of empirical evidence to show that students typically even comprehend our

responses to their writing, let alone use them purposefully to modify their practice" ("Teacher Commentary" 69). Although their statement is potentially disheartening, anyone who teaches writing remains steadfast in the knowledge that responding to student writing is integral to the process of writing instruction, despite the lack of empirical data. This study examines the body of literature relevant to teacher response and investigates the conversation among key players in the field. The following questions have guided this study:

- How do we help our students become better writers as we evaluate their writing?
- What kind of comments do we write on student papers that will facilitate improvement?
- How will we know that a particular comment or method of commenting is directly responsible for improving student writing?
- Is the purpose of responding to improve student writing, or is the purpose to substantiate an assigned grade? If we must do both, which we do, how do we assign a grade but at the same time facilitate improvement?

Originally, the goal of this paper was to examine the effect of teacher commentary on students' writing progress in the hopes of finding a more concrete method with which to assess growth. Unfortunately, measuring an individual's writing development has too many variables to consider before reaching any quantifiable conclusions. To add to this limitation, much of the work on response has focused on the types of comments teachers write on student papers and their effect on successive drafts. Furthermore, the research tends to generate more questions than answers, thus suggesting significant implications for writing instruction, standardized

writing assessment, and most importantly, the environment and manner through which teachers respond to writers.

Informed by this body of work, this study grew into an examination of instructional practices and the power of teacher response during the revision process and contends that armed with knowledge of how a student responds emotionally and intellectually to these comments, a teacher can have a lasting impact on a writer's development. A consistent finding in the research is that negative comments discourage writers, especially younger ones, so teachers must find a balance in their communication with writers that is both nonjudgmental and instructive. Teachers must also experiment with strategies that motivate a student to deeply revise rather than singularly focus on surface corrections. This includes strategies that develop in students the ability to extend a teacher's comment to other areas of the paper that is in need of similar revision. Finally, a teacher may exert the most influence within an educational environment that is flexible and supportive, although this is often not the case. In secondary schools, teachers may have up to one hundred-thirty students or more per day. How can one teacher respond to each of these writers in the manner suggested by the research? Most teachers know they can make a difference in their students' writing, if only given optimal conditions. Since the norm in the vast public school system is to educate the masses, both teachers and their students are shortchanged when it comes to the structure and implementation of sound writing curricula. So, based on the research reviewed in this study, writing teachers must create their own optimal conditions and find ways to communicate with their students using the most appropriate and generative methods. Many of us already work with integrity to help our students achieve success, but most often our efforts fall short due to an inordinate numbers of students. Despite this we use our ingenuity to create the circumstances that nurture response and incorporate into our instruction

peer conferencing, portfolio assessment, and instructional rubrics designed to provide students with guidelines and directions. However, we have much work to do in this area. With the influx of state mandates and emphasis on achievement, perhaps it's time to hone our skills in response and manifest the power we possess to actually improve a student's ability to write well.

Early Notions of Grading and the Evolution of Response

Traditionally, assigning grades to student writing suggests a product–oriented judgmental relationship. We live in an assessment driven era in which student writing scores are perceived as definitive and finite evaluations of performance. With that said, most experienced writing teachers view these product-driven grades with disdain, knowing that a single piece of writing composed under artificial constraints, such as a timed writing within the context of a state exam written in response to an arbitrary question or an essay requiring little or no opportunity for revision, reveals a fragmented view of an individual's writing ability, one that is valid only when considered within the body of an individual's authentic writing experiences.   Add to that writing assignments with ambiguous or vague instructions, papers marked primarily for errors, or nonsensical commentary, and a student is hard pressed to make sense of a grade on a piece of writing. In this nebulous exchange between teacher and student, the student tends to react with indifference, perhaps genuine, perhaps not, nonetheless limiting the potential to improve subsequent writings. In his book, *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Teacher's Guide*, Ed

White recounts his early memories as a student when "the grade was all that really counted – revision was rarely required or rewarded – so we developed various ways of ignoring the comments a few teachers sometimes provided" (51).   Many of us can recall similar experiences, finding ourselves wondering exactly what the teacher wanted us to write in order to earn the best possible grade, not really certain of this elusive piece of critical information. White contends that many patterns of assessment – unclear assignment, vague commentary, lack of expected revision, emphasis on grades – still have a place in today's classrooms, all adding up to an exclusionary design, with concern only for product   (51).   Despite all the scholarly discourse surrounding the pitfalls of product-centered writing instruction, the fact remains that we teach writing within a flawed system, one that typifies a timed writing assessment as an accurate measurement of student achievement.   Almost twenty years ago, Frances Zak and Christopher Weaver warned that "if we [those in the business of teaching writing] do not foster conversations about the grading of writing among ourselves and in the larger culture, we may see our pedagogies undermined by legislators' demands for "standardization" in the name of 'accountability'"   (XVI).   They had the foresight to realize that in the wrong hands (which would include any individual who does not think about writing for several hours a day)   the assessment of writing would be absorbed into a normative and punitive grading system despite the emphasis on process and revision (Boyd 14), which unfortunately has come to fruition. These writers caution instructors to be cognizant of grading's "social history" (Boyd 14), and as evaluators of student writing do so with the knowledge that the "marking of that student essay with a grade is not an insignificant, nor apolitical, gesture" (Boyd 14).

Whether or not one is in agreement with Boyd's sociocultural perspectives on grading, we cannot argue that grades are ingrained in our culture and seem to be more important than ever

both in as well as out of the classroom.   In fact, even in a process-based writing classroom, a classroom in which the fundamental principle is that writing development involves many stages, a grade is required. Most writing teachers experience much angst when grading student papers, myself included.   Part of the discomfort is an internal fear that our students will not be any more informed about their writing progress than they were before submitting the paper for a final grade, assuming that is the purpose of grading.   In classrooms where the teacher is assigned one-hundred thirty students, such as mine, the task seems a futile attempt to substantiate a student's score while at the same time conveying a clear understanding about the writer's strengths and weaknesses.   Despite attempts to objectify assessments with the use of content-specific rubrics, a criterion-based assessment tool outlining the requirements and quality gradations of a particular writing assignment, it is only one facet of the response process between student and teacher and does not guarantee the writer is thus cognizant of any new understandings.

   White describes a similar situation at the post-secondary level where "the pressures of time and the force of tradition often keep us from thinking through the purposes and effects of responding to a particular set of student papers," forcing "most teachers to 'mark' a set of papers without much consideration of options (52).   This sense of urgency often dictated by the deadlines of marking periods and semesters exists at both of these educational levels and has influenced both the instruction and assessment of writing.   White reminds us, however, that "the uses of writing are so large – as a tool for learning new material, as a means of power in a verbal world, as a way to understand complex ideas, as a route to understanding of self, and so on – that we do not want to narrow our purpose as writing instructors to merely judging and enforcing group standards" (52),   an assertion shared by Robert Connors in his essay

"Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research"

(158).   In his introduction, Connors writes:

> Marking and judging formal and mechanical errors in student papers is one area
>
> in which composition studies seems to have a multiple-personality disorder. On
>
> the one hand, our mellow, student-centered, process-based selves tend to condemn
>
> marking formal errors at all. Doing it represents the Bad Old Days. Ms. Fidditch
>
> and Mr. Flutesnoot with sharpened red pencils spilling innocent blood across the
>
> page. Useless detail work. Inhumane, perfectionist standards, making our students
>
> feel stupid, wrong, trivial, misunderstood. Joseph Williams has pointed out how
>
> arbitrary and context-bound our judgments of formal error are. And certainly our
>
> noting of errors on student papers gives no one any great joy; as Peter Elbow says,
>
> English is most often associated either with grammar or with high literature-"two
>
> things designed to make folks feel most out of it."   (158)

This ambivalence Connors describes characterizes most conscientious and process-based writing

instructors. We are often torn between policing and correcting grammatical errors and focusing

more on the ideas in our students' writing.   Unfortunately, this either/or mentality is the focus of

much current conversation among writing teachers rather than the actual words we write on our

student papers. When I even mention my concerns to colleagues, they gaze at me questioningly,

as if the topic is absurd. However, as it turns out, teacher response is a relatively "new" topic in

the field.   Connors' research in the field of rhetoric and composition ultimately led him to the

examination of the comments teachers write on student papers ("Teachers' Rhetorical

Comments" 236) and the realization that "evidence of widespread acceptance of teachers acting as rhetorical audiences for their [first-year] students simply does not exist much farther back than the early 1950s. Before that time, the most widely accepted idea was that teachers' jobs were to correct, perhaps edit, and then grade student papers" ("Teachers' Rhetorical Comments" 236). In this essay, one of the first efforts to examine the typed of comments teachers actually wrote on student papers (241), Connors traces the evolution of the increasing interest in the value of teacher commentary in the field of composition, returning to the early 1900's with the introduction of "'rating scales' that represented the first systematic attempt we know of to deal with the issue of rhetorical effectiveness in student writing" ("Teachers' Rhetorical Comments" 238). This early effort to evaluate writing raised several questions as do contemporary rubrics. In those early years, the scales were heavily aimed at the mechanical aspects of writing such as language conventions, which invariably led to a desire to measure rhetorical elements such as an individual's ability to support an argument; however, this was not easily accomplished due to the complexity of numerically evaluating an abstract concept like a writer's voice. Connors goes on to say that at the time Fred Newton Scott, an early rhetorician, cautioned academia against the use of these scales stating that "whenever a piece of scientific machinery is allowed to take the place of teaching – which is in essence but an attempt to reveal to the pupil the unifying principle of life – the result will be to artificialize the course of instruction" Scott also claimed that rating scales came to be used as instruments for rating teachers rather than for student improvement (238), therefore calling into question the efficacy of a device that diminishes the value of process in a student's writing development.

Anson, in his introduction to *Writing and Response* has also studied these early evaluation methods and the influence on teacher commentary, citing the newly instituted composition

programs at Harvard in the early 1890's and early 1900's   (3).   This period in American

education marked a time of increased enrollment, so much so that instructors in these classrooms

were overwhelmed with their teaching responsibilities, particularly evaluating student writing.

In their efforts to handle the workload, coupled with a penchant for correct grammar usage,

those instructors used mechanistic grading methods that had far reaching effects throughout the

next fifty years   (Anson 3).   Thus, the following description from a 1901 program for *Freshman*

English and Theme-Correcting in Harvard College illustrates this emphasis on correction:

> 'The first effort of the instructors…is not to make the daily themes
>
> interesting, but to make them correct. [The] daily exercises are the
>
> only material from which to teach punctuation, spelling, grammar,
>
> the right use of words, the principles of structure, and whatever
>
> else ill-prepared youths need to learn. The special kind of subject
>
> [description of the writer's new surroundings] is prescribed merely
>
> that the students may have a fairer chance to make themselves interesting.
>
> If they succeed, so much the better; but first they must seek correctness,
>
> and live in the hope that the other things may be added unto them.   (qtd. in
>
> Anson 3)

Similarly, Connors' research found that teacher response was largely characterized as this

type of formal-error correction, which continued throughout the twenties, thirties, and early

forties,   ("Teachers' Rhetorical Comment" 239), a practice that was not challenged until the late

forties and early fifties when Jeffrey Fleece proposed that "teachers actually consider

themselves as students' real audiences and respond to their essays accordingly," a somewhat radical notion for the times ("Teachers' Rhetorical Comments" 240).   Since the 1950's, the assumption that teachers and students must engage in rhetorical dialogue has monopolized much of the literature on teacher response, and over the next thirty years became the topic of an ongoing conversation between such notable composition experts such as Chris Anson, Peter Elbow, Edward White, Nancy Sommers, Cy Knoblauch, and Lil Brannon; however, as Connors writes, no numerical study on the type of comments teachers wrote on student papers existed up to that point ("Teachers Rhetorical Comments" 241).   With this in mind, it is necessary to take a closer look at the evolution of process writing in the classroom to gain a clearer picture of why response is so important and so in need of continued study.

Response and Process

Studies in response were most prevalent during the 1980's and 1990's, a time when process writing became firmly rooted in classroom pedagogy and in composition studies.   Despite this emphasis in the research, the transition to the secondary and postsecondary classroom has not been that smooth. It is true that countless numbers of teachers have embraced process writing approaches at all grade levels, but equal numbers are resistant to the concept that process is more important than product. This is largely due to a common structure in many public schools where the teacher is assigned five sections of classes, totaling up to one-hundred fifty students. Within this arena, genuine response to student writing is almost impossible.   A further obstruction to progress in this direction is the increasing emphasis on product-oriented standardized testing

administered under the guise of it being deemed "best for students" in terms of evaluating growth. These variables detract from the main premises consistent in most of the research – that during a writer's process a teacher has the opportunities to coach, advise, and nurture the development of skills, voice, and rhetoric.

Twenty-five years ago, Chris Anson wrote: "At a time when efforts are being made to understand the social and interpersonal nature of writing, we are beginning to recognize not only how important response is to the development of literacy, but also how little we know about it" (1).   Several years later, we are still working at understanding this relatively "new" relationship, and how we can most effectively respond to our students' voices.   In his seminal work, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*,   Donald Graves helped revolutionize writing instruction in classrooms across the country by identifying the following fundamentals in the teaching of writing:

1. Writers [Children] need to choose most of their own topics. But we need to show them all the places writing comes from, that it is often triggered by simple everyday events.
2.   Writers [Children] need regular response to their writing from both teacher and other readers.
3.   Writers [Children] need to write a minimum of three days out of five. Four or five days are ideal.
4. Writers [Children] need to publish, whether by sharing, collecting or posting their work.

5. Writers [Children] need to hear their teacher talk through what she is doing as she writes on the overhead or the chalkboard. In this way, the children witness their teacher's thinking.

6. Writers [Children] need to maintain collections of their work to establish a writing history. Collections show that history when they are used as a medium for evaluation.   (xii)

At the heart of these fundamentals is the recognition that writing is both recursive and communal and as such invites interaction between and among teachers and students to procure student learning.   The emergent years of writing workshop highlights the reciprocal nature that exists between teacher and student when engaged in a rhetorical dialogue, an exchange that often directs the writer to examine previously written ideas and question intent, word choice, or style. Because writing in this environment invites conversation, and that discourse includes all who are present, writing workshop organically stimulates a sense of community among writers and the teacher.   Whether the encounter includes a young child or twenty-five year old graduate student, it is during this critical contact that the writer finds the way to convey his or her intended meaning, "and to the extent that we deny ourselves and our students the opportunity for such natural social interaction, then we are sterilizing language and weakening the chance for its fullest development in our students' lives" (Anson 7).   White makes a similar assertion in which he compares teaching writing to parenting in that "it combines discipline and nurturing, encouragement and warning, even perhaps love and hostility" (49).   Although some practitioners may find these statements a bit melodramatic, both echo the essence of Graves'

fundamentals, reminding us that the process of response within the process of writing instruction is undeniably essential.

In *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher's Guide*, White states that "the educational purpose of responding to and evaluating student writing ought to be the same as the purpose of the writing class: to improve student writing" (50), with the one overriding goal being to guide students through the revision process (50). That essentially is the objective of the writing teacher; it is not for the writing teacher to judge necessarily but to equip the writer with the skills and understanding of the mental process inherent in composing so that the writer insightfully engages in creating the intended meaning of the paper (White 50). In this way, the writer learns to self-assess throughout the process, learning to recognize adjustments to be made and becoming confident when a revision achieves a desired outcome. He also suggests the following:

> Though there is much debate these days about the most effective methods
> of responding to student writing, there is a clear consensus about the least
> effective ways to handle student papers. Far too much of what teachers do
> with student writing is picky, arbitrary, unclear, or generally unhelpful. Most
> of us model our teaching behavior on the instructors we have had in school,
> and more than likely they used negative responses rather than effective patterns.
> To help us avoid merely repeating what our instructors did, we need to make conscious
> decisions about how we will handle student papers if we are to use the most appropriate
> methods for our own classes. (49)

White's description of contemporary writing pedagogy ironically mirrors that of Connors' research findings of the 1920's – the writing teacher's job is primarily to critique and judge rather than to edit and intervene in the process. Nevertheless, to avoid perpetuating a mode of response that has not been proven to improve student writing, White recommends several alternative approaches, beginning with a concept that has a consistent presence throughout the research - "responding to writing does not begin when you start to read student essays; it starts much earlier, at the point when the assignment is made" (53). In other words, what is the point of making comments on the finished product; unless the student has received comments throughout the composing process, or the student has the option to rewrite, the comments will be useless to the student. White clarifies for us the intention of response, elucidating the futility of product-driven assessment. The logic to this is so clear, it's hard to believe that many instructors continue to assign writing rather than instruct it, ignoring sound practices of process and response consistently espoused in the research.

Nevertheless, despite the challenges, responding to students throughout the drafting process may be accomplished in a number of conferencing scenarios. At the core of all conferencing is the dialogue between individuals, though not necessarily limited to the student and teacher. The most traditional approach involves the teacher and student writer, the main purpose being to prompt the writer to reflect on certain aspects of the writing in need of revision. This conversation works best when the teacher possesses judiciousness in terms of direction and allows for an organic process to take place, so that the writer naturally comes to his or her own decisions. A conference such as this requires optimal conditions, which is simply not the norm in most classrooms. When a teacher is charged with instructing thirty students within a forty-five minute period, it is virtually impossible to meet with each student in the manner described.

Fortunately, to meet the demands of students, teachers have organized writing conferences in inventive and creative ways.   It is not uncommon for students, under the direction of the teacher, to work in pairs or triads to conference with peers.   Teachers are also utilizing technology to make conferencing more available to students. For example, the internet provides online teacher sites such as Edmodo where teachers can engage in discussions with their students during or after school.   Students can submit papers to their Edmodo class where the teacher or other students may offer comments, to which the student may reply. Teachers can even create separate and distinct writing groups on this site and still monitor the process. Although this is an exciting alternative to traditional teacher response, it is not without challenges. Students in impoverished areas may not be privy to a computer, and language barriers may exist, but these problems are not insurmountable.   Students may utilize their public libraries, or some schools may offer laptops for loan.   In the case of language barriers, there are many computer programs that translate for students.   Relatively speaking, we have barely touched the surface in terms of technology, but it is slowly making its way into classrooms.

Despite these innovative discussion designs, there is still the probability that the comments made by teachers or peers will be grounded in correction. Knoblauch and Brannon assert that teachers have somehow "missed the fact that responding to student writing is a species of communication, subject, therefore to the same rhetorical principles that govern other situations ("Responding" 298), which is why in most writing classes the teacher is perceived as the authority. A conversation between two people is a bipartisan act of discourse; there is an unspoken agreement between the two that both will contribute to meaningful dialogue. Teachers tend to become one-sided during their discourse with students, often dictating to the writer and therefore diminishing the writer's role in the conversation, albeit with good intentions.

Consequently, discourse between the teacher and writer is governed by the expectations of the teacher and the assignment.   Within this scenario, the process, intentionally or not, is often overlooked and the teacher's commentary is based on what he or she wants to see in the writing. This type of exchange, according to Knoblauch and Brannon,   "encourages a directive style of commentary, the function of which is either simply to label the errors in writing or to define restrictively what a student would (or will) have to do in order to perfect it in the teacher's eyes" ("Responding" 301).   Ironically, writing teachers who are acutely cognizant of the role of audience in the rhetorical construct and typically instruct their students to write with one's audience in mind, often overlook the writer's intentions.   A teacher can become so focused on a specific skill or strategy that must be taught, that the writer's intent is not even a consideration. This is poor pedagogy, and whether intentional or not, it is one that demands more attention from the profession.

An alternative mode of instruction is writer's workshop, an environment that strives first and foremost to maintain the writer's control over his or her ideas through facilitative conversation. This guiding principle of the workshop model is accomplished through several stages, beginning with focused instruction of generative strategies, providing students several options with which to develop seed ideas. Students utilize a writer's notebook, which in addition to being a fluency tool, is a place where writers can experiment with stylistic elements of writing, such as creating a desired mood through choice of detail, while also practicing language conventions.   However, throughout writing workshop, the writer's voice and intention is consistently supported.   This is largely due to the different dynamic between the student and teacher that is a cornerstone of the workshop model; comments tend to be less directive and more generative, leading to the student's increased authorial control. The honest and open exchange allows for more clarity in

commentary and an open negotiation between the writer and reader that organically lends itself

to questioning and an ongoing dialogue.   One of the workshop's most distinctive features is the

emphasis on formative assessments, evaluations that take place throughout each stage of the

writing process.   Students often take part in the creation of assessment rubrics and are given

multiple opportunities for reflection.

Methods of Response

Considering the evidence supporting the positive effects of teacher commentary during the

processing stage of writing, the next area of inquiry is an examination of the type and style of

teacher response.   Unfortunately, this is not a topic that is typically discussed among writing

teachers, which is a detriment to our students. Why don't teachers of writing talk about the

comments they write on student papers? The answer to this is multifaceted. First, commentary

varies by the individual.   A survey of the English department in the school where I teach would

most assuredly yield a broad spectrum of comments. Some teachers use codes or abbreviations,

some use symbols such as happy or sad faces, some write questions, some offer specific

suggestions, and some write arbitrary comments on papers. Consequently, there is little cohesion

among a large staff responsible for producing better writers.

White's suggestions for effective response cite the work of Anson, Straub, and Lindemann,

among others (71).   According to White, responses in the early stages of writing are the most

useful for students, providing an environment in which students may work through early ideas

and receive guidance to help focus and rewrite. This may be in the form of student presentations to the teacher, a group, or a partner – "the advantages of making such presentations are obvious; the student will gain ownership of the ideas presented, will get to work early on the task, and will come up with ways of demonstrating the major concept of the essay and making it interesting to others" (White 53).   In the secondary classroom, these strategies work well but extend the process of response beyond the teacher. If these methods are implemented, young writers must be instructed in the language of response to avoid trite or vague comments. The teacher on the other hand must remain as neutral as possible,   offering response that is balanced by support, encouragement, and rigor (White 53).   As the writer proceeds through the drafting process, "respect for revision" is paramount in terms of student learning, and therefore must be a consistent quality in the writing class.   By revision White does not mean merely editing for mechanics or making changes based only on a teachers' comments - "every real writer and writing teacher know that revision means a "new vision" of what is being said, responding to internal as well as external demands; most writing in a writing class should be revised as a matter of normal routine, a natural part of the thinking process that writing expresses" (54). Establishing a sense of routine is key in any classroom and even more influential when trying to lend value to a step in a cognitive process of writing.   It can be accomplished, however, with diligence in maintaining protocols during the instructional process, such as consistently providing time to conference with students, being cognizant of the quality of comments one writes on a student draft, giving students opportunities to explain their thinking during the writing decisions. In my classroom, when students submit final drafts, they also submit their working drafts, identifying and explaining revisions they have made throughout the process. On final drafts they highlight sections of the paper where they made the most significant revisions

and the effect of those revisions on their final submission. They practice responding to other students both verbally and in writing to become better acquainted with comments they will find on their papers. Although I have no numerical data to validate the influence of such practices, the students' final drafts are typically improved from the first.

White refers to practices such as these as "schemes" teachers devise to optimize the process experience. Moreover, he also shares that "experienced teachers have developed various schemes for reading early drafts and concentrating on their ideas, development, and structure. Some make a point of skimming the work before commenting, attending particularly to the opening and closing paragraphs; sometimes the first sentence of each paragraph will give a clear clue to the structure, or lack of structure, of the paper. It is always useful to identify the central or controlling idea, circle it, and comment on its interest and possibilities" (54-55).

Most importantly, however, are the words teachers write on the paper.   "Questions are more useful to students than assertions at this stage," of which I am in agreement.   The simple act of asking a question opens a path of inquiry and just as a question functions in a discussion, it has the same effect when posed to a writer.   White also notes that "instead of writing an obtuse comment such as 'coherence' or 'coh' in the margin, we might say, 'I've underlined the two separate ideas you are pursuing in this paragraph; can you connect them? If not, focus on one or the other,' or, 'Your point in this paragraph makes good sense, but it seems to conflict with what you said in your opening. How do these two ideas relate?'" (White 51-55).

White also negates the efficacy of returning student papers labeled with cryptic phrases (even such well-meaning ones as, "nice work," claiming that students want to know what is nice about the work), puzzling abbreviations, and consistent red-marking throughout the paper highlighting errors.

Knoblauch and Brannon, although in agreement with White's ideologies, also share their frustration with the lack of quantitative evidence supporting the effects of response during revision on the quality of student writing. While White's ideas are written from the point of view of a practitioner, his writings focus primarily on pedagogy to circumvent these issues, whereas other researchers have tried to quantify teacher response. In the introduction to *Key Work*s, Knoblauch and Brannon state the following: "While defending a particular style of response, we offer the undocumented assurance that intervening in the composing process, by allowing students to write successive drafts immediately responding to facilitative commentary, can measurably improve student writing, provided that a teacher adequately supports revising efforts" (6). They refer to the thoughtful process of commentary as one that allows the writer to internalize the role of "questioning reader," enabling them to return to the writing cycle, gaining internal control of their choices. In their efforts to find empirical evidence for their suppositions, Knoblauch and Brannon have surveyed a range of studies in which several modes of commentary have been the focus:

1) responses offering praise with those offering criticism,

2) responses that contrast oral and written comments,

3) three varying types of comment – abbreviated grammatical responses, actual corrections of mechanical error, substantive comment to foster thinking. ("Teacher's Comments" 70)

Based on their research, they summarize that different types of teacher comments on student themes have equally small influences on student writing. For all practical purposes, commenting

on student essays might just be an exercise in futility. Many students admit that they simply do not read the comments, or they read them and do not attempt to implement suggestions and correct errors.   Several studies support this assertion, such as one conducted by Jean King in 1979 that sheds more doubt on the efficacy of one comment over another. In this study, King categorized three types of comments, one a direct correction of errors, a second naming kinds of error (i.e., lacks subject-verb agreement), and a third offering rules (i.e., singular subjects take singular verbs) (Knoblauch and Brannon, "Teacher's Comments" 70).   King generalized that students often do not comprehend teacher responses to their writing, and even when they do, may not make revisions to their writing. In light of these findings, the question whether one type of comment might be more or less helpful than another is conspicuously irrelevant   (Knoblauch and Brannon "Teacher's Comments" 70).

   This raises the question of the methodology of these studies and suggests that we take a closer look at instruction.   From a methodological perspective, the studies referenced here rely heavily on types of comments, which according to Knoblauch and Brannon have "led researchers to expect too much from isolated marginal remarks on essays and to reflect too little on the larger conversation between the teacher and student to which they only contribute" ("Teacher's Comments" 71); however, a more significant problem concerns the actual practice of commenting and its role in the classroom .   Most of the research fails to address the oral and written interaction between the teacher and student and its effects on a writer's development and would not necessarily yield any definitive results, due in part to the subjective nature of the interaction between teacher and student.   From a practitioner's perspective, it is an art to navigate the conversation with one's student that is a balance of constructive criticism with no judgment. Add to that the myriad personalities within a class of thirty, and this becomes a

slippery slope. Based on the delivery of the comments, remarks may be taken out of their intended context and result in confusion for the student; for example, a comment may be perceived as more restrictive than facilitative or more judgmental than open-ended, depending on the communicative habits of the teacher (Knoblauch and Brannon, "Teacher's Comment" 71). To measure the effectiveness of such an interaction is even more challenging.

Nonetheless, Nina Ziv is credited with attempting to "explore the effects of teacher comments on successive drafts of student compositions in order to generate hypotheses concerning effective kinds of responses and thus begin to develop a model of teacher intervention" (95).   Ziv's study is driven by the inconsistencies of intention that exists among teachers in regards to responding to student writing. Is the goal to assess a product, or is it to identify mechanical errors?   According to Ziv, both lend themselves to a stagnant atmosphere in which the teacher acts as a judge with the expectation that the comments written on a final draft will ensure improvement on future papers (94).

Ziv's case study of four college freshman explores how these students perceived the specific comments she wrote on their papers and how students used the comments during revising.   In an effort to lend reliability to her research design, Ziv inductively created categories of comments based upon inductive sorting, meaning she gathered the comments she had written on student papers and then analyzed and organized them according to whether they were explicit and implicit.   She defines explicit clues as those in which the teacher indicates to the student exactly how he or she might revise a paper or points out a specific error.   Implicit clues are those in which the teacher calls attention to a problem, suggests alternative directions for the student to pursue, or questions the student about what he or she has written.   A third category is a collection of actual teacher corrections which include the rearrangement, addition and deletion

of phrases and sentences and the addition, deletion, and substitution of words in a paper. She further delineates her taxonomy of comments by subdividing the explicit comments into macro and micro levels. Macro level comments are either conceptual in nature, referring to comments that direct the student to make a major conceptual or structural change, which suggest a rearrangement of major ideas. Examples of micro level comments are sentential level, lexical level, grammatical, or those having to do with conventions of language (Ziv 98-100). These micro level comments attend more to the students' use of language skills and mechanics and may simply direct the student to use one word for another or comment that a student must change the punctuation.

Implicit cues are also divided into macro and micro level comments including similar subdivisions as the macro level comments but tend to engage the writer through inquiry, asking the writer questions about his or her intended meaning. In addition, Ziv also categorizes the perceptions of research participants into the following categories: student perceives teacher intention, student does not perceive teacher intention, student explains own intention, and student suggests course of action (101). Finally, she creates a taxonomy of actions taken by students in response to teacher comments. After studying some of Ziv's samples, she appears to have asked her students to explain the revisions they made on their papers based on her comments and subsequently drew conclusions about whether or not they took the direction she intended. This is ambiguous territory to say the least but worthy of consideration. A consistent practice in my classroom is for students to reflect on the revisions they make between drafts and to explain their reasoning, my intention being for them to take ownership of the decisions they make. It is my attempt to minimize their dependence on my intentions and focus more on their own. Ziv takes this a step further by attempting to ascertain the degree to which the student conceptualizes the

teacher's comment.   This would be the equivalent of me asking a student to not only explain why they made a particular revision but also what they think I meant by the comment.

Based on current understandings in the field of composition and rhetoric, Ziv's findings are not surprising. Inexperienced revisers value explicit comments on a structural and conceptual level (Ziv 104). When writers are still struggling to find their focus, explicit cues helped them find their way, while implicit cues helped students to clarify their ideas or stimulated them to think about ways they could further develop the topics.   As expected, Ziv's implicit clues on a sentential level were not helpful because the research participant frequently did not recognize what the problems were in the sentences she had commented on and/or didn't have the strategies needed to revise them   (105). Neither did they on a lexical level; when Ziv wrote "wrong word" next to a word, students did not know why it was wrong. Likewise, when she corrected a student's misuse of the relative pronoun "who," the student corrected it but had not gained any knowledge about the use of relative pronouns. He only corrected it because Ziv advised him to do so.

This is a common occurrence in many English classrooms; unless a teacher takes the time to discuss the error with the student and hold the student accountable for consistent correct usage, the student will not internalize the concept.   Fortunately, there are also many teachers who realize the contradiction of marking errors in an effort to improve a student's writing process. For example, many of my colleagues choose to respond to student papers using any color ink but red, having come to the realization that red ink splattered throughout a student's paper can be condescending and humiliating to the writer and in turn completely undermine any potential progress. We also know we need more time to talk with our students, often meeting with

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students before and after school and during free periods; as helpful as this is however, it does not help cultivate the ongoing classroom dialogue illustrated in Ziv's study.

A key aspect of this dialogue in a classroom setting is the opportunity it provides to inform and support students in the revision process. Ziv found that during revising, students benefit from explicit suggestions and directions, and as they become more experienced may require less explicit commenting from the teacher (107). Inexperienced revisers also benefit from exposure to various types of comments teachers write on student papers. Students should be gently introduced to the process or response and be provided with exercises in which they practice responding to peers. Ziv also infers from her findings that teachers should become more sensitive to the intentions of student writers rather than be guided only by their own stylistic preference, and further suggests that teachers create their own taxonomies of comments and student perceptions and correlate them with their students' actions on subsequent drafts (108). As a result, students will become more adept at understanding their teacher's comments and more experienced at revising their drafts, becoming more of a participant in the process like Ziv's student:

I guess the reason teacher comments never really influenced me

Before was because I got fairly good ones. You know, before it

was always a mark or a statement. The teachers never went into

any big descriptions about your writing. If you fulfilled the task,

you know, it was okay. Suddenly, this year, I see it. I can question

it. I can disagree with it. I can see, you know, the different aspects

of it. That did make sense. (109).

Ziv's search for a model of teacher intervention directs this discussion once again to Knoblauch and Brannon's concerns regarding methodologies and White's concerns about traditional assessment methods. A key aspect of Ziv's work calls attention to the instructional methods of the classroom teacher and the tone of the delivery with which these comments are delivered to students. In addition to flaws in the research design, Knoblauch and Brannon assert the following and perhaps more serious concern:

> A second, more important problem concerns the actual practice of commenting, its peripheral and largely judgmental role in conventional teaching. If research efforts have failed to show the use of teacher commentary, one reason may be the larger ineffectiveness of the instructional format within which it has been evaluated. In other words, those efforts may say more about the potential value of a widespread and traditional teaching method than about the potential value of our intervention in student composing. ("Teacher Commentary" 71)

Although some might take offense from this statement, there is a great deal of truth to it. The preoccupation of error correction is prevalent throughout the literature on teacher response as it is in contemporary classrooms across the country.   That is not to say that promoting the use of correct grammar and usage is not within the purview of the writing teacher – of course it is, but it does not have to monopolize the writing classroom.   Furthermore, there are strategies and methodologies with which to create opportunities for students to experiment with language conventions.   The point is that perpetuating a system characterized by a device such as

composition card or rating scale will not have lasting influence on a writer's development, an insight supported time and again in the research. Essentially, the research of Knoblauch, Brannon, and others support a major assertion by this paper that it would serve us well to examine more closely the instructional practices employed during response and the inherent problems in the writing classroom.

One of the major problems is the time it requires to respond effectively to student writing. In "Responding to Student Writing," Nancy Sommers admits that "we do not know in any definitive way what constitutes thoughtful commentary or what effect, if any, our comments have on helping our students become more effective writers" (107). She argues that we comment on our students' writing because we know writers require a reaction to their ideas and need to know if they are conveying their intended meaning. We also know as teachers that they will write better if they take control over their writing if they practice becoming a questioning reader (107). Even more important, however, is that we comment during the process of composing a text to discourage our students from revising narrowly and predictably, which they do when inexperienced with revision. Typically, as Sommers writes, most students take narrow approaches to their drafts, unmotivated to modify, rearrange, or rewrite. Many equate revision with mechanical corrections, and wait for a teacher to point out mismanagement of language, not at all empowered as writers should be. Sommers identifies this as appropriation of the text by the teacher in which the teacher takes charge of decisions the writer will make about the writing (108).

Through her research on styles of commenting, Sommers found that "teachers' comments can take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers' purpose in commenting" (108), a sentiment shared earlier in this

paper by Ziv. When a teacher formulates a response based upon his or her stylistic inclinations,

students perceive these comments as the focus of revision, diminishing their authorial intent,

shifting their revision process from "This is what I want to say," to "This is what you the teacher

are asking me to do" (Sommers 109).   In addition to this shift in attention, students are often

given contradictory messages. For example Sommers provides the following example of

contradictory teacher commentary:

Every year [on one Sunday in the middle of January] tens of millions of
wordy - be precise *which Sunday?* *comma needed*

people cancel all events, plans or work to watch the Super Bowl. This
word choice

audience includes [little boys and girls, old people, and housewives and
wordy

men.] Many reasons have been given to explain why the Super Bowl has
Be specific - what reasons?

become so popular that commercial (spots cost up to $100,000.00.
and why   *what spots?)*

One explanation is that people like to take sides and root for a team.
awkward

Another is that some people like the pageantry and excitement of the
another what?   *spelling*

event. These reasons alone, however, do not explain a happening as big as
too colloquial

the Super Bowl.

you need to do more research

This paragraph needs to be expanded in order to be more interesting to a reader.

Fig.1

The comments between the lines ask for specific corrections, while the ones in the margins make

copy editing premature by asking for the whole paragraph to be reworked   (Fig. 1 109). In her

explication of the teacher's response, Sommers notes that the "interlinear comments and the

marginal comments represent two separate tasks for this student; the interlinear comments

encourage the student to see the text as a fixed piece, frozen in time, that just needs some

editing" (110).   She also explains that the student is commanded to edit and develop

simultaneously adding further ambiguity to the process. There is also no clear prioritization of

revisions, thus leaving the student to try and figure out the teacher's intended meaning.

Consequently, "teachers' comments do not provide their students with an inherent reason for

revising the structure and meaning of their texts, since the comments suggest to students that the meaning of their text is already there, finished, produced, and all that is necessary is a better word or phrase" (110).

As much as I am reluctant to admit it, I think ambiguous commentary is evident in the practice of many teachers. Even when a teacher tries to maintain a focus when commenting on student papers, for example, only writing comments about detail development, consistent errors or consistent weaknesses tend to distract the reviewer. Consequently, the teacher becomes mired in ambivalent reactions to the paper – Should I mark this even though it's not the focus? – If I don't bring this error to the student's attention, then I am not doing my job. The dialogue then between the teacher and writer becomes strained and less productive. Sommers' research as well as Knoblauch's, Brannon's, and Ziv's generalizes the comments of so many teachers to be vague and abstract. In fact, Sommers identifies an "accepted, albeit unwritten canon" (112) that is the language of teacher response. If not so troubling, this idea is almost humorous. I have written many of these comments myself, comments such as "elaborate," "be more specific," "this is confusing," vague comments that do not engender the writer's questioning of the text. She strongly advocates that teachers become more skilled in the vocabulary of revision, so that students gain the most from the drafting process; however, she does not place the blame with teachers, many of whom admit they have not been properly trained in commentary (113). Sommers concludes her study with this sobering thought:

> The challenge we face as teachers is to develop comments which will provide an inherent reason for students to revise; it is a sense of revision as discovery, as a repeated

process of beginning again, as starting out new, that our students have not learned. We

need to show our students how to seek, in the possibility of revision, the dissonances of

discovery – to show them through our comments why new choice would positively

change their texts, and thus to show them the potential for development implicit in their

own writing.   (115)

 If we heed these recommendations, we can perhaps influence our students' writing ability and

design instruction that facilitates this recursive thinking in our students.   In doing so, if we are

successful, our students will produce drafts, pose questions about those drafts, and invite our

comments.

    So, how do well-informed teachers of writing make written responses to their students'

writing? This question is the focus of Ronald Lunsford and Richard Straub's survey" Twelve

Reader Read," a study which enlists the talents of several leading writing teachers-scholars

asking them to comment on a collection of student writing in their usual manner of response

(159).   As the purpose of the study was to examine the types of comments teachers write on

student papers and to compare and contrast varying methods of response, the study does not

provide conclusive evidence of any effects on student writing. It does, however, make a strong

statement of the style and form desired in teacher commentary and provides much food for

thought for the practitioner. Based on an analysis of these comments, Lunsford and Straub

found the following:

Although no two samples could fully represent the ways the twelve teachers

in the study respond to student writing, these are like the other responders'

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comments in several important respects. The readers in our study respond in

full and often highly elaborate statements, not in symbols, abbreviations,

shorthand, or technical language. They spend most of their time commenting

on matters of content, organization, and purpose, and give only moderate

attention to the outward and obvious features of writing: mechanics, word

choice, sentence structure, and style. Beyond the conventional forms of

teacher response – criticism, commands, and corrections – they make regular

use of praise, advice, reader responses, and all manner of questions. (163)

Once again it is suggested that cryptic, vague, and error driven comments are not conducive to

generating student ideas. This body of comments also demonstrates the type of comments that

Knoblauch and Brannon recommend, comments that offer students the incentive to engage in

their writing and continue their work as writers. A summary of the focus and modes of these

readers' comments are :

1)   Most of the teachers' comments are written out in full statements, and many of them
     are elaborated.
2) In the vast majority of cases, comments are reader and student-friendly.
3) Typically, comments are limited to what they consider the two or three key issues in
    the writing.
4) They write no fewer comments on good papers than on poor or immature papers.
5) Comments are aimed at the meaning and purpose of writing, not its outward formal
    properties.

6) In terms of correction, when they do deal with local problems, they cite the problem briefly, perhaps point to a few examples, and then explain how the problem can be fixed or suggest that the student work on the problem on her own; in other cases, they invite the student to a conference in which the problem can be discussed. (174-177)

Although the comments varied among the twelve readers, as a group they reject styles of commentary that are overly directive and controlling, and that take control out of the hands of the writer (188). The researchers make it a point to note that despite the varying degrees of praise a teacher may use, their statements are typically helpful and generative. Interestingly, they also found a relatively small percentage of comments were questions. Teachers typically make use of questions to elicit responses in their students, which works well in classroom discourse, but as this study shows, perhaps has a different effect when posed as a writing comment.   Overall, this study makes a compelling case for teachers to take the time to examine their innate style of response as well as their purpose when responding to their students' writing. It also serves as a source of a wide range of strategies for teachers who want to help their students grow as writers.

Conclusions

The four major conclusions of this study of teacher commentary are:

1) A teacher's response is most effective during the drafting process.

2) Teachers must heed the research, reflect on their own response methods, and engage in active discussion with colleagues. Most research supports the futility and inefficacy of error-driven commentary.

3) Although the body of research on teacher commentary is prolific, further investigation into the relationship of response and student learning is warranted.

4) The majority of the research advises teachers to respond humanly and uniquely to their student papers; this seems impossible to accomplish for secondary English teachers with rosters of one-hundred thirty students. Thus, this is also a call for further research to examine the possibilities of structuring the secondary writing class in such a way that nurtures and supports the optimal performance by the teacher.

This paper, while comprised of some of the most notable studies in the field of teacher response, unfortunately provides an incomplete and inconclusive view of the role and effects of teacher commentary in writing instruction. In fact, my search for more recent studies in the field yielded a small number, one of the latest being an article by Brian Slusher published in 2009, entitled "Praising, Questioning, Wishing: An Approach to Responding to Writing," in which the author narrates his experience using the protocol referenced in the title. Prior to that I found another study by writing instructor Randy Koch, "Where Writing Really Begins," published in 2004 and clearly influenced by Straub, Anson, and Elbow's approach to commentary. There are also

countless articles on peer response and writing workshop, but any efforts to measure student

progress or achievement is at best, sparse. Consequently, the effect of teacher commentary

remains a dubious topic raising more questions than answers; there is simply no conclusive

evidence that quantifies the degree to which a type of comment or mode of comment influences a

writer's growth.   Forty years ago, Paul Diederich of the Educational Testing Service explained

what can and cannot realistically be accomplished in writing assessment and nothing in the vast

body of research on the topic has shown him to be mistaken   (Knoblauch and Brannon,

"Introduction" 4).   He observed that even though raters could be trained to be consistent in their

judgments, the fact remains that evaluation instruments cannot be completely detached from

some measure of subjectivity.   Furthermore, all readers bring their own perceptions to the

experience and are "looking in a textual mirror at themselves; what they see derives from the

values and predispositions they bring to the reading" (qtd. In Knoblauch and Brannon,

"Introduction" 4).   As teachers, we can examine our students' writing from the beginning of

the term to the end, and can qualitatively conclude the areas that show improvement; however,

"we don't have instruments sufficiently refined to detect, let alone identify, the maturation" (qtd.

In Knoblauch and Brannon, "Introduction" 4).   Despite this, our culture is one that continues to

expect a numerical measurement of our students' growth and achievement in the area of reading

and writing, and continues to do so through a slew of standardized testing methods, the same

methods that Diederich found lacking in objectivity and reliability.

Perhaps, at the heart of this issue is a theme that is germane to the researchers' findings in

this study;   it is during the revision process that teacher response is most effective, regardless of

whether or not it can be quantitatively measured.   This is the most critical consideration when

evaluating writing and one that must be more embedded in English teacher preparation

programs.   Although in recent years, there have been marked improvements in undergraduate and graduate certification programs, most working English teachers will admit to having very little training in writing instruction, let alone training in teacher response to student writing. This recommendation also pertains to professional development programs within secondary school districts. Literacy leaders and department chairpersons are ethically obligated to become conversant in teacher response research and orchestrate professional development sessions in which ELA teachers examine and practice the most effective response methods. It is not to be inferred that a group of teachers adopt one method of response; that would only adversely affect agency in the classroom and ultimately interfere with student progress. There is simply no conversations about teacher response and its effect on student writing. Considering the breadth of research, this is an egregious oversight both in some certification programs and secondary education.

One final conclusion is that research breeds more research, and the effect of teacher commentary is no exception.   After the late 1990's, researchers seem to have abandoned this topic, perhaps due to the lack of quantifiable data; however, as a profession we risk, as Anson puts it, "the loss of humanity" when the comments we write on our student papers are "short circuited by accident or design" (2).   Therefore, I propose that teacher preparation programs throughout the country revisit their foundations and treat the topic of response with an increased sense of them to put theory into practice.

In order for teachers to make the best use of conversations with student writers, we need to reexamine our philosophies and ideologies about response and share these governing principles with other professionals.   After establishing, or in some cases reestablishing the purpose of response, which is to help students become better writers, we have to look further at our

instructional practices to determine their alignment with research-based best practices.   This is

the first step towards reform and is one that can transform classroom pedagogy.   Armed with the

knowledge of how a student responds emotionally and intellectually to comments, a teacher can

have a lasting impact on a writer's development.

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