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Responding to Students' Writing: A Research Review and Suggestions for ABE and GED Teachers

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"Awkward"
"Nice"
"Word choice"
"Weak"
"Vague"

As adult educators and teachers of writing, most of us have been guilty of writing some, if not all, of these comments on our students' papers. It is important that we understand the effect that our written comments can have on our students' work, and the role that we play in their writing development as the reader of their texts. We need to acknowledge that not all comments we write, regardless of the intent, help our students.

By knowing this we can respond to our students' written work in ways that will enable them to develop more as critical thinkers, self-editors, and evaluators of their own writing. The focus of this paper is two-fold. First, I review research that will be helpful for adult educators as they learn more about the most effective ways to respond to their students' writing. It is important to note that I have not been able to find any research conducted on how to best respond to adult education students' writing, so this research review focuses on studies conducted in secondary and college classrooms.

The second focus of this paper is to give adult educators some suggestions about how they can best respond to their students' writing so that the students can learn the most from the comments they receive.

RESEARCH REVIEW

Why do we comment on students' writing?

Because we want them to write the perfect paper? Because we are the experts and they need to learn how to write the correct way? Because we have to write something on their papers to show that we read them? Hopefully these aren't the primary reasons why we respond to our students' writing. Research suggests many other,
more palatable, reasons for doing so. Sommers (1982) believes

_We comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students become that questioning reader themselves, because ultimately we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing (p.148)._ 

With this knowledge of audience and reader, students will become more independent in their approach to the writing process

Click here for a brief explanation of the writing process.

They will be better able to examine their writing in a different respect, thinking not only of what they want to say but also how to say it for their intended audience. Sommers sees an even more important reason for commenting on students' drafts. She believes that "comments create the motive for doing something different in the next draft; thoughtful comments create the motive for revising" (p.149). Because of the emphasis on the process approach to teaching writing it is important for us to see how our comments can help students see ways that they can improve their writing on successive drafts. If our comments are not instructive and purposeful, then students will have one less reason or motive to revise. They won't know where to begin.

**Stressing the Positive**

Some excellent research has explored ways that teachers can respond to help students. Daiker (1983) found that nearly 90% of all comments made on papers are negative. In response to this finding, he wrote, "Learning to Praise" (1989), in which he discusses the importance of positively responding to students' writing. He found that many students despise writing because of the frustration they feel when they see that most of the commentary on their papers is so negative. Students can easily become apprehensive about writing when there is so little positive feedback on their work (Daly & Miller, 1975), and one way to include this missing feedback is to "allow students to experience success with writing" (Daiker, p.106). Obviously, this success can be experienced whenever their writing is praised. One method that Daiker advocates is that he writes "nothing but positive comments during an initial reading of a student paper; I lift my pen to write words of praise only" (p.107).

Other teachers and researchers have similar methods of responding. For instance, in R.W. Reising's (1973) method, "It demands, first of all, that I say something nice about what's been written before I even entertain the possibility of saying something negative about it"(p.43). He continues, "my first recorded reaction to a paper, regardless of its quality, must be positive: I must identify one strength--and perhaps as many as three" (p.43).
Reising uses a form that outlines no more than three positive and negative comments, plus things to work on in the next paper or draft. He believes this format avoids the "bleeding" on students' writing that gives them little guidance for future papers.

**Stressing the positive may be especially important with adult literacy students. Have you discussed with students their attitude toward writing? Do they give clear reasons for this attitude?**

Respond here.

Click here to see reader responses/comments

**Role of the Teacher**

Researchers have described the different types of roles teachers should play as they respond to student texts. Anson (1989) calls this variety "the schizophrenia of roles" (p.2). He refers to the teacher as having to move from "helpful facilitator" to the "authority" to the "intellectual peer" and finally to the "gatekeeper of textual standards" (p.2). Bartholomae (1980) refers to teachers as "policemen, examiners, gatekeepers" (p.255). Straub (1997) comments that research suggests teachers need to move beyond the traditional roles of "examiner, critic, and judge" (p.92). So what roles should we play when we respond to our adult education students' writing? Some researchers have gone into greater detail in their examination of the ways that teachers' roles as responders should be defined.

Greenhalgh (1992) suggests that we "need to bring students into the conversation about response by discussing in class their expectations about the teacher's proper role" (p.409). In the adult education classroom, this could be something as simple as asking students for feedback about their strengths and weaknesses as writers. By doing this, we get an idea about our students' opinions of their own writing as well as a starting point for examining their work. Once feedback is begun, a dialogue is created that enables both parties to begin to examine each other's points of view. With the onset of this dialogue, teachers can begin to monitor their own attitude when they respond to student texts, and students can begin to take more control of their writing by risk taking, experimenting, and developing more of a voice.
Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) reiterate Greenhalgh's ideas when they discuss how often teachers assume that their role is "to tell the writers how to do a better job than they could do alone, thereby in effect appropriating the writers' texts" (p. 158). They continue by pointing out that too often student incentive to write is taken away because their authority as writers is reduced by the comments that teachers make. Further, they believe that giving students authority in their writing is parallel to giving them incentive--with one so goes the other. If this authority and incentive are given then improvement can occur.

**Adult learning theory stresses the importance of self-directed learning. Do you have any other practical ideas about how to promote this?**

Respond here.

Click here to see reader responses/comments

**Ways to examine students' writing**

Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) also found that "Teachers need to alter their traditional emphasis on a relationship between student texts and their own Ideal Text in favor of the relationship between what the writer meant to say and what the discourse actually manifests of that intention"(p.161). Essentially, we need to reexamine the way we look at student writing. We need to refrain from seeing each text as a piece of art work made perfect by our comments, and begin to ask the writers what they meant to say and respond to the difference between their intent and the final product. How do we do this? By asking questions, realizing that even the most basic writers "operate with a sense of logic and purpose that may not appear on the page but that nonetheless guides their choices"(Brannon & Knoblauch, p.161). By making this realization, our emphasis shifts from looking for the perfect text to looking for "the disparity between what the writer wanted to communicate and what the choices residing in the text actually cause readers to understand"(p.161). This attitudinal change will enable the writers to feel more in control of their texts and in their readers' interest in the material.

Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) suggest some ways to bring about this control. They believe that multi-draft assignments are essential to helping students take charge of their writing. Multi-
draft assignments give writers and teachers more opportunities for
dialogue and discussion, and writers are given more chances to
revise and retain control of their purpose and authority with their
texts. Further, teachers need to avoid strictly searching for errors
in student writing. The point of the writing is not to find the
errors, but to revise until the writers feel they have satisfied their
authorial intentions.

Researchers have done a variety of studies in search of the best
ways to respond to students' writing. As previously mentioned,
teachers taking control of student writing has been found to be
detrimental to students' growth as writers. Straub (1996) found
that "generally speaking, the more comments a teacher makes on
a piece of writing, the more controlling he or she will likely be"
(p.233). He found that this is particularly true when the majority
of comments are attending to grammar, mechanics, punctuation,
and spelling. Straub calls for teachers to become less directive
and imposing in the manner and form of their comments. He
writes, "the extent to which a teacher assumes control over
student writing is also determined to a great extent by the way he
frames his comments--by the modes of commentary he employs"
(p.234). Straub comes to the conclusion that the most controlling
types of comments are corrections, criticisms, and commands,
while the less directive responses such as advice, praise, and
reflective comments, "provide lessons, offer explanations of other
comments, present reader responses, or simply make
interpretations of the writing"(p.234). Clearly, the latter three
types of responses would be more beneficial for adult education
students.

Lynch and Klemans (1978) conducted a study of basic writing
students that found some interesting parallels to the Straub
research. They administered an open-ended questionnaire to six
college basic writing classes. One section of the questionnaire
asked students to detail the comments they found most helpful
and those that they found least helpful. Students replied by saying
that the best responses are those that are detailed and give
examples whenever possible, are clear, being sure to speak on the
students' level, are factual, and finally, are positive, more
encouraging rather than rude or sarcastic. On the other hand,
students found comments least useful that showed just a symbol
or question with no explanation, that dealt strictly with grammar
and spelling, that were concerned with content, and that were
"negative or sarcastic" (p.169).

Lynch and Klemans' exercise would be great to try with your
adult education students. Ask your adults to list your most
and least helpful comments. Let us know what they say.

Respond here.
Teachers' comments impact on student writing.

Some research has also examined the effect of teacher comments on student writing. Dohrer (1991) found that although students felt that revising their essays was a chance to learn more about writing, they primarily used it as an exercise to improve their grade. He also discovered that, on average, 72% of teachers' comments concern surface level features. Essentially, students are spending more time correcting surface level errors (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) than working to improve the content of their essays. It is clear, however, that the reason students spend so much time with surface level corrections is because their teachers are attending to those features much more often than the content or organizational responses.

Dohrer (1991) sees the importance of teachers separating themselves from the role of evaluator while the students are engaged in the writing process. Dohrer's study determined that once students feel that they are writing for a grade they abandon their own purposes and will simply do what the teacher tells them. He also believes that "teachers need to be aware of the number of comments they are making on compositions" (p.54). Too many comments on papers leads to frustration on the student's part. Often when this is the case, students give up or just concentrate on correcting the surface comments. Finally, Dohrer suggests that teachers must give students comments that have enough information. Comments such as those at the beginning of this article, "awkward", "vague", or "rewrite", are not acceptable. If students fail to understand how and why teachers are responding, they won't be able to properly revise or rethink the structure and content of their writing.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

What are some of the key elements from this research that ABE tutors and teachers can use to help their students improve as writers?

First, before we can help our adult education students we need to look at ourselves. We need to examine how we comment on our
students’ writing. What parts of their writing do we tend to focus on when we look at their papers? Grammar? Punctuation? Spelling? Content? Organization? Research informs us that students will revise only what we tell them to revise. If we are focusing our comments strictly on things other than content and organization, then they (students) will get the idea that superficial responses are more important than idea development and how their writing is organized. Most adult education students do need a great deal of help with grammar, punctuation, and spelling, but those areas can be addressed in later drafts. If, when taking the GED writing test, students have perfect grammar and punctuation but lack focus or organization to their writing they will still score very low. We need to stress, through the comments we write on their papers, that content and organization are just as important, if not more so, than grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Second, we can set the tone by talking to students before their first writing assignment. Sitting down as a group and discussing what makes good writing good and poor writing not so good is an effective way to learn about students' perceptions about writing. It also gives us a measuring stick to begin engaging students' understanding of writing. Further, this discussion becomes the first step in our dialogue with our students. We can tell them what we expect from them this year and they can do the same for us. This experience can be the beginning of trust and can open the door to learning for adults and ourselves. "Ask students How should I comment?"

A third key element in our responses is that we need to give detailed, descriptive comments written so that our students can understand them. Writing one word comments such as "awkward", "vague", or "rewrite", might be clear for us, but for most of our ABE or GED students these responses offer little guidance or direction about how or what to revise. I combat this by monitoring each comment I say or write by asking myself if I have included information that will allow my students to understand what I'm saying about their writing and help them revise based on the comment. For instance, if a student writes a paragraph with no main idea or focus, I may write next to the paragraph: "What is the point you are trying to make here? You have several interesting points expressed here; it might be helpful to focus on one and expand on it more thoroughly."

By doing this, I can be sure that the student will understand what the comment is, and she also has some idea about how to proceed with the next draft. Further, I am giving her the choice about how to proceed--she chooses what part of that paragraph to expand on-by doing so she has more control over her own writing. Obviously, writing in this much detail will not give most of us much room to comment throughout an entire piece of writing. I propose we should respond to one or two primary weaknesses per
paper or draft. By doing this we will be able to spend more time with the more serious problems and give students the opportunity to redraft their writing more often.

A fourth important element when commenting on our students' writing is that we praise them whenever possible—but not gratuitously. As Daiker (1983, 1989) discussed in his research, praise is crucial for students. Praising students writing when it's warranted can add to their self-confidence and belief in themselves as writers, and they may learn that writing can be an enjoyable and enlightening experience for them. It doesn't have to be the same cause of frustration and anxiety it was for so many when they attended school as children and young adults. Furthermore, praising students also helps teachers because we are able to see how our students are improving and making progress.

Finally, we need to be certain that when we comment on our students' writing -- we do not take control of their writing and ideas. It may be better to ask questions than to comment. There are many questions you or your students can ask.

Click here for some questions to ask about our students' writing.

There are several ways to deal with comments. First, as Straub (1996) pointed out, the more comments we make on a paper, in general, the more control is being taken away from the student. By following guidelines whereby we comment on only one or two main points each draft we will not be wresting creative control away from the student. Also, by allowing students to write on topics of their choice and by giving them freedom to experiment with the language we are showing them we trust their opinions and that they have educational worth. Furthermore, our comments themselves can take control from our students. By writing comments whose purposes are to help the students reflect on what they have written, to praise their writing, and to offer advice—but not order or direct them to do something, we are keeping the control of the writing process with them.

CONCLUSION

We need to look at how we currently respond to our students' writing to try to determine the reasoning behind why we write the comments we do. By focusing on our reasons for responding the way we do, we may discover patterns in our responses that fail to give students insight about how to improve their writing. For instance, by examining our own comments about student papers, we may find that we tend to focus a great deal on spelling and punctuation problems but in class we may have had a focus on content and organizational difficulties more. This discrepancy may send mixed signals to our students. The kinds of comments we say or write should reflect our emphasis in the classroom. As
adult education teachers, most of us have the responsibility to help our students improve their writing skills—whether their ultimate goal is to pass the GED exam or simply to feel better about themselves. In any case, one way that we can help bring about this improvement is by responding to students' texts in better ways. We can do this by focusing more on content and organization when responding—particularly in the early stages of the writing process, being sure to write understandable and detailed responses, praising our students' writing when possible, and not taking control of the their writing and ideas. By doing these things and continually examining ourselves as responders of our students' writing, we will not only improve as teachers but also help our students to improve as writers, critical thinkers, and self-editors.

Please share your own practical suggestions for promoting your ABE or GED students writing.

Respond here.

Click here to see reader responses/comments

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REFERENCES


