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Teacher response to student writing: exploring the needs of composition students beyond English 101

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TEACHER RESPONSE TO STUDENT WRITING:
EXPLORING THE NEEDS OF COMPOSITION
STUDENTS BEYOND ENGLISH 101

Thesis

Submitted to

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Master of Arts in English

By:

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UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

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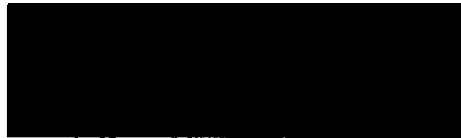
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ABSTRACT

TEACHER RESPONSE TO STUDENT WRITING: EXPLORING THE NEEDS OF COMPOSITION STUDENTS BEYOND ENGLISH 101

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This thesis seeks to understand the comment needs of student writers in first-year English courses and in upper-level writing courses (for juniors or seniors). The intent of the study is to discover how the needs of these two groups compare and to discover which types of comments they find most and least helpful in order to discover if the needs of student writers change as they gain more experience. The study was conducted in two writing courses, one English 102 and one English 272 course. The participants filled out questionnaires related to two of their written texts to which their teachers had responded. These questionnaires asked them specific questions about the clarity and helpfulness of the comments on their papers. The students also participated in four interviews over the course of the study in which they discussed their papers and their general feelings about writing and teacher's responses. Additionally, the teachers of the two courses participated in one interview about their response practices. The data gathered from the interviews and questionnaires was then analyzed, and the two classes were compared.

The results of the study revealed that first-year students and upper-class students are similar in their desire for specific comments and comments about the more global concerns of the paper, such as content and organization. They differ in their abilities to make connections between comments, their propensity to disagree with their teacher's ideas, and the amount they feel they learned from the comments. The more experienced writers were better at making connections, disagreed more with their teacher, and felt they learned less from the comments. From these conclusions, important implications for students and teachers can be drawn.

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I also need to thank my friends and family. Their support in this, as in all things, has meant the world to me. Their constant encouragement and support of me has helped me complete this thesis. To my husband, Andrew, thank you for supporting me and believing in me, and thank you for listening to my constant ramblings as I worked out this project. Thank you to my mom and dad, and to my brother, Andrew, for always believing in me.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As with many inventive processes, this research began from necessity. Being a new teacher of composition, I struggled to know how to best respond to my students' writing. I never struggled with planning lessons, creating assignments, or teaching the actual class, but the area of response and grading seemed foggy to me. While my good communication skills and my creative approach to teaching lead me through the other aspects of teaching, I still struggled to determine best practice when it came to response. This task of response also took up more of my time than any other task related to teaching composition and spoke most directly to the students' writing, and so it seemed that more knowledge on the subject would be valuable to me as a new teacher. I wanted to understand what actually helped students to improve as writers so that I could implement effective response strategies. If I was to spend so much of my time out of the classroom responding to papers in hopes of making better student writers, then I wanted to know more on the subject. How much should I be writing on students' papers? Should I write long comments or short ones? Would correcting grammar really help the students learn? These questions plagued me as I struggled blindly through the process of response. While I often saw improvements in my students' writing over the course, there were still occasions where my comments seemed to make no difference at all in

a student's writing. This discrepancy also encouraged my desire to research and discover good tactics for responding to student writing.

Initially, these questions and concerns led me to conduct a review of literature which explored the various methods for response and categorized different types of comments and how helpful they were. I explored scholar after scholar in my first year of graduate school (my second year of teaching) trying to discern which methods and comments were effective and which were ineffective. I quickly discovered that this matter is not clean cut, black and white. Vast grey areas exist in the topic of responding to student writing. Many of these grey areas exist because the needs and characteristics of the students in any given class can vary greatly. This led me to question what differences there might be between two particular groups of students, first year student writers and more experienced student writers. While the research was fairly clear in reporting that students preferred, for instance, specific, more detailed comments and were not helped by grammatical corrections, many scholars admitted that different student groups would have different needs. The scholars I consulted gave me a very solid understanding, I feel, of how to respond to student writers. I was satisfied by what I learned and felt that I was more equipped to respond well and helpfully to my students' work. In spite of that satisfaction, I still felt a keen interest in the subject and wanted to explore some of my own questions about different age groups – first year students and upper-class students – more thoroughly. Although my teaching experience thus far has been with first year students, I know that the future may hold different tasks for me, and additionally,

reporting on this research could reach others who currently do teach writing for students beyond English 101.

I also was motivated to conduct this research because I felt that I was not alone in my questions about response. The vast body of literature on this subject reveals that truth. Many scholars have wondered how to help students through written commentary, and many questions yet remain about effective methods for responding. Perhaps so many questions arise because all teachers in English departments teach composition at some point. Even if they are literature instructors, generally teachers are required by their departments to teach at least one of the many sections of composition that are offered each semester for first-year students. And most every teacher will then face the challenge of responding to his or her students' writing. In order to do this effectively, each teacher needs to have some knowledge, based in research, about what works and what does not work when it comes to response. With this in mind, my research seeks to add to the information already provided in the published literature and expand it by discussing the needs of different student groups that teachers may encounter in teaching composition classes.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most every English teacher will have to face the challenge of responding to student writing. Whether teaching writing or literature, most English courses involve student writing in some way. The job of evaluating this writing is left up to the teacher. Many instructors evaluate writing based on grammatical correctness and formalist concerns while other teachers choose to focus only on whether the student has said something worthwhile in his or her essay. Whatever the teacher values most is what he or she will be looking for in evaluating his or her students' work; this is arguably a very subjective process, which can leave teachers mystified over how to comment and students confused over how to interpret the comments and grades. Nancy Sommers gives clear definition to this problem: "Although commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student writing, it is the least understood" (148). Much of the process of evaluating student work involves responding to this work through written comments that both justify and explain the evaluation and also direct the student towards areas of his or her paper that could be improved in subsequent drafts. Because this is a task that is so central to the English teacher's job and because it seems to be a task that is so subjective, much research has investigated what types of comments are most helpful to students and what

teachers' primary concerns should be as they respond to their students' work. This review of literature will discuss different issues related to response and different types of comments as defined by various researchers. The helpfulness of these different comments will also be explored according to how the scholars have viewed them. The following study will then focus on answering those questions that the previous research has not adequately addressed.

The Necessity of Revision

First, it should be noted that in many studies, students did not find teacher comments helpful at all if they were not given a chance to revise or improve their writing (Dohrer 48; Freedman 36; Haswell, "Minimal" 600; Sullivan 52). Because writing is really a social action that allows for communication between a writer and his/her readers, students learn to be better writers by addressing the needs of their readers and revising their texts to meet those needs (Sperling, "Constructing" 175). If students are not given the opportunity to revise, they will not be allowed to practice meeting the previously unmet needs of their readers. In her study on what comments helped students' revision most, Sarah Washauer Freedman found that successful teachers focused their "attention on response during the writing process" (37). They understood that comments on final graded drafts did not teach their students much (36). Thus, if a student is never given the option to revise, all they will have are comments on final drafts, which Freedman suggests are not helpful to students. Therefore students must be engaged in a revision process in order for comments to be helpful to them, and teachers must produce comments that encourage this revision process rather than make it

seem like an editing project. Revision of an essay involves more than surface level changes like commas and word choices. Revision should be substantive, addressing issues of structure and content. If teachers do not address these more global concerns and issue mainly formalist corrections on a paper, then they encourage editing and not revision.

Comments that direct the student forward to the process of inventive revision, or formative comments, are more helpful than summative comments, those that focus the student back on what has already been accomplished (Moneyhun 328; Sommers 151). Formative comments facilitate improvement and push the student towards revision rather than towards judging a past work (Haswell, "Minimal" 600; Moneyhun 328; Straub, "Reading" 31-32). Sommers asserts that when teachers take too much control of a draft and make mainly summative comments, students are encouraged "to believe that their first drafts are finished drafts, not invention drafts, and that all they need to do is patch and polish their writing" (151). Therefore, teachers should do all that they can to further the inventive process in the student writer and avoid directly telling the student that his or her ideas are incorrect because this tends to focus him or her back on her past text and remove control from his or her hands (Lunsford 98). Boldly declaring right and wrong tends to shut down a student's inventive side and focuses him or her on fixing the text according to the teacher's desires. Then, according to Sommers, revision becomes just "a rewording activity" (151). On the other hand, open questions that focus the student forward, towards exploration, in the next draft or essay are effective. These formative comments should "open up inquiry rather than [close] it down" (Lunsford 98).

Timing is also an important issue. Formative comments made during the writing process are most useful (Brannon and Knoblauch 162). Comments made on final drafts too easily become summative because students do not easily transfer what a teacher wrote on one paper to the next paper that they write. Again, revision is a necessity in order for students to learn. Freedman notes that the successful teachers in her study "focus their attention on response during the writing process" (37). It seems logical that "what might be regarded as 'errors' on a single-draft assignment may be seen as opportunities to clarify or refine relationships between intention and effect" in a multiple-draft assignment (Brannon and Knoblauch 162). In other words, if students are allowed to revise their papers, comments will naturally be more formative in that they will be used to improve students' next drafts instead of just to show their errors on the current draft.

Issues of Control

In addition to directing their students toward revision with formative comments, writing teachers must also have a proper perspective on their control over student texts. This perspective influences the way a teacher will comment, perhaps more than any other issue related to response. In a normal writer/reader relationship, the reader trusts in the authority of the writer and therefore leaves the decisions about how the piece should be written in the hands of the writer; however, because students have not achieved this level of authority, the normal reader/writer relationship is not in place between students and teachers, and teachers easily assume control over a student text (Brannon and Knoblauch 157-

158; Straub, "Reading" 27). In spite of this abnormal writer/reader relationship, many scholars assert that teachers must do their best to leave students in control of their own texts because they will not improve as writers otherwise (Bolker 182; Brannon and Knoblauch 165; Lees 372; Lunsford 96; Moneyhun 327). Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch state, "Although student texts are not, in fact, authoritative, we must nonetheless accept a student writer's authority to the extent that we grant the writer control over the process of making choices" (165). Additionally, Elaine Lees feels that if a teacher takes control giving "detailed [...] blueprints" for revision, which are not "transferable" for the student, the result will be "a better revised paper without [...] a better writer" (372). The natural solution to this problem is that teachers "ought to relinquish [their] control of student writing and return it to the writers: doing so will not only improve student incentive to write, but will also make [their] responses to the writing more pertinent" (Brannon and Knoblauch 161).

This release of control must be reflected in the way teachers comment on their student papers, for it has been shown that students respond best to teacher comments that are made in a "nonauthoritarian" tone (Lunsford 96) that keeps control of the text in the students' hands (Moneyhun 327). In other words, teachers should not "take the steering wheel out of the students' hands" (Lunsford 96) and should "strive not to be overly controlling in their responses to content issues" (97). For instance, a teacher would be taking control of a student text if she rewrote an entire sentence in the text and directed the student to use her sentence. Rather than using this controlling type of comment, a teacher would be better off to question the student and encourage her to explore better

ways of communicating that sentence on her own. Straub identifies "questions and nonevaluative" comments as non-controlling commentary because they are "interactive" in that they "initiate a more active response from the student and place greater responsibility on her to come up with her own ideas and revisions" ("Concept" 234). Similarly, Brannon and Knoblauch point out that "questions initiate a process of negotiation" in which the student and teacher can communicate to discover the best way to say what the student wants to say (163). They assert, "the teacher's principal concern in asking and cooperatively answering these questions is to make the writer think about what has been said, not to tell the writer what to do" (163). Lees points out that a teacher who does a lot of editing is using too controlling a commenting style (373). In their commentary, teachers do not want to do the student's job, but should pose their comments in ways that motivate students to think and be active in the revision process. Richard Straub heavily emphasizes that commenting is not just based on what a teacher says, but on how the comment is phrased ("Concept" 237-241). The phrasing and tone of a comment can often make it ineffective even if it is well intentioned. Several research studies reveal that the attitude revealed in a comment is vitally important in the issue of response (Brannon and Knoblauch 167; Chandler 273; Connors and Lunsford 215; Crone-Blevins 97). Brannon and Knoblauch simply state, "attitudes are more important than methods" (163). Similarly, Deborah Crone-Blevins asserts, "Styles of response seem to matter less than [the] underlying message, which imbues writers with a sense of worth and takes them seriously, regardless of the quality of the work" (97).

In order to place the most control into the students' hands, teachers should also attempt not to look at how the student has failed to meet the teacher's own idea of good writing and instead should judge how well a student has achieved what she wanted to achieve (Connors and Lunsford 218; Straub, "Reading" 27; Straub, "Student" 31; Underwood and Tregidgo 82; Williams 8). Sommers points out that teachers often "read student texts with biases about what the writer should have said or about what he or she should have written" (154). Clearly each reader brings her own priorities, values and standards with herself when she comes to read a text (Elbow 192). Brannon and Knoblauch present what should be done about this: If teachers can compare the student's essay not to an "ideal text" but to what that writer actually intended to say through the piece, then response comments will "allow the writer to sense both a real control over the discourse and also the reader's real interest in what is being said" (161). Anne Greenhalgh concurs, "A responsible teacher [...] would be a responsive reader, one who helps students identify and solve writing problems but, in the course of suggesting how they might do so, avoids unwittingly appropriating the draft" (401). Just as it is vitally important that teachers do not take control of their students' texts, so it follows that students are more receptive to "comments [. . .] posed in a more open suggestive way" rather than those which are controlling directives (Underwood and Tregidgo 91). Refusal to take control of a student text manifests itself in comments that are only suggestive and not directive. Straub sums up the issue: "comments that recognize the integrity of the student as a learning writer and that look to engage him in substantive revision are better than those that do not" (Straub, "Concept" 248).

Response as Conversation

One mode of commenting that can lend itself to student rather than teacher control is often represented by the metaphor of "conversation" or dialogue (Fife and O'Neill 313; Greenhalgh 409; Lauer 121; Straub, "Teacher" 377; Welsh 377). In theory, teachers and students engage in a conversation about the student's text and how to improve it. Straub characterizes this commentary as "informal" and like the "spoken voice" which allows the teacher to "talk with the student rather than talk to him or speak down at him ("Teacher" 377). Straub also indicates that these types of comments tend to maintain a certain level of casualness and use wording that is simple, avoiding technical, academic or teacherly language ("Student" 29; "Teacher" 378). Straub cautions, though, against merely seeing "conversational" comments as those that are softer, friendlier, etc. He asserts that "conversation is defined not so much by its casualness as by its engagement with a subject and a real exchange between two parties" (Straub, "Teacher" 381). Thus, this commentary is not free from criticism or suggestion, but it does not use directive statements which would define the teacher more as a judge than a reader and coach (384). Straub asserts, "The best conversational responses integrate informal dialogue and serious inquiry" (388). Ideally, this type of commentary focuses on the student's content and attempts to "engage him in discussion of his ideas and purposes" (379). In order to do engage student writers with their comments, teachers must first and foremost be readers of student work, and not critics; they should "listen to what the writer says and [let] him know what [they have] heard" (380). Straub argues that conversational responses "dramatize the presence of a reader, keep

a good deal of control over the writing in the hands of the writing, and lead students back into the chaos of revision" (391). Additionally, conversational response "encourages teachers to adopt a reader's perspective and play back for students how well they are communicating their intentions to an audience" (391). Many scholars assert that at times a reader's approach is better than strictly approaching a text as a judge or evaluator (Brannon and Knoblauch 158; Connors and Lunsford 217; Sperling, "Constructing" 189; Straub, "Reading" 40-41; Straub, "Student" 32). Summer Smith argues that by responding as a reader, "a teacher can establish a more personal connection with the student and demonstrate the effects of words on readers" (257).

Research also discusses the student's role in conversational response. Jane Fife and Peggy O'Neill suggest that "students need to be offered the opportunity to *begin* the conversation, to initiate the process of inquiry by stating their observations, goals, and concerns" (313). This will give teachers initial insights into the paper and help them shape their comments around helping the students' meet their goals for the text. Conversely, "when students' writing is only commented on by the teacher and not by the student writers themselves, the dialogue does not take place on the same plane of writing [. . .] Instead, the student's contributions to this dialogue become the implementations of the teacher's writing decisions" (313). In other words, if students are not given the opportunity to be a part of the conversation about their papers, then the conversation becomes one-sided, and the student basically just aligns the paper with what the teacher has said. Greenhalgh suggests that this problem can be avoided by "bring[ing] students into the conversation about response by

discussing in class their expectations about the teacher's proper role" (409).

Greenhalgh posits that students need to also be made aware that teachers are not to be the dominant voice in the conversation; many students are used to this, but by reinforcing the students' own role in the conversation, they become aware of their ownership of a text (409). Nancy Welsh also presents a method of implementing a literal two-sided conversation. She calls her method

"sideshadowing," where the margins of a student's paper are not reserved for the teacher's comments only or the one right way to compose the text, but are a place where students can also comment and where the "right way" can be negotiated, creating real conversation between student and teacher (377).

Sarah Warshauer Freedman and Melanie Sperling suggest that conferencing with students is the best way for teachers to have "conversational dialogue" with their students (3).

Limiting Comments

In order to leave control in students' hands and provide effective and helpful commentary, teachers must also limit their comments. Many teachers are highly tempted to mark each and every error on the page. However, this amount of commenting produces a type of cognitive overload in the student which does not serve to improve his or her writing at all (Lunsford 93). Rather, teachers should apply the principle that "less is more" (Lunsford 93; Moneyhun 327). Keeping comments to a minimum can help students "avoid the mental dazzle of information overload" that they sometimes encounter when looking at their newly evaluated papers (Haswell, "Minimal" 601). In order to effectively

avoid this overload, research shows that no more than two to three issues should be addressed in a paper (Lunsford 93; Moneyhun 328; Straub, "Guidelines" 359; Straub, "Student" 40). This does not mean that only three errors are marked in the paper, but it means that the responder should find a theme or themes to bring to the student's attention, marking several examples of that theme (Lunsford 93; Straub, "Guidelines" 359). This allows the student to actually focus on that one particular aspect of her writing that needs to be improved. Students' writing will improve more if teachers limit their comments so that the students do not become overwhelmed. Additionally, Straub points out that failing to limit comments cannot only cause the student to become overwhelmed and confused, but can also remove control of the text from the student's hands:

Generally speaking, the more comments a teacher makes on a piece of writing, the more controlling he or she will likely be. The more a teacher attends to the text, especially local matters, and tries to lead the student to produce a more complete written product, the more likely he is to point to specific changes and thus to exert more control over the student's writing process.

("Concept" 233)

Thus to avoid overwhelming students and appropriating their texts, teachers should always attempt to limit their comments.

Prioritizing Comments

In addition to limiting comments, teachers must also prioritize their comments for students in order to gain the best results. As previously mentioned,

studies reveal that students are easily confused when too many comments are made on a paper (Haswell, "Minimal" 601; Lunsford 93); thus, teachers should clearly "encourage students to address certain concerns before others" (Underwood and Tregidgo 79), depending on the draft they are reading (Sommers 155). On earlier drafts, global issues relating to topic and argument should be the priority (Moneyhun 327; Straub, "Guidelines" 360). On later drafts the focus can shift to more localized concerns such as grammar and syntax (Moneyhun 328; Straub, "Guidelines" 361). For instance, if a teacher is responding to a first draft of a paper that has serious concerns on the global level, he or she should realize that much on the sentence and grammar level will change as the content of the paper evolves (Sommers 154; Straub, "Guidelines" 360). There really would not be any point in addressing these local concerns before the global problems have been revised. Sommers says,

There seems to be no point in having students correct usage errors or condense sentences that are likely to disappear before the next draft is completed. In fact, to identify such problems in a text at this early first draft stage, when such problems are likely to abound, can give a student a disproportionate sense of their importance at this stage in the writing process. (154-155)

Again, prioritizing comments according to the draft of the paper is vital as teachers consider their commentary.

Teachers also need to clearly specify what their priorities are for the students in revising or students may not figure it out. Students tend to associate volume with importance, so if a teacher has made many comments relating to

grammar, a student may assume that this is the most important concern for her paper when, in fact, it is not (Sommers 154-155). Similarly, if teachers provide no prioritization, students may become confused when interlinear, correctional comments (formalistic) compete with marginal comments (formative/content based). This competition between comments sends students a mixed message about what is most important for them to revise (151). Furthermore, even the wording of comments can create competition of importance in the minds of students. Comments can be worded in a way that makes it "difficult for students to know what is the most important problem in the text and what problems are of lesser importance" (151). If teachers do not clearly communicate which issues in their comments are most important, it will be hard for the "student to sort out and decide what is most important and what is least important" (151). An end comment is often an ideal place to give an overall conception of the paper and suggest ideas for revision in a prioritized manner.

Global versus Local Comments

In regards to specific types of comments, some debates and discrepancies in research exist about which types – global or local – are actually most helpful. Jody Underwood and Alyson Tregidgo cite several different studies that reveal a debate about which comments are more used and more useful to students. In their study, some teachers revealed that they used a combination of these two types of comments while other teachers said they used primarily one or the other (77). Similarly, some students expressed an appreciation for local comments relating to formalist concerns, while other students seemed to prefer

global comments that related to their content (77-78). Whichever type of comment teachers make more, and whichever type students seem to prefer, the influence of these different comments on revision is clear: students responded more often to local comments than to global comments (78-79).

Richard Haswell discusses the same issue. He says when students are

forced to revise, they assiduously follow the teacher's surface emendations and disregard the deeper suggestions regarding content and argumentation. They prefer global, non-directive, and positive comments but make changes mainly to surface, directive, and negative ones. In sum, they want lots and certain kinds of response, but have trouble doing much with what they ask for. ("The Complexities" 7)

In other words, though students seem to prefer receiving global comments, they most often respond to local comments. Perhaps this is because local comments are often surface-level comments that students can fix more easily than comments related to global issues. Global issues relate to larger, more complex issues that can be difficult for students to address. Though students do not always find global comments to be their favorite type of comment, research recommends that global comments relating to content, organization, development, etc. are by far the more important matter to consider in responding (Straub, "Student" 34). Straub also suggests that local comments not be a real concern for teachers until global matters of content and organization have been worked out ("Reading" 31; "Student" 36-37). Teachers should focus

their comments according to which stage a particular draft is in (Lauer 121), always showing concern for global issues over local issues.

Specific Comments

Whether teachers are commenting on global or local issues in a paper, they should make their comments text-specific because these are most helpful to students. (Elbow 202; Lunsford 103; Smith 260; Straub, "Guidelines" 358-359; Ziv 372). Studies have found that "feedback was more effective when it gave details of how to improve" (Underwood and Tregigdo 86) or provided "specific guidance" for the student (Smith 260). These types of explicit cues are generally received well by students (Ziv 372). Perhaps this is what causes students to respond well to local comments – these comments usually do point to a specific problem and give direction about how to fix the problem simply. Peter Elbow suggests that teachers "must learn to . . . read closely and carefully enough to show the student little bits of *proto-organization* or sort of clarity in what [students have] already written" (202). Elbow's article suggests that teachers can provide specific comments by using the student's own text – pointing out what has been done correctly in part of the paper so that the student can model other weaker parts of the text after the stronger section the teacher identified. Straub finds that writing out comments in full sentences is also better; short abbreviations or one-word comments, in addition to being vague, can communicate a lack of respect for the student's writing and haste in grading ("Guidelines" 358-359).

Positive Feedback or Praise Comments

Another kind of comment that students find helpful is the praise comment or the constructive criticism comment (Crone-Blevins 98; Smith 261; Straub, "Reading" 33-34; Straub, "Student" 46). Praise comments commend something the student has done well and/or constructively suggest improvements. These comments are helpful because students can see what they have done correctly and, consequently, their self-esteem and confidence will rise. However, teachers must be wary because praise comments do not always naturally produce better writing (Underwood and Tregidgo 85). In fact, too many praise comments can cause the student to become so fixated on his or her own positive self-esteem that he or she fails to really see how she could improve his or her papers (85). Additionally, Crone-Blevins "cautions against empty praise, which can both call into question a teacher's integrity and prevent a writer from seeing his or her work as a work in progress" (96-97). Patrick Sullivan agrees that praise, especially empty praise, can leave students worse off than if there had been no praise at all (51). He asserts that students generally misinterpret ambiguous praise comments meant to soften the blow of a poor paper grade (51). Though these dangers do exist in praising, if teachers can find positive ways to phrase even their critical comments, students will be more receptive to the comments (Underwood, and Tregidgo 86). A positive comment can "demonstrate [teacher] fairness," showing that "the teachers were not simply searching for papers' faults" (Smith 261). This can "give the student a positive attitude" in relationship to the rest of the comments (261). In her study of end comments, Smith points out that one of their benefits is that they permit teachers to "fulfill the

generic conventions of including positive evaluations [...] even when the student's paper is poor" (255). As Smith points out, the end comment is a good place to give positive commentary to encourage the student when other places for praise are hard to find. In her study sample, 88% of end comments began with praise or "positive evaluation" (261). This serves to soften the blow of the problems the teacher may point out in the rest of the end comment. As with all other types of comments, praise comments work best when they are specific (Underwood and Tregidgo 87). Overall, teachers' comments will be more effective if they provide an equal number of praise comments and criticisms (Straub, "Guidelines" 363).

Grammar

While historically the main focus of teacher response was on formal matters (Connors and Lunsford 203), present day research makes clear that a focus on formal grammar does not really improve student writing. Studies repeatedly reveal that comments about grammar in student papers are not helpful to students for a variety of reasons (Underwood and Tregidgo 81; Sommers 149; Straub, "Guidelines" 361; Ziv 374-375). First, these comments are often written in a directive manner, as simply a correction on the page, giving the students the feeling that the teacher is in control of their text (Underwood and Tregidgo 81; Sommers 149). Students will then revise the paper according to what the teacher wants (Sommers 150), but give little thought to why they are making the particular grammatical change because they may not even understand the formal concern (Ziv 374-375). This would seem to indicate that

the student is not really learning from the comment. Second, if teachers correct each and every formal error that they find, students will get the impression that these errors are most important (Sommers 150). Too many comments focused on grammar lead students to look at revision as merely an editing process and cause them to focus more on rules and correctness (151). This turns writing into a rule-following process (153) rather than the inventive explorative process it is meant to be. Because of the directive nature of grammar-correcting comments and because of the over-valuing of these comments, teachers are encouraged to make as few of these types of comments as possible. If necessary, a teacher could point out a couple of examples of a common grammatical problem and ask the student to search for similar errors throughout the paper (Haswell, "Minimal" 601; Straub, "Guidelines" 361; Ziv 376).

Vague Comments

In addition to grammar, many studies reveal that comments of a vague nature are not at all helpful to students (Sommers 152; Straub, "Student" 29; Sullivan 52; Underwood and Tregidgo 86-87; Ziv 373). Research finds that often teachers' comments are not "text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text" (Sommers 153). Even worse, studies show that these are often the most prevalent types of comments noted on student papers (153). Examples of these types of comments, which are often one or two word, "underdeveloped comments," include "vague; tense; tone; good use of quote" (Lunsford 92). When students find these types of one-word comments littered throughout the margins of their text, they often cannot even figure out which

words or sentences are being referred to (92). Thus, these types of comments make revision into a "guessing game" where the student must try to figure out what the teacher is referring to and what she means by her comment (92). In situations like this, more often than not the student will be too uncertain about how to revise his or her work so he or she will not revise. From comments like "vague," students see that teacher has license to be vague and unclear, but they (the students) do not (Sommers 153). This is obviously a contradictory message that is both confusing and frustrating to students. In order for comments to actually be helpful to students, teachers must "anchor" their comments "in the specifics of that student's text" (153). Additionally, Sue Ellen Williams's study revealed that students found comments composed of "specialized language or jargon" to be vague as well (5). Abbreviations that may seem perfectly clear to teachers are often vague to students. This study indicates that not only is text specificity an important factor, but using language that is specific and clear to the student is important in effective communication.

Negative Comments and Directives

Worse than the grammatical or the vague, negative or directive comments are perhaps the least helpful to students. Students often view negative comments and directives as synonymous. Both tend to discourage the writer and take control out of his or her hands. The student writer sees that the teacher has written a corrective comment on the paper, and plainly sees that he or she is expected to follow it. Straub defines directive commentary as "the commentary of the critic and judge" which is "highly critical and sets out for the

student in no uncertain terms what is not working in the paper and what needs to be done" ("Concept" 226). This type of commentary has a "definite and rather narrow agenda for the writing, and [the teacher] clearly imposes this agenda on the student writer" (226). Such commentary may discourage the student. Additionally, too many negative or directive responses can serve to frustrate students, lower their self-esteem or self-confidence, cause feelings of depression, and incapacitate their abilities as writers (Smith 253; Sullivan 52; Underwood and Tregidgo 85). Negative feelings can result not only from the wording of the comment, but also from the tone in which the comment is made. If teachers do not like their students' work and do not choose to see any value in it, a negative attitude will likely come through in their commenting and not affect the student's writing positively (Elbow 201-202). Similarly, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford found in their study that teachers sometimes became "savagely indignant" or "sadly resigned" in their comment styles, which "gave the message that the teacher was seriously disappointed with this effort and was not equal to the task of finding anything about the paper to like" (210).

The Need for Further Research

Though a great amount of research has obviously been conducted about teacher response to student writing, there are still questions about this subject that remain. For instance, do students' perceptions of teachers comments and needs in relationship to response change as they age and become more mature? Most of the body of research on this topic relates to students in basic first-year English courses. This group is comprised of students who like to write and

those who strongly dislike writing, those who will pursue English degrees, and those who will pursue degrees in engineering, science, medicine, mathematics, etc. Basically, students in English 101 comprise a very mixed bag. Naturally, this student group would have very different needs from a more experienced group of writers. Once students are juniors or seniors in college, and once they have chosen a major in a humanities-related field, they will likely think differently and have different needs than younger students. They are becoming participants in their discourse community and have more experience as writers. They have completed English 101 and have received instruction on their writing in this and other courses. This instruction and experience might lead these student writers to need, expect, and appreciate different types of comments on their writing. More research is needed to see what the needs of these more experienced writers may be. Additionally, how do these needs compare to the needs of freshmen writers? Do the older students find the same types of comments helpful as the younger students? Or do they have more complex needs in relationship to teacher response? It is unclear whether junior/senior students in a writing-intensive course would respond in similar ways as first-year students and would benefit from the same types of comments as first-year students. Therefore, more study is needed in order to determine what types of comments more experienced students find helpful in improving their work.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine and compare what types of written comments different age groups of student writers find helpful. The student groups to be focused on were first-year students and junior- or senior-level students. The study's goal was determine how the needs of the two groups differ. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of comments are most helpful to first-year student writers?
2. What types of comments are most helpful to more experienced writers, such as those at the junior and senior level?
3. What types of comments are not helpful to junior/senior writers?
4. What types of comments are not helpful to both first-year writers?
5. How does the teacher's style of commenting impact the way students perceive the comments on their papers and the level of helpfulness of those comments?

Course Selection

In order to answer these questions, I searched for two writing courses that would fit the needs of the study. The courses needed to have student texts, which were collected and responded to throughout the course of the semester rather than a final portfolio collected at the end of the course. This way, students would see their teachers' responses right away and the study could be

completed within my time constraints. A portfolio course would not have worked because the students, once finished with the course, would be on summer break and unlikely to want to participate in a study. They would also likely not be at the university or even be reachable.

Two courses at a midwestern university presented themselves as suitable for the study. One was College Composition II, which was a required course for most first-year students in the university. The course is described as a "study of appropriate rhetorical structures and styles for analytic, synthetic, and argumentative essays. Practice in developing critical reading and writing skills with an emphasis on writing from sources" ("English" para. 2). Students in this course studied a collection of literature including fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama, and short story as part of the course work. They were required to write 5-6 papers over the course of the semester, with an emphasis in argument and using secondary sources. The final paper in the course was a research paper. Most students took the course in their second semester as first-year students, unless they were repeating the course as an upper-class student. The student make-up of this course was particularly appropriate for the study because the students were average, not advanced or behind in their English coursework. The chosen university had other English courses for students who tested lower or higher in the English portion of the ACT. Those in the middle range were all placed in the Basic Composition I and II series. This average type of student participant would be most likely to produce general data that could represent all average students.

The second course selected for the study was an upper-level writing course, Writing and Research. This course included the "study and practice of

research methods commonly required to complete writing assignments across the curriculum, formulation of research questions, use of appropriate methods to gather data, analysis of information, and creation of effective written documents" ("English" para. 12). This course shared similar goals with College Comp. II in that it focused on research. The class was also not made up solely of English majors, so the students in it were also able to represent a general student population. They were sophomores, juniors or seniors in the university. This age difference allowed the study to investigate how the needs of students might change after they had gone through the first-year students' English requirements. In theory, once they had been given more instruction, the students should be better writers and, therefore, focused on more complex issues with their writing, which would mean that they would prefer different types of comments. Theoretically, having gone through English 101 and 102, their general writing skills should be in place and they should require different types of attention. For instance, as first-year writers, students are often struggling to organize and structure their essays, to write a thesis, and to form clear sentences with appropriate grammar. After a year of instruction in 101 and 102, these students would hopefully not struggle so much with these simpler concepts and should be focused more on the strength of their content and its development. Additionally, upper-level writing courses are not required of all majors at this university. The students in the course would have chosen to be there. Consequently, students who chose to take the course, in theory, may have increased writing abilities compared to the mixed bag of students found in English 101 and 102.

Teacher Selection

After deciding on courses that would be appropriate for the study, it was necessary for me to get official teacher consent. I had previously talked with a few teachers about the study and knew that their courses would be a good fit, so I talked further with them about potentially using their classes. I discussed my research with several teachers of College Comp. II (ENG 102) and with the instructor of Writing and Research (ENG 272). Several ENG 102 teachers seemed compliant, so I chose one whose course fit well within my schedule. The teacher of this section of ENG102, Mike Asher (pseudonym), was a second-year graduate teaching assistant. He would be completing his master's degree at the end of the semester in which the study was conducted, and he had already been accepted to several PhD programs. The teacher of ENG 272, Susan Saunders (pseudonym), had her master's in English and was working on her PhD as well. She had taught a total of seven years in English, two as a graduate assistant, one as a full-time instructor, and four as a part time teacher in multiple universities. Both teachers agreed to give me time to introduce the study in their classrooms. Each teacher also agreed to participate in an interview, which gave me insight into their method for commenting and their perceptions of their own comments (See Appendix A).

Participant Selection

The participants for the study were chosen on a volunteer basis from the two courses I had previously selected. I presented a description of the study to them, and they decided on their own whether to participate. From ENG 102, four

females and two males agreed to participate. From ENG 272, two females and two males agreed to participate. Immediately, one male participant from ENG 102 had to drop out because of time conflicts, and one female participant from ENG 272 dropped out for unknown reasons. About two weeks into the study, another ENG 102 participant dropped out for personal reasons. Neither of these two participated in any of the study itself, so the study ended up with 7 participants all together. At the very end of the study, one female from ENG 102 had to drop out for time management reasons, and one male ENG 272 student failed to finish because of health reasons. The remaining five participants all finished the study.

In ENG 102, one male, James, and two females, Celeste and Kay, (pseudonyms used for the study) completed the study. James was a sophomore retaking the course who said his writing skills were "enough [...to] get through college." He does not "completely dislike" writing, but admits, "I've just never had a passion for it." James reveals that he does not like to revise his writing, generally pays a lot of attention to the comments on his papers, and feels they are "constructive." Celeste, a first-year student, enjoys writing, saying that composition was one of her favorite courses in high school. Since high school she feels she has improved as a writer, but still sees areas of where she needs to grow. She likes to revise her work and have others review it and gives as much attention as she can to the comments on her papers. The third 102 participant, Kay, is also a first-year student. She says she does not like writing because she does not like "getting critiqued." She feels that she is "a fairly okay writer." Kay

does not like to revise her writing, but says she gives good attention to the comments on her papers.

In ENG 272, one female, Stacey, and two males, Phil and John (pseudonyms), participated in the study. Stacey, when asked if she liked to write, answered, "it depends on what I'm writing about. I'm not a big fan of papers, but sometimes it's nice to just write for something else." She is a journalism major and a junior. Stacey says that she is a decent writer, and does not like to revise her writing. She views teachers' comments as helpful "if [...] they've taken time to write the comment[s]" and gives "more attention to the positive [comments]." Phil, the second participant is an upper-class student who says, "I don't necessarily like or dislike writing in and of itself. If it's something I'm interested in, I like writing about it, but if I'm not interested in it at all, it's just, I don't like it." He views comments on his papers as "normally helpful." John, the third participant, was not able to complete the study due to health reasons, but completed everything but the final questionnaire and provided good data in the earlier parts of the study. He is a management information systems major. John says he likes writing because it is "logical and also creative at the same time." He feels he is an average writer, commenting that he is only a sophomore and has "a ways to go." He, like Phil, indicates that he writes much stronger papers when he is interested in the topic. He says the same is true of revision: If he enjoys the topic, then he likes to revise the paper, but if he's not interested in the topic, then he really is not that interested in working on the paper more. He views his teacher's comments as helpful, but he says that he's "a skimmer" when asked how much attention he actually gives to the comments.

Conducting the Study

The participants met with me for four interviews. The first interview contained questions that allowed me to gain general information about the students' writing abilities and perceptions of writing and how much teachers' comments help their writing (See Appendix B). The second and third interviews took place after students received graded papers back from their teachers (See Appendix C). These interviews pertained to the comments the students received on each specific paper. The students were asked about the clarity and helpfulness of the comments, which issues or problems in their papers they felt were most important, and how the comments impacted their writing and their view of the teacher's responses. Finally, the students participated in a fourth interview, which allowed them to reflect on their own perceptions of their teacher's comments and whether those perceptions had changed (See Appendix D). This interview also asked the students to reflect on which comments helped their writing the most and the least through the course of the study and gave them the opportunity to share any additional thoughts about their teacher's comments. Throughout the course of the study, students also filled out two questionnaires about their graded papers, which asked them to evaluate the utility of each particular comment (See Appendix E). I collected their graded papers and photocopied them, numbered the comments, and made corresponding questionnaires for them to fill out. The students answered the following questions for each comment:

1. Do you understand the comment? Explain why you do or do not understand. In your own words, what do you think the teacher means by the comment?

2. Do you view this comment as helpful or unhelpful? Why or why not?

I analyzed the comments made on the text as well as the students' responses to those comments to find out which comments the students perceived as most helpful. I looked in particular at what they said was helpful and why. I categorized that information to look for patterns in terms of what first-year students found helpful in general and what upper-class students found helpful in general. Then I followed the same steps with the comments that they found unhelpful. I categorized the comments and looked for trends in the responses to see what types of comments were not helping first-year students or upperclassmen writers. I looked particularly at why the students perceived the comments as unhelpful. After gathering all this data, I analyzed and compared the information from the two classes to see how the needs of the two student groups varied. In my analysis, I also discovered that the difference between the two teachers was very important. Their styles of commenting did not share many similarities, and their students' needs are perhaps a reflection of the way the teacher commented on the papers. Thus, my analysis also included a careful study of what the teachers said about their own commenting styles and how this aligned with what the students felt and what I observed in the written comments on the documents I collected.

Drawbacks to the Study

The study had some drawbacks and weaknesses, as all studies do. One drawback of the study is that students sometimes did not provide a clear answer as to why the comment was helpful. Students seemed to rush through their answers at times and did not always provide deep responses to the questions they were asked about each comment. A second drawback would be timeframe. If I had been able to carry this study out over the course of the entire semester and examine each paper that the students wrote, I would have been able to gather more data and more examples than I could with the limited study of two papers per course. Even with only two papers, this process took much longer than I anticipated because the students did not always finish their questionnaires in a timely fashion and did not always remember to come to their interviews. What I had anticipated would take two months took nearly three. Additionally, if I could have had a few more participants, the study would have yielded more data. I needed to keep the scope of the project small enough to complete it in a reasonable timeframe, but more participants will always yield more data, and the number of my participants dwindled over the course of the study. Finally, one drawback for the ENG 272 course was the extreme difference between the two papers considered in the study. The first paper was much more difficult than the second. Thus, the students did much better on the second paper and there were far fewer comments on it. This stripped some depth from the analysis and also skewed the overall perception of Saunders' commenting style. The ease of the second paper did not allow for real depth in the comments. Likewise, the nature of the assignment, to write a descriptive essay

based on an hour of observation, did not allow for many deep global comments. The students would not have been able to recreate their given situations in order to provide more detail, and the teacher had not observed any of the situations that were recorded so she had no means by which to judge the quality of the work other than by its descriptive nature and basic local requirements.

In summary, this study focused on the needs of two student groups, first-year writers and junior or senior writers. The goal was to examine and compare what types of comments these two groups found helpful on their papers. The courses selected were a first-year writing course, ENG 102 and an upper-level writing course, ENG 272. Both males and females participated in the study by responding to two questionnaires about two of their graded papers and by completing four interviews about their papers and their writing in general. These research methods allowed me to discover which comments first-year students and junior or senior students found helpful and unhelpful so that I could compare the needs of the two groups. The teachers of the courses also participated in an interview which allowed me to compare their beliefs with their practices. The insight gained about the teacher's impact on the students' perspectives was invaluable in understanding the results of the study. In the following section, I offer detailed results of the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

ENGLISH 102

The students in English 102 wrote two different types of papers during the study. The first paper, Mike Asher describes, was a literacy narrative in which the students "told a story about an experience in their past that impacted their ability to read, write, speak, or listen." In responding to this paper, Asher said his focus was on mostly on "things related to the content and organization of the paper" and also on the students' implementation of "tools" discussed in class such as "creating [...] a dominant impression" or "mix[ing] up the order of the narrative [to] make it more interesting for [the] audience." The second paper, Asher says, was "an argument based on a non-fiction text. [...] The idea was to write an argument on whether or not [the chosen text] should be kept in the English 102 curriculum here." In this paper, he describes his focus as being on the content and organization, but also on the rhetorical situation. As he responded, he wanted to make sure that the students were "writing for a specific audience." Asher explains that this is always a part of his focus, but was particularly more so here because he wanted his students to understand that what might count as a good argument for one audience would not be convincing to a different audience. Overall, Asher says his focus is to always consider "what's good

[content] given [...] the guidelines for the assignment and [...] the rhetorical situation and the audience they're trying to consider."

Asher says his style of commenting in general is focused on getting students to think rather than on giving them answers. He says,

I try to give comments that inspire them to rethink what they're saying a little bit, or how they're organizing the paper instead of just telling them to change things. Like, instead of directing them on what to do, I try to give them questions to think about or different ways to think about what they're saying and how it could be better. [...] I'm not, like, giving them the answer, or you know, the thing that they should do 'cause there's more than one possible way to address [the concern], but I'm trying to make sure that they really could read the comment and have an idea of what I'm trying to get at.

He says that he does sometimes use "more directive" comments. For instance, he might suggest "condensing the wording in a sentence" by just crossing out some words. For the most part, Asher focuses on content and organization, keeping his comments "as general as possible" so as to lead the students into thinking about their writing rather than to make them follow his directions. Asher says usually he "tend[s] to write quite a bit" when he's commenting, but his students seemed to like this and felt it helped them rethink their papers and make them better. The following sections detail what the students found helpful and unhelpful from Asher's comments.

Control

The issue of control, which is widely discussed in the literature on response, was not a key issue for the ENG 102 students. This is perhaps because Asher did not tend to respond in a controlling way. As he described before, his comments were generally open-ended and simply encouraged the student to rethink an aspect of the paper. For instance, on Celeste's first paper, he suggests, "Could detail this more and bring it to life for us," encouraging her to rethink her description in a particular section. He often used questions to encourage students to think of answers themselves. On James' paper, he writes, "Could you maybe elaborate on the learning process?" prompting James to reconsider the amount of detail he gave. Often Asher included suggestions for how to make changes, such as "give more examples" after asking a student to elaborate. The fact that his students responded well to these types of comments supports the ideas brought forth in the literature; students respond better to comments that are not controlling. In the one case where one of Asher's students did feel he was being controlling, a problem did arise. In one instance, Kay expressed strong concern over the issue of control in her text because she felt that Asher's suggestion was infringing on the original meaning of the text. In the literacy narrative, Asher suggested that she return to the discussion of a particular person at the end of her narrative to emphasize the importance that person had in the story. In her interview, Kay reacted rather strongly to this, saying,

I was always open to, you know, better my writing in any way, but especially with this one because it was our story and stuff, like after he gave me the comments about that girl, I was really, it's hard for

me to want to go back and change it, like to revise it because I just don't feel like he understands. Like, it's my story and it's hard to go back. [...] With the deeper meaning, or what I'm really trying to convey, it's hard for me to and try and revise that. I think he interpreted it a different way, and he wants me to go back and write it that way, and I don't want to.

Kay was feeling that to change the ending of her paper would significantly alter the meaning that she was trying to get across in the paper, and she wanted her meaning, rather than her teacher's idea, to be the one that stayed in the paper. This led her to say that she thought for this paper the comments that were the least helpful were the ones that were "about the meaning of your paper. [...]" 'Cause that's up to the writer of the paper, like, what the paper means and what the big focus is." She felt that her Asher's suggestion directed the paper in a different direction than she had intended it to go. Because the nature of the paper was so personal, this was a big problem for Kay. She wanted to own the meaning of this text and took what I viewed as a subtle suggestion a bit too harshly.

In her final interview, Kay also expressed a certain disregard for comments that seemed to be based in the teacher's "opinion." She says those comments that seemed to be his opinion were ones that she "didn't really change" because she felt "those were his opinions, so it was kind of [her] versus him," and so she preferred to go with her own opinion. She said that his opinions came through in the language of his commentary, things such as "I don't think this works" or "this sounds a little wordy." To Kay, these comments were not about

issues of right or wrong, and although she agreed that his wording was probably an intentional attempt to soften the effect of the comment, she still preferred things to be "this is right and this is wrong." Otherwise, she says, "As the writer, I like to go with what I feel." Kay prefers to exert control over her own text and shows this by often choosing her own way when she feels her opinion is just as viable as her teacher's.

Other than Kay, the students did not express a huge concern over the control of their papers. In fact, another participant, James, expressed the desire to write "what the teacher's looking for" or "what the teacher wants." James also commented that he revises to "get a better grade" which also shows a concern for what the teacher might want to see in the paper. Although as Asher pointed out, he does not have one answer in mind when responding to a problem in the paper, students still seem focused on what the teacher wants instead of what they might want as writers. They were less concerned with owning the text than they were with producing something that would satisfy the teacher and earn them a good score.

Global/Local Comments

The debate over the issue of global and local comments is perhaps no more clear from the results of this study. Students reported that they found both types of comments helpful, but felt that those relating to content were really the more important issues. When they revised, they tended to address the local concerns first, and then tried to work on the global concerns because they were confident about how to fix the smaller problems and knew this would at least improve their scores a little bit. Then they attempted to address the more global

issues. Asher comments, though, that his students do try to address global concerns, but often do so in a local way. For instance, he says that he may

make a comment on a particular sentence within [a] paragraph, and maybe say something like, 'I'm not sure how this is fitting with the rest of the paragraph. How can we fix this?' And lots of times what I'll see is they'll just kind of reword the sentence or something and maybe not really recognize that there's a much larger concern with the paragraph.

This is an example of addressing global concerns in a local way. Really the students are not addressing the actual global concern because they are only making local changes. In these cases, students obviously see that "there is a concern, but they're not really sure, like, what to do about it." He also says that they often take on the "editorial style" when revising and "address the question right then and there and not the more global concern" he's trying to point. They don't always sufficiently address the global concerns, but do tend to fix all the local errors he has pointed out. Asher feels that his students are good about reading all the comments and attempting to respond to both the local and global concerns, but often they fail to really see the global issue and make surface level changes, such as wording, to try to affix a bandaid, so to speak, to the gaping wound in the paper.

Grammar. The students generally said that the comments relating to grammar were helpful. They said most of these types of errors pointed out "simple grammar mistakes" (Kay) that the student could "easily fix" (Celeste). These comments were generally answer comments, ones that fixed the problem,

or attention comments, ones that drew attention to a problem (Bardine, "Reconstructing" 29). For instance, on one of James' papers, the teacher simply wrote, "fragment" by a couple of sentences. James said that these comments would allow him to "fix [his] grammar" even though they did not provide the correction. Further study of student revisions would reveal whether the students could actually fix the grammatical problems, but the purpose of this study was to examine what the students perceive as helpful, and comments about grammar, according to them, are helpful. Though they do generally find these comments helpful, they never answered that these comments were the *most* helpful. Kay says that she likes the way her teacher comments because the comments "help not just like the little areas of the paper. There are comments on the whole aspect of the paper." By this, Kay means that Asher focuses his comments on the big issues in the paper and on concerns that will help the paper as a whole, and not just sentence level concerns. Similarly, in one interview, James said that he felt the "grammatical ones" were the least helpful comments in the paper because he "could probably find those on [his] own." He also indicates that he thinks "grammar is important, but [...] the overall concept and flow of the paper is more important." Comments like these reveal that while the students do find the grammatical concerns helpful, they realize that the more important issues with their papers are related to the global concerns such as content.

Content. In terms of global issues, the students generally found comments about the content of their papers to be helpful. Perhaps the one exception to this was Kay's first paper where she felt the teacher had misunderstood her point and was trying to change the meaning of her paper. In contrast, though, Kay

responded very well to other comments about content that asked her to elaborate more or be more specific. For instance, on her second paper, her teacher commented that her introduction was a little "vague," and Kay says if she can "be more specific" she will be able to make the "paper better." Kay believes the comments on "the bigger aspects, the bigger concepts of the paper" have helped her more than "the little areas, the little grammar stuff." She explains that the comments about the global concerns of the paper "get you to start thinking [...] more about the content." She states, "I realize that [the content is] more important than, you know, I don't know, spelling, structure, like, structure's important, that's great, but you know the big main focus should be the content." It is interesting that at the start of the term, Kay seemed very concerned about shaping the meaning of the text her own way, yet as she progressed as a writer, she seems to have seen the value in the critique of her content. Celeste and James also found comments about the content to be helpful. About most content comments, James generally says, "he wants me to add more," and "it will strengthen my paper." James saw that in elaborating and adding more, he would have a stronger paper. Celeste also commented that certain comments ask her to elaborate and she finds this helpful because it is a way to "strengthen this portion of [her] paper." The students responded positively to the comments about content in general, but were even more positive about comments that were suggestions for the content.

Suggestions. The students found a variety of types of comments helpful if they included suggestions. Praise comments with suggestions were viewed as helpful as they served to soften the effect of the comment. For instance, on

Celeste's paper, Asher writes, "A lot of great stuff (especially ethos) in the intro. Could this be condensed though?" Celeste notes that this combination of praise and suggestion allows her to see the "tone" in which the comment was made. She can see that her teacher is trying to help her, and the fact that he likes her work opens her up to his suggestion. She says she is more receptive to comments such as these.

Additionally, comments about the content were perceived as most helpful when they contained suggestions for the students. These comments gave direction and a clear path for revision. For instance, on Kay's paper, Asher comments, "Try to be more specific about what each source is saying and how this relates to Kozol." Kay felt this suggestion was helpful because it gave her "direction" for when she was revising, which she says "helped a lot." She compares this to other teachers saying, "usually, I have no idea, like, to revise a paper, I wouldn't know what to do better, but with him, he definitely, like, gives you like a good path to start with." Likewise, James found the first two comments on his first paper helpful because they showed him "what [he] needed to add." Later comments on the content of the paper phrased as questions helped James because they gave him "ideas of how to improve" the paper. James said similar things about the content suggestions on the second paper. He noted that the teacher "is giving [him] ideas on [his] paper." Most convincingly, in our final interview, James said that the comments that helped his writing the most overall were "when [the teacher] gave suggestions about, like, how to add detail, or like, [...] something I could add to improve it. So, suggestions [were the most helpful]." These comments line up exactly with what Asher said his goal was in

commenting. He says he tries to give comments that "inspire them to rethink" and that "really [...] spell it out without just [...] telling them exactly what to do." His goal is to push the students in the right direction and challenge them to reconsider their content, and according to his students, he succeeds in guiding them with his written comments.

Organization. The English 102 students seemed to have less to say about the organization or structure of their papers, perhaps because there were few comments about organization. However, even with a small number of these types of comments, the students did say they were helpful. Most often, organization comments suggested condensing paragraphs or breaking paragraphs up. In her first paper, Kay received a comment about breaking up her long paragraphs, and she agreed that her paragraphs "were long and could have been more broken up." This comment was helpful to her. Celeste had a similar problem with some of her longer paragraphs. Her teacher asked her to "break [the paragraph] up and organize ideas into several cohesive paragraphs relating back to thesis." She agrees that her "paragraph is too long" and plans to reorganize the section. The teacher's comment is pretty large in scale, indicating that she may have several topics in the paragraph and that her ideas are not well connected to the main point of the paper. What Celeste seems to take from this detailed comment is "my paragraph is too long." While the comment does mention the length of the paragraph, it also highlights the cohesion of the ideas and their relationship to the thesis. With that response, I am not sure that Celeste really understood the more global issue, just as Asher

indicated. Examining her revision would give more insight into whether or not she really grasped the problem.

Specific Comments

An overwhelming number of student responses referred to comments as being helpful when they were specific. For instance, about a comment on her first paper, Kay says it is helpful because Asher "actually explains why he marked it." She also noted on her second paper that Asher "pointed out the things [she needed] to do and which points [she needed] to explain more." His comments were perceived as helpful because they indicated a specific direction for the student to go. Kay elaborates: "If there was something to focus more on, he gave you direction." She says her teacher told

just how you could be more specific, how you could elaborate more, or maybe where you needed to condense more. [...] A lot of times when he would say elaborate more, he would tell, like, for example, you know, refer back to a certain text, or like, tie this in with the previous research. He would give me ideas on how to do it, and I think that helped a lot too.

Similarly, Celeste says that she feels the comments that helped her most over the course of the whole semester were "the ones that were more descriptive, [...] the ones where he would take the time to write out what needed to be, like, fleshed out. [...] I liked when he kind of elaborated on things. I think those helped the most." She says these helped the most "because they had good information. [...] I just think things need to be explained more than this is good or this is bad."

The first-year students found their teacher's comments to be more helpful if they were specific and gave direction or ideas for the student to consider.

Vague Comments

In contrast, the students did not find comments to be helpful if they were vague or lacking in details. Kay found some of Asher's comments needing a little more detail. She says that on her first paper, he wrote, "this is vague," which she does not find helpful because the comment itself is vague to her. She says, "I don't know what he means." Here the teacher's vague wording has left her feeling confused. On her second paper she experienced a similar problem. In one comment, the teacher circled the word "but" and asked, "don't these things impact literacy?" But Kay was unsure of what "these things" referred to. She says, "he didn't really, like, specify which things he was talking about either, so I really don't know where he was coming from with that. Kay was unable to figure out how the circle around but was connected to the note because the use of "these things" was vague to her.

Celeste also commented that she "could use a few more details" or "could have used more information" with certain comments in order to really understand what the teacher meant. She also noted that some comments "could have been more descriptive." For instance, in one part of her paper, her teacher said that the paper "seemed to shift focus" and then she says, "He wrote, 'what should be done here' with a question mark. Well, I don't know, so maybe give me an example of what [should be done]." Referring to this same comment on her questionnaire, Celeste said she "could use a few more details on the comment." Generally, students expressed that they would have found

certain vague comments more helpful if greater detail had been given. They could recognize that there was a problem in the text, but without more detail they were unsure about how to revise the problem.

Symbols. An interesting facet of vague comments is the use of symbols. A symbol might be a circle around a word, words crossed out, arrows drawn, underlined words, lines made beside paragraphs, etc. Generally, students found symbols to be unhelpful unless the error was extremely simple or the symbol was universal, such as a line or X through a word, or a carrot underneath a space with a word above it, meaning the word should be inserted. Even then, though, careful study reveals that students still sometimes misinterpret the symbol. For instance, on Kay's second paper, her teacher circled the word "my," and Kay says he is drawing attention to her use of first person, but in reading the paper, it is evident that "my" is a typo for "may".

Others my argue that the writing is not necessarily right material for an English 102 course ...

Even something simple like this circled typo can be misconstrued by students if they are not reading carefully. This seems to be the cause of a lot of confusion with symbols. For instance, on Kay's paper, her teacher has drawn a line down the length of an entire paragraph, starting on one page and continued onto the next page. The line on the first page is accompanied by a written comment. Kay understands the first portion with the written comment, but on the next page, she says the comment is "just a line" and so she does not understand it. Later in the same paper, her teacher has underlined three words in a list which should be

parallel, and he has circled the endings of the words to show her that they are not; with the last word, he corrects the ending and circles the new ending:

The Kozol text is an important lesson incorporated into English 102 classes and should be kept because the piece stresses the importance of literacy, allows students to understand the life of different social and economic cultures in the United States, ^{and} ~~as well as~~ ^⑤ ~~supporting~~ the Marianist mission of the University of Dayton.

Kay does not connect the three symbols even though they are in the same sentence. Because there is no written note of explanation, Kay misinterprets the comment. On her questionnaire, she says that the first two are "spelling errors" that she needs to fix. When she gets to the third circle, the word with the changed ending, she says that this change makes her sentence "sound better." Clearly without a written note, students are free to assume whatever they wish about a symbol on the paper. If the student misconstrues the symbol, then the real problem is lost and the student will not really be helped by the comment. James indicates this problem too, commenting that symbols with out written explanations are the least helpful. He said these were least helpful "because [they] had no explanation to [them]. It's just a mark. [...] It was harder to decipher it, like, why he was saying take this out or add this 'cause it had no explanation to it."

Celeste experienced a similar problem on her second paper. Asher has drawn a squiggly line down the length of a very long paragraph, from the bottom of page two to the top of page four. The written comment next to this

line is on the top of page three where the teacher points out that Celeste's paragraph is very lengthy. She understood the written comment, but failed to connect it to the line on the pages prior to and following the page with the written note. On her questionnaire Celeste said, "there is just a squiggly line" and this is "unhelpful." Symbols that are used apart from written comments or even at a distance from written comments are not easy for first-year students to understand and therefore they are unhelpful to them.

Symbols should not be used without a clarifying explanatory comment. In these cases, students indicated the comments were helpful. For example, in Kay's paper, she notes the link between two comments, an underlined sentence and a question written next to that sentence. Kay says the underline "helps to understand the next comment." Because of the underline in conjunction with the written comment she understands exactly where she "needs to be more specific" in her explanation. In a comment on one sentence in Celeste's paper, the teacher has underlined a phrase and then written a note about the phrase. About the note, Celeste says, "It just explains what's wrong with my sentence." The underline alone would not have provided this explanation. Written comments that are closely linked with symbols prove helpful to students so long as they are connected closely enough.

Praise

Praise comments were generally helpful to students unless they were not specific enough to let the student know what was done well. Celeste says that comments need to include more than "this is good or this is bad" because she wants "to know why it's good" and not just that it is good. Other than that,

students seemed to respond very well to praise comments. Kay indicated that they are "encouraging and ego-boosting." When asked which comments were most helpful overall, Kay responded saying, "He made a lot of positive comments. Before usually when I get papers back [the teachers] mark what's wrong. I thought it was really good that he marked what you were doing right so you knew you were on the right path." James also said that praise comments helped him to see that he was on the right track. Praise comments give students examples of places where they are making good choices and writing well. This encourages them, and it also gives them a model in their own writing to see what they are doing well so that they can repeat those things in future papers.

Other than praise comments being a little bit vague at times, one student found praise comments to sometimes be contradictory. Celeste, on her first paper, said that her teacher "emphasized the positive comments too much" which made her think her "paper is pretty good" but her grade did not seem to reflect this and she admits feeling confused about this. She was also confused by comments such as "audience interest, just a bit more, but what's here is great." She says, "If what is already there is great, then why do I need to change it?" Here Celeste seems not to really understand that her teacher is trying to encourage her and challenge her at the same time. What is extremely interesting about this is that in her second paper, the combination of praise and suggestion was precisely what she found most helpful.

Praise in combination with suggestion was named as the "most helpful" type of comment on Celeste's second paper. She gives an example: "It says, 'a lot of great stuff here, especially ethos in intro' but and then it has like a question

mark 'could this be condensed?'" She said these types of comments made her "want to consider [change] because [the comment] is positive." She admitted that sometimes if the comment is more "negative," then she becomes "annoyed with it." Her teacher's combination of praise and suggestion allowed her to really "tell what the tone of [his] voice" was meant to be. She agreed that the praise set the tone for the comment and allowed her to know "how he was [...] intending it to come across."

Summary

In summary, the students in ENG 102 responded to the issues of control, grammar, content, content suggestions, organization, specific comments, vague comments, including symbols and misunderstood comments, and praise comments. These were the types of comments that they picked out and labeled as helpful or unhelpful. Generally speaking, the theme of their responses was that specific comments helped them most. Whatever the subject of the comment, if it was detailed, specific, or supplied a suggestion, it was more helpful than if it was vague and did not give any explanation. Whether the comment was about the content or about a problem within a sentence, they found it helpful if it was specific enough to give them direction for revision. They responded positively to these types of comments; they seemed to like being given a suggestion of how to improve or where to go with the paper. The students were most confused by symbols or marks that did not have a written comment nearby. These comments were nearly always unhelpful to them, and in some cases, they misunderstood these comments altogether. From the English 102 students, we can see, as the literature claims, that specificity is highly important. Next, the ENG 272 situation

will be analyzed so that comparisons can be drawn between the two student groups to fulfill the goals of the study.

ENGLISH 272

The English 272 participants also wrote two different kinds of papers during the course of the study. The first paper, according to Susan Saunders, was "a research paper on where [the students'] profession is headed, what the [...] outlook is for hiring, what the skills needed for that are." This was a formal paper that required the students to collect sources and gather research. The second paper in the course was dramatically different from the first. This paper was "a sensory perception paper where [the students] had to sit and observe [...] surroundings, people, noises, for at least an hour in any busy location." The students reported that this second paper was by far easier for them to write, and their scores reflected this as well. Saunders agreed that the students did much better on the second paper than the first since it required only observational research and the ability to write descriptively.

Saunders explains that her method for commenting is to vary the style of the comment "between corrections, straight out corrections, asking questions, just highlighting a few things or bracketing and saying, how can you make this better." She feels she does not make comments that reflect "this is wrong, this is how you fix it." Rather, Saunders wants "the students to be thinking about how they could fix [the problem] or how [something] could have been better developed or what's missing from the paragraph." When asked about what she focuses on most in her comments, Saunders replies, "I would definitely be more

focused on the content, um, because you know personally, if a student hasn't gotten grammar by now, he or she probably isn't going to get it." She does admit to correcting grammar problems when she sees them, but feels, "it's more beneficial to show [the students] content, organization, making a good argument, than a comma splice here, uh, missed punctuation, split infinitive."

Saunders's philosophy about responding to her students' writing is "to get them thinking about writing." She contends, "It's not about me sitting there taking an hour on each paper, fixing it and knowing that they'll never look at it again. So I want a more interactive process between the student and myself." She feels students "don't learn anything if you just simply correct their papers." This is why, she explains, she uses her varying types of comments. She states she does not want to simply use corrections throughout the paper, but wants to engage the students by using questions and suggestions. Her philosophy is to "probe them into thought" and engage the students in the process of writing. The following sections will analyze what Saunders's students did find helpful for probing them into being better writers and what attempts fell flat and were ineffective.

Control and Disagreement

While the ENG 102 students rarely reacted to comments as if they were controlling, the ENG 272 students frequently found places to disagree with their teacher and to resist her control of their texts. Where only Kay in ENG 102 really seemed to exert her own opinion and preference, all three of the 272 participants expressed disagreement with or disregard for certain comments. In Stacey's first paper, she included a graph to illustrate the point she was making.

Her teacher asked her "why?" next to the point in the sentence that referred to the graph. Stacey felt this comment was "unnecessary" and explains, "I figured a chart would help instead of just trying to explain what I was talking about." While it seems Stacey has perhaps misunderstood the comment in that it may refer only to the wording of the sentence and not to the actual placement of the chart, it is still evident in Stacey's response that she favors her own opinion about her content.

Phil objected multiple times to the changes his teacher made to his paper. Like Stacey, he marked one comment in which the teacher had asked for more detail as "unnecessary." He seemed to feel that what he said himself was sufficient and chose his own opinion over the teacher's. Later on the same paper, the teacher suggests that Phil not use a pronoun in his sentence because it is unclear, but Phil says, "it would sound repetitive" to use the words she has written in. He does not like her answer. John's case is perhaps the most striking example. His first paper contained comments that he summarized as being mostly about "style issues" and MLA. By style, John says that he means things relating to the wording and grammar of the sentences as well as the MLA style. He noted, and I observed, that most of the comments on the paper were correction comments. In our interview, John said that he did not like that she just changed his paper and focused only on the smaller matters. He wants to see "a little less of like the trivial matters, like combining sentences or paragraphs." His objection was in particular to one comment where the teacher had instructed him to join two sentences, but in our interview he indicated that the sentences were grammatically sound and clear on their own, so there was no reason other

than her opinion to join the sentences. Overall, the more experienced students had a much higher rate of disagreeing with their teacher than the less experienced students did. This seems to reflect a resistance to the teacher's way or preference, especially since many of Saunders's comments were made in a corrective manner. Her directives clearly indicate that she expects the changes to be made, but her students often resisted these types of comments.

Global/Local Comments

One problem with the samples taken from ENG 272 was that a majority of the teacher's comments seemed to be more locally focused. Of 121 total comments on both sets of papers combined, only 23 comments relate to more global matters, while 98 comments were about local matters. This works out as Saunders's comments being 19% global and 81% local. Although she says that she focuses most on the content of her students' papers, she often failed to reflect that philosophy in practice. Since her students were allowed to revise their papers, this tactic also seems particularly ineffective. How could she expect substantive revisions when she only marked local concerns on drafts turned in? John's example from the previous paragraph demonstrates this problem poignantly. While Saunders said that she tried to focus most on content, her comments often related to word choice, sentence structure, repetitious wording, comma placement etc. Although she was not strictly focusing on grammatical concerns, her comments seemed to be more locally focused. She did ask questions of the students in order to encourage them to think more about expanding their content or giving more detail, but these comments often came in the form of a one or two word question, which does not draw the same type

of attention that a lengthier comment might. Or, her comments were phrased in a way that made them appear more local, such as better connecting an example into a paragraph. On Phil's first paper, she writes, "Why the discussion of Indiana? What function does it serve – you need to connect it back to paragraph." This comment highlights the ineffectiveness of an example in Phil's paper because of a lack of connection back to the main point, but the comment mentions nothing about making a point or having an effective example. Rather, the example seems to just be out of place in the paragraph. If this comment were phrased in a way that drew attention to the more global concern – clarity of content – rather than to the sentences around the example, it would have seemed less local and more global. Because of instances like this, the students seemed to feel that Saunders's comments were largely local. They did indicate that she was very concerned about the quality of their research since learning to research was the purpose of the class. However, not commenting in a way that would encourage better communication of the research is perhaps not the most helpful tactic.

Grammar. The 272 students reported all of the grammatical comments on their papers as helpful, but never as the most helpful comments on the paper, similar to the 102 students. Stacey appreciated the grammatical comments the more than the other students. She felt that fixing those problems would help her with her writing in the future. She says, "If you don't know how to put things, and you know, if you don't know grammar ... that's pretty important." In contrast to Stacey, Phil and John did not feel the grammatical corrections were as helpful. They acknowledge that these are important things to look out for in editing, but,

as Phil says, "I don't think that the smaller things would improve my writing as much as some of the more like, flow issues or organizational issues. I think grammatical things can be corrected pretty easily." Similarly, while John found the grammatical comments on his papers helpful, he points out that this class is one in "qualitative research" which is "heavy on content" so he wants to know "if I'm doing things right or if I'm doing things wrong." The focus on grammatical concerns in his first paper proved particularly frustrating to him. Although the comments themselves were helpful, the fact that his content was not commented on was extremely frustrating to John.

Wording. The students also seemed to have a large number of comments focused on the wording of their papers. Sometimes these comments came as corrections, and sometimes the new word was suggested, as indicated by a question mark after the word, asking the student if he or she thought it would be a good replacement for the original word. About the majority of these comments on her first paper (there were seven in all), Stacey says they make the sentence "sound better." In Phil's case, most of the wording issues related to use of repetitive wording. He says, "I have a tendency to [use] the same words or phrases over and over. I need to watch for that." Saunders frequently pointed out the use of "this" or "it is" on her students' papers, saying that these words were "repetitive and vague" to her every time they were used. The students all caught on to her dislike for these words, calling them her "pet peeve" and avoiding them as best they could.

Content. The comments about the actual content of the paper were sparse. When comments of this nature were given, though, the students

responded well to them. On her first paper, Stacey agreed with Saunders that her "paragraph needed to be more developed," and so she viewed this short comment "develop more" as helpful, though there were no suggestions about how to develop that part of the paper. Phil's second paper had a comment that asked him to be "more specific and give more info." He says this is helpful because he needs to see these places where he is "vague" or doesn't "give enough information." John's comments about content were that he "would like to see more on content. [...] you know, 'this is a good point,' or 'this is not strongly supported.'" John showed a preference for global concerns; even though Saunders did not comment on any in his first paper, he clearly indicated that he wished she had.

Specific Comments

As is to be expected, the students in ENG 272 preferred specific comments far more than vague comments. All three of the participants felt that comments that were specific helped their writing much more than comments they perceived as vague. Stacey says comments that are "very detailed" or that "tell [...] exactly what to do to fix the problem" are the most helpful. She compares the end comment with its high specificity to the "one word" comments made throughout the paper. She says that the end comment "really helped [her] understand where [Saunders] was going as far as [...] with the one-word responses where [there isn't] really detailed information" on what needs work. She said that in comparison to the short comments throughout the paper, this comment was the most helpful "because it was detailed." Phil indicates that comments that are specific in nature help the most with "improving [his] writing

overall." He says that he "prefer[s] if they write more than if they write less" because "it helps to explain things a little more." John feels that comments ought to be more specific than "good, great, very possible" which he received on his second paper. He wanted to see more detail in these types of comments about what he had done so well.

In addition to preferring very detailed individual comments, all three of the ENG 272 participants said they also preferred a greater number of comments in general, giving them more detail overall about the problems and successes of the paper. Not only did they want sufficient detail in each comment, but they also wanted many comments to help them understand the concerns of their papers. Stacey says, "A lot of people think it's bad to get a lot of marks on papers, but I kinda feel like, you know, at least they had something to say about my paper." Phil agrees,

I like when there's a lot of comments, [...] rather than just, like, one comment per page. When it's one comment per page I kinda feel like I did all this work and then she just kind of glanced though it. But I feel like the more comments that are on there, the more feedback it gives me on where I need to improve and where I did well.

Likewise, John says, "I do actually prefer a lot of comments so I can know what she's thinking as she's going through my paper." He adds that the longer comments are usually the most helpful, specifically mentioning the longer end comments that Saunders always includes at the end of each paper.

Vague Comments

Vague comments in the ENG 272 class came mostly in the form of symbols that were not accompanied by explanatory notes. Other one-word comments were also viewed as unhelpful. About a comment on her first paper, Stacey says, "it is just a word with no explanation" and she needs "more of [an] explanation" in order to correct the problem. Stacey repeated similar sentiments about other one-word comments throughout her first paper and on her second paper as well. Additionally, John commented that he felt the praise comments on his paper were too vague. His teacher wrote things like "good" and "great" but John says, "You don't really know what you did good." He feels that "just like critical analysis is something specific, the praise should be something specific as well."

Symbols. Saunders used a plethora of symbols in responding to her students' writing, and her students generally did not find these comments helpful. Occasionally the problem was so clear to them that a circle around it was enough, but even in these cases, there was risk of misunderstanding. For instance, in one case, Saunders circled the period in one of Stacey's citations and moved it with an arrow. This symbol was clear to the student. However, in other places, she simply circled, underlined or bracketed portions of the paper and made no comment indicating the needed action. These symbols were always unclear to Stacey. About these types of comments, Stacey said, "I don't know what the symbol means, so I don't know how to properly fix it." Also, symbols such as abbreviations like "sp." were understood by students because of their universality. Generally, if words were crossed out, the students were also

clear on the meaning of the comment and found it reasonably helpful. Often Saunders circled or underlined her pet peeve, "it is." Her students quickly picked up on this problem; Stacey mentions the frequency with which this comment appears. After her initial mark by "it is" students could follow any time she circled or underlined it throughout the rest of the paper. Simple symbols such as these were relatively helpful to the students, but did often appear as answer comments, which would not encourage the students to think on their own, as Saunders indicated was her goal.

The symbols that were usually problematic to the students were those unique to this teacher. Phil explains, "She did explain her shorthand on the board, but I forgot to write this down." About these symbols, Stacey frequently noted, "I don't understand what that symbol means." She therefore felt that these comments were not helpful. In addition to the teacher's unique symbols, both Stacey and Phil mentioned problems with symbols that did not have written notes accompanying them. For instance, on her first paper, Stacey says that symbols are not at all helpful because she needs "more than just a symbol" in order to fix the problem. Stacey also says explicitly that a symbol is not helpful when "there is no comment to accompany it." The problem with these types of comments, according to Stacey, is that the student doesn't "know what [the teacher] wants" or "how to fix it" because the comment "doesn't tell [her] what to do." While Stacey did tend to like answer comments a lot, her point is still clear. If the comment is not enough to explain or suggest what needs to be done, then the comment will not be helpful to the student. Student writers need comments to reveal the problem and also indicate a way to improve it.

Misunderstood Comments. The lack of clarity and detail in comments undoubtedly led to a large number of comments that were misunderstood or not understood at all by the students. These comments were both symbols and written words, but more often than not were symbols. For instance, one written comment that Stacey struggled to understand told her to include a page number in her citation from a webpage. Her response to her teacher's comment, "Where's the page number?" is "websites don't have page numbers." Saunders did not explain to her what she should do in this case, and her lack of explanation has left Stacey feeling confused. Phil also could not understand certain comments because of their lack of detail. One comment that he did not understand related to his MLA citation. Saunders has indicated that he should give the name of the source that he is citing information from in the first sentence he uses from the source. At the end of his paraphrase, she writes, "Now you make it clear where [the] material is from – you need that [the] first time you mention, use the work." But Phil says, "I thought that I could cite at the end of the sentence if I was paraphrasing most of the paragraph. Should I cite every sentence?" Here the problem seems to be that Saunders has not clearly stated what she wants Phil to do because Phil has included the source name early on in his paraphrasing. The student is therefore left confused and questioning what he should do. An example of a misunderstood symbol can be found on Phil's first paper. His sentence reads, "Current graduate students that I have spoken with have reiterated this point." Saunders has crossed out his helping verb, "have," because it is unnecessary, but has not written any explanatory comment by the crossed out word. Phil indicated on his

questionnaire that his teacher was instructing him here not to use the passive voice, but this is clearly not the passive voice. Had the teacher given Phil a reason for removing the word she crossed out, he might not have misunderstood. From these examples, we can conclude that teachers need to explain their comments, even when they think they might be clear enough for the students to follow.

Praise

Generally, the students in ENG 272 responded well to praise comments though they had less to say than the 102 students simply because the number of praise comments was fewer and the detail of the comments was less. Stacey notes that on her first paper these comments are helpful because they give "encouragement instead of just things [she] needs to work on." On her second paper, she seemed to view the comments much more positively because many of them were praise comments. She says the comments "were a lot more positive than the last paper," referring to the first paper she had written for the course. Phil also found praise comments helpful, particularly, he said, because they showed him what the teacher liked and expected. When she praised a certain aspect of his paper, for instance, the use of detail, he says, "It helps show me how much detail she expects." Generally, praise comments were encouraging for these students and helped them see what the expectations of the teacher were so that they could strive to meet these in other areas of the paper where the teacher may have commented negatively.

Praise comments were not helpful to the students when they were vague or not substantive. For instance, on her second paper, Stacey labeled several of

her praise comments as unhelpful because they did not "tell [her] what [she] needs to fix." She saw some of these comments such as "great" or "funny" as "random comments" that did not really give her any help. John's remarks about praise comments were that they needed to be more specific to be helpful to him. He reported no praise comments at all on his first paper, and his second paper contained brief comments such as "good" and "great." He says these types of comments do not really let the writer understand what was "good" or "great." He felt the praise comments needed to be more specific. In summary, praise comments were perceived as helpful when they were specific and when they gave the student encouragement that was explicitly tied to the paper itself.

Comment Placement

A very interesting aspect of response that mattered greatly to the 272 students was the placement of the comment. Students naturally struggled to understand a comment and find it helpful if they were not sure exactly which part of the paper it was referring to. Comments that were closely related to specific parts of the paper were best understood. About one comment, Stacey says that it is "easy to understand because of its placement over the sentence." She noted similar responses for several comments on her first paper saying that the comments were helpful because they were right over or right under or situated nearby the problem area in the paper. Similarly, John says, "I really like more [comments] in the body." He says he likes for teacher to "comment near [the mistake] in the margin" of the paper. He feels it is easier to see specific instances of an error if the comment is made by the error rather than in the end comment.

Since comments placed in close proximity to the problem area were helpful, it follows that comments not connected clearly enough to the problem in the text were not as helpful. Stacey indicates that she does not understand comments that are "just floating in the margin." She says she "[doesn't] know what [these] are referring to." Similarly, Phil had a comment in his paper that he said he was "unsure of which sentence [his teacher was] referring to or what it means." Because he did not know which area of the paper was having the problem his teacher highlighted, he was not helped by the comment. Though comments made through the body of the paper are generally helpful to students, they must be explicitly connected to the problem in the text or they will be unhelpful. This problem can often be resolved if the teacher uses a symbol such as a circle, line or arrow that indicates exactly where the problem is with the text.

Summary

In summary, the comments most helpful to ENG 272 students were those that were specific and those that related to the more global concerns of the paper. This at first did not seem evident because the students did not say all that much about the content of their papers or the comments about the content, but in looking more closely, the study simply revealed that this particular teacher did not make the bulk of her comments about the content. Thus, the students did not have opportunity to discuss these types of comments as much. They commented more often on the helpfulness of comments about grammar or wording. These comments were generally helpful to them, but not as helpful, according to the students, as those comments about the bigger issues of the

paper. This issue is interesting because it shows how much impact the teacher's focus may have on the students' focus. Where at first I thought the 272 students were simply more concerned about grammar and style, I came to realize that they were just talking more about these issues because their teacher was. While local level comments were helpful to them, and in spite of their teacher's heavy emphasis on these issues, the 272 students still desired to know more about their content.

The 272 students also found the placement of the comment to be particularly important. Comments that were specifically and clearly related to a specific portion of the text were more helpful than those that were not. The students did not find vague comments, symbols, or ambiguously placed comments helpful. Their responses to symbols are particularly pertinent to the research because this is a type of comment not greatly explored by the current literature. Now that the results of the individual student groups have been discussed, I will move on to answering my primary research question, how do these two groups compare? Do teachers of upper-level writing courses need to apply different response techniques than they would for first-year student writers?

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS: COMPARING 102 AND 272

The question that was originally the driving force behind this research was where do first-year writers and junior/senior writers (or more experienced writers) compare in what they find helpful and unhelpful in the comments on their papers. As I analyzed the results of the study, it quickly became evident that another question was also important: How do the teachers of particular classes differ in their focus when commenting and how does this impact what the students say is helpful? Both of these questions will be examined fully in the following sections.

Students

The comparisons between the 102 and 272 students are fairly evident from the results described in the previous section. Both groups of students found comments that were specific to be the most helpful, whether they related to the content, structure, grammar, or wording of the paper. If the comment was specific, it was more helpful than if it was not. Vague comments were not helpful to the students; in particular, symbols without written explanations were hard for them to understand. Both groups of students also reported never asking their teachers to explain the symbols (or comments) that they did not understand. They acknowledged in interviews that they should have asked, but none of the participants ever took the initiative to do that. Though they found specific

comments about any aspect of the paper to be helpful, they found the ones about the content to be the most helpful. Students in both groups acknowledged that while the grammar comments were helpful, they were of less importance than those about content. Both the 102 and 272 students said that they felt the content of the paper was the most important aspect, so they would rather have comments relating to this rather than to the smaller matters of grammar and wording. Both groups said specific comments and global comments were the most important. Themes in their responses centered on these issues, and so contrasts did not at first appear evident to me. Closer examination of the data, however, has proven that several important contrasts exist.

One way that the students in 102 differed from the students in 272 is in their ability to draw connections between the comments. For instance, ENG 102 students often reported being confused by "squiggly lines" or lines next to paragraphs with no comments. This happened on both Kay's and Celeste's papers, more than once. It was evident that this line was a continuation of a line from the previous page which was intended to denote a problem with the entire paragraph. For some reason, the 102 students were not able to see the connection between the lines on the two pages. In another case, Celeste fails to see the connection between an underlined sentence and a marginal comment about the sentence. She calls the underline "unhelpful" because she says she "doesn't know why it's underlined." Even though there is a marginal comment placed directly beside the underlined sentence, Celeste does not draw the connection between the two. This combination of symbol and explanation was

something that 272 students found especially helpful. Perhaps the 102 students do not read their comments as carefully or read them in the context of the paper. If the student was reading the paper and the comments in conjunction, then perhaps these types of comments would be more clear.

The 272 students, on the other hand, were able to realize how the comments related to each other. For instance, if the teacher circled the use of repetitious wording on one page and wrote that it was repetitious, the students were able to recognize this problem throughout the rest of the paper. If those words were circled again, even if there was no written note about repetition, the students were able to recognize the problem. On some of the questionnaires, they even wrote that this comment showed the same problem as a previous comment. The connections between the comments were always implicit, never explicitly stated, but the more advanced students seemed to have an easier time seeing the unstated connections than the less experienced students did.

The 272 students also exhibited a great propensity to disagree with their teacher than the younger students did. Only Kay from ENG 102 ever expressed any measure of disagreement with Asher, and this only happened on one occasion. Generally all three 102 participants agreed with their teacher's comments the majority of the time. They always felt that what he had written would make the paper better. In contrast, the 272 students often expressed their disagreement with Saunders. In her first interview, Stacey said that she did view comments as "pretty valuable," but she said, "Sometimes I'm like, I know best, 'cause it's my writing." Stacey exhibits a strong belief in her own abilities as a writer and shows that she does not always just accept what her teacher writes.

She said that the amount of attention she gives to the comments depended on "how [she felt] about the comments." If she felt that paper was better than the grade reflected, she took the comments "with a grain of salt." In one case, Stacey used a graph to illustrate a point she was making, and the teacher questioned, according to Stacey, why the graph was included. (The actual question may or may not have referred to the presence of the graph. It was unclear exactly what the "why?" was referring to.) Stacey felt this comment was "unnecessary" and asserted her own opinion: "I figured a chart would help instead of just trying to explain what I was talking about." She indicated that this comment was unhelpful to her because she did not agree that there was any question about using the chart. Phil also noted comments that were "unnecessary" in his mind, and pointed out that some things the teacher noted as wrong were "open to interpretation." John exhibited similar disagreements with some comments on his papers. For instance, when instructed to combine two sentences, John said, "I think those two sentences kind of stand, you know, apart from each other. Especially 'cause the first sentence, I think it's a compound sentence. [...] I didn't want to make it overly complex [as] the last sentence in the paragraph, but she wanted me to combine them." He questioned whether this was just the teacher's "personal preference" and expressed his own opinion about wanting to keep the sentences the same.

The two groups of students also differed in how much they felt they learned from the comments on their papers. In the fourth interview, which took place in the last weeks of the semester, all the ENG 102 participants talked about specific things they had learned or areas they had improved in. Kay felt she had

improved "in terms of, like, the bigger ideas of, like, making good points" and coming up with "a good idea for [the paper]." She did attribute this improvement to the comments she received, saying, "The comments have been more on like the bigger aspects, the bigger concepts of the paper. [...] So I think those comments get you to start thinking about, like, I'm thinking more about the content. I realize that's more important." Similarly, James said he "learned some techniques from [the] 102 class that [he could] use in the future." He said that the comments' ability to help him improve each paper also helped him learn "what to do on [his] next papers." Finally, Celeste noted that she had learned better in 102 how to use scholarly sources. She said she learned how "to relate back to a text and tie it in with the paper and then use [her] own ideas to elaborate." She felt that the comments on each paper helped her "know what [...] to work on" so then her later papers were stronger. Each of these three 102 students felt that they had improved as writers in some way due to the comments they received on their papers.

In contrast, the 272 participants tended to feel they had not necessarily improved as writers in their course. While the course was one focused on learning to do qualitative research, the goal should also be clear communication of quality research. Still, when asked if they had improved as writers, the 272 students said they improved minimally, if at all, and felt their main improvements were in local issues and not global issues. For instance, Phil said the course was not "writing intensive," and so he did not feel his writing had improved all that much. He indicated that his biggest improvements came on a more local level: "Going back and editing, just for repetitiveness, where I'm vague when I need to

be more clear" were the main things he felt he'd improved at. He said the comments that helped him the most were the ones focusing on "the repetitiveness and adding more information." He said both of these concerns were "more of a wording kind of thing," the former relating to "just using the same phrases over and over," and the latter to "just putting um like maybe one or two more words in [the paper], like good descriptive words just to kind of clear up meaning, or maybe phrase something a little differently so it's not so vague." Similarly, when asked if he improved as a writer in the 272 course, John said that he felt he had improved "maybe in some of [his] other classes, like philosophy." He seemed to feel that because the class was in research it was "more about gathering data and putting that in your paper than it [was] about writing in general, like a composition class." John did not feel that this class helped him improve as a writer. He said his improvements were in "catering to her wants" and avoiding her pet peeves like the use of "it is." When asked what comments helped his writing the most overall, he pointed to mainly local matters: "Probably just the reminders about, do this, or don't do this." He said these reminders were about "careless little things" like the "passive voice" and period placement in citations.

Initially, I felt that this contrast was odd because I thought it reflected a bigger concern for local issues in the 272 students, compared to a more global focus in the 102 students. The 102 students repeatedly expressed that they found suggestions about the content most helpful and most important. In contrast, the 272 students seemed to indicate that they learned more from the grammatical comments as they reflected on the whole semester, even though they said that

they felt comments relating to content were more helpful through the course of the semester. However, in reflecting on the comments that the students received, I noticed that the majority of their comments were local. The comments intended to improve content were usually short and simple, such as "add more detail here." Because of the number of technical comments, these things just tended to stand out more to the students. If the comments were not, on the whole, about their content, then, although they might think it is important, this would not be reflected in their analysis over the course of the semester. What the teacher chose to focus on directed the students' focus as well. Thus, I now realize that part of the difference in the way the students responded was due to the different ways their teachers commented on their papers.

Teachers

As I examined the students' texts and their responses to the comments on their papers, I began to realize that I was looking at two vastly different commenting styles. Asher gave very focused comments that usually provided suggestions about how to improve the content of the paper. He rarely focused on grammatical problems in the students' texts. Because of this, the students began to realize that content was most important as they worked to improve their papers. As Sommers points out, students tend to associate volume with importance (154-155), so if the teacher makes a lot of comments about the content, the students will tend to assume this is the most important aspect of their paper. This rings true with Saunders's students as well. Although she claimed to make content her focus when responding, examination of her students' papers

clearly showed otherwise. The bulk of her comments were made on a more local level, and so this is what her students thought was most important to her.

Although they all acknowledged the importance of writing good content, they all felt their improvements in the course were primarily in the area of grammar. Each one of them mentioned her pet peeve for "it is" at some point during the course of the study. John even goes as far as to say that he improved at "catering to her wants" for his writing. From his experience with his first paper which received all technical, local comments, he realized that this was the area he needed to focus on. A student is not miss-focused in wanting to improve his or her grammar, but we can see from the students' final reflections that they learned more at the local level than the global level. This may indicate that Saunders was perhaps too much focused on this area of her students' writing. It is not inappropriate for teacher's to respond to local concerns, but with the amount of local comments that Saunders made, we can wonder if her focus was too much on local matters. She seemed to assign relatively low grades to papers where the only problems she pointed out were local. The amount of local comments in conjunction with the grades she assigned do seem to indicate an ineffective focus on local comments. The reason, then, that her students did not say more about global matters and content was that she did not draw their attention to these issues with her comments.

Another difference in the commenting styles of these teachers was the length of each comment and the number of comments. Asher tended to give longer comments, but there were fewer of them on each paper. On the documents I examined, the greatest number of comments on any given paper

was 34, but for the papers I looked at, this was rare. Asher averaged around 15 comments per paper for papers that were about 4-5 pages in length. About half of his comments were longer notes focused on the content of the paper. In contrast, Saunders gave her largest number of comments, 54, on a five-page paper. On the first paper, which was the five-page paper, she averaged around 25 comments on each paper, 10 more than Asher. Her comments were largely short comments and symbols; on the 54-comment paper, only five of the comments were more than five words long. This leaves 49 comments for short, one-word questions, comments, symbols, word changes, grammatical corrections, etc. With this great of an emphasis on grammar and style, it is no wonder that Saunders's students seemed more concerned with the local issues in their writing.

Saunders's second paper was so vastly different from the first that it almost skews the results. The second paper was a descriptive essay that the students wrote based on one hour of "people-watching" in a busy location. Unless the students totally disregarded the directions, it would be difficult for them to totally mess this up. There were fewer than ten comments on these papers, and again, very few of them were over five words. More of the comments on this paper were praise comments because the students did vastly better on this paper than the first. But even the praise comments were non-specific and short.

In summary, Asher tended to make fewer comments, but those he made were generally longer and more detailed. His comments also focused more on the content of the paper. Saunders tended to make more comments, but hers were shorter and less detailed. Her comments were generally more focused on

the style and grammar of the papers. This undoubtedly affected their students' perceptions of what was helpful and what was important. Therefore it is not odd that Asher's students, though younger, expressed more concern for and learned more about global matters, while Saunders's students, though more advanced, focused more on and learned more about local concerns. From these comparisons, we can see just how much the teacher's focus will affect the students' focus.

Summary

The 102 students and 272 students ended up having more contrasts that I initially realized. Though they both preferred global comments and comments that were specific, the older students did, as I suspected, appreciate different tactics in response. First, the older students were more able to draw connections between different comments in their papers. Once something was marked once, they were able to see the problem later in the paper. The 102 students did not make these connections so readily. This would seem to indicate that the older students would be more able to recognize a persistent problem throughout their text even if it went unmarked. 102 students, on the other hand, do not see these types of problems unless they are clearly denoted.

Second, the 272 students also disagreed with their teacher more than the 102 students did. This is logical considering the 272 students were older, more mature, and more experienced. They possibly had more confidence in their own abilities simply because they had more training and maturity. The other possibility is that Asher just made more pertinent comments for the 102 students. They readily accepted his suggestions because they were good suggestions.

Additionally, though, the 102 students were less experienced and had more to learn, so it was only natural that Asher's comments would teach them more.

This is the third point of contrast: The 102 students said they learned a great deal from the comments on their papers, while the 272 students said they learned relatively little. Again, this could be because the 102 students had more to learn, or because Asher was making comments that were more apt to teach. Given Saunders's focus on local concerns, her students' belief that they learned little makes sense. If Saunders's focus was more global, the students might have felt her comments were more stretching. Local comments do not really require a lot of thought and work to revise, but global comments would.

CHAPTER VI

IMPLICATIONS

What initially began as a study intended to compare the needs of more experienced writers with the needs of first-year writers turned into a study that also compared the commenting styles of two teachers. The study revealed that students' perceptions of what is helpful is largely shaped by what their teachers choose to emphasize. Because of this dual focus, there are naturally implications for both students and teachers in this study that can add to the current body of research.

Students

From the results and findings of this study, students can learn several important points. First, students need to read their comments in the context of their papers to avoid misunderstanding the comments as much as possible. Kay's example earlier on shows us that had she really been reading her paper as she read the comments, she would clearly have seen that her teacher's circle around "my" was not intended to point out first person usage, but a typo. This is not a difficult thing to deduce if the student is carefully reading the paper. The problems with the squiggly line comments could also possibly be cleared up if 102 students were reading their comments carefully and in context. If the written comment by the start of the line indicates that there is a problem running

through the entire paragraph, then the student should be looking for that problem within the whole paragraph, even if it extends onto the next page. Just as teachers need to connect their comments to the paper (Sommers 153), so students need to pay attention to the context of the paper when reading the comments. Paying attention to the context in which the comment is given is just as important for students when reading the comments as it is for teachers when giving the comments.

A second implication for students is that they should ask questions of the teachers when they do not understand the comments. Comments that were misunderstood or not understood were not at all helpful to the students in ENG 102 and ENG 272. Students from both classes admitted never asking their teachers about comments they did not understand. They all said that they should have asked, but they did not. A possible solution for this problem is for teachers to have students respond to the comments they receive for homework the day they receive a paper back. A part of this response could be a section for questions that the student has for the teacher. This would promote an ongoing conversation between the teacher and student more in practice than in theory. Scholars have suggested that a conversational approach to response is helpful to students (Fife and O'Neill 313; Greenhalgh 409; Lauer 121; Straub, "Teacher" 377; Welsh 377). Dialoguing about the paper will both get the student involved in the writing process and clear up miscommunications that might be occurring in regards to the comments on the text.

A third consideration for students based on this research is that they should attempt to revise beyond the comments the teacher makes. In

comparing the commenting styles of Asher and Saunders, it is evident that Asher's commenting style led his students to focus on writing and revising for good content, while Saunders's commenting style led her students to focus much more on the grammatical side of writing. In spite of the teacher's emphasis, students need to look beyond the given comments and search for other areas of the paper to improve. In Asher's case, many grammatical problems went unmarked, and without examining revisions it is not possible to know if students caught these mistakes and fixed them anyways. Students need to be looking for these things on their own. On the other hand, Saunders's emphasis left her students feeling concerned mostly about grammar because they wanted to do everything correctly so they could get good grades. While students do often seek ultimately to produce what they think the teacher wants in order to get a good grade, students need to be able to see beyond their teacher's comments to improve other aspects of the paper that the teacher may, as in Saunders's case, not be as focused on. At a very basic level, no matter what the teacher chooses to focus on, students still need to understand the importance of good content and be able to revise their content even when it is not commented on as much as they would like. Or, they need to be able to pick up on the grammatical problems that might go unnoticed in their texts.

In a case like Saunders's class, it might have been beneficial if the students would have met with her to discuss specific questions about their content since she did not comment much on it in their papers. While students should always strive to go beyond the comments given on their papers, they should also not hesitate to discuss their concerns with their teacher. None of the

272 students ever discussed their papers with Saunders, even though they expressed frustrations about the clarity and helpfulness of the comments. If the teacher does not realize the ineffectiveness of his or her comments, then he or she will not be likely to change. While I am not suggesting it is the student's place to instruct the teacher about how to respond to papers, I do think that students need to make their teachers aware when their needs are just not being met. The teacher would have a better chance of picking up on this problem if the lines of communication were open between the teacher and the student so that the teacher was aware of instances when a student wanted to know more about a particular aspect of his or her paper.

Teachers

An important implication for teachers is to fully explain each comment, even when the mistake seems obvious. A circle around a typo may seem to be a clear comment to the teacher, but if the student is not reading carefully, then he or she may not recognize the problem being pointed out. It does not take long for a teacher to jot "typo" next to a circled word. Similarly, as teachers, we often assume that our students know certain rules better than they actually do. When Saunders instructed Stacey to put a page or paragraph number in her website citation, she clearly thought that Stacey knew what to do in the case of a source not having page numbers. Stacey's response shows that she was totally unaware of this rule. As a teacher cannot explain every comment in great depth, it is also, as mentioned before, the responsibility of the student to participate in the writing process and ask questions of his/her teacher when there is confusion about a comment.

A second important implication for teachers is that they should avoid over-using symbols. Where a teacher thinks a quick circle explains the whole problem, a student may still be feeling baffled about what is wrong with the circled word or the underlined sentence. Bardine agrees that students often feel confused by symbols, and teachers should really avoid making assumptions that the students will understand these symbols ("Students'" 244). Teachers need to be especially cautious of using symbols that they have created. Most students can understand an arrow, or a carrot, or an X, but when teachers create their own sets of symbols, it is easy for students to get confused. This was most evident in Saunders's class because she used her own set of unique symbols, and her students continually struggled to understand them. Even though she defined the symbols in class, her students still reported feeling confused about what the symbol meant. The obvious solution for this problem seems to be avoidance, whenever possible, of symbols. Teachers should take time enough to write out the problem that they see instead of hastily scratching a mark onto their student's paper.

A third implication which goes hand in hand with the second is that teachers need to take the time to write out more detailed comments, even if it means making fewer comments overall. Asher's students responded far more positively to his lengthy comments, and Saunders's students said they preferred her lengthier comments, which were usually the end comments, and said that they wanted even more long comments. Though this does take time on the part of the teacher, if teachers are really focused, as they should be, on two or three themes in the paper (Lunsford 93; Moneyhun 328; Straub, "Guidelines" 359;

Straub, "Student" 40), then writing longer comments is not as time consuming. What really gets time consuming is trying to fix every little problem in a student's paper. And as students in this study reported, those comments on smaller errors are really not the most helpful type of commentary they could receive. This points us back to what many scholars have already found and what this study confirms: Students prefer to receive comments on global issues and do not think local matters are as important in their writing (Straub, "Reading" 31; "Student" 36-37). Even when Saunders's students received mainly local comments, they still expressed a desire to hear more about their content and reported that content was their primary concern in writing and revision.

Fourth, teachers need to be aware of how their response focus is shaping their students' focus when they are writing or revising. The contrast between Asher's and Saunders's styles of commenting really highlighted this issue. Asher's comments were very content focused, and by the end of the semester, all three of the participants in his class were emphasizing the importance of content to me in our interviews. On the other hand, Saunders's students were far more focused on fixing grammatical problems in their texts and all reported that they had learned to pay more attention to the little things from Saunders's comments. In examining their documents, it is evident that the focus of the teacher's comments directed the focus of the students. Therefore, teachers need to ask themselves what their true focus is as they respond. We all say that we value the content of the paper the most, but does that really come across in the way we respond to students' texts? Even if we give more point value to the content of

the paper, if we have a great many more comments on technical errors than on content, the students will feel that their focus should be on the grammar.

Fifth, as I stated previously, the lines of communication need to be open between teachers and students. As much as students need to approach their teachers to ask questions if they have them, teacher also need to be approachable and be the ones to open the lines of communication in the first place. As the head of the class, the responsibility for good communication lies with the teacher. Most teachers do strive to be approachable by making their office hours known to students and by offering while returning papers to meet with students if they have concerns, but for some reason, students do not seem to take their teachers up on these offers. Both the first-year students and the older students acknowledged that they had questions about the responses on their papers, but they all admitted to not going to the teacher about these questions. How can this communication gap be bridged? One possibility would be what I described earlier, require students to write brief response papers to the comments on their papers and pose questions in the response that they may have. Another possibility would be to require a conference for students who choose to revise their papers. This would give students a built in opportunity to have their questions answered. A third option might be to have students write back to their teachers directly on their papers that have been commented on. As soon as papers are returned, students could be given a portion of class time to read the comments and to make notes next to any that they do not understand. The teacher could then recollect the drafts and explain further the problems that the students did not seem to understand. Of course this would

require more time from the teacher, but with the goal of making better writers kept in mind, this is not too much time to sacrifice to help students.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand the differing needs of first-year writers and upper-level writers. The goal of the study was to examine how these two student groups were similar and dissimilar. In the process of researching this goal, I discovered how large an impact the teacher's response style has on the students' perceptions of what is important in good writing. The differences that seemed to arise between the two groups came mostly from the way their teachers differed in response style. One group ultimately focused more on content and one group on grammar because that is what their teachers did. It was not the age difference that caused these differences; it was the teachers.

The comparisons between the first-year students and the junior or senior level students also leave lessons for teachers. Younger writers with less experience will perhaps struggle less to accept their teacher's suggestions and will need mistakes pointed out more clearly. More experienced writers seem to be able to pick up on patterns of mistakes more readily, while younger writers struggle to see the connections. As teachers we must then be especially careful to help our first-year students look for and find patterns of mistakes through their papers. Also, we must be careful to continue guiding the content of our older students' papers; just because they are past their first writing courses does not mean that they have reached a plateau in their writing skills. We do not want our students to come away from our writing courses saying that they learned very

little about writing from the comments on their papers. As teachers we always need to be pressing our students to develop their ideas more, no matter what age or experience level they may be. In that, we need to be especially cautious not to infringe on the control of our older students. While first-year students may be open to most any idea, older students are more mature and more confident in their own abilities. Junior and senior level students may be more receptive to comments phrased in a way that suggests and does not direct.

Ultimately, this research supports the basic premise that teachers must take the time to thoroughly and adequately respond to and explain the problems of their students' papers. Both the 102 and the 272 students felt that longer, more specific comments were more helpful and that comments focused on the content were preferable to those focused on more local matters such as grammar and wording. They struggled with unexplained symbols and with comments that were brief and vague. Understanding of how much a teacher's comment style affects his or her students' perceptions is something of value for every teacher of composition. What we choose to make important, our students will perceive as important. So we must carefully choose what to highlight in our responses, and we must take care to see that our comments are clearly explained. Finally, we must see that the lines of communication are open between ourselves and our students for those occasions when we, as imperfect people, sometimes fail to communicate clearly.

APPENDIX A

Teacher Interview

1. What kinds of papers did the students write in this course during the study?
2. What process do you go through when responding to a paper?
3. What types of things do you tend to focus on as you respond? (i.e. grammar, content, organization, wording, etc.) What things would you say you care less about or focus on less?
4. What is your revision policy for this class?
5. If the students revise, do you generally feel that they understand your comments or not? Overall, how much do you feel they understand based on their revisions?
6. When students do misunderstand, what do you think is the cause?
7. If the students revise, what issues do you see them focusing on the most? For instance, do they just do editing, or do they work on the global issues you've brought up too?
8. What is your philosophy about responding to your students' writing?

APPENDIX B

Student Interview 1

1. Do you like to write? Why or why not?
2. How skilled would you say you are at writing right now? What are your strengths and weaknesses?
3. How would you describe your writing process? What steps do you take when you write a paper?
4. Do you like to revise your writing? Why or why not? What is your revision process like?
5. In general, how do you view the comments that your teachers give you on papers? How much attention do you give to the comments? Do you think they affect your writing on subsequent papers?
6. Has your writing process changed over time?

APPENDIX C

Student Interview 2 and 3

1. Can you summarize the comments you received on this paper?
2. Were there any comments that were unclear to you? Why do you think they were unclear?
3. Are you going to revise this paper? Why or why not? If so, what issues will you address as most important? Why are those issues the most important to you?
4. What was your response to the comments on your paper? How did you feel reading them?
5. Did the comments help you understand your grade? Why or why not?
6. Do you feel the comments will help you as you revise or as you write your next paper? Why or why not?
7. Overall, which comments were most helpful and which were least helpful?
8. Do you think your view of your teacher's comments has changed since before receiving this paper back? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D

Student Interview 4

1. Do you feel you have improved as a writer thus far in the semester? If so, how do you feel you have improved?
2. If you feel that you have improved, do you attribute any of your improvement to the comments you have received? How have the comments impacted your writing?
3. Overall, what comments did you find helped your writing the most? What helped the least?
4. Has your attitude about yourself as a writer changed during this semester? If so, how has it changed?

APPENDIX E

Student Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions about the comments you received on your paper as specifically as possible. You will see that I have numbered each comment on your paper, and the numbers on this sheet correspond to those numbered comments. Please use additional paper if you need more space, just be sure to clearly indicate which number you are working on.

1. Do you understand the comment? Explain why you do or do not understand. In your own words, what do you think the teacher means by the comment?

Do you view this comment as helpful or unhelpful? Why or why not?

2. Do you understand the comment? Explain why you do or do not understand. In your own words, what do you think the teacher means by the comment?

Do you view this comment as helpful or unhelpful? Why or why not?

3. Do you understand the comment? Explain why you do or do not understand. In your own words, what do you think the teacher means by the comment?

Do you view this comment as helpful or unhelpful? Why or why not?

4. Do you understand the comment? Explain why you do or do not understand. In your own words, what do you think the teacher means by the comment?

Do you view this comment as helpful or unhelpful? Why or why not?

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