STUDENTS’ REACTIONS TO TEACHERS’ WRITTEN COMMENTS

The following is excerpted from a longer paper to be published by the NWP. The article describes a very informative piece of research any teacher can replicate.

The Problem—One evening last fall, I sat slumped at my desk plodding through a tall but not particularly handsome stack of student compositions. I envied those teachers who are able to employ the electronic scoring machines, the pocket calculators and mini-computers to mark their students’ work. Like some medieval monk, I worked on into the night. Still I sat; still I marked. Then I began again to wonder to what end I was working? What did I want my students to gain from all my cogent comments? I knew I wanted them to write better, but my experience taught me that all my comments, and those of my colleagues, were having little effect in the constant struggle to achieve clarity in writing. I began my investigation.

Over the years I had developed numerous systems for marking papers—some as simple as correcting misspelled words, some so complex it took two lectures to explain them to the class. The problem with each system was that I never checked to see if the receivers of my messages ever “heard” anything. I often felt like I was writing letters to people who had moved. I began to wonder if I wasn’t writing comments to make me feel fulfilled rather than to improve student writing. In order to find out what students do get from teachers’ comments, I finally decided I had better ask them.

I decided that I should interview other teachers’ students since I could not divorce myself from my role as my own students’ teacher. For that reason, I asked an eleventh grade U.S. history teacher and two ninth grade English teachers to each select three of their students to participate in my study. I briefly outlined the study and told the teachers I was trying to find out what students learned from teacher comments on their papers. They all agreed to help me.

Next, I established a set of questions to ask each student about each mark on his or her paper. These are the questions:
1. What is this mark?
2. What does this mark mean to you?
3. How does it make you feel?
4. What does the teacher want you to do here?
5. How will that effect the way you write in the future?
6. Are there any other comments?

I field tested these questions on three of my own classes and although they felt some of the questions overlapped, the classes generally felt that these questions were answerable. At least one student in each class said that I needed to know how the student being interviewed got along with the teacher. Many of the students agreed that the relationship between teacher and student affects the way the comments are read by the student. I asked “How do you get along with this teacher?” at the beginning of each interview. All nine of the

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students interviewed felt they got along with their teachers well.

The students were interviewed individually in my classroom when no other students or teachers were present. The interviews were conducted during my prep period, so the students were released from class for the interview. Each interview took about forty minutes. During that time we would review about three compositions from one to two pages long.

The Interviews—At this point I would like to caution the reader that this is an exploratory study. In no way is it offered as definitive proof for some program or theory. Rather, it is offered as a beginning to point the way towards more effective research into the complex process of writing instruction.

The first conclusion I drew from the interviews was: “If the students cannot read or understand the comment they cannot learn from it.” As obvious as this conclusion seems, it is still important to note the number of times this occurred and the response students gave.

1. Carrie: “...I can’t read it. His writing is hard to read,...I should go ask him what it means...I guess I get kind of mad that I can’t read it.”

Q: What does the teacher want you to do?
C: “I don’t know. I guess go ask him.”
Q: How will that affect the way you write?
C: “I don’t know.”
Q: Did you ask him?
C: “I don’t know, I guess go ask him.”

A lot of times he’ll hand out papers and we’ll go directly on to something else. There’s not much time to ask him. Sometimes I forget.”

2. One ninth grade student struggled to find meaning in this comment:

Q: What is this mark?
Jill: “‘A solid paper’.
Q: What does that mean to you?
J: “I don’t know. I really combined my work, I’m not sure.”
Q: How does it make you feel?
J: “Good, but I’m not sure.”
Q: What does this teacher want you to do?
J: “I’m not sure. Keep writing better. She likes to read everybody’s papers.”

In this case the teacher’s use of the word ‘solid’ confused the student. However, this student did get the idea that the teacher likes to read papers, but I’m not sure that information comes from the comment.

The second conclusion that I drew was “Students often understand what the mark says but they don’t always know what to do about it.” This would account for the fact that many times students don’t ask questions about teacher comments but they fail to improve in succeeding work. Here are some examples:

1. Carrie: “[He] crossed out argument and put fact...sometimes I have trouble distinguishing between the two...I kind of thought it was an argument...I guess he wants me to make it more of an argument.”

Q: How would you do that?
C: “I guess I’d try to make it more general.”

[Re-reading the statement confused Carrie. She was unable to correct the sentence.]

Here the teacher pointed out what was wrong, but did not show the student how to turn a fact into an argument. The comment identifies a problem but does not offer a solution.

2. Later in that paper Carrie encountered “?”:

Q: What does that mark mean to you?
Carrie: “That he didn’t understand what I was saying again...it kind of makes me upset...I can’t understand it.”

Q: What does the teacher want you to do?
C: “Explain it better.”

Why would a student explain something better that she already understood? The comment “?” was one of the most frustrating to the students I interviewed. They all understood that the teacher didn’t understand something, but none of them were able to tell what it was. Perhaps we need to “explain it better” so they can.

3. Another student encountered the comment “contradiction”:

Bryan: “I put two parts together that didn’t make sense. It all depends on how you think about it...It makes me feel that maybe he was thinking about something else...He wants me to word it better...I’ll have to get somebody else to proofread it. I had too much work.”

Although Bryan knows something is wrong, he doesn’t know what is contradictory and he doesn’t attempt to find out. He doesn’t even see that as his job. Again the teacher identifies a problem without offering a solution.

The third major conclusion I drew from the interviews was “That students often perceive that their writing is clear because they know what they mean. If the meaning is not clear to the teacher it is the teacher’s problem, not the writer’s.”

1. Carrie: “He has ‘they’ circled. I had just mentioned it in two sentences before who ‘they’ were and I guess he didn’t understand...I was mad at him because he didn’t understand it...He wanted me to write out who I was talking about...I guess I won’t use very many pronouns.”

The problem in this particular case was that the pronoun reference was unclear. Carrie never saw this. Not using pronouns could solve this, but Carrie
needed to learn to use them accurately. She cannot do that when she perceives the problem as belonging to her teacher.

2. David: “I don’t understand why he put ‘how?’ there because I think it makes sense...I asked him and I still don’t understand...I guess I’m supposed to clarify.”

Q: How will that affect your writing in the future?

D: “I don’t know.”

Here David believes his meaning is clear. The short comment did not give him a clue about where his meaning confused the teacher. I believe the teacher was looking for examples but he didn’t state that so David could see what to do next. Again, the student could use more direction.

The fourth major conclusion I drew was “That although students believe comments from teachers will help them improve their writing in the future, the students lack specific strategies for change and their writing is often unaffected.”

1. In response to a problem with pronoun reference, Carrie said “[in the future] I’ll be more careful in stating my sentences.” [Further discussion made it clear she did not see a reference problem.]

The student believes she can solve a problem but she has no clear perception of the problem or a solution from the teacher’s comment.

2. Carrie: “He put a question mark around ‘was a township’. . . [in the future] I’ll explain words that aren’t entirely clear.”

The problem here is very common. Students cannot tell what words are clear and what ones are not until a reader, usually a teacher, tells them. Since most papers are evaluated at that point, it is too late to explain.

3. In response to a C-grade on one paper, David said “[in the future] I’ll read it [the paper] over and let other people read over it.”

Although David could solve many of his problems by having trained responders read his paper, he admitted that when he and his friends read papers they seldom knew how to make improvements. Once again without specific directions for improvement the student doesn’t know where to begin.

The fifth major conclusion I drew was “That students believe re-reading or being more careful will help catch errors but they cannot recognize the errors.”

1. Carrie: “[He put] ‘which’ I put ‘who.’ I guess it sounded better with ‘who’. . . It’s more proper to use ‘which’ but I don’t know why... in the future I’ll be more careful to read my sentences over.”

Since the comment merely corrects the error without explaining the problem, Carrie still doesn’t know which pronoun to use. Consequently, more careful reading will not produce the desired result.

2. Carrie: “I put an ‘e’ in argument. I wasn’t careful. I should have realized it...[in the future] I’ll be careful and look it up if it doesn’t look right.”

Q: Why would you look it up if it looked right to you?

C: “I suppose I wouldn’t.”

Q: What could you do?

C: “I suppose I could get someone else to read it first.”

In this interchange Carrie was uncomfortable realizing “looking it up” would not solve her problem. Her solution was only tentative. The problem again is corrected words do not teach correct spelling.

3. Q: What is this mark?

Bryan: “Your logic is a bit vague. What is the real difference between early economic acts and programs to tighten control? These are imprecise distinctions. I wasn’t being very specific. He’s probably right. I think I wrote it the night before it was due. I didn’t get anyone to read over it. If I did I’d have to rewrite the whole paper... I’ll have to try to get more time.”

Although more time might help Bryan’s writing, it probably will not improve the logic of his writing. Again the comment identifies a problem but it does not demonstrate how to make the “distinctions more precise.”

The sixth conclusion that I drew was “That when students learn what they need to change, they seldom get the opportunity to fix it.”

1. When Carrie learned that she should present a biased view in her paper on Hamilton she said:

Carrie: “...I should make it sound more like a liberal. I’ll try to be more careful if I ever write a paper like this again.”

Q: “Has the teacher had you do this again?”

A: “No.”

In this case, when the teacher’s comments do show the student how to fix their papers they do not get a chance to try and succeed. The game becomes “Here’s what you did wrong in your last paper. Now do a different type of paper and see what I can mark wrong this time.” Several students had this same problem—once they learned how to write something correctly they were not given the chance to practice their new knowledge.

The seventh conclusion that I drew was “That some comments are perceived by students as helpful.”

1. Deborah: “[the mark is] a red line over an ‘s.’ I spelled the word wrong.”

Q: Has this helped your spelling?

D: “Yes.”

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In this case the student felt identifying her spelling errors helped her spell better.

2. Q: What is this mark?
   Deborah: “‘What happened’...I don’t think she understood. I guess I left out some parts...I’ll explain better so the reader can understand.”

Here the teacher’s comment asks for more information and Deborah can see that that will make her writing more clear. In the future she will try to anticipate this and include more information.

3. One student had an extremely positive attitude towards her teacher’s comments. She felt virtually every mark helped her write better. Here are several examples:
   Jill—“[the mark is] ‘a comma’...it will encourage me to write more.”

   “[the mark is] ‘done instead of did’...it will make me take more time.”

   “[the mark is] ‘he instead of him’...It will make me write better. Expand my vocabulary.”

   “[the mark is] ‘Handwriting is much improved.’ It will make me write better.”

   “[the mark is] ‘May I use this?’...she read my paper in class...Maybe if I keep writing like that more teachers will want to read my papers more and more.”

   “[the mark is] ‘Big improvement over first draft’...I really feel good about her telling me what’s right and what’s wrong. Encouragement helps.”

In this case the teacher-student relationship was so positive that the student would try to get whatever she could out of the comments. Possibly the positive nature of the last three comments helps to establish that relationship. I doubt that a comma by itself encourages anyone to write more.

The eighth conclusion that I drew was “That students’ reactions to grades varied widely, but it was not clear to the students how the grade on one paper affected their writing on future papers.”

1. Q: What is this mark?
   Teresa: “‘C’ It’s not very good. I’ll try to do better next time. It’s kind of a let down. I’ll see what I didn’t do right and fix it.”

T: “‘A/A’—That it was a pretty good paper. I’m not sure. I think one is mechanics and one is my grade. I don’t think it really will [affect my writing in the future].

Jill: “‘A/A’ Handwriting A. The paper was an A. It makes me feel real good. I’ll write better.”

Deborah: “‘F’. Well I didn’t finish it so I knew I deserved it...I’ll finish it.”

D: “‘B/B’. That I did pretty good. I’ll try to do better until I get an A.”

D: “‘4/10’. That I got four points out of ten. Oh boy...It’ll just help me write better.”

Bryan: “‘Grade of C+’. I blew it. I feel alright because I didn’t put out that much effort. He wants me to take more time and catch my spelling mistakes...I usually read the grade first and then look around and see what I messed up on. If I have enough time I’ll read all the comments.”

No comment.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

After reviewing my research, I began to wonder if the results presented here contained all that I had learned. Several questions arose. First, what would happen if I interviewed students who do not like their teachers? Further research needs to be done here. I also noticed that during the course of the interviews, some of the students got the idea they should re-read their work. I am not sure what effect the interview itself had on the responses of the students to the teachers’ comments. All the students admitted that the interview was more time then they usually spent reading teacher’s comments. Work needs to be done comparing writing before and after comments to see if any of the marks do affect student work.

I must admit that after interviewing these students I began to feel that marking papers is a very poor means of communicating with students about their writing. The alternative of the writing conference seems to be far superior. Donald Murray, in “The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference,” College English, Sept. 1979, describes many of the benefits of the writing conference. I recommend this technique for any teacher who has the time. However, for many elementary, intermediate and high school teachers the pressures of the student load combined with little time for individual conferencing during the day makes the conference impractical. Also, this study assumes that as long as students write, teachers will mark papers. How, then, can we mark papers more effectively?

As teachers perhaps our greatest mistake is that we collapse the process of giving instruction in revision (explicit directions for revision), giving instruction in proofreading and editing, and evaluation all into one jumbled we call “marking papers.” Most students are not capable of distinguishing between these three categories.

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