6.4: When Responding to Student Writing, More is Better

When teachers of writing grade student papers, they include written comments aimed at helping students improve their writing skills. The rationale for such teacher comments and corrections is based on two assumptions: (1) that the instructor and the institution need to know how well students are performing, and (2) that students need to know how their writing skills measure up and what they can do to improve. The expectation is that students will read the comments and corrections and learn from them. While some may think instructor comments and grades have long been an integral part of a student’s education, paper grading—as Mitchell R. James explains elsewhere in this book—is a relatively recent phenomenon in academia. And so now, highly conscientious teachers, wishing to be effective and helpful, read students’ writing and offer a lot of advice, write suggestions for future work, note corrections, and perhaps ask questions for the student writer to think about. Teachers who spend extensive time writing on student papers are apparently convinced that students learn from their responses. Parents and administrators are happy because they too assume that more teacher verbiage results in more learning—with a corollary that an exceptional teacher therefore offers extensive feedback. Unfortunately, there is a point of diminishing returns when the comments become so extensive that students are overwhelmed, unable to sort out what is more important from what is less important. Some students react negatively because they are convinced that a lot of comments equals a lot of criticism.

Teachers take on the time-consuming mental and physical effort with the best of intentions and dedication. They assume students will read all the comments, find out what they need to learn, and will work on problems that have been labeled and perhaps explained by these instructors. Similarly, when teachers use correction symbols for students to locate in the textbook and include encouragement and praise for what is well written, that would seem to round out the kinds of feedback that students benefit from. It also increases the amount of teacher comments on the paper. Thus, a thoroughly graded paper might include along with words of praise: suggestions; questions; indications about organization, clarity, and accuracy concerns; recommendations for future writing; and annotations to indicate grammatical, spelling, and word choice problems—plus, an explanation of how the grade was determined. It would be comforting to note that such over-grading of student papers is a rare phenomenon, but unfortunately, that’s not the case.
Some teacher responses even exceed the total word count of a student’s essay. Such extensive response by the well-intentioned, dedicated instructor is widely viewed as the expected result that follows when students hand in their papers. There are, of course, some who see written teacher responses as less effective and have turned to methods that do not include commenting on every paper, such as students getting feedback from other students in peer-response groups.

Although extensive commenting on student writing is not a universal practice, it is widespread, widely accepted, and widely practiced. Moreover, if writing comments and questions on the paper has educational value, then for many teachers, even more written response results in even more learning. Oh, that it were so. The over-graded paper too often has little or no educational value. Extensive written response is not productive for instructors because it is highly labor intensive in the time that it takes instructors to read and write a response for each paper, much less those for a whole class or multiple classes. Most teachers simply do not have that much time to slowly, carefully read papers and then think about what to note in the comments because they also need additional time to prepare for and meet their classes. Extensive marginal notes, along with a paragraph or four at the top or end of the paper summarizing the teacher’s feedback is counterproductive. Yet it persists. Unfortunately, the over-graded paper is a waste of a teacher’s time and far too often a total loss in terms of the student’s ability to understand and learn from all that instructor prose.

Multiple factors contribute to students’ problems with reading fulsome teacher responses and learning from them. One of the most obvious student problems in decoding all that teacher commentary is that students’ critical reading abilities have steadily declined. The class of 2015 had the lowest SAT scores in critical reading—along with writing and math—since the SAT test was overhauled in 2006. In 2006, the average critical reading score was 503, out of a possible 800; in 2015, the average critical reading score had dropped to 495. As a result, too many students struggle to critically read and understand their instructors’ prose. To compound the problem, many teachers now offer their responses online, but as some studies have shown, reading online reduces comprehension and memory of what was read.

Another problem with reading teacher comments is that some students lack an adequate command of English because of inadequate literacy skills in general. Even students whose literacy level is adequate for college-level writing can be mystified by jargon that some teachers inadvertently use, such as development or coherence. I’ve heard students trying to guess what coherence means and fail utterly. They wonder if their writing is stupid or wrong or just not what the teacher wanted. Or, as another example, teachers may note the need for transitions between sentences or paragraphs or for more sentence variety. Even comments such as “your thesis needs a tighter focus” is not intelligible for students who don’t have a firm grip on what a thesis is or what focus in a paper means. These terms are part of an extensive vocabulary describing aspects of writing that instructors become used to because it is the jargon of the field, used in teacher-training classes and books on teaching pedagogy. But most students, other than those studying to become teachers of writing, do not spend class time learning this vocabulary. Knowing a goal and having a strategy for how to get there can be, for too many students, mission impossible.

Yet another problem with extensive feedback from teachers is that in the welter of prose, there is often a lack of hierarchy. Which of the many comments does the writer focus on? As they read through the instructor’s writing, student writers all too often don’t know what to tackle first or what is most important. Sadly, such students become overwhelmed by the lengthy marginal notes and questions or excessively long responses so carefully crafted by their instructors. Papers requiring revision tend to be especially overgraded, perhaps because the teacher envisions how much better the next draft will be when the writer works on all the aspects of the paper that need to be rewritten. But writing center tutors hear, instead, students’ views on all the comments. They say a teacher
“ripped all over my paper,” or they ask tutors to tell them what they should do. They don’t know what to focus on first or where to plunge in when thinking about what to revise. Students in this situation usually don’t know how to prioritize among all the verbiage.

When there is too much for the student writer to attend to, another result is students’ preference for selecting the low-hanging fruit. They choose to focus on the more easily edited sentence-level comments, such as correcting a misspelled word, rather than tackling the more challenging comments about clarity, organization, or clarifying a main point. They want to know how to fix the comma error that is checked or how to revise the sentence marked as awkward. And then there are students who choose to ignore what the teacher has written because, if they don’t need to revise the paper, why bother plowing through the endless prose? But they have been assigned to come to the writing center and often don’t want to hang around and talk about a paper they consider no longer on life support. They refer to such papers as dead, as done with or history. Why bother with a post-mortem?

If there are so many reasons why extensive teacher response to student writing is unproductive, and if more is generally less in terms of what students learn from all that commenting, what does a well-meaning teacher do? One possibility is to focus only on a very few concerns the student can work on, and that includes reducing the number of marginal comments. Make it clear that while there are other aspects of the assignment that the student has handed in that need work, the student writer should, for this paper, concentrate only on a few aspects the instructor suggests. Decreasing the amount of teacher response can lead to closer attention to those matters instead of getting lost in trying to cope with an overload. If time permits, teachers can meet with students in conferences to discuss revisions and explain on the spot when students need more explanation.

Another way to consider responding to student writing is to recognize that not all writing needs to be graded. Taking the pressure off by not grading every single bit of composing allows writers to experiment, to ease the burden of a grade. That is liberating for some students who constantly worry about the repercussions of a grade as they compose every sentence. Students can also get feedback from peer groups, and in schools and colleges where there are writing centers, they can get reader response from tutors. For teachers who recognize that less really is more in terms of responding to student writing, students will be more likely to absorb and learn from the limited, specific feedback they offer. Such students will have a greater chance to improve their writing, and teachers, instead of staring at their desks with piles of papers to grade, will have more time to think about how to make class time more productive.

Further Reading

Chris Anson’s Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research is a particularly helpful guide for commenting on student papers. For options other than grading and offering feedback on student papers, two excellent books are John Bean and Maryellen Weimer’s Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom and Stephen Tchudi’s Alternatives to Grading Student Writing.

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Muriel Harris, professor emerita of English at Purdue University, initiated and directed the Purdue Writing Lab where she spent decades learning from students she met in many hundreds of tutorials. She also learned how awesomely effective it is for tutors to meet one-to-one with students to work with them on their writing skills, in a setting where there is no evaluation or grading. In the process, she also marveled at how varied each writer’s needs, literacy background, and learning styles are, and most of her professional writing has focused on writing centers and individualized instruction in writing. Harris spends time promoting writing centers as a superb learning environment and editing *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship.*