W

riting Program Bulletin

October 16, 2008

“Most teachers’ comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text. . . . There seems to be among teachers an accepted, albeit unwritten canon for commenting on student texts. This uniform code of commands, requests, and pleadings demonstrates that the teacher holds license for vagueness while the student is commanded to be specific” (Sommers 153).

Just prior to the fall break, I offered a workshop entitled “Editor, Teacher, Reader? What’s Your Style in Commenting on Student Papers?” It was a chance to step back and look at faculty comments from a student perspective, and in particular to examine major responding styles and discuss their purposes and effects.

As the quotation from Nancy Sommers (at right) reminds us, we often take for granted that our comments are clear to students and will result in the revisions we expect. But are they, and do they?

Workshop participants were given two marked up papers, and asked to put themselves in the shoes of the student writer to answer the following questions:

1. How did you feel as the student in relation to each of your professors? (Realizing, of course, that we really don’t know anything about their relationship in real life – a context that \*is\* important in how feedback is interpreted by students.)
2. What “personality” emerges in each paper from the comments by the faculty member?
3. How would you describe the goals of the comments in each paper?

Faculty members agreed that looking at comments from this perspective was helpful, and the resulting discussion underscored the many frustrations we often feel when responding to student writing. The most productive part of the discussion, however, was in delineating the differences in the two samples. Each one represented two points on a continuum concerning the degree of control our comments assert over a student text. The two ends of this continuum are “authoritative” and “interactive”; both have their uses, depending on the stage of writing and the student’s writing maturity. An authoritative style identifies “what can or should be done by way of revision” and uses the authority of the teacher to “set in motion the changes to be made” (Straub and Lunsford 191). An interactive style engages “students in actively making their own choices about revision, relying less on the teacher’s authority and more on the interplay between reader and writer” (191).

The next step in the workshop was to examine the six major responding styles on this continuum as outlined in *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing* (see attached pdf file), and then identify which style best characterized the two examples. We then discussed the benefits and appropriateness of the various styles in particular situations. For example, using more interactive comments assumes that students can read open-ended questions and reflective notes productively to make substantive revisions. The following faculty member’s experience is instructive: after writing what she perceived to be a friendly and encouraging comment which connected the student’s point to the work of another scholar, the faculty member was surprised when the student asked, “What do you want me to do here?” In other words, the student was so used to corrective feedback that she couldn’t accept this for the reflective comment that it was. Moreover, some students may not know how to interpret feedback that asks them to think about the effects of their writing on the reader. This rhetorical awareness needs to be cultivated. We may even have to train students to read our feedback when we try new approaches.

As I’m sure everyone can imagine, the issue of the amount of time invested in reading, responding to, and correcting student papers also came up. Due to time constraints, we did not discuss this in detail, although I did provide several handouts. Here in the Bulletin, however, I can address it more fully. First, as study after study in the field of composition and rhetoric has shown, when a majority of comments identify and/or correct sentence-level errors, the majority of the “revisions” tend to ignore higher order thinking and organization, even if these were the faculty member’s main concern:

Writing teachers must be aware that their written comments may communicate more to students than simply what is wrong. Students often have difficulty determining which of the teachers’ comments are most important. When 60 to 80 percent [of the comments] deal with editing issues, they infer that teachers give editing top priority when evaluating—an inference not necessarily accurate. (Dohrer 51).

Yet, I know that we often feel compelled to identify every error; in fact, we feel that it’s a professional obligation. How could it be responsible *not* to mark every error? My answer is to think about the context and purpose of any given set of comments. Detailed feedback on graded papers has little to no effect on future papers because students often cannot apply these comments to a **new** context. So, unless students have the option of re-submitting the paper for a higher grade, it’s simply not worth our time to mark up a paper extensively. Instead, consider a brief note in which you identify the kinds of errors you see, and explain the consequences of submitting another paper with the same lack of proofreading and editing. If it’s an early draft, then marking micro-level errors isn’t the best use of our time and energy either, since students will likely be re-writing whole sections of the paper to better elaborate on the ideas. Most of the errors and lack of clarity seen at this stage of the writing process are due to confusion about the content. After all, we want our students to be grappling with difficult concepts. It’s not unreasonable for a first draft to be an attempt to think through these ideas in a search for meaning. Our comments at this stage best serve student learning if they help deepen student thinking or otherwise guide the organization of ideas. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t bring error patterns to our students’ attention. We should, and we should also say that we expect a more polished version in the final draft. But they need not be the primary focus of our comments on an early draft.

Think of it this way: if we mark every “error” and comment on every aspect of the paper that needs editing or revision in some way, we risk overwhelming students with too much feedback. The result? At worst, students will tune out entirely; at best, they may attempt to address every point but do so only superficially: “Student writers—just as apprentices in any other area—can’t target all their weaknesses simultaneously” (Ransdell 6).

The other thing to keep in mind is whether identifying and/or correcting errors teaches students how to avoid them in the future. Depending on the terminology we use, our marks may be unintelligible to students; or, even when the comment itself is clear (e.g., “wrong word”), it doesn’t help students see a better alternative. For additional ideas on how to handle editing issues in student writing, see previous issues of the Bulletin @ <http://www.tcnj.edu/~writing/faculty/bulletinarchive/index.html> (past issues are now titled). Another excellent resource with practical tips on responding is this one from George Mason University: <http://mason.gmu.edu/~ereid1/teachers/tchguideROI.htm>.

I would be happy to offer this workshop again for those who are interested. Please email me at [goldschm@tcnj.edu](mailto:goldschm@tcnj.edu) with some possible dates and times.

Works Cited

Dohrer, Gary “Do Teachers’ Comments on Students’ Papers Help?” *College Teaching* 39.2 (Spring 1991): 48-55.

Ransdell, D.R. “Directive Versus Facilitative Commentary.” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 26.3 (March 1999): 8 pgs.

Sommers, Nancy. “Responding to and Evaluating Student Writing.” *College Composition and Communication* 33.2 (1982): 148-56.

Straub, Richard and Ronald Lunsford. *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1995.