Responding to Student Writing

New Faculty Orientation
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Facilitators

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We've designed this handout to be used as both a guide through today's workshop and a reference guide after the workshop is over.

1. Research on Responding to Student Writing

Today's workshop draws on two disciplinary traditions, one from the research in TESOL and one from the research in composition studies (or rhetoric and composition).

Some **key terms** that are useful in discussing responding to student writing:

- editing vs. revising
- feedback focused on errors vs. feedback focused on content
- summative vs. formative feedback
- focused feedback vs. unfocused feedback
- direct feedback vs. indirect feedback

Also useful is Rosina Lippi-Green's "**linguistic facts of life**" (1997, p. 10; Greenfield, 2011, p. 33) that the vast majority of linguists agree upon about language, which have import when we read and respond to student writing:

- "All spoken language changes over time."
- "All spoken languages are equal in linguistic terms."
- "Grammaticality and communicative effectiveness are distinct and interdependent issues."
- "Written language and spoken language are historically, structurally, and functionally fundamentally different creatures."
- "Variation is intrinsic to all spoken language at every level."

1. What is error in a student text?

Linguists say:

“Most L2 writers’ texts are observably different from those of native speakers...When L2 writers make errors, teachers must recognize that such errors do not simply represent a lack of proofreading or a minor short circuit...but rather such errors are often clues about what students do not know about the language system as a whole and about written texts in particular…” (Ferris, 2008, p. 93)

Compositionists say:

Errors can (should) be seen as “evidence of intention” . . . error produced by a “lack of choice and option, “the power to make decisions about the idiosyncrasy of writing” (Bartholomae, 2005, p. 21)

Error is not simply a marker of incompetence or accident by the student, it is a “**flawed verbal transaction between a writer and a reader**” (Williams, 1981, p. 153).

Error is not static, but is a social construction that occurs in the intersection of the reader’s idiosyncrasies, the text, and the persona of the writer that the reader creates. Anson explains that “[h]ow we construct each author, in turn, affects the role and strength of the errors in our reading, leading to an admittedly contextualized response” (2000, p. 10).

Table 5: Comparison of Average Length of Student Essays, 1917–2006

Year	Average Paper Length
1917	162 words
1930	231 words
1986	422 words
2006	1038 words

Table 8: Comparison of Error Rates per 100 Words

Study	Year	Errors per 100 Words
Johnson	1917	2.11
Witty & Green	1930	2.24
Connors & Lunsford	1986	2.26
Lunsford & Lunsford	2006	2.45

Andrea A. Lunsford and Karen J. Lunsford (2008) in their national study of error in college student writing found that students write more yet produce no more error than in past studies.

2. Can students learn to be better writers from error correction by teachers?

Linguists say:

“Second language acquisition takes time...Rather than envisioning ourselves and our courses as the final stop, we need to perceive ourselves as part of a process that takes years…” (Ferris, 2008)

“Even teachers’ and students’ best efforts at error correction do not result in 100 percent accuracy...When error feedback is thoughtfully and consistently delivered, it can

help students to improve the *[grammatical] accuracy of their current texts* [emphasis added]" (Ferris, 2008, p. 94). *Note: grammatical accuracy and overall writing quality are NOT the same.*

Compositionists say:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has **to invent the university for the occasion** -- invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the various discourses of our community" (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 134).

A teacher might teach through feedback on error if error in student writing become places where the teacher and student negotiate what constitutes the error, why, and for whom. In this kind of response, "[w]hat counts as an **error will have to be taught as negotiable** and thus variable, dependent on the specific historical and social context in which a notation occurs, its status as an error varying from reader to reader, even from reading to reading, as agreements as to relationships of power and authority are renegotiated" (Horner, 1992, p. 176).

3. How can teachers help students with their writing through their response strategies?

Linguists say:

Teach students to take the time to write" (Ferris, 2008, p. 98). Teachers can reinforce this by structuring writing assignments as iterative processes with opportunities for feedback, revision, and more feedback. We telegraph our values about writing by how we design our writing assignments and how we respond to writing.

Matusda (2012) suggests "put[ting] grammar learning into the category of incidental learning—to facilitate learning and reward success...To facilitate learning, writing teachers need to continue to provide grammar feedback for second language writers along with metalinguistic commentary." (p.155)

"Be diligent, consistent, and systematic in providing error feedback that can help student writers to make progress in accuracy" (Ferris, 2008, p. 104). In other words, be mindful about giving *focused* feedback. It won't be effective if it's given haphazardly (i.e. unfocused).

Compositionists say:

A teacher can treat her feedback on student writing as a dialogue, a conversation with the writer, through six strategies: (1) "create an informal, spoken voice, using everyday language"; (2) "tie commentary back to the student's own language on the page"; (3) "focus on the writer's evolving meanings and play back their way of understanding the text"; (4) "make critical comments but cast them in the larger context of help or guidance";

(5) "provide direction for the student's revision but . . . do not take control over the writing";
(6) elaborate on key statements of their responses" (Straub, 1996, p. 389-90).

3. Response Activity

Take 5-10 minutes to read and provide written feedback to the student-writer of our sample text from a current UWT student who gave us permission to use the paper. As you read, imagine that you have assigned this paper, and this is the paper you receive. Comment on the paper as you see fit. How would you provide feedback and what would you say or write to the student?

4. Discussion

Consider these questions:

- What were the 2-3 most important writing issues you (as the fictional teacher) felt needed addressing in your feedback? Why?
- What purposes did you give yourself for reading and responding? How did those purposes affect the nature and amount of comments that you offered to the student?
- Did you comment on error or mistakes, or mostly on content and/or arrangement? Why?
- When is it best to comment on content in student drafts, arrangement, and error? Is it different times/drafts/moments in the quarter? Why?

5. Take-Aways

The following are a few ideas and strategies for responding to ESL and multilingual student writing that comes from the research discussed in first portion of this workshop. Some of these ideas may have come up in a number of ways during our discussion of the student paper.

Premises and Pedagogical Assumptions

- Language learning takes time -- "tough love" won't help students learn language any faster; it only punishes them.
- Good feedback starts with good reading practices.
- Feedback on errors and mistakes may move students to correct sentences but there is much more to revising than error correction.

Ferris's (2008) Helpful Editing Strategies (for improving *grammatical accuracy*).

1. Ask students to **read their work aloud**. This strategy may help students notice missing words and mistakes. It may be successful for the parts of language students know, but not successful for the aspects of language they are less confident about.
2. Add **another pair of eyes**. For instance, ask them to go to the TLC (the writing center).
3. Structure drafts so that students must **edit them in stages**. For instance, use separate passes through a text to locate and correct different error patterns.

Response Practices

- Let the purpose of your writing assignment drive the purpose of your feedback to students.
- Respond only to things you teach students explicitly (why grade something you are not teaching?)
- Consider rubrics that help focus a teacher's feedback so that it discusses just the dimensions of writing that the assignment asks the student to demonstrate/practice.
- There are times for summative feedback and times for formative. Be sure you know which time it is and adjust your feedback accordingly.
- Consider how important error and mistakes are in accomplishing the goals of each assignment and let your feedback reflect these priorities.

7. Your Initial Concerns - Our Brief Responses

In the RSVP survey, several of you identified questions and concerns that you hoped we'd address. In case we didn't cover them in our workshop, we invite you to look over them in the table below and read our short responses. While our responses are far from comprehensive, we hope they go a little way towards addressing concerns we may have not had the time to cover in the workshop.

You Said / Asked	We Respond
1. I am most interested in how to successfully get across the idea of revision to my students.	As we are sure you know, revision is not intuitive to most students.It's often unclear what it means exactly for you in your class (as opposed to other classes and teachers). One good strategy is to design drafts and revision tasks into the course. Some call this "scaffolding" assignments. You can also try leading your students through discussions about what revision is, and come to some articulations of revision as a practice that perhaps you reproduce in assignment instructions. Anne Lamott has a good, short piece on revision and drafting called, "Shitty First Drafts," which can be found here: https://wrd.as.uky.edu/sites/default/files/1-Shitty%20First%20Drafts.pdf and it can be useful in such dicussions.
2. How to help multilingual students write papers that conform to the standards of academic writing while retaining their own voice.	Often by standards many teachers mean formatting and source attribution conventions. These details of the assignment can be clearly articulated through expectations (rubrics), but should be reinforced in direct instruction and your feedback. However, if by conformity you mean grammatical accuracy, we would point you to the sources above and ask you to reconsider a) if grammatical perfection is possible and b) why that is important in your class. Lippi-Green (mentioned in section 1 above) explains that Linguists understand "grammaticality" and "communicative effectiveness" as distinct issues. Are you looking for grammatical accuracy or effective communication?
3. Providing feedback that improves scientific writing (clarity, economy of expression)	Keep in mind that our students are "inventing the university" in every class, so what one teacher sees as "clear" and "economical" expression isn't always apparent. We must teach what we mean by such language. For instance, what are the rhetorical values of scientific writing in your class for you, and how do they manifest themselves (rhetorically, grammatically,

	lexically)? Both clarity and economy of expression can be improved with explicit vocabulary suggestions in your feedback. It may take 10 or more (incidental) exposures to a word before language learners learn a new vocabulary word. You can help this process. Try something like “a scientist would write _____ because ________.”
4. Helping ELL students, especially, see comments on their writing rhetorically, not as directions for permanently "fixing" a problem.	Seeing any feedback or conversation on their writing as rhetorical is not intuitive or natural for most students. Plus, most have only received feedback from teachers that tell them what to do, so they expect this from all teachers, even when those teachers are trying to respond differently. Two ideas: first, try having an explicit conversation with students before you return your feedback, discussing your intentions/goals for the feedback you gave, and how your students can most profitably read your feedback. You might even ask them beforehand (“what do you want from me as a reader?”), and have them write a note to you with their draft, explaining any more problems they see and what they want to hear from you about. Second, the more exposure to a process the more natural if will feel to folks, so perhaps lead students through similar kinds of rhetorical reading practices with other texts before they get your feedback, then reference those activities in your discussion about reading your feedback.
5. minimal marking strategies	Minimal marking, advanced by Haswell (1983), is really about grammar error correction (i.e. editing not revising). More specifically, Haswell used check marks to signify that an error was in that line and prompted students to self-correct. This can work if students know that this is your practice and if they can identify the error. This gets into the distinction between “error” and “mistake” in second language acquisition: an “error” is something a writer doesn’t know, whereas a “mistake” is a language feature that the writer knows but overlooks. Minimal marking will likely be less effective with writers who are making more errors than mistakes. It works best with native speakers who have more access to the dominant discourse and its written conventions. Additionally, this practice works best if students have access to a grammar handbook that both of you can reference.
6. How to distinguish between content comprehension and writing difficulties on student lab reports.	Many times it is too hard to know the difference between such things. The ancient Sophists (of the 4th and 5th century BCE, Hellenes, what is today Greece) thought of language and the ideas being expressed in language as one and the same. Simply put, form is the shape of content, but content determines the form. At a practical level, if you cannot make heads or tails of the disciplinary idea the student is trying to express, then the student needs practice expressing those ideas. If the lab report is a one-and-done assignment, then the student may lose the opportunity for dialogue with you – i.e. to learn through their writing process and your feedback.
7.Doing so efficiently and effectively!	Tough one. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to feedback. What is efficient and effective will depend on what your feedback goals are, the class, the genres you are working with, etc. On the other hand, responding to writing is a time-consuming practice. There is no way around it, if we want to do well. Being purposeful about what you provide feedback on can help. For instance, you could decide only to comment on one aspect of draft from your rubric before you begin reading any paper. Research shows

	that students get easily overwhelmed with too many comments on their papers, so focusing on fewer things is both more efficient and effective.
8. student writing by non-native English speakers student writing by students from racial/ethnic cultures and communities that are not predominantly White writing issues of low-income students and students with disabilities	We appreciate these interests and concerns, but we’re not sure of the question you’re asking. If the workshop doesn’t answer your questions, contact us.
9. Strategies for effectively and efficiently commenting on students' papers (I find I spend hours on providing feedback, and wonder how to cut down on the time, and make the feedback the most helpful for students.)	See our response to the same kind of question above (# 7).

8. References

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