

# Opening Dialogue: Students Respond to Teacher Comments in a Psychology Classroom

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Beginning in 1999, City University of New York (CUNY), significantly increased its commitment to Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) by funding faculty development, Writing Fellows, and Writing Intensive courses on the majority of its 18 campuses. With this renewed interest in WAC, administrators and faculty across the disciplines are increasingly taking responsibility for using writing processes to foster learning and thinking as well as teaching writing in the disciplines. As teachers use writing more as a communicative tool in the content areas, how they respond to students' writing becomes increasingly important.

As a WAC Coordinator at Bronx Community College (BCC), I have had the opportunity to work with faculty in professional development seminars. A common concern teachers often raise is how best to respond to students' writing. In turn, I, too, have often wondered how students in my classes react to my feedback on their written texts. Careful consideration of what we say and how we say it is an important part of good teaching practice. Teachers typically invest much time and effort in responding to students' texts with the assumption that their feedback will help improve students' writing. Teacher feedback takes on greater significance when students are revising their writing through multiple drafts. But what do students really think about our comments? Do our words help students move their thinking and writing forward on subsequent drafts?

Do students' understandings of our teacher feedback match our intentions? How do our responses make students feel about their writing, about themselves as writers, and about us? Creating more opportunities for dialogue between teachers and students about students' writing can shed light on such questions.

Classroom research has viewed instructional conversation or dialogic interaction as an important tool for facilitating thinking, learning, and reflective processes (See Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Mercer, 1995; Nystrand, 1997; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988 among others). However, despite teachers' efforts to encourage students' active participation and connections among language-based processes (e.g., speaking, reading, writing, and listening) in classrooms, one place where students are seldom asked to engage in or participate in dialogue is in response to teacher feedback on their written work.

One strategy for making writing and revision more interactive is to meet one-on-one with students to conference on their written texts. This is ideal, if the teacher is a skilled listener who has ample time. However, large class sizes, heavy teaching loads, and pressure to cover course content render one-on-one conferences with each student for every written assignment next to impossible. As an alternative to the face-to-face conference, teachers may create the conditions for dialogue between themselves and their students by inviting students to respond, in writing, to teacher feedback.

A closer examination of how students perceive teacher feedback is important for both student and teacher learning in a number of ways. First, encouraging dialogue between teacher and students invites students to actively engage in the writing process, transferring the responsibility for the writing and revising process to the student. Second, creating opportunities for dialogue helps students to see their writing as situated in a social context, highlights the social nature of language use, and encourages students' awareness of the reader in their writing process. Third, thinking about and reflecting on their writing in

response to teacher commentary encourages students to slow down their cognitive process, making their thinking an object of contemplation. When students are asked to reflect on their writing processes or encouraged to be more aware of them, their understanding improves. Fourth, offering students an opportunity to tell us how our comments make them feel allows us to be more aware of how our comments impact students not only cognitively but emotionally as well. Writing can be an emotionally-charged activity for students, especially if those students do not have positive identities of themselves as writers. At BCC, the majority of the students are developing their fluency with English and are underprepared in the skills of academic discourse. As a result, many of them approach their writing assignments with much anxiety. Bean (1996) reminds us to keep the writer in mind when responding to students' papers: "The best kind of commentary enhances the writer's feeling of dignity. The worst kind can be dehumanizing and insulting—often to the bewilderment of the teacher, whose intentions were kindly but whose techniques ignored the personal dimension of writing" (p. 239). As Bean suggests, at times, teachers may be unaware of the impact their comments may have on students' attitudes about themselves as learners and writers.

In addition to serving as a window into students' understandings and affective processes concerning writing and communication, an examination of students' responses to teacher commentary can foster important learning opportunities for teachers as well. Such an examination can enable teachers to review and reflect on their pattern of responding, to assess its effectiveness, and to examine whether or not it serves their teaching philosophy. Creating opportunities for dialogue about students' writing allows both teacher and students to become learners in the classroom.

Research on teacher response to students' writing has examined the types of teacher comments students prefer or find most helpful. Students seem to prefer comments that are tai-

lored to the specific text rather than generic (Straub, 1997; Zamel, 1995). Students find comments that are explicit in indicating exactly how a paper may be revised most helpful and prefer comments that provide reasons for the teacher's opinions (Lynch & Klemans, 1978; Sommers, 1982; Straub, 1997; Zamel, 1995; Ziv, 1984). In her study, Ziv (1984) found that inexperienced revisers preferred explicit and specific suggestions on how a paper might be improved. Additionally she found that comments that provided more implicit cues (i.e., less specific and exact) on how to revise a paper were more appropriate when the students had presented well-developed ideas. Straub (1997) found that students considered comments that focused on global matters (e.g., content and organization) as helpful as those that focused on local matters (e.g., grammar and wording). He also found that students did not like comments that seemed to appropriate or change what they were trying to say in their writing, and they preferred all forms of praise, especially praise that was accompanied by a reason why the work was good.

In an effort to better understand how my students were making sense of my written comments and to reflect on my own response style, I invited students in my psychology course to respond to my written feedback on their first drafts of a brief thought paper. In the following section I discuss a strategy I used for opening up dialogue between myself and my students that may be used on its own or in combination with face-to-face conferencing.

### **The Classroom Context**

Abnormal Psychology is a three semester hour course that introduces students to descriptions of major psychological disorders, theoretical perspectives, and treatment modalities. It is one of the psychology electives offered at BCC. The prerequisite for the course is Introduction to Psychology.

In my class, I value the use of language, language-based processes (e.g., reading and writing) and social interaction as

important tools for fostering reflection, thinking, and learning. Additionally, I view learning as most effective when the learner is actively engaged in the task. As a teacher, I believe it is important to set up conditions of learning that maximize students' strengths and help them expand upon their resources.

Given my teaching philosophy, I use a variety of teaching tools in my classroom. In addition to formal lectures, classroom discussion, and small group work, I use a number of low stakes and high stakes writing activities and assignments in the class. These activities include learning logs where students respond to structured questions based on their readings, quick in-class writing to facilitate thinking about relevant topics, multiple drafts of brief thought papers to encourage revision, and a research paper. Although the textbook, Alloy, Jacobson, and Acocella (1999) *Abnormal Psychology: Current Perspectives*, is the primary text for the course, I typically augment the textbook with other readings in the field, such as articles from trade magazines, newspapers, and journals to expose students to different types of reading and writing tasks.

In the 2002 spring semester, 25 students enrolled in the class. They had diverse backgrounds in academic experience, English language fluency, and writing abilities. Most were majoring in Psychology and Human Services programs. With regard to their academic experience with college-level English, the majority of the students in the class had completed the first year of freshman English. A number of students were taking the second semester of freshman English concurrently with my course, and a number of students had completed an upper level English course. Although most of the students in my class had completed the first year of college-level English, many of them needed much writing practice to further develop their skills. Many of the students in my class had completed remedial English or ESL courses.

### **The Assignment**

I asked students to write a brief (2-3 pages) thought paper based on their reading of an article from a popular psychology magazine. The reading I selected presented a cross-cultural analysis of the behavioral symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). My purpose in giving this assignment to my students was twofold. First, I wanted students to gain experience reading, summarizing, and quoting appropriately in their writing from a course-related article (see Appendix for the assignment). I have found that students have difficulty with these aspects of the writing process. Second, I wanted to encourage students to develop their thinking and writing through the process of revision. I explained to students that they would be writing two drafts of their paper, that their first draft was an opportunity for them to put their thoughts down on paper as best they could, and that I would provide written comments to assist them in their revising process. I explained that only the final draft would receive a formal grade.

### **A Strategy for Opening Dialogue**

As part of the revising process, I asked students to complete and submit to me a *Student Response-To-Teacher Feedback Log*<sup>1</sup>. In class I explained to students how to complete their response logs. In the first column, students wrote my verbatim comments that appeared in their texts. In the second column, students indicated how the comment made them feel and in the third column, students indicated whether or not they understood what to do on their subsequent drafts. Students handed in their response logs along with their first and second drafts of their papers for the final assessment.

### **Analysis of My Response Pattern**

Inviting students to respond to my feedback enabled me to review my pattern of response to students' writing, to reflect on how effective specific comments were for students, and how my

responses related to my teaching philosophy. To systematically examine my pattern of response I conducted a content analysis on seven students' logs and drafts. This sample of students represented diverse backgrounds with regard to academic performance in the class, writing abilities, and language fluency. After students returned their logs and two drafts of their thought papers, I numbered each of my comments on their logs and first drafts. I then examined students' second drafts to determine whether or not students addressed my feedback.

I analyzed a total of 79 teacher comments. I examined my comments with respect to their form, instructional function, level of discourse addressed, and degree of specificity or explicitness adapting coding schemes developed by Bardine, Bardine and Deegan (2000) and Ziv (1984).

### *Form of Teacher Comments*

I was able to group my comments into three form categories, similar to Bardine et al.'s data. These were 1) a word or words (e.g., *please revise for clarity*), 2) a symbol (e.g., underlining or circling a word), or 3) a combination of both words and symbols. My comments were fairly evenly distributed between words (47%) and symbols (42%). A smaller percentage (11%) of my comments took the form of a combination of the two. Typically, when I used words to comment on students' papers, it was to address some conceptual or structural concern. I most often used symbols when referring to local level concerns such as the use of "-ed" or focusing the student's attention on word choice. These more cryptic responses such as underlining a word or phrase or circling a word seemed to be confusing to some students, especially to those who had limited fluency in English.

### *Function of Teacher Comments*

Using categories adapted from Bardine et al. (2000), I was able to organize my comments into five function categories.

These were: 1) questions: These comments ask the student a question about their writing (e.g., “*What differs from culture to culture?*”), 2) instructional comments: These comments inform the student how to improve their draft without explicitly telling them the answer (e.g., “*please clarify*”; “*please cite the authors using appropriate form*”), 3) praise: These are positive comments that acknowledge good work, (e.g., “*good introduction*”; “*good, more appropriate word choice*”), 4) attention focusing comments: These comments focus attention on an aspect of the student’s writing, typically with the use of a symbol without further explanation (e.g., “*causes*”), 5) corrections: These comments supply the correct answer (e.g., providing the correct spelling of a word).

Thirty-nine percent of my comments functioned as instructional comments. These comments informed students of how to improve on something without supplying the answer (e.g., “*Please support this statement*”; “*please revise sentence for clarity*”). These comments primarily focused on global level concerns such as content and organization. Another 29 percent of my comments functioned to bring students’ attention to some aspect of their text. These comments typically took the form of underlining or circling a word to bring students’ attention to a local level concern such as a grammatical or spelling error. Eighteen percent of my comments were corrections. These comments primarily focused on local concerns of punctuation, spelling, and grammar. Eight percent of my comments questioned students about some aspect of their writing (e.g., “*Are these symptoms prevalent in Bali or the U.S.?*”)

Only 6 percent of my comments functioned to praise students’ writing. In some cases this took the form of words (e.g., “*good introduction*”). In other cases, my praise was in the form of a check mark in the margin.

### *Level of Discourse*

My comments focused on two levels of discourse: 1) the



global level (e.g., conceptual and/or structural focus) and b) the local level (e.g., sentence, lexical, grammar, and spelling). More than half (58%) of my comments focused on the local level of discourse. These comments focused on word choice, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The remaining 42 percent of my comments focused on the conceptual or structural level of discourse. Overall these comments tended to focus on a request for conceptual clarification. In some instances these comments were specific (e.g., “*in which cultures do we find this behavior?*” or “*revise and place in your introduction*”). In other instances these comments were a more general request for clarification, (e.g., “*please revise for clarity*”). The comments that students seemed to find most helpful were ones that were specific with regard to suggested changes.

#### *Degree of Specificity (Implicit or Explicit Cues)*

I analyzed my comments with regard to their degree of specificity or explicitness. According to Ziv (1984), comments that provide *explicit* cues indicate specifically and exactly how the student might revise a paper. In contrast, she defined *implicit* cues as comments that offer possible suggestions for how to revise a paper or focus the student’s attention to an aspect of the text without explicitly telling the student how to improve a paper. More than half (53%) of my comments offered students implicit cues on ways to improve their drafts. The remaining 47 percent of my comments offered explicit and specific guidance on how to improve their drafts.

#### **Analysis of Students’ Responses**

Overall, creating an opportunity for dialogue by inviting students to respond to my feedback on their first drafts encouraged students to reflect on their writing. All of the students in my sample addressed the majority of my comments clearly in their second drafts. In some cases my comments facilitated students’ reflections about the nature of audience and the knowl-

edge that a reader might or might not have regarding the article. For example, in response to my request to clarify what she meant, one student wrote:

*I spoke of broken glass assuming that the reader would have read the article, not elaborating on why the glass was significant. I quoted the article, so my readers would understand what I was talking about.*

In other instances, students demonstrated an awareness of audience and reflected on the purpose of an introduction. For example, in response to my positive comment regarding her introduction, one student wrote:

*I felt great! I think introductions are extremely important because that's when you get to make your first impression about the material you're about to read. You want to capture your readers' attention and to do that, you need a good introduction.*

In another case I asked a student to be more specific with regard to the particular culture she was referring to when describing how the culture viewed particular symptoms of OCD. The following is an excerpt from her first draft:

*What is considered normal or abnormal behavior varies from country to country thus culture shapes or influences mental disorder[sic]. In the western world someone who repeatedly thinks he or she is hearing voices in their head like schizophrenia [sic] people, and in the east people think this [sic] normal as they are close to spirits that they believe are real. The two different perspectives affect the diagnosis of these people.*

In this case, I asked the student to “please be more specific” with regard to the “western world”. I underlined the second sentence and wrote, “please revise sentence for clarity”, I circled the word, “east” and wrote, “where, specifically?” In response to my feedback the student wrote:

*I was glad for the comments, so I can understand where I went wrong and am able to revise the paper well. I*

*knew where to correct my mistakes and was able to re-structure my paper a bit.*

Overall, this student made improvements on her second draft. In this section of her paper she provided more specific details which resulted in greater clarity for the reader. The following is her revision of the text:

*What is considered normal or abnormal varies from country to country. In the western world, for example America, someone who repeatedly hears voices in their head, this could be considered as schizophrenia, whereas in the east, like in Bali, people think this is normal as they are close to the spirit world. The two different perspectives affect the diagnosis of these people.*

Students also felt comfortable telling me when my comments made them feel confused. In some instances this seemed to reflect the students' difficulties in comprehending the assigned reading and in some cases the confusion reflected students' limited fluency in English. For example, one student indicated that she was confused by five of my twelve comments. All but two of these comments focused on the global (i.e., conceptual) level of the text and offered implicit cues. For example, on her first draft this student wrote:

*A same type of abnormal behavior is different in every culture. Some cultures are extreme in their abnormal behavior. It is because they have habits or customs that shape it, the majority of times in a worst way. The study of an abnormal behavior in a culture can help us to know that culture.*

In this section of the text I underlined the first sentence and wrote "What do you mean here? Please explain." In response to the log question, "how did the comments make you feel?" this student wrote:

*So confuse [sic]*

Additionally, in some cases, the specific form that my feedback took may have inadvertently confused some students. For

example, in several instances, my responses drew students' attention to a sentence or word-level problem with the use of a symbol. In the text example given above, I underlined "*in a worst way*" in the third sentence without offering further comments. This same student revealed her confusion by writing:

*I didn't understand because there arent [sic] any comment.*

In the column indicating, "did I know what to do next," this student wrote:

*Take out?*

It is not surprising that some students found this feedback confusing. The students who tended to be most confused by these cryptic comments were those who had limited fluency in English.

Despite this student's confusions, I found her responses helpful because they served as a window into her thinking process and helped me to reflect on the effectiveness of some of my comments. Rather than view these "confusions" as a major stumbling block, these "miscommunications" may serve as a teaching tool to open up further discussion regarding students' understandings of their reading and writing processes and my feedback. As a follow-up, I talked with several students about their confusions and some students sought the assistance of a writing tutor on campus.

Although some students were confused by my use of symbols such as underlining or circling a word, there were other students who seemed to understand these comments. For example, on one student's text I circled the word "*obsess*" in the following sentence:

*He noticed that people in the States are mostly concerned about germs while people in other countries like Cambodia, China, Bali, and others are obsess with knowing about new people.*

In response to this teacher comment, she wrote:

*I felt annoyed and frustrated. I thought I spell checked*

*and proofread over and over and still ended up with misspelled words.*

In response to “did I know what to do next” she wrote:

*I fixed the mistake.*

On her second draft, this student made the appropriate correction and added a quote from the article to support her point. In the case of another student’s text excerpted below, I circled the word, “causes” in the second and third sentences with the intention of inviting her to assess her word choice and to revise her text for clarity:

*Obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression affects people differently from many cultures. Culture greatly influences what causes mental disorders and how it is expressed. Obsessive-compulsive disorder causes people to constantly repeat actions, have frequent thoughts and worry constantly.*

In her second draft, this student used a more accurate word choice (i.e., “influence”) and revised her third sentence to express her thought more clearly:

*Obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression affects people differently from many cultures. Cultures greatly influence how to define what is a mental disorder and how it is expressed. Obsessive-compulsive disorder is the constant repeating of actions, having frequent thoughts, and worrying constantly.*

### **Reflections on my Pattern of Response**

This classroom research suggests that using the student response log fostered students’ greater attention to and reflections on their revising process and improvements on their subsequent drafts. Additionally, this technique enabled me to gain a window into students’ thinking about the usefulness of my comments. Engaging in this dialogue with my students enabled me to reflect on my pattern of responding in a systematic way. “Listening” to students allowed me to learn some important lessons

about responding to students' texts and resulted in several changes to my teaching practice. First, I have become more aware of highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement on students' texts. Helping students to identify their own strengths and weaknesses by highlighting them through our comments will help students become more effective evaluators of their skills and growth. Second, I try to avoid the more obvious cryptic comments and try to be more specific and elaborate with my commenting, especially in cases of students with limited fluency in English. I also emphasize the value of revision with my students both through classroom discussion and by having students engage in revision processes throughout the course.

### **Implications for Teaching**

I would like to address some of the challenges to creating dialogue in our classrooms and to offer some recommendations for teaching. One important challenge to creating more dialogic interaction around writing is students' perceptions of their own role in their learning and writing process. Although students come to the classroom with varied conceptions of themselves as learners, they often perceive their role in the learning process as a passive one. Research suggests that students often perceive teachers as someone who will read their writing and "fix it" or correct the errors. Additionally, students often feel that teacher feedback is not to be questioned. I believe students' perception of their role in the learning process is related to the role the teacher plays in this process. Many teachers may be reluctant to relinquish control over the learning/writing process and to step out of the traditional role as an evaluator of student performance. Addressing this issue in her own teaching, Ziv (1984) stated, "implied dialogues rarely happen because students invariably look upon their teacher as a judge and, consequently, see themselves as participants in a 'dialogue' in which they can do little but accept their teacher's criticisms"(p. 379).

As teachers we need to reflect on the potential messages

our feedback sends to students and more clearly understand the purpose of our responding on different texts. For example, comments that focus on both conceptual and grammatical concerns on the same draft may be too much for the student to focus on. An alternative to this is to assign multiple drafts with a clear writing/teaching focus on each which would then determine our level of response on the different texts (Sommers, 1982). For example, on first or early drafts the teacher might function more as a responder to the writer (e.g., commenting on the ideas). On the second or later drafts, the teacher's role as an evaluator of writing can play a greater function, focusing more on the mechanics of the text. Separating out these different aspects of the writing process on different drafts may help students to develop a greater awareness of the different components of the writing process, including composing, revising, and editing processes.

A third challenge to opening dialogue on a revising assignment is that students may not be familiar with the process of drafting and may not see the purpose or value in it. In this case, teachers will need to help students "see" the value in revision by building this into their classroom instruction and expecting that this is a developmental process that will grow over time. Creating different types of opportunities for students to respond to our feedback on different types of writing tasks may help students become more actively engaged in their writing and change their perceptions of their role in the writing process. With the appropriate structure and modeling, multiple draft assignments along with the invitation to students to respond to our feedback can help students gain control over their writing and become more conscious of the choices they make in their writing. By asking students to respond to our feedback and by listening to their responses we will become more aware of our own pattern of responding and the impact this has on students' learning. This knowledge will allow us to revise our teaching practices to help students become more reflective about their thinking and writing processes.

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## **Endnote**

- <sup>1</sup> This strategy was developed in collaboration with peers during a faculty professional development seminar focused on classroom inquiry, language, teaching, and learning.

## **Appendix**

### [Sample of Assignment]

Please read the attached article by Robert Lemelson and Jeffrey Winters (2000) and answer the following questions. Please write your paper in essay format. All papers must be typed, double-spaced, stapled, and use a font size of 12.

1. In your own words please summarize the main points of the article.
2. According to the article, how does culture shape or influence mental disorders?
3. Citing specific examples from the article, discuss how the same disorder is expressed differently in different cultures. Please include two direct quotes from the article, using appropriate citations.