Adopting a Mentoring Stance When Offering Feedback to Student Writers

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One of the most challenging roles that teachers of English face throughout their careers is that of responding to their students' writing. Thoughtful feedback takes time and careful consideration of how that feedback can best build a productive mentoring relationship. For teachers of ERWC, the centrality of this challenge in teachers' instructional lives tends to expand, in part because of the pivotal role that rhetoric plays in all aspects of ERWC students' writing. That rhetorical role evokes a kaleidoscope of concepts, including audience, purpose, exigence, and pathos, that ERWC teachers strive to cultivate in their students. We have developed the following guidelines to provide teachers with suggestions for their feedback responses that, we hope, will enable teachers to adopt a mentoring role in a mentor-apprentice relationship with students. We also offer recommendations to facilitate reading and responding to students' writing while developing those relationships.

The qualities of our relationships as mentors to our students contribute extensively to whether they become more deeply engaged in and motivated to work on themselves as writers or find the process a path marked by frustration and discord. As we consider the diverse student populations that we are likely to be working with, it is especially important for teachers to consider how important the development of trust becomes in the teacher-student relationship. Indeed, culturally-sustaining pedagogies, such as those advocated by ERWC, rest on the assumptions that trust, safety, and mutual respect between teachers and students are necessary before transformative teaching and learning are possible. Oftentimes, resistant writers "do not trust easily," as they "struggle to foster authentic interactions with their peers and teachers" (Paris and Alim 37).

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One experienced ERWC teacher, Christy Kenny, initiates her connection with students through an initial writing assignment she's entitled, "Who I Am as a Writer." In this activity, she asks her students to share personal anecdotes about their history with writing and teacher feedback, a history she's discovered has not always been beneficial or supportive. Nevertheless, students frequently share experiences that are of central importance to themselves as writers. When reading these responses, Kenny identifies one point to which she relates and calls attention to that item. In brief and individualized conversations, she is able to convey her belief in each student's writing ability while also affirming the histories and assets that her students bring with them to the classroom. For most students, that connection forges an immediate buy-in. It shows Kenny is actually reading their words and cares about what they have to say. When speaking to

her students, she's acutely aware of her tone, careful to avoid evoking their feeling that she is judging. She has seen that students who feel judged often shut down both their conversation and their connection, thus stifling the promise of a future mentor-apprentice relationship.

In her book, *Responding to Student Writers*, Nancy Sommers provides us with a common-sense approach to engaging with student writers that we will echo here: establish with students the importance of comments on their papers, create a classroom environment that promotes learning to write, engage students in dialogue with their teachers and peers about their drafts, and recommend best methods of writing marginal and end comments on students' drafts.

The Importance of Comments

Comments on students' drafts matter because they provide a direct and personal form of communication between ourselves and our students. However, students must appreciate the value of those comments and understand them as tools for improvement and growth rather than punitive judgments. This means teachers must consider the number, type, and tone of their comments so that they become conversation-starters as opposed to a checklist of negatives that will disengage students. Getting students to join the conversations taking place about topics that arise in the modules is an over-riding ERWC objective, and teacher comments immediately open doors to participation in that dialogue. Comments and questions placed on student drafts enable us to pull students into discussions that contribute to the development of their academic literacy. Through comments, teachers, as readers, reveal how they are absorbing their students' ideas and provide the means by which those ideas can be deepened and embellished. Each student's paper, when returned with teacher responses that convey the view that the student is an apprentice learning an important craft, serves as a vehicle for academic development, indicating who students are and what they can become. In pointing out the importance of responding to students as writers rather than responding to their papers, we hope to highlight how comments foster dialogue and a teacher-student partnership to improve writing.

The Classroom as a Stage for Discussion about Writing

The ERWC classroom is a setting for discussion not only about a topic or a text but also for instruction in reading and writing. ERWC's pedagogy is designed to move students beyond the routine of the five-paragraph essay and into structures that more uniquely reveal each student's opinions and their persuasive articulation. For the ERWC teacher, students' writing demonstrates their engagement with a topic or an idea in an authentic writing situation—not with finding language to fill in a five-paragraph format.

With our focus on revising students' written drafts, we aspire to create a learning environment in which teacher-student conversations encourage in-depth analysis of ideas and effective ways to express those ideas. This environment is reflected in the physical space of an ERWC teacher's classroom, such as what is displayed on the walls, but also in the tools teachers use and offer to students to support and scaffold student writing.

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This inclusive environment manifests teachers' commitment to their students as writers and to their nourishing of an apprentice-mentor relationship.

"What'd I get?" It's an almost inevitable chorus when returning papers to students. Then, somewhere in the room, a student can be overheard muttering, "Why did I get a C on this?" It's quite common for an episode of grade-fever to precede any serious investigation of what a teacher has communicated to students about the essence of the paper itself. More meaningful teaching and learning only begins when the grade-fever subsides, and a student begins to view the teacher's response as a dialogue, a communication process. As Jennifer Fletcher writes in *Teaching Arguments*, "By directing high school students' attention to authentic writing situations, we're trying to shift their focus from 'What do I need to do to get an A?' to 'Does this work?' This redirection away from a grade-based purpose to a communication-based purpose is important" (133). Embracing this perspective enables teachers to offer more effective feedback focused on goals to improve overall writing efficacy rather than on a specific grade.

With respect to responding to students' writing, when a teacher sits with a student's draft, a modest goal of teaching one concept at a time offers a promising path for students to understand and internalize aspects of writing central to their personal development as writers. This point is echoed by Carol Jago, who forewarns in *Papers, Papers, Papers: An English Teacher's Survival Guide* that students resent extensive criticism and generally ignore more than a few well-placed and meaningful comments.

Teaching students one concept at a time can be realized through a solid understanding of the purpose for comments on students' papers. All of us have heard students say something like, "I don't have any idea what my teacher wants me to do to improve what I wrote already." Giving students a limited goal and a means of achieving that goal is a challenging objective when responding to a student's draft through comments. We know from extensive research on student essay feedback that giving "Where to Next" feedback is the most powerful (Hattie et al.). This means focusing feedback to students on a single, large concept rather than an array of faults, and giving them a sense of what steps they need to take next to improve their writing. Instead of dwelling on a writer's weaknesses and limitations, mentoring teachers aspire to show students what could be further developed in their draft and how they can build on what they have accomplished so far to achieve the objective (Johnson). This assets-based approach is echoed in ERWC's "Theoretical Foundations for Reading and Writing Rhetorically" and "reflect[s] the CSU's ongoing efforts to become a student-ready university system in which instruction is designed to nurture and leverage students' many social, linguistic, and cultural assets and values in support of their development as civically engaged and educated citizens" (Katz et al. 1).

Overwhelming students is a risk. There is always the danger of providing students with a tidal-wave of punctuation and grammar errors and a deluge of nearly unmanageable recommended changes. We recognize that some teachers believe comments should be a mix, a balance of acknowledging a student's assets that appear in the draft and areas where a student needs to focus their attention. Such a perspective can work well for teachers as they provide feedback and initiate a dialogue for improvement. However, finding the lesson that can be taught by providing a student with an identified goal and a means of achieving it is the major challenge we face when

deciding what comments we should give in response to the reading of a student's text. ERWC modules have student-generated goals for writing built into them, and, while these activities take time for students to complete, they give students agency and move them toward becoming more capable writers.

With a classroom of apprentice writers, we have to detect our students' capacities and find their zone of proximal development, that is, the zone in which a student will be able to both understand the learning goal we present to them and a succinct explanation of the means of achieving that goal (Vygotsky). The tone we set in delivering the goal and its means of achievement is quite important. As Sommers puts it, "*How* we phrase a response is as important as *what* we say" (6). That's a piece of advice difficult to realize in working with student after student, draft after draft. It takes a lot of time, organization, and scheduling to work thoughtfully with one student's paper after another. Take breaks. Walk. Stretch. Take a yoga pose. Get a cup of something. Whatever the time pressures with which we must work and live, the tone we set in our feedback will permeate the life of the relationship we develop with our apprenticing writers. Indeed, it is the development of a positive, encouraging, coaching tone that allows students to see us as partners in their development as writers.

As teachers of writing, we can monitor our effectiveness as mentors by observing what students are learning from our comments and if the comments we have delivered are being received in such a way that students internalize those lessons and transfer their learning to subsequent writing tasks. As noted in ERWC's "Theoretical Foundations for Reading and Writing Rhetorically," when student writers become "better able to recognize that they are personally part of a larger conversation (members of a discourse community), they also begin to feel that they have some power over the text, and through the text, some power to shape others' thinking and actions" (4). As April Baker-Bell reminds us in her insightful book, *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, it is vital that teachers of writing invite all students—representing all cultural and linguistic backgrounds—to this larger conversation. Doing so enriches our academic discourse communities and allows students an entry point into communities where they can demonstrate their linguistic talents. This invitation may also widen our views regarding the broad range of linguistic assets that can contribute meaningfully to academic conversations. Ultimately, teacher feedback helps to support novice writers as they attempt to join the on-going rhetorical conversations that surround us all—in school and beyond.

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Engaging Students in Discussion about Their Development as Writers

The comments we provide to students about their writing ought to be viewed as texts to interpret and discuss in class. Should we overlook opportunities to discuss those comments, the chance for dialogue about them may well be lost. If we take advantage of classroom dialogue based on those comments, they are likely to provide the foundation for lessons to be learned about writing

through conversation between experienced teacher and apprentice writers. The focus for those classroom lessons ought to be the students' writing and the lessons that are identified and learned from discussions about that writing and its revision.

Although teachers can structure their classrooms for one-on-one conversations with students about their papers, there are other methods of gathering information about students' writing issues and using that knowledge as a foundation for classroom discussions.

In almost every set of ERWC papers we read and respond to that are based on a culminating task or prompt that students have addressed, we are likely to find patterns of concern across the set. It's not unusual, even well into an academic year, to notice that many students have problems articulating their thesis, the major claim that controls the content and direction of their paper, for example. Class discussions about the role of the thesis in students' papers can be extraordinarily beneficial—not just to our students. While those discussions may reveal problems that students have in understanding the function and structure of a thesis, they are also likely to reveal to us approaches that we can take to enable our students to better understand the importance of a paper's core claim, how it is formed, and how it informs a writer's work as an argument evolves into a draft. Other kinds of rhetorical issues may also arise in a classroom set of papers, issues such as a paper's audience, its use of evidence, its persona. If a plethora of grammatical, syntactical, or punctuation issues arise across a set of papers, a class discussion about those issues would be in order—and will save a great deal of time compared to being addressed paper by paper. It also creates a sense of community to address "common problems," helping students appreciate that they are not alone in their struggles. These kinds of discussions, in response to a recognition of patterns in student writing, also provide opportunities for teachers to create targeted mini-lessons to focus on specific areas that will have an immediate impact on students' writing.

Unless students receive and benefit from the comments we provide, they are likely to view those comments as judgments rather than opportunities to expand their knowledge and skills as developing writers. Classroom discussions about the commentary, more specifically about trends and patterns that emerge from the commentary collectively, provide an opportunity to confirm students as apprentices who can engage in what Sommers calls the "structural demolition and renovation" that is often essential between drafts of a paper (10). The breaking down of a paper's internal design and the exploration of new plans for its future features can be facilitated through classroom dialogue that takes into account the lessons we have identified or the issues and challenges that students bring to the discussion.

During classroom discussion, we can discover what comments students found provocative and which were unproductive or not understood. This discourse also functions as a platform for us to grasp the impact of our comments on our students. What has worked? What needs to be reworked? What can we learn from the discussion that can transfer to our future writing of comments on students' drafts?

Another exercise for polishing writing with our comments entails the writing of a one-page plan for revision after students review our comments. In this plan, students should explain, in their own words, what they have learned from our comments and how they intend to revise their paper

in the light of these comments. That plan for revision ought to include what resources they could use to succeed in their endeavors. Teachers can provide resources, such as handbooks or online Web sites, that provide guidance to writers and information about the revision process. Carol Jago invites teachers to consider a similar approach that she has used successfully as an English teacher for decades. Jago asks writers to submit a letter to her with their revised work, carefully explaining how they have incorporated her feedback into their revision. This allows her to ensure that students are indeed using her feedback while also serving as a useful tool for students as they reflect on their writing and consider how they are making improvements. (ERWC offers an additional resource that can be helpful for teachers who want to delve further into how to provide effective feedback to student writers. For teachers who are looking for specific guidance on pragmatic revision strategies, we suggest that you consider reviewing "Revision Strategies," by Rick Hansen. In this resource, Hansen provides supportive revision strategies, some of which you might find helpful in your own work with student writers.)

A third exercise that involves the use of your comments on drafts is to ask students to provide you with feedback on the comments you've given to them. What was useful and why? What have they learned from commentary in the past that they've been able to transfer to other writing tasks they have done? Much of this work can be applied to the review and articulation of learning goals your students have for themselves.

Another practice that Sommers recommends is that of a "Dear Reader" letter that students submit with their papers. These Dear Reader letters, such as the ones recommended in the 12th grade ERWC module "Value of Life," can reflect a module's culminating task. Several questions that you might provide to your students could include:

- What is the thesis of your paper?
- What strengths and what problems appear in your draft?
- What difficulties did you encounter and overcome as you wrote your paper?
- If you had more time to devote to your paper, where would you put your energies?
- What questions would you like me, as your reader, to address?

Such a reflective letter triggers and targets the dialogue in which you can engage your students as apprentice writers, a dialogue in which they become partners in a conversation about their growth and development.

Many ERWC modules include activities asking students to reflect on the kind of feedback they would like to get or to reflect on the feedback they have received. In "Fake News," students are asked to list one or two things that were challenging as they wrote their support paragraphs and to make a to-do list of revisions they plan to make after meeting with their teacher (Activity 13D). In "New Space Race," students are asked to look carefully at marks and comments teachers have made and make a plan for revision in which students think about questions such as "Where do I need to reorganize parts of my essay?" and "Where do I need to add material?" In both the *Hamlet* and *Othello* modules, activities call for students to engage in peer response to their papers, or consider their personal writing goals and address reflective questions such as

"What part of writing a paper is typically easiest for you? Most challenging?" These activities offer opportunities to engage students in classroom discussion about their writing and to discover new solutions to challenges they may have faced in composing their papers.

Suggested Policy Statement about the Use of Your Feedback

Drafting your own philosophy on feedback that you give to your students can help students understand your position with regard to writing and the role of your feedback. We've provided a prototype that you might elect to use if it aligns with your ideas about written response to your students' writing. Of course, it may also serve as a document you revise to reflect your own personal teaching purposes and processes related to providing written feedback to students.

An ERWC Philosophy for Written Response to Students' Writing

1. ERWC modules include a series of reading and writing activities that conclude in a writing task. Frequently, these culminating tasks presume that, as a result of working through the activities in a module, you will have gained a thorough comprehension of texts central to the module and have prepared yourself to write about the topic, perhaps presenting an argument you craft in response to a prompt about it. Each full-length module includes activities focused on revision. However, you'll be exploring additional approaches to revising your drafts through feedback from me or from classmates, often in the form of comments.

2. My comments on drafts of your papers are an integral part of the lessons on writing that I plan to provide for you throughout the course. Comments are intended to complement my focus on writing instruction and what I believe we should aspire to realize as your writing develops. I view our apprentice-mentor relationship as one that provides both of us with extensive opportunities to learn. I want to learn from you, and I hope you'll learn from me.

3. The comments I provide on your papers will serve as opportunities for us to discuss the lessons they convey in one-on-one discussion or in class lessons. The dialogue in which we engage will serve as exchanges for you to learn more about writing and for me to learn more about how I can become a more effective mentor for your writing growth.

4. I value the ideas and opinions you express in your writing. My comments are intended to be constructive and used for your discovery and growth as a writer. If something I have written on a paper of yours does not make sense to you, please let me know so that I can clarify my thoughts for you.

5. I value not only your knowledge but also your cultural and linguistic heritage. I hope you will feel comfortable sharing that knowledge and those assets through your writing and in classroom discussions and activities. If you ever feel as if you are sharing something that I might not understand due to our different backgrounds, please feel free to explain it to me so that I can better understand you.

6. I would like us to view your papers not as separate events that don't relate to each other, but as connected events that contribute to your long-term growth as a writer with me as a writing coach. Comments and lessons learned through your drafts ought to transfer to other writing tasks that arise in the future.

7. My comments are intended as both descriptions and evaluations of your work. I see them as far more important than a grade assigned to your paper because the comments should inform your future growth as a writer and provide knowledge that can transfer to future writing tasks.

Methods of Writing Marginal and End Comments on Students' Drafts

Comments of the kind important to our feedback on students' drafts usually come in two forms: **marginal** and **end** comments. They have somewhat different purposes and are generated as a result of somewhat different kinds of processing.

Marginal comments are intended to let our student writers know that we are attentively reading what they have written. If possible, it's probably better to read a student's entire draft before commencing to comment in the margins. Knowing the paper load that teachers carry, however, this practice may not always be feasible. We could liken these readings to reading with and against the grain (Bartholomae and Petrosky), understanding that the "with" part would focus on reading a text to absorb what your student likely intended it to mean, and recognizing that the "against" part shifts to questioning the text and discovering what's problematic in it. Praise and promise could then emerge from your reading and be recorded in the text's margins. Whether or not we can read a paper through before beginning to comment on it, we want to convey the message that we are interested in collaborating with the writer to develop the paper further, and a read-through prior to writing comments may increase the chances that we'll give more attention to substance than to grammar and punctuation. When writing our comments, we ought to be careful that our correcting zeal doesn't leave too heavy an imprint on the margins. That also means that we are watching for both strong and problematic patterns in our students' writing and that we will have some suggestions to address troubling patterns we've observed. In her book, *Writing Rhetorically*, Jennifer Fletcher suggests that, rather than offering student writers advice, teachers might consider "asking questions that activate rhetorical thinking" (221). This focus on questioning helps to support developing writers in a non-threatening manner because questions invite a conversation as opposed to isolated comments that might not make sense to apprentice writers. Asking marginal questions of writers is a non-threatening way to nudge writers in productive directions. Carol Jago also clearly supports this notion *Papers, Papers, Papers* when she recognizes what considerable research bears out: "in order to make tangible growth as writers, students need personalized feedback" (9). *Papers, Papers, Papers* is full of examples of the kind of questions that Jago asks of student writers on their papers. She goes on to say that "by responding like a reader who is trying to understand what the student has written, you send a message that the [writing] needs revision without doing the revising yourself" (7). Jago urges teachers of writing to comment rather than correct in order to avoid taking over their students' work. Speaking directly to teachers, she explains that "when you do all the revision, you are the only person becoming a better writer" (9).

As mentors, it's more advantageous if we view the margins as a space to which we've been invited to offer helpful comments. Our presence in those margins has more to do with letting our students know we are alert to what's being said—not that we have plans to take over the structure and substance of the paper. Our intention is to discover what single lesson we would like to drive home. That way we are more likely to help our apprenticing students focus on a single problem to be addressed rather than a panoply of difficulties.

For writing marginal comments, Sommers makes several suggestions, some presented here in her own words:

1. Identify patterns—representative strengths and limitations—to help students gain control over their writing.

2. Anchor marginal comments in the specifics of a text to avoid directives.

3. Use the comment language of the classroom to engage students in a dialogue about their writing.

4. Link marginal comments to specific lessons that address those comments.

(Sommers 18)

These are not easy directives to guide our commentary. However, if applied, our commentary is more likely to provide our students with understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement that appear in their papers and with directions they can use to address those problematic patterns. The identification of problems may well lead you to the planning of classroom lessons to directly address those issues. For example, a number of students may be drafting paragraphs that become diffuse because they lack a unifying sentence that establishes coherence. Presenting students in class with examples of well-focused and coherent paragraphs—along with examples of paragraphs that are unfocused and diffuse—can breach problem spaces through discussion and dialogue. Giving students opportunities to work on troubled paragraphs in the classroom and sharing those remedies as a class allow students to discover from each other how best to resolve rambling paragraphs that may not effectively engage with other parts of the paper.

Keep in mind that we are striving to foster and build a conversation with our students about how to make words matter in the drafts of texts they write. Our challenge is to find the words that will help engage our students in an exchange with us that will foster growth. We may have to ask ourselves repeatedly, as we formulate comments on draft after draft, "What lesson am I trying to teach this student?"

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While marginal comments tend to be more localized to specific sections of a paper, **end comments** are more global, reflecting on the entire draft's strengths and boundaries. They also convey the message that we have read the student's writing in its entirety, and we intend to reflect in these comments on what we think of it from our point of view. They compose a miniature conversation response: "This is what you've said. This is what I say. Let's see where it goes from here."

Comments on early and later drafts usually have a different focus. Comments on early drafts are likely to focus on features students mentioned in their Dear Reader letters that accompanied the draft. If a student's letter asked its reader to identify the paper's strengths, its thesis, and specific elements that need more attention, those would be the focal points of the comments. Thereby, the dialogue between us and our students is nourished. We send a message via our end comments: "I am listening; here's what I heard; here's what might be done to enable the paper to speak more precisely or more effectively to the task presented." We can convey the degree to which we believe the student has understood the module's texts and its writing task. We can provide feedback about the paper's thesis, its sustaining evidence, the degree to which alternative perspectives have been addressed. The greater the student senses that we have heard the questions asked and answered those questions, the greater the likelihood that we've fostered a relationship with a student that connects us, as mentors, with our student apprentices.

Sommers makes several recommendations regarding the organization of the end comments based on her experiences and those of her colleagues. First, she suggests beginning by highlighting the paper's strengths, which might be related to its thesis, its gathering of evidence, its analysis of the evidence, its counterarguments, or some other outstanding feature. Second, she recommends describing the paper's limitations, which might be the weakness of the thesis, sparse evidence insufficiently analyzed, absence of counterarguments, or some other feature. Third, she suggests linking the marginal comments with the end comments. Fourth, if more than one draft of a paper has been read and given feedback, she urges some guidance across the drafts that have been read. Finally, she recommends reinforcing the writer-teacher relationship, which could be reflected in acknowledging your interest in the paper and in reading its next rendition. Overall, the end comments ought to convey your care and interest in your student's development as a writer and that you're there to help in that process.

We recognize that there is much more that could be shared on the topic of developing a mentoring stance toward student writers, especially regarding the kinds of written comments that we might add to their papers and the conversations we have with them regarding their work. We are well aware of the time involved in the development of teacher-student relationships that share the qualities we have described. English teachers know all too well the time burden of providing meaningful feedback to students, especially when we are often faced with 150 or more writers each semester. But at the foundation of all effective writing instruction lies the relationship between teacher and student. It is upon this relationship that we have focused our attention.

In conclusion, we'd like to return to a core belief we hope has been reflected throughout this paper: Building a mentoring relationship with our students as we work with them on their writing ought to drive our feedback. Opportunities to foster that relationship may arise not only from comments we provide on our students' papers but also from dialogue we foster during classroom discussions about writing and its development (Street). Identifying those opportunities and finding ways to promote our students' growth as writers through them remains one of the

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most challenging and important dimensions of our work. The factor of time is a constant burden when teachers consider providing meaningful feedback on their students' written work.

However, we have found that the kind of mentoring relationships, conversations, and approaches that we've discussed in this paper can actually improve the efficiency and effectiveness of English teachers—saving us time. When teachers and students are working collaboratively in a mentoring relationship, it can result in improved student writing, which is ultimately what we want for our students.

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