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Impact of Written Comments on Student Writing

Margi Fox
Western Washington University, margi.fox@wwu.edu

Jeanne Killgore
Western Washington University

Researchers' Names/Department: Margi Fox/ English Department & Jeanne Killgore/ Student

Project Title: Impact of written comments on student writing

Research Question: What is the *usability* of written comments on graded writing in the Introduction to Professional and Technical Writing course? What impacts the usability of the comments for readers, students in Margi Fox's English 302 course? The framework for the project—and for the curriculum in English 302—revolved around three main rhetorical principles:

> **Purpose:** *Clarify and prioritize purposes for written comments on student work*
> **Readers**: *Understand and address the needs of student readers*
> **Context:** *Focus on the dynamics of different situations over the course of the quarter*

Method & Data Studied: The twenty students in Margi Fox's winter English 302 course filled out the three questionnaires during the quarter. The initial questionnaire asked students about their general experience in college using written instructor comments. The second focused on reactions to reading Fox's comments on their graded writing projects. The final one, answered on the day students turned in their final portfolios, concentrated on the use of the comments while revising the main projects of the course.

Key Findings:

Delineation of Purposes: We defined a challenging number and range of purposes for written comments during the course of the study. Intentions for written responses included helping students improve a particular paper, explaining expectations and grading standards, building self-confidence in students as writers, and assisting them in gaining writing skills.

Knowledge of Readers: The questionnaires gave us information in a number of areas:
1. Most students read instructor comments and usually understand them. The numbers were higher when students focused just on Fox's responses.
2. Most students usually find instructor comments helpful for future revisions. The usefulness goes down for other assignments in the class and drops even further for writing situations outside the class. Again the level of usefulness was higher with comments on papers in English 302 (perhaps because of the nature of the class with its focus on applications outside of the academic setting).
3. A significant number of students read the comments to understand (or "justify") their grades.
4. Many students say "specific" comments are most helpful, but in the first two questionnaires they didn't define what they meant by "specific."
5. The inability to read instructors' handwriting causes many problems in usability, but students rarely ask instructors for clarification.
6. A significant number equate the number of comments with the success of the paper, believing more comments means the assignment is "bad."
7. Overall, students appreciate instructor time, effort, and care in offering comments. When asked for ideas to improve Fox's written comments, half the group used the opportunity to thank her for the responses and told her they didn't see a need for changes. (Her responses include margin comments and typed end comments focused first on strengths of the paper and then on suggestions for revision.)

Exploration of Context: After using the written comments for revising their portfolios in English 302, students were far more detailed in citing the responses most useful to them. The class split between those who preferred margin comments and those who utilized the end comments. Some found the discussion of strengths helpful and others focused on the suggestions for improvement. Several perceived the tone more positively when they no longer concentrated on the grade but relied on the comments to guide them in revising the work.

Implications for Further Study: A number of themes and questions emerged during our collaboration:

How do students' confidence levels impact their ability to use instructor comments? Do less confident students have trouble reading and utilizing responses because of embarrassment and/or a sense of futility?

What makes a comment specific from a student's point of view?

How might increased dialogue between instructor and students improve the usability and better achieve the purposes of written comments?

What helps develop communication between professors and students? How might instructors encourage students to ask questions clarifying comments—either for the deciphering the handwriting or the meaning?

Implications for Teaching and Learning:

Most students read and appreciate comments on their writing, particularly in situations calling for revision. Better explanations about the teacher's approach to commentary would help students interpret feedback. Encouraging students to ask for clarification would promote more dialogue about their work, helping them grow as writers and critical thinkers.