2013-03-13

We Know Better and It's Time to Act Like It: Ending Written Feedback

Jacob S. Rees

Brigham Young University - Provo

We Know Better and It's Time to Act Like It: Ending Written Feedback

Jacob Rees

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Deborah Dean, Chair
Jon Ostenson
Brian Jackson

Department of English

Brigham Young University

March 2013

ABSTRACT

We Know Better and It's Time to Act Like It: Ending Written Feedback

Jacob Rees
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

Researchers have tried to demonstrate the effectiveness of written teacher feedback over the course of the last sixty years, and the results are inconclusive. Many studies point to improvement on subsequent drafts as evidence of student improvement; however, this only indicates students' abilities to follow directions. It is not an indication of autonomous writing ability. This study demonstrates that with proper curriculum support high school students can develop intentional transferability (the autonomous, intentional transferring of writing skills to varied rhetorical situations) throughout the course of one academic year without receiving any teacher written feedback.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to recognize those graduate students who graded essays and coded data for days, making this study possible. I'd also like to thank my family and loving wife for their continued support no matter how late or early the phone call. Most importantly, I'd like to thank my thesis committee. Without them I could not become my potential. Debbie Dean is a wonderful mentor, leading me to becoming a better writer and a better teacher. She has and will continue to be someone I think of when looking for inspiration to write. I am grateful to Jon Ostenson and Brian Jackson for their discerning eyes and digging questions that helped me clarify my own thinking. I am grateful for your patience, your concern, your friendship. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Two years ago while grading my students' fourth term papers, I made a frustrated decision that at the time seemed perfectly rational: I will never write another comment on any student's work again. Quiet in department meetings, vague in answering questions about my students, as best I could, I did my research and kept my secret all year.

Now after following through on that idea, I eavesdrop during my high school seniors' group review sessions catching only clips and phrases of their conversations:

Group 1

"Well, it depends on your overall purpose whether you end with statistics or with another description of Kony."

"Yeah, also [depends on] the audience."

Group 2

"There were whole paragraphs in here where I was like 'why is this even here?'"

"Yeah I wasn't sure why that was in here."

"I felt it detracted from the point I was trying to get across and I had to cut them, so I was glad you guys saw the same thing and like what I've added."

Group 3

"It's in the quote, make sure it's out of the quote. Semicolons are the only ones that go outside."

"Yeah, I noticed grammatical errors"

Depends on the purpose and audience? Deleting whole paragraphs? Catching misplaced punctuation? As a new year approaches, I'm ready to speak out: I will never give students written feedback on any of their papers again. They will never see notes in the margin or at the

end of their paper, no reflective letters, emails or comments on their blogs. I know better. And more importantly, so do they.

How many times have I excitedly written in their margins "consider audience" or "relates to purpose?" at the beginning of a new school year, only to write those same comments on the same students' work, frustrated and out of patience at the end of the year. Despite all the pre-writing, written feedback throughout the writing process, and their final draft revisions based on that feedback, good students never seemed to hang on to a skill long enough to apply it more than once. With each draft they seemed to improve, but with each new assignment they lapsed into old habits; their drafts improved, but they didn't. My students were following directions instead of learning to write.

Why Write Comments?

At some point I think we've all questioned the benefit of commenting on student work, and rightfully so. There is plenty of research showing how students consistently ignore comments, delete the areas noted for improvement (classic ignorance-perpetuating academic jujitsu), or misunderstand comments only to unwittingly further muddle the meaning they're trying to communicate in their revisions (Bardine, Bardine, and Deegan; Hodges; Knoblauch and Brannon, "Teacher Commentary"; Ziv).

Many researchers have proven what teachers already suspected: time constraints brought on by mandated curriculum, standardized testing, and large classes keep instructors from including the detailed suggestions or strategies that guide students through a valuable reconsideration of content, organization, or audience reactions (Anson, "Response Styles"; Knoblauch and Brannon, Introduction). Subsequently, even the best teachers are so burdened they only have time to point out superficial areas of improvement which reinforces students'

specious idea that writing is improved by "correcting" it, something I would never say in class, but inadvertently taught students in our standard writing process: students write, instructor comments, students revise.

Some teachers, admirably, go back to the drawing board to find faster, more thorough ways of commenting. But it isn't a matter of writing better comments. Even if a teacher had unlimited time to write out clear and encouraging comments full of helpful insights about overall organization and the subtlety of using punctuation for stylized effects, written commentary would still be the wrong strategy. Whether it's a marginal comment or end comment, a voice recording or a typed letter, any commentary that isn't given face to face in real time invokes a policy of silence on the student. At that point, we've slipped into a role of telling, not teaching.

We know that good teaching weaves formative-assessing-in-the-moment questions and unexpected answers by both teacher and student into natural conversation. Leaving out that element can be disastrous. I've explained assignments perfectly to a silent class only to have one-third of the class sit in complete stupor doing nothing at all, while the other two-thirds enthusiastically do the assignment incorrectly. If we need more than a statement—however clear and detailed it may seem to us—for making sure students understand the simple directions to their writing assignment, why leave such a statement in the margins or endnotes of their papers to handle the more complicated task of explaining the principles the assignment means to develop?

In the end, researchers haven't been able to prove whether teachers' written comments on student writing actually improve that writing (Knoblauch and Brannon, Introduction; Moffett, Sommers, Stiff), yet we still do it, slavishly. That is, I used to. I've since dropped the high-cost, low-yield habit, and my students and I have never looked back.

At this point I'll briefly discuss the foundational methods for replacing written commentary. From there I'll detail the logistics of how I set up a class for writing instruction without teacher written feedback, what I do to teach students how to give feedback, followed by a rationale of the larger, more dynamic changes.

<div align="center">Intentional Transferability</div>

Eliminating written commentary on my students' work opened me to a clearer assessment paradigm, what I've come to term "Intentional Transferability": knowing the how, when, and why of skill to the point that a student can intentionally use that skill on any assignment in any class.

The idea stems from a childhood challenge my older brother issued whenever I did something well, "If you can't do it twice, you can't do it at all." In other words, if I couldn't duplicate my success, I had luck, not skill. Maybe my students were just getting lucky, maybe I was helicopter-teaching them into helplessness. Whatever the cause, they could follow my directions to improve one paper, but they couldn't do it autonomously on the next assignment, they couldn't intentionally transfer that skill to a new task.

Commenting on my students' work kept my focus on single-assignment performance rather than on multi-assignment ability. Where math teachers ask students to show their work in order to assess the students' understanding of process, I've always asked students to polish, clean, and hide their work so I could assess their product. By separating process from product I'd misrepresented the writing process (Huot 168) and consequently the writer's intentions and abilities. This problem of assessing process versus product isn't easily reconciled by assessing first drafts in addition to final drafts. A rough draft is still a product; it's just an unfinished one.

We need to move beyond assessing drafts. The real writing process is the hidden work between drafts: recognizing the difficult problems writing asks of our students, how they attempt to solve those problems, and why they choose the methods they do. Comparing these questions to standard six-trait rubrics highlights how performance heavy (and therefore ineffective) those rubrics are for assessing writing ability. We need to assess the why (audience, context, purpose) along with the how (content, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, mechanics) students apply skills in multiple assignments to get at a more complete, and therefore more accurate assessment of ability than any draft or combination of drafts can provide. And we can't do that as long as written commentary, with its performance-based perspective and time-consuming nature, dominates as our number one feedback strategy.

So, if we throw out commenting, as I'm recommending, what do we do in its place to develop intentional transferability? I don't believe in a writing panacea, but I have redesigned my writing instruction around a repeating assignment I call Write Club that has proved successful in developing my students' writing ability. It has three foundation principles to developing intentional transferability:

1) increase the volume of student writing and provide feedback on that writing without increasing my paper load

2) increase the variety of audiences for students

3) provide audience feedback through face-to-face negotiation of meaning

To be sure I wasn't letting partiality skew the success I thought I saw, I asked five university first-year writing instructors to evaluate 71 essays from the 19 English students who remembered their permission slips. I coded the essays to avoid bias and according to the university instructors, our class's average score steadily improved from 86.1 to 88.5 in spite of

the increasing assignment difficulty and assignment variety. Granted, B to B+ isn't miraculous, but it is solid improvement for a first attempt, solid evidence that this is a good path to walk.

Developing Intentional Transferability: Write Club

Write Club works on an every other week cycle: students exchange writing with their peers then take it home to annotate over two weeks. After two weeks they bring a new piece of writing to exchange as well as the annotations from the previous week to use as notes to guide their group discussions.

Logistics of Creating Write Club

Once I was free from the time burden of writing comments on student work, writing became our first priority: we started every class period responding for 20 minutes to one of three prompts written on the board.

I put my 36 seniors into six groups of six, giving them an audience of five. Then at the end of each term I switched their groups as a way of increasing their audience to 20 different people per year.

Every two weeks they chose a piece of writing to revise and type (500-1,000 words) at home before bringing in six copies to give to their Write Club group for feedback. Often I dictated which papers they exchanged with their peers (to keep their interest, I never let an entire group exchange papers on the same topic). Otherwise, I let them choose anything that met our length requirements: history paper? writing prompt from our class? couple of pages from the fantasy book they're writing? I learned that if they were invested in the writing, they were invested in the feedback.

It was essential that on Write Club days students brought a new piece of writing to pass out and their annotations to discuss from the previous week's writing. Thankfully my students

obsess about their GPA, so as motivation I made bringing back their annotations and six typed

copies of new writing worth as much as a final exam, and then scored it as all or nothing,

pass/fail.

This type of GPA danger was new for students and parents, and there was a bit of a

learning curve. To compensate, I gave each student a cardstock "slacker-pass," which allowed

them to make up three assignments without penalty. Students whose "printers broke" brought in

their finished work late. I hole-punched their slacker-pass and gave them full points. Otherwise,

not having their work or being tardy to class was a zero score for the day. It worked. I've never

had higher return rate for homework.

On our alternating A/B class schedule, every other Friday was Write Club. After

exchanging a new piece of writing, the remainder of our 84 minute class period was dedicated to

negotiating feedback. I didn't collect any other homework, didn't make any announcements.

This let students spend 10-12 minutes talking about each paper.

Every other class period we filled with mini-writing lessons, punctuation practice,

reading novels, analyzing arguments, and enjoying poetry.

Teaching Students to Work Effectively During Write Club

Students needed a significant amount of training before they began giving clear, skilled

feedback. Up to this point, most of their experiences with giving feedback were limited to peer

review tasks such as underlining thesis statements in one color and supporting details in another.

Because Write Club requires students negotiate the how and why of writing, they not only

needed to learn how to write, but also how to talk to someone about their writing.

Before we began our first Write Club day, we spent a considerable amount of time explaining, modeling, and role playing our two most important rules for responding to our peers' work:

1) Respond truthfully and respectfully, never using honesty as an excuse for cruelty, or civility as an excuse for lying.

2) When people are responding to your work, be quiet and open—not silent and dismissive. Take notes on your copy about what the audience feels and thinks, and what you're going to do about it. Once they finish, ask your questions and negotiate an understanding.

I re-taught and reminded each group about these two rules almost every Write Club.

Initially students struggled to push for understanding. They were too passive in giving and receiving feedback (possibly worried about our first two rules). Out of trial and error I assigned someone in each group the task of making sure that no one person could machine gun all of their comments at once and then wait for the bell. After each comment one person needed to agree or disagree with the comment, and the author of the paper needed to either summarize or question the comment before the group could move on. A bit formulaic in the beginning, but it didn't take more than a few days for this rule to fade away into natural conversation.

In addition to learning how to comment, they needed direct instruction regarding what exactly they should comment on. We started simply, reading published works and pointing out what we liked and why. Slowly, we moved through the difference and essential inclusion of surface (punctuation, word choice, sentence structure), meaningful (additions or deletions that significantly alter the meaning of the text, paragraphing, overall organization), and rhetorical (purpose, audience, exigency) features of a text. We circled back on these topics throughout the year, never achieving perfection, but always gaining experience and insight.

To insure students addressed a full range of comments from surface to rhetorical, on the back of every annotated Write Club paper students wrote and explained six directive and/or suggestive comments for each of their peer's papers: two surface comments, two meaningful comments, and two rhetorical comments.

At the beginning of class as Write Club got underway, I would visit each group with a clipboard and check off students who wrote comments with rationales in all three categories.

I also took part in their Write Club groups, visiting each group and giving my feedback along with the students for the papers we received two weeks earlier. I pointed to our six trait writing posters, pressing students for the why and when of traits, simultaneously reminded and questioned about ethos, pathos, logos, and argument. We talked punctuation, introductions, conclusions--every subject I had always taught in previous years as a class. But in those small groups I didn't have to direct conversation or stoke the fire for long before they were doing it on their own, creating many strike-while-the-iron-is-hot teaching opportunities.

Still, there was plenty of learning on the run, how to comment as we commented, how to write as we wrote. The following list represents a quick breakdown of essential dos and don'ts we learned in the process.

The Trenches Between Desks

- No email. Students always want to email each other the new piece of writing instead of bringing physical copies to exchange during class. Each group to use email complained of never receiving the writing or never receiving it on time.

- Work to the bell. I put three writing prompts on the board as a backup for faster or smaller groups (because of absent students). If they finish early, they divide the remaining class time into thirds, using two-thirds to respond to a prompt and the other

third to share what they wrote with their group. Even if there is only five minutes left,

they write and share their best "first lines" to the three prompts, which keeps everyone

writing and/or negotiating feedback right up to the bell.

- Move quickly between groups. If I stay with one group for more than five to seven

  minutes, they tend to rely on me to do their work. They make better progress if I circle

  among groups discussing feedback, answering questions, and pressing for the why of

  their comments.

- Practice points. A subtle but useful distinction from participation points that helped

  students better understand the class environment expected during Write Club.

<div align="center">Theoretical Underpinnings for Write Club's Success</div>

Increasing the Volume of Feedback Without Increasing the Paper Load

By taking two papers from each group in a class of 36, I'm only reading 12 papers every

two weeks—about two papers per school day. Because students will only hear this feedback

rather than read it, teachers can use whatever shorthand suits them to further speed up

evaluations (either for a grade or giving feedback during Write Club).

Because students receive feedback in groups of six, each student has an opportunity to

negotiate feedback with an instructor 30 times over the year where an instructor discusses two

student papers per group for 15 days.

Additionally, students exchange verbal feedback with five peers in their group. Over the

course of the year, that yields 75 opportunities to question and clarify the effects of their writing

with an authentic audience.

As a result, instead of merely reading or listening to feedback four times a year from an audience of one, each student now has 105 opportunities a year to consult with 21 people, including their instructor, about the intentions and effects of their writing.

Relying on Students for Accurate Feedback

Even though the number of opportunities for face-to-face instructor mentoring will increase from four to 30, the majority of feedback comes from students. This is a logical redistribution of responsibility: if we expect students to learn how to use the writing skills we teach, and if we expect them to carry those skills independently to other assignments in other classes, clearly we should expect them to do the less difficult task of identifying those skills in their peers' work.

Indeed, with proper scaffolding Cho, Schunn, and Wilson have demonstrated that students can (and I add, *should*) provide reliable and valid ratings of writing (Patchan, Charney and Schunn 125). I believe that "being able to assess writing is an important part of being able to write well," and that assessing rhetorically always comes before revising rhetorically (Huot 165, 170). When my students comment on tone or the depth of ideas to their peers, they show that students can, with appropriate time and experiences, do this important writing work.

Face-To-Face Negotiation of Meaning

Even though I require students to annotate their peers' work, even though I ask them to write out six of their comments and explain the reasoning behind each comment, they are never allowed to show their written comments to their peers. Their annotations serve as evidence to me of the work they put in and as notes to guide their Write Club discussion. Once Write Club is over, every annotated paper goes in the recycling bin—without exception. When I explain this, the students cough and rail against my insistence.

But I explain that feedback, like all instruction, is best done face to face where they can ask clarifying questions, respond with hypothetical examples, and all-around come to an understanding of how their writing affects their audience. There is too much room for misunderstanding when giving feedback in written or recorded formats. Additionally, when students receive copies of written feedback, they get lazy in every aspect of negotiating meaning. They stop asking questions, stop explaining comments, and stop learning for themselves.

It takes a few times through explaining intentional transferability before they understand I'm not wasting their time; I'm saving it.

Is There a Place for Written Commentary as Writing Assessment?

I believe having students comment and explain the rationale for their comments on their own work and on the work of their peers is the only way to get at the hidden work between drafts, the intention part of intentional transferability.

En route to developing a rubric for intentional transferability, I asked students to keep a portfolio of all the comments they wrote on their peers' work. I hoped to categorize comments according to the characteristics of inexperienced, novice, and skilled writers as identified by researchers (Patchan, Charney and Schunn; Hoyne).

However, simply matching my students' comments to the appropriate category proved time consuming and ineffective. Worse, in categorizing comments, I couldn't pin down the student's rationale the way I could in a face-to-face question and answer discussion. For example, I overheard this conversation during Write Club:

"So, it'll change if I say 'Mr. Sorenson,' or—"

"Yeah, yeah, like I'm all 'hey Kirk, what's up, like he's my buddy,'"

"Okay, I just didn't know if I wanted to say 'Mr.' or 'Dr.,' you know?"

Their conversation reveals their intention to create tone through professional titles and anticipate the audience's reaction. If the above conversation was in the form of a written comment, it would probably look like "Mr. or Dr.?" and no type of categorization could uncover the writer's intentions.

We need an assessment that addresses both skill and motive if we are to more accurately assess writing ability. Duke and Sanchez remind us that no assessment system is perfect (53). I'm continually revising my assessments and hope other teachers will experiment with using student commentary in their instruction as a supplementary assessment for the hidden work between drafts, the intentional transferability of our students.

Beyond Assessments

As a result of such a heavy emphasis on audience, purpose, and context inherent in our Write Club assignments, my students have begun to embrace one of the most common complaints about English courses, their subjectivity. When one year's instruction yields 75 sessions of face-to-face feedback with 20 of their peers and 30 sessions of face-to-face instructor feedback, my students realize that all writing has to be subjective because our audience, purpose, and situation are never the same. Dealing with subjectivity in an English class is not a deficiency, but an advantage in preparing for next year's courses and beyond.

Until we focus on intentional transferability, we will continue to share our surprise with colleagues that we have to "go over how to write a thesis statement" each year no matter whether we teach sophomores, juniors, or seniors. When students can't transfer skills from one assignment to the next, how can we tell them their grades are earned and not given? The only thing worse for our students than not having a particular writing skill, is thinking they do. We don't need blogs, wikis, or written teacher commentary to develop intentional transferability. We

just need to commit to writing, reading each others' writing, and talking face to face about what we read.

   Face-to-face peer feedback can be used as an interactive assessment that states can't administer and online classes can't replicate. With the increase in alternatives to public school, we can give students something they can't get anywhere else: a real, personal community of peers, writers, friends. We haven't solved all our problems, but because my students are commenting on their peers' work instead of my doing it, I know their abilities and I have time to help them make more out of what they have.

Works Cited

Anson, Chris M. "Response Styles and Ways of Knowing." *Writing and Response: Theory,*

    Practice and Research. Ed. Chris Anson. Illinois: NCTE, 1989. 332-66. Print.

Bardine, Bryan A., Molly Schmitz Bardine, and Elizabeth F. Deegan. "Beyond the Red Pen:

    Clarifying Our Role in the Response Process." *English Journal* 90.1 (2000): 94-101.

    Print.

Duke, Charles R. and Rebecca Sanchez. "Giving Students Control over Writing Assessment."

    English Journal 83.4 (1993): 47-53. Print.

Hodges, Elizabeth. "Negotiating the Margins: Some Principles for Responding to Our Students'

    Writing, Some Strategies for Helping Students Read Our Comments." *New Directions for*

    Teaching and Learning 69 (1997): 77-89. Print.

Huot, Brian. "Toward a New Discourse of Assessment for the College Writing Classroom."

    College English 65.2 (2002): 163-180. Print.

Hoyne, Susan H. "Peer Revising: A Study of Student Comments Within Heterogeneous Writing

    Groups." Diss. U of Washington, 1996. Print.

Knoblauch, C.H., and Lil Brannon. Introduction. *Key Works on Teacher Response*. Ed. Richard

    Straub. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006. 1-16. Print.

---. "Teacher Commentary on Student Writing." *Key Works on Teacher Response*. Ed. Richard

    Straub. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006. 69-76. Print.

Moffett, James. "Learning to Write by Writing." *Key Works on Teacher Response*. Ed. Richard

    Straub. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006. 234-49. Print.

Patchan, Melissa M., David Charney, and Christian D. Schunn. "A Validation Study of Students'

    End Comments: Comparing Comments by Students, a Writing Instructor, and a Content

    Instructor." *Journal of Writing Research* 1.2 (2009): 124-152. Print.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *Key Works on Teacher Response*. Ed.

    Richard Straub. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006. 287-95. Print.

Stiff, Robert. "The Effect upon Student Composition of Particular Correction Techniques." *Key

    Works on Teacher Response*. Ed. Richard Straub. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006. 17-37.

    Print.

Ziv, Nina D. "The Effect of Teacher Comments on the Writing of Four College Freshman." *Key

    Works on Teacher Response*. Ed. Richard Straub. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006. 94-111.

    Print.