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ABSTRACT

A series of taped interviews with undergraduates at Indiana University of Pennsylvania enrolled in a writing class yielded a number of findings about their responses to their instructor's marginal and terminal comments on their papers: (1) the comments least understood were the "blanket comments," those comments that the instructor used often to indicate common problems; (2) the students understand writing as a matter of being right or wrong--they do not understand writing as a form of expression, a process; (3) students are not so much interested in improving their writing as improving particular papers; and (4) the comments that the students found most helpful were the positive ones because "negatives make you feel bad." The interviews were conducted by three tutors at the campus writing center; the instructor was not present. Nineteen of the students signed up for the interviews; 15 came and were recorded but 6 were erased accidentally. (TB)

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Abstract

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To assess how a College Writing instructor's students interpreted the marginal and terminal comments on their English 101 essays, the instructor used a five question survey administered by Writing Center tutors. The instructor concluded the students found the most meaning in compliments and did not understand her eccentric conventional remarks. As a result of listening to the audio-taped comments, the instructor realized that the students do not see themselves as writers who want to communicate with others. Rather they view writing as being right or wrong. The students' goal was to produce a better paper, not become a better writer

Do You Read Me ?

A paper presented at the Pennsylvania College English Association, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, April 16, 1994.

Over the years I have spent much time reading, editing, rethinking and responding to students' papers. And I have always wondered what I was communicating. Years ago one student reported that she didn't like her grades on the papers I was returning so she decided that she better study my comments and make some changes, which she did. She figured out what her audience of one liked to read and wrote for that audience. I don't know if she realized other people like to read clear, clean, concise papers too or not. But she figured out I did. On a selfish level, I have wondered if I were wasting my time marking surface errors, reacting to ideas, and making suggestions for a better paper. But even with doubts, I plunged onward, reading, marking in the margins, often filling an entire back page with reactions and suggestions, not knowing if I were being understood.

To assess my students' reactions, I enlisted the aid of the

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Writing Center tutors (two freshmen and a sophomore) and my College Writing class. I made up a five question survey designed to give me some answers without putting the College Writing students on the spot to make teacher-pleasing remarks. I passed the survey out in class, explained the questions, and asked the students to take the survey and a paper of their choice to the Writing Center where the tutors would conduct a tape recorded interview. I passed around an appointment sheet in class for sign-ups. Nineteen signed up, fifteen came, and regrettably six of the interviews were erased when someone rewound the tape and started over.

The survey's first question asked if the students understood the margin abbreviations I used. All nine students said they understood the abbreviations I used in the margin, which reassured me because I had had the students copy a list of abbreviations from the board and take notes on my explanations when I passed back the first papers. However, there was one student who did not understand what o-m-i-t meant, which was not on his list of abbreviations because omit is not an abbreviation. At first I thought the student didn't know what the word omit meant, but then I realized that he was looking at omit in the context of abbreviations. Another student made a very good point. She wished I would explain why the "frag" was a sentence fragment and write in the missing word or words. Since she thought the phrase was a sentence to start with, my marking it "frag" didn't help her.

When another student said he didn't understand what the p

meant, I looked at his paper and sympathized with him. P for punctuation in this case meant that he should put quotations around a quoted phrase. One sentence later I stuck p over reproduction, a word he should have underlined because he was referring to the word reproduction. I also noticed that I was inconsistent--in the first sentence I made the correction, in the second sentence I didn't. No one misunderstood my work to the extent that a former student did when I put checks or tics over surface errors. Because he wasn't correcting the surface errors on revisions, I asked why he hadn't corrected any of the surface errors I had marked off with check marks--he had thought I had put the checks to mark my place when I had been interrupted while reading his paper. I changed my style immediately!

Question number two asked which terminal comment "had the most meaning." In every case, the student writer picked the comment that had a compliment in it. One student writer said that she didn't think I would say I liked something if I didn't, describing me as "frank" and "straight out." Another student liked that what I had written on her paper was clear and interesting and said that it had given her encouragement. Of course, I too like compliments, if I think they are honest and helpful. Another student pointed to a comment she saw as providing a specific way to improve her paper.

Question three, asking students to identify a terminal comment they didn't understand, pointed out to me a problem that I do not know how to solve. I had expected complaints about

remarks that seemed to be apropos of nothing. However, there were no complaints of that nature. Instead, two of the students told the tutors specific phrases they did not understand, phrases that I use as conventions--Walker Gibson's "dumb reader" and "the ideas are superior to the expression." I know referring to the dumb reader during class discussion did not clarify the phrase for the student because I use the phrase frequently, but in the future I will try to give the phrase context because over the years other students have reported that knowing they are writing for the "dumb reader" has helped them write clear papers. The second comment, the "ideas are superior to the expression" comment, is supposed to be a compliment, that the paper contains interesting ideas but they are not easy to read. The survey showed that my expression is unclear. I need to give up favorites like "the conclusion comes from the body," a fast but ineffective way to say "now, finally, you have thought about an idea that intrigues you so why didn't you revise your paper from a perspective that interests you?"

The fourth question, asking the students if they found the comments to be personal or objective, was not a good question. It was too easily answered with an either/or answer, and the tutors were unable to get students to give examples of what they considered to be personal or objective comments. Some objected to my including my opinions which they did not see as relevant to the paper. Others seemed to have found some comments personally offensive but helpful in improving the paper. Only one person

said that any comment that would improve his paper was acceptable.

The answers to the last question, "If you were writing comments about a paper, what kind of comments would you make," emphasized the need to give positive comments. Several students said that they would write positive things "because all [only] negatives make you feel bad." They also commented that they would write comments to make the paper better.

What conclusions can I draw? I see three problems. I cannot tell when the student writer does not understand the written me, but I did learn that the comments the students pointed to as being least understandable were the ones I use as blanket statements. A second problem that came through in the taped interviews rather than in the surveys was the notion of writing being right and wrong rather than writing being a matter of saying what the writer wants to say the way the writer wants to say it. The students do not see themselves as writers who want to communicate with a reader. And the last problem I see is that the students were interested in making a paper better instead of becoming better writers. They wanted the quick fix, which perhaps explains their satisfaction with the comments in the margins. But the most important thing the students told me was that they like positive feedback.