

Journal on Empowering Teaching Excellence

Volume 5
Issue 1 *Journal on Empowering Teaching
Excellence, Volume 5, Issue 1, Spring 2021*


Article 7

May 2021

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Recommended Citation

Shvidko, Elena (2021) "Taking into Account Interpersonal Aspects of Teacher Feedback: Principles of Responding to Student Writing (Republication)," *Journal on Empowering Teaching Excellence*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/jete/vol5/iss1/7>

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Taking into Account Interpersonal Aspects of Teacher Feedback: Principles of Responding to Student Writing

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Abstract

Providing feedback on student work is a fundamental aspect of instruction and an important part of the learning process. A considerable amount of literature describes the pedagogical value of different types of feedback—explicit vs. implicit, comprehensive vs. selective, direct vs. indirect, and feedback on content vs. feedback on form—thus treating feedback primarily as an instructional/informational phenomenon. It must be remembered, however, that there is a real person behind each paper; therefore, interpersonal aspects of teacher feedback should not be disregarded. This article discusses five principles of responding to student writing that take into account this interpersonal nature of feedback: providing positive comments, avoiding appropriating student writing, responding as a reader, involving students in the revision process, and minimizing student frustration. The author suggests that these principles can help instructors deliver supporting and encouraging feedback that will be able to demonstrate their genuine interest in students’ ideas, acknowledge students’ efforts and writing progress, respect their voice and agency, and foster their growing motivation and self-confidence as writers.

Keywords: feedback, response to student writing, interpersonal aspects of teaching

“[R]esponding to student writing entails more than deciding whether to comment on form or content; it involves delicate social interactions that can enhance or undermine the effectiveness of the comment and the value of the teaching itself” (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p. 194).

Responding to student performance is an essential aspect of instruction and a vital part of the learning process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). As Laurillard (1993) rightly noticed, “action without feedback is completely unproductive for the learner” (p. 61). Similarly, response to

student writing is an indispensable element of their writing development as well as their ability to produce independent written work. A considerable amount of literature is devoted to describing the pedagogical value of different types of feedback--explicit vs. implicit, comprehensive vs. selective, direct vs. indirect, and feedback on content vs. feedback on form. However, regardless of the significance of these “best practices” (Ferris, 2014, p. 7) for pedagogy, feedback is primarily treated as an instructional phenomenon, or, as Hyland and Hyland (2006) put it, “as *purely* informational, a means of channeling reactions and advice to facilitate improvements” (p. 206, emphasis in original).

As instructors¹, we need to remember, however, that each written paper has an author--i.e., a real human being who produced it. As such, the way feedback is received and processed may be influenced by interpersonal factors (Shvidko, 2018; Tobin, 1993; Värlander, 2008). According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), “Evaluation always carries with it the seeds of potential friction” (p. 194). Thus, the instructional value and purpose of feedback can be severely undermined, or, as Race (1995) put it, “eclipsed” (p. 67), by adverse reactions on the student part. I fully agree with Sommers (2013), who said, “The same comment can be phrased in different tones and often makes the difference between students feeling dismissed and insulted and students feeling respected and taken seriously” (p. 6). Therefore, teacher feedback--both *what* is said and *how* it is said--may have important implications both for students’ writing development and their self-esteem, confidence, and motivation (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011).

According to Hyland and Hyland (2006), response to student written work “not only communicates beliefs about writing, language, or content but also expresses and negotiates human relationships” (p. 222). Taking this interpersonal aspect of feedback into consideration, teachers need to provide encouraging, supporting, and motivational comments, which are not only useful from an informational point of view, but also beneficial for students from an affective standpoint. To this end, this article discusses five principles of providing feedback on student work that may not only promote student writing development but positively affect their agency, self-confidence, and motivation. These principles include providing positive comments, avoiding appropriating student writing, responding as a reader, involving students in the revision process, and minimizing student frustration.

¹ For the purpose of this article, the terms “instructor” and “teacher” are used to refer to those who perform instructional activities in formal educational settings, including teaching in the classroom and online, working with graduate students, and tutoring students one on one. Therefore, these terms are applicable to teachers, tutors, professors, and faculty, and they are the intended audience of this article.

Providing Positive Comments

Instructional feedback is sometimes described in the literature as inherently “face-threatening,” as it implies evaluation/judgment of student work and even critique (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012; Shvidko, 2018, 2020). As Trees, Kerssen-Griep, and Hess (2009) stated, “Even when combined with glowing comments about strong aspects of the students’ work, suggestions about improvement inherently contain the message that students did not do as well as they could--and perhaps *should--have*” (p. 398, emphasis in original). Therefore, feedback messages may inadvertently “heighten emotional tension and pose identity threats” (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012, p. 499) for students. This affective dimension of response to student writing is often overlooked because, as previously mentioned, it is often viewed from a fundamentally cognitive--as opposed to relational--lens.

Nevertheless, it is important for teachers to remember that negative feedback may potentially be discouraging for student writers and detrimental to the overall teaching-learning enterprise. For example, learner identity and self-esteem can be harmed by teacher negative evaluations (Carnicelli, 1980). Student motivation can also be shattered due to teacher criticism (Värlander, 2008). Furthermore, negative comments may potentially have a damaging effect on the learning process. Thus, as Witt and Kerssen-Griep (2011) stated, feedback “imposes on [students’] freedom to act and often negatively evaluates what they have done, which can provoke negative, unhelpful responses” (p. 79). Finally, even students’ perceptions of the instructor--e.g., instructor’s credibility--can be influenced undesirably by teacher response to their written work (Lee & Schallert, 2008; Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011).

While it is true that teacher feedback is intended to offer constructive criticism to facilitate student learning, it should also acknowledge positive aspects of student work and highlight the strengths of their writing. As Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) put it, “[I]t is human nature to desire and appreciate favorable responses to the work that we have done” (p. 242). Therefore, even simple positive remarks such as “*Well said,*” “*Good point,*” and “*Excellent example,*” can build student motivation and confidence in their abilities as writers. By providing a “blend of encouragement and constructive criticism” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 240) in their written comments, teachers also validate student time spent on the assignment, thus making them feel respected and open to further feedback. It may not always be easy to achieve a balance between praise and criticism when commenting on student work, so in my own teaching, I found that responding as a reader, not only as a teacher (see below), helps me discover more positive features of student writing.

Avoiding Appropriating Student Writing

From my personal experience as a writer, I know that there is nothing more discouraging than comments that take over the writer's voice and creativity. From my teaching practice, however, I also learned that appropriating (i.e., taking over) student work oftentimes happens inadvertently. That is, in their best efforts to help students improve their papers, teachers may involuntarily impose too much control and authority--sometimes to the point that a student's paper looks like it belongs to the teacher. Then, as Severino (2004) pointed out, "students are confused or demoralized by having to puzzle out their teachers' expectations and write to fulfill them instead of writing from their own impetus and intentions" (pp. 50-51).

While it is obvious that taking over student agency and creativity is a negative practice, part of the teacher's job is to facilitate student learning by providing feedback that may include guidance, critique, and correction. How, then, can teachers distinguish between appropriating student writing and offering suggestions necessary for further improvement? Goldstein (2004) describes an important differentiation between appropriation and what she calls "helpful intervention" (p. 68), summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: *Difference between appropriation and "helpful intervention" (Goldstein, 2004).*

Feature of student text	Appropriation	Helpful intervention
Purpose	"commentary that ignores what a student's purpose is for a particular text and attempts either purposefully or accidentally to shift this purpose"	"commentary that shows a student where he or she is not achieving her/his purpose(s)"
Point of view	"commentary where a teacher demands that a student shift a position or a point of view"	"commentary that suggests a student read about a different point of view or interview others with a different point of view in order to know the other side"
Intended meaning	"commentary that "corrects" sentences or passages without asking the student about the intended meaning risks changing that meaning"	"commentary that asks students what they want to say and then helps students find the language to do so"

Note. Statements in Table 1 are taken from Goldstein 2004, p. 68.

Writing experts offer numerous suggestions on how to avoid appropriating student work (e.g., Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Goldstein, 2004; Severino, 2004). I personally like to ask myself the following questions addressed by Joy Reid in her article "Responding to ESL students' texts: The myths of appropriation" (1994): "When might I interfere with their objectives or crush their creativity? In what ways might I assume control or ownership over their texts? What might I say that would deter them from becoming independent writers?" (p. 277). As a teacher, I learned that giving students power over their texts and a chance to exercise their writer agency and express their voice freely and proactively is crucial both for their writing

development and their evolving self-confidence and motivation. Some of the suggestions described below (i.e., giving students opportunities to challenge teacher comments, request specific feedback via reflective notes or memos, and discuss their papers in one-on-one conferences) may help to endow students with such power and control over their own texts, thus allowing their papers to fully reflect students' original voices.

Responding as a Reader

Teachers can also encourage and support student writers by responding to their texts not as an evaluator or an expert but as an interested reader (Sommers, 2013). According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), “By expressing their commentary as a personal response, [...] teachers can make a subtle adjustment to the interactional context and perhaps foreground a different persona. It allows them to relinquish some of their authority and adopt a less threatening voice” (p. 198).

The key to responding as a reader is in showing students genuine interest in their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and experiences that students share through their written work. For instance, teachers can reply to students' experiences by sharing their own. They can relate to students' challenges by describing similar struggles of their own. They can also include affective comments in their responses, such as expressing surprise (“Who would have thought!” “Oh really?”), empathy (“That must have been challenging!” “That would make me sad too.”), or disappointment (“That's too bad!” “How disappointing!”). Expressing this candid interest to the things students write about promotes relationships of trust and mutual respect, increases solidarity and prosocial connection, and makes feedback more authentic and meaningful (Shvidko, 2018). As Sommers (2013) put it, “Knowing that there is a real, live person--a teacher as a reader--at the end of the composing process imbues that process with meaning and significance that would otherwise be absent” (p. xii).

Involving Students in the Revision Process

Revision should not be “just a giver-receiver relationship with the teacher giving the information and the student receiving it” (Shvidko, 2015, p. 55); instead, it should be a collaborative endeavor. Such collaboration may stimulate student engagement in the revision of their writing, which in turn may help them grow into independent learners who are able to reflect on their development and make necessary changes for further improvement (Andrade & Evans, 2013; Benson, 2007; Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 2000; Milton, 2006; Shvidko, 2015). Research suggests that students' ability to reflectively analyze their writing may not only

increase their revision skills (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014), but it can also promote their motivation (Lamb, 2001; Sommers, 2013), establish connections between writing instruction and students' academic and professional life in the future (Beaufort, 2007; Downs & Wardle, 2007), and cultivate self-regulated writers (Andrade & Evans, 2013). Therefore, it can be argued that involving students in the revision process facilitates their “long-term improvement and cognitive change” (Reid, 1993, p. 229).

Teachers can involve students in the revision process by helping them learn how to thoughtfully and meaningfully respond to feedback (Shvidko, 2015; Sommers, 2013). One of such methods is to encourage students to reply to teacher comments in the margins of a paper/writing assignment. Many computer programs allow for this function, so this strategy would probably work best when feedback is given electronically, although the classic “pen and paper” approach is possible as well. When commenting on teacher feedback, students can explain what revisions they made based on the feedback, ask questions about the comments they do not understand, or even challenge teacher remarks. Teachers can also give students the opportunity to argue their cases—for example, in a memo/note attached to their draft. In other words, when disagreeing with the feedback, students would explain why the comments were disregarded, and the expected revision was not made. Providing students with the opportunity to respond to feedback and even challenge it may promote students' engagement in “a dialogue about their writing” (Sommers, 2013, p. 9) and send them the message that the feedback should not be seen as the ultimate judgment of their work, and that the teacher is open to negotiation (Shvidko, 2020).

Along with encouraging students to respond to feedback, teachers can also engage them in the revision process by holding one-on-one writing conferences. The value of such conferences, whose purpose is to “transmit feedback and discuss potential revision” (Qureshi, 2013, p. 27), is in negotiation and collaboration that usually take place during this pedagogical activity (Gilliland, 2014; Martin & Mottet, 2011). Thus, writing conferences “allow students to exercise their agency by negotiating teacher feedback and standing up for their ideas” (Shvidko, 2018, p. 20). My own experience with writing conferences as a teacher demonstrates that these “dialogic encounters” (Consalvo, 2011, p. 30) are usually one of the students' favorite features of writing courses I teach. Most students appreciate the opportunity to discuss their writing face to face, ask questions and receive immediate answers, and clarify feedback. To facilitate their preparation for conferences, I usually ask my students to complete *conference preparation notes* (Appendix A). I noticed that completing these notes helps students reflect on their writing and be better engaged in the discussion.

Involving student writers in the revision process can also be achieved by encouraging them to reflect on and analyze their writing. By being immersed in the systematic analysis of their

own drafts, students become more attentive and reflective readers (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Sommers, 2013). According to Ferris and Hedgcock (2014), self-evaluation² “builds confidence as students become more aware of their own strengths and of their abilities to help themselves” (p. 262). To this end, I like to implement a technique called *Letter to the Reviewer*, which facilitates collaboration between the teacher and the student. A *Letter to the Reviewer* is a short reflective note/memo submitted with each draft, in which students pinpoint both the strengths and weaknesses of their paper and request specific feedback that, from their perspective, would improve their draft (see Shvidko, 2015 for the description of this technique and examples of *Letter to the Reviewer*). Similar strategies are described in the literature as Dear Reader letter (Sommers, 2013), student-teacher memos (Sommers, 1988), writer’s memos (Sommers, 1989), and process notes (Giles, 2010). To help students compose their letters/notes/memos, teachers can provide a list of questions/prompts to be used as a guideline (Appendix B). My experience with *Letter to the Reviewer* shows that students participate more actively and agentively in the collaborative revision process, become more reflective readers, and are able to better recognize the relationship between classroom instruction and their own written work. I also noticed that interaction developed through students’ composing such reflective memos and teachers’ responding to them increases interpersonal connections between teacher and student (Tobin, 1993) and encourages teachers to respond “to a *person* rather than to a script (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 206, emphasis in original).

Minimizing Student Frustration

To provide supportive and helpful feedback, teachers should avoid responding to student writing in a way that would cause their frustration. Student frustration can be triggered by unclear and even cryptic comments such as confusing symbols (e.g., “?” “^”), abbreviations (e.g., “awk,” “frag”), single-word questions (e.g., “transition?” “summary?”), vague remarks (e.g., “weak paragraph,” “more evidence”), and writing/grammar-related jargon (e.g., “discourse-level transitions,” “subject-verb agreement”), which not all students, and language learners, in particular, are familiar with. Feedback is most useful when it is understood by

² While not discussed in this article, self-evaluation, and more specifically self-editing, is a crucial skill that promotes student long-term writing development and helps them become independent writers. See Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) for an extensive discussion on strategy training for self-editing skills, as well as examples of practical activities teachers can implement to help students develop their self-editing skills.

To promote student independent assessment of their own writing, teachers can also introduce students to online self-editing tools and software, including grammar and plagiarism checkers.

students; therefore, teachers should try to comment on their work with complete sentences or detailed phrases that are clear, specific, and concrete. Along with clarity, feedback also needs to be legible. That is, if students receive hand-written comments, they should be able to read them effortlessly, instead of deciphering what the teacher has written.

Overwhelming comments are equally frustrating. When teachers comment on every single weakness of the paper, students may lose motivation and interest in writing, they may become “overly dependent on teacher feedback” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 242). Therefore, instructors should provide focused feedback by prioritizing features of student-written texts. The literature on writing feedback sometimes suggests responding to content (also called *higher-order concerns* or *global writing issues*) in earlier drafts and commenting on form/linguistic features of student work (also called *lower-order concerns* and *local writing issues*) in later drafts (Keh, 1990; Searle & Dillon, 1980; Zamel, 1985; also see Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014 for more discussion on the “content-form” dichotomy). Whether instructors choose to follow this model or provide a combination of feedback on content and linguistic issues of student texts, focusing on just a few characteristics/patterns of student writing would help to avoid overwhelming students with “commentary that may exceed the amount of text that students themselves have produced” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, pp. 241-242).

Another important factor influencing student perception of teacher feedback--its transparency. Different instructors have different approaches to delivering feedback. A few examples of such approaches include focusing on content and topic development in early drafts and on linguistic characteristics of student papers in later drafts, formulating feedback as questions, affirmative statements, or imperatives; implementing marginal comments, end notes, or a combination of both; combining written feedback with other modes of responding to student work (e.g., conferences, audio comments). Similarly, teachers’ expectations regarding student responses to feedback may also differ. Therefore, teacher philosophies about feedback, their approaches to responding to written work, and expectations from students should clearly be articulated to learners. In my own teaching practice, for example, I prefer to use categorized, color-coded feedback (Appendix C), which, as I discovered, helps students differentiate the purpose/point of each of my comments. I realize, however, that students may not be familiar with this method; therefore, I always give them an information sheet with the description of this approach and the list of color-coded categories of comments I use while responding to their writing.

Conclusion

As Sommers (2013) rightly noticed, “Our comments are written for specific purposes--to inspire, to encourage, to nurture, to evaluate--and are written to our students, who need respect and honesty, not harshness or mean-spiritedness” (p. 5). The evaluative function of feedback may sometimes overshadow its relational aspect and its inspiring, encouraging, and nurturing purposes, mentioned by Sommers. Unfortunately, it is possible for busy teachers to overlook this human dimension of the revision cycle and the fact that there is a real person behind each paper, and that every evaluative remark may have consequences of a personal and affective nature. As Hyland and Hyland (2006) suggested, “interpersonal aspects of response have the potential to construct the kinds of relationships that can either facilitate or undermine a student’s writing development” (p. 209). This article highlights this very view of feedback and encourages teachers to remember that responding to student written work constitutes more than just commenting on content, language, and mechanics.

The above suggestions aim to provide instructors with further insight into the interpersonal--as opposed to informational--dimension of feedback. There is no single recipe on how to respond to student writing in a caring and supportive way. Therefore, this article only discusses five principles that can help teachers attend to the relational aspect of their feedback: providing positive comments, avoiding appropriating student writing, responding as a reader, involving students in the revision process, and minimizing student frustration. The principles described above may help instructors deliver supporting and encouraging feedback that will be able to demonstrate their genuine interest in students’ ideas, acknowledge students’ efforts and writing progress, respect their voice and agency, and foster their growing motivation and self-confidence as writers.

Ultimately, offering thoughtful and caring comments on student written work may contribute to the development of positive rapport (Lee & Schallert, 2008), whose pedagogical value is hard to overestimate (e.g., Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Nguyen, 2007; Shvidko, 2020). Therefore, teachers should carefully consider their feedback--its content and the manner of delivery, and pay attention to the significance of their comments “in both providing helpful advice on [...] students’ writing and in negotiating an interpersonal relationship which will facilitate its development” (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p. 208).

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Appendix A

Conference Preparation Notes (handout for students)

Name of Assignment: _____

Date of your conference: _____

Name: _____

Instructions: Carefully think about your current draft and things that you need most help with.

Please fill out this form and bring it to the conference.

My goal for the conference (Please be very specific):

Questions/comments I have about my draft (organization, ideas, etc.):

I have the following technical or computer-related problems or questions:

I have the following grammar-related problems or questions:

I have the following problems or questions about documenting sources (APA):

Any other comments/questions

Appendix B

Examples of Questions/Prompts for Letter to the Reviewer

Questions/Prompts for First Draft

- What are the strengths of your draft?
- What are the weaknesses of your draft?
- Does the draft have sufficient support or does it lack support?
- Is the organization of the paper effective? Briefly explain.
- What part of the draft is in most need of further work?
- What would you like your reader to pay close attention to while reading your draft?
- Are you expecting feedback on any particular elements of your draft? If so, what are they?

Questions/Prompts for Second Draft

- Briefly identify the major revisions that you have made in this draft based on the feedback that you received from your teacher and your classmate.
- What difficulties did you encounter while revising this draft? What was the most challenging part of revising this draft?
- What makes this draft stronger than the first one?
- In what ways does this revised draft better fulfill the purpose of the assignment than the first draft?
- What parts of this revised draft still need further work? Identify specific problems that you feel need to be addressed.
- Are there any particular places in your draft you want your reader to pay close attention to?
- Are there any language concerns (e.g., grammar, word choice) that you would like your reader to help you with?

Questions/Prompts for Final Draft

- Briefly identify the major revisions that you have made while composing this final draft.
- What difficulties did you encounter while working on this paper?
- What makes this final draft stronger than the previous ones?
- What are the major strengths of this final draft?
- Are there any weaknesses in this draft you want your reader to be aware of?

Appendix C

Categorized, color-coded comments for providing feedback

Categories of comments:

C: Content Comments that relate to the content of your essay, usually suggesting some revisions/additions in the content (e.g., ideas, supporting details).

O: Organization Comments about organization (e.g., flow of your ideas, paragraph structure, transitions words)

L: Language Comments that relate to linguistic elements of your writing, such as grammar and word choice.

F: Formatting Comments that relate to the format of your draft (e.g., spacing, font, documenting style)

R: Reader remark Comments that I make as a reader, not as a teacher. They are my “thinking aloud” comments, my reactions to your writing. These comments do not require any action from you.