The Rhetorical Situation of Teacher to Student Feedback: Written versus Oral Feedback

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**Introduction**

The rhetorical situation that occurs when a teachers gives a student feedback on her writing involves two human participants: the teacher and the student. The message is also the same: content that will help the student improve her writing. But often, the difference between whether the rhetorical situation for giving feedback is effective or not depends on a third factor: the medium. Often, the strength or weakness of the medium makes or breaks the effectiveness of the feedback.

In this paper, I will first discuss the traditional rhetorical situation of giving feedback. Next, I will point out the weaknesses inherent in this rhetorical situation. Then, I will talk about an alternative rhetorical situation which is, according to some scholars, more effective than the traditional situation. I will use research from other composition scholars, as well as my own research, to support these assertions. My observations are based off of my experience teaching two sections of English 1010 at Utah State University (USU) during my first semester of graduate school.

**Written comments: The traditional rhetorical situation for giving feedback**

Written comments on student papers have traditionally been the method of choice for teachers. Several composition scholars attest to this fact. Dr. Donald Murray observes: “The tradition that every student paper deserves a written response from the instructor is so deeply ingrained in our system that most of us feel guilty when we do not mark up a paper.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Nancy Sommers posits that “commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student feedback,”[[2]](#footnote-2) and Gary Dohrer asserts that “[w]riting teachers have traditionally written comments on student papers to express their reactions to students’ work.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This traditional method has persisted largely because “teachers seem to assume that students will learn from such comments and will apply the new knowledge to subsequent papers or drafts of the same paper, leading to improved writing.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

There is, though, a significant weakness in this traditional method, a weakness which is inherent in the rhetorical situation. In the situation, the medium used is written commentary. Imagine this: A teacher writes comments on the student’s paper, or, as in the case of many of the papers I gave feedback on, sends comments to students electronically. If the teacher wrote comments on a hard copy, she passes back the paper at some point during class. The student reads the comments, whether received electronically or on the hard copy, and responds in a variety of ways.

The problem in this rhetorical situation is that the medium used in this rhetorical situation—written comments—does not inherently invite response from the student. If the student does not respond to the teacher’s comments through asking questions or otherwise initiating a conversation about the comments, how can the teacher know whether she has been clear in her recommendations without asking the student? My research, which I will explain later in this section, shows that students often will not initiate a conversation about the comments when those comments are delivered via the traditional method. This leaves the responsibility on the teacher’s plate to check if the student understands, rendering her written comments redundant. In the remainder of this section, I will explain several unfavorable ways students respond to teacher feedback—responses discovered through research—that are the result of the weakness inherent in the medium.

The first observed response to written commentary is this: confusion and not asking for clarification. Gary Dohrer, in his meticulous study of how eight college students responded to and integrated teacher comments into their writing, described a process by which those students were effectively handed a list of comments and then struggled to interpret the teachers’ meanings. Dohrer remarks: “Students in the study seemed to be perplexed by comments such as ‘awkward,’ ‘reword,’ or ‘rewrite.’ They had considerable difficulty determining what was wrong with challenged sentences, the teachers’ comments having provided little information to help them.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Dohrer, in his detailed analysis, does not mention any student asking for clarification from the teacher. In my own experience, sometimes students did not ask for clarification when they had questions about the comments I had given them. Partway through the semester, I conducted the following experiment: I took the comments I had given them electronically on their first assignment, the Literacy Narrative, and put them into a separate document for each student. Each student had a piece of paper that had a chart listing each comment I gave them on the paper accompanied by a blank box. In class, I gave out these papers. I asked each student to jot down his or her emotional response to each comment in its accompanying blank box. I told them they could write words like “discouraged,” “happy,” “angry,” “sad,” “encouraged,” etc. Their responses helped me start to see the emotional connection my students had with the comments I gave them. Two students wrote in the box next to one of their comments a question about the comment. Neither of them had approached me at any time during the semester to ask for clarification about those comments.

The second observed response: confusion and asking for clarification. Barbara Monroe writes about her experience giving comments on student papers while teaching high school English: “Those [students] who did [read my comments] would sometimes ask for a conference so I could explain the comments, rendering my carefully crafted commentary totally redundant.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The fact is that sometimes, regardless of how clear and specific we think we are being, our students will not understand our comments. This happened with one of my students. One student downloaded his paper to the electronic interface, Canvas, that USU uses. I downloaded the paper from Canvas onto my computer and wrote comments in the margins using Word’s commenting features and emailed it to the student. Several days later, during the work time I gave my students in class, this student approached me and asked for clarification on at least one of the comments.

If there is a written comment that a student does not understand, she may choose to not ask for clarification. Her reasons for not asking may include one or both of the following:

* She may assume that the teacher expects her to understand and may feel that if she asks for clarification she will be viewed as unintelligent.
* She may not feel comfortable enough in her relationship with the teacher. Based on the research with my students that I explained earlier, I know of several cases in which a student had questions about the comments I gave them but did not ask me about them. These were questions about comments I gave them on their first paper. Towards the end of the semester these students approached me often about their papers, so I suspect their level of comfort in approaching me was tied to an increase of their trust in our teacher-student relationship.

Again, the rhetorical situation of teacher-student written feedback—because of the nature of the medium—has significant weaknesses.

How can we make teacher-student feedback more effective?

**The Conference Method: A more effective rhetorical situation for giving feedback**

We can improve the effectiveness of teacher-student feedback by changing the medium in the rhetorical situation. Instead of using written feedback, we can use oral feedback—referred to here as the “conference method”—to give our students helpful feedback. The conference method invites responses to the student’s text from the student; unlike the written comment situation, the conference method is inherently inviting of student response. Teachers who use this method need only structure their conversations in a way that yields the most benefit; no time-consuming follow-up emails or stating our feedback in both written and oral form required.

In this section I will discuss one of the factors that needs to be part of the class structure in order for the conference method to be effective. I will also point out some of the strengths of this method.

The conference method depends on multiple conferences involving the same assignment. That means that the student must write more than one draft of each assignment. By writing more than one draft, the student can actually implement the ideas generated in a conference. This is much more meaningful than discussing a paper that only gets one shot at a grade, because it increases the pressure for the conference conversation to grapple with more than one writing problem. A process that involves multiple drafts allows the teacher and student to confer over just one, maybe two, writing problems per conference. Even with multiple conferences and drafts, not all of the issues in the paper may get addressed. One of the issues with teaching composition that we teachers need to accept is that most students will not leave our classes as perfect writers. Rather, we should focus on helping guide the students along a gradual path toward better writing, a path that does not end in English 1010 or other composition classes.

Currently at USU, students turn in one draft of a paper for a grade; later they revise that paper and turn it in as part of a portfolio. Individual instructors can alter the curriculum. I plan to involve more drafts in my class structure in future semesters; I feel that more drafts, in conjunction with an appropriate conference style and in-class instruction, places more emphasis on true revision.

Gary Dohrer points out that most students, when given written comments, simply make their best effort to make the corrections their teacher recommended, instead of making thoughtful changes to the text on a “macrostructural”[[7]](#footnote-7) level: in other words, they do not truly revise. Dohrer explains: “[A]ll students, as revealed by their interviews and think-alouds, had consciously decided that revision was predominantly an exercise in correcting errors to get a higher mark.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In my opinion, the conference method—a rhetorical situation which involves an exchange of responses to the text between teacher and student, not just a response to the text given by the teacher to the student, who may or may not respond—encourages a correct understanding of the revision process. The student cultivates this understanding largely due to the type of conversation she has with the teacher during the conference.

In her article, Jo An McGuire Simmons describes Roger Garrison’s form of the conference method. At the time of the article’s publication Garrison taught in the Los Angeles area. McGuire refers to this system as the Garrison method, and I will use that title for it as well. McGuire writes about some of the benefits of the Garrison method: “The teacher’s response gives the student a sense of audience and moves him or her from composing writer-based prose to composing reader-based prose...”[[9]](#footnote-9) Murray says that “[t]he purpose of [the conference] pattern is to help students learn to read their own drafts with increasing effectiveness”[[10]](#footnote-10) and that these conferences help prepare students for “the conferences [they] have with themselves during the writing process.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

I held conferences during my first semester of teaching English 1010. As a teacher’s assistant during my undergrad years I held conferences with students about their papers, so it wasn’t even a question to me as to whether or not I would do the same thing as a teacher. I was accustomed to the practice and felt that it was beneficial to students. As I have held conferences with students I have sensed that they gather more from our sessions than from in-class instruction. This has a few implications. First, it has made me aware that most students need time one-on-one to clarify assignment instructions, work through issues in their writing, and to build a relationship with me so they feel comfortable asking me to help them with their writing. This realization also causes me to pause to reconsider my teaching methods, and the activities I plan, for our class time together. I want my students’ in-class experiences to be just as valuable as their individual conferences.

Barbara Monroe, in her article about alternate methods to written feedback, “confront[s] what [she] believe[s] is the number one cause of English teacher burn-out: writing comments on students’ papers.”[[12]](#footnote-12) I can see why she has this opinion. For about the first half of the semester, I truly despised the process of crafting written comments. I told my officemates I wasn’t going to stay in teaching after I graduated with my master’s. I made that resolution because I hated the process of crafting “the perfect comment” for every paper, for every student. But I still had to come up with some methodology for giving commentary. Since it was impossible for me to switch to the conference method, for the latter part of the semester I effectively said “Buzz off” to all the advice on what kinds of comments I should write on my students’ papers. I figured since trying to craft a response was so draining and potentially ineffective since I didn’t know how my students would respond, I would simply say simply what I thought. I rebelled against the voices inside my head, the ones that whispered things like: *You’re being too harsh—what if you crush him?* or *You’re being too sensitive—what if what she needs is someone to be more demanding to make her rise to a higher level?* I was done letting my mind be a battleground.

Since that point in time I have decided to stay in academia and to look for better ways to give feedback to my students, hence my affinity for the conference method. I believe that when I use this method next semester, not only will it help my students’ writing improve, it will also keep me from feeling emotionally drained about this aspect of teaching.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, these are the direct benefits of the conference method for the student: its ability to help students enact real revision, its providing an audience to the piece and therefore helping the writer create reader-based prose, and its space for students to get clarification and work through their writing with her teacher. All of these benefits stem from the fact that the medium used is oral communication, instead of written comments. These benefits for my students, plus the benefit it gives me as a teacher, are the reasons I am going to use the conference method with my classes next semester.

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1. Donald A. Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nancy Sommers, “Responding to Student Writing,” *College Composition and Communication*, 33 (May, 1982): 148-56. Reprinted in An Anthology of Essays, publication information unknown, 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gary Dohrer, “Do Teachers’ Comments on Students’ Papers Help?” *College Teaching*, 39, no. 2 (Spring, 1991): 48-54, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27558454.48. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Barbara Monroe, “Feedback: Where It’s at Is Where It’s At,” *The English Journal* 92, no.1 (Sep. 2002): 102-104, http://www.jstor.org/stable/821956. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dohrer, “Do Teachers’ Comments,” 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Simmons, “Responding to,” 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Murray, *A Writer*, 148 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 160 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)