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What Writing Teachers Can Learn From Editors as They Structure Writing Conferences:

Pre-Project Involvement and the “Meta” Feedback Conference

As a teacher of freshman composition at Utah State University (USU), I have studied various methods (written and oral) and media (text and audio) that can help me give better feedback to my students. I feel that all writing teachers should undergo such thoughtful experimentation, rather than defaulting to previous feedback experiences from their days as a writing student. My study of how to give effective writing feedback continues: Just a month ago I asked my students to briefly evaluate the comments they received on a recent paper. And as a student in the graduate-level Technical Editing class at USU, I have realized that some practices good editors employ are strategies that we writing teachers should also integrate into our work.

The focus of this paper will be two editing strategies that Eaton and Rude in their editing text, *Technical Editing*, term “Participate early” and “Clarify your expectations.” I will discuss these concepts more in depth later in the paper, but for now I offer short-hand explanations: Editors should, where possible, be involved in the planning stages of a writer’s project, and they should “agree with the writer upon the level of edit that [they] will perform” (33). In this paper, I argue that writing teachers should adopt these strategies as they work with students, “translating” them into the following pedagogical practices: Teachers should meet with students individually prior to at least one major project during the semester, and they should meet early in the semester to agree with individual students regarding the degree, amount, and type (written/audio) of feedback the student will receive. I propose that such conferences will be beneficial for students and teachers, just as early editor involvement in the writer’s project and clarification of the editor’s (and writer’s) expectations helps facilitate a positive editor-writer relationship.

My experience as a writing teacher has been, so far, limited to an environment in which I have a great deal of liberty in how I structure my class periods and curriculum. I do not claim to know that these strategies will work for all writing teachers at all institutions; rather, I recommend them and hope that readers will adopt these ideas to fit their teaching circumstances.

**“Participate Early” and The Pre-Project Conference**

Angela Eaton and Carolyn Rude’s co-authored book, *Technical Editing*, offers five strategies that editors should consider as they work with writers. The first two of these strategies are, in my opinion, the most applicable to the work we do as writing teachers.

The first strategy is as follows:

1. *Participate early.* An editor can offer helpful concepts at the early stages of project development. If you can participate in planning the project, you and the writer and team manager can agree on project goals from the start. This strategy helps to eliminate the conflict that arises when the editor enters the project at the end and has different ideas about the way it should have developed. If you are a freelance editor, you may not get to help determine when you enter the project, but if you are asked, ask to be integrated as early as possible. (33)

Clearly, Rude and Eaton foresee the need for editors to be involved in the project at hand as early as possible. Such involvement, presumably, will prevent problems later on in the editing process. Early involvement may help alleviate what some literature, as Mackiewicz and Riley observe, “acknowledge[s] [as] the initial defensiveness and even hostility that authors may bring to the table, in anticipation of having their work criticized.” If writers can meet the editor early in the process, such familiarity may help decrease that “initial defensiveness.” Additionally, Eaton et. al found that “[a]uthors appreciated editing relationships that were based on a dialog during which both author and editor listened with open minds; they also appreciated relationships that enabled them to ask questions comfortably.” If an editor and a writer can meet early in the process, such interaction may help foster these kinds of dialogic relationships. Further: “Fully 69% of authors preferred to meet with an editor at some point in the editing process” (Eaton et. al). Although this finding does not explicitly state that this meeting should happen at the start of the project, it supports the claim that many authors prefer more, not less, interaction with their editors before the project is finished.

Writing teachers can apply this concept of pre-project involvement in a variety of ways. Here, I will explain how I have used this strategy to benefit my students. At USU, the second required composition class students take (English 210: Writing in a Persuasive Mode) requires them to write at least one persuasive essay. This semester, my students wrote a classical argument essay for their first project. I required students to write a Classical Argument Proposal (CAP) in which they explained their topic and intended audience and purpose. They uploaded this document to our CMS, Canvas, before their conference with me. Aside: I recommend that teachers require their students write and upload a proposal before the conference. The first time I taught this class, I did not require students to do an assignment beforehand but told them to “think about” their topic before the conference. Most students came to the conference with little or no idea of what they wanted to write about, so those conferences were spent doing basic brainstorming—work that students can (and should, in my opinion) do on their own. Teacher-student conferences are best spent building on work students have already done.

During their CAP conference, we discussed their project plans, including the kinds of sources they might use to write the paper. In many cases, we used index cards to “map out” the structure of their paper. Multiple students have told me that these conversations about their paper, including the index card outlines, were very helpful. After this CAP conference, I do not require students to discuss subsequent papers with me, although I invite them to talk with me during my office hours if they need extra help. By requiring students to meet with me at least once to discuss a project, I help students understand what can happen in a conference and show them that I want to help them succeed. Writing teachers may choose to require students to meet with them before every project. Such a choice depends largely on what the teacher’s schedule allows.

**“Clarify Expectations” and the “Meta” Feedback Conference**

The second strategy Eaton et. al propose as one that editors should adopt is this:

1. *Clarify your expectations.* Clarifying expectations early makes for a much smoother editing process…Make sure to clarify the following:
2. Agree with your writer upon the level of edit you will perform…[T]here are many levels of editing. A new writer may not know about the different levels of editing you can conduct, and you will need to explain them. If your writer works with editors frequently, you simply need to agree on the level. (33)

In their study of writers’ preferences, Eaton et. al note that “[a]uthors…appreciated editors who refrained from editing at levels other than those the author requested.” Editors need to both solicit and be respectful of their writers’ feedback preferences.

Much of the literature that pertains to writing teachers seeks to answer the following questions: What method of delivering feedback is best for writing students? How much (quantity) feedback should writing teachers give their students? What should teachers say in their comments? The breadth of answers to these questions suggests that much can left to the discretion of the teacher. Regarding mode of feedback, some advocate one-on-one writing conferences. Donald Murray writes that “[t]he purpose of [the conference] pattern is to help students learn to read their own drafts with increasing effectiveness.” Barbara Fassler asserts that an effective teacher-student writing conference allows the teacher to “respond to the student, and to the subject of the paper, much more fully and personally than is ever possible in a written comment.” In my field research with my own students during my first semester teaching at USU, I found that, in some cases, written comments were not sufficient to communicate my meaning to students, which led me to write a paper advocating the conference method for delivering feedback.

Because some research suggests that written comments can be effective when used properly (Monroe, Sommers), and other findings promote one-on-one-conferencing (Simmons), it stands to reason that either method can be helpful for students. If the research suggests that both written and oral modes can be effective, and with the rise of audio files as another media option for feedback, what factors should the writing teacher consider when answering the three previously mentioned questions for her own students? I suggest that one determining factor should be the students’ individual preferences as determined in a “meta” feedback conference.

**A Suggested Model for the “Meta” Feedback Conference**

In the first week or two of the semester, writing teachers can meet with students to talk about how the feedback process for that student. Like I did with my CAP conferences, I recommend that students upload a form to the CMS before coming to this conference. This will force students to think about their preferences before coming to the conference.

On the form, teachers should ask questions that focus on the students’ writing goals (which, after all, feedback should help them achieve), experiences with prior feedback, and feedback preferences. Below I’ve listed some ways these types of questions could be presented:

* What are your writing goals this semester? What do you want to get better at, in terms of writing?
* What has been your experience with feedback on your work in the past/with other writing teachers/classes? Positive/negative, somewhere in-between?
* I can give you feedback in one of the following modes: Written (text comments in Canvas), oral (you come in for a conference and we talk about your paper), and audio file (I use the audio file feature on Canvas). Which mode would you prefer?
* When I give feedback, I talk about ways the paper could be improved and ways it is working well. Choose from one of these options: 1. I give 2 comments on things that could be improved and 2 comments on things that are working well. 2. I give \_\_\_(your preference) comments on things that could be improved and \_\_\_comments on things that are working well.

A discussion of writing goals segues nicely into a conversation about feedback. Like writers who have prior negative experiences with editors, students may come into a writing class with negative prior experiences with teacher feedback. Writing teachers should respond with sensitivity to the experiences students choose to share and use that knowledge, along with the responses to other questions on the form, to guide their feedback.

Teachers should know what kinds of media they are prepared to use and should only offer those options. Not all writing teachers feel comfortable using, for instance, audio files, so in those cases that media tool should not be offered. Asking students to specify the number of comments they want helps teachers understand how much their students can process. Rather than being micro-managerial, the answers to these kinds of questions can prevent the teacher from wondering later on if she is giving too much or too little feedback.

As the semester progresses, the student can revise her answers to these questions. The student can let the teacher know via email and/or an office hour visit that her preferences have changed. Perhaps the teacher can schedule a mid-semester check—by that point, the student may have changes in terms of what kind of feedback she wants to receive. It may be that initially the student wanted minimal feedback, but by the middle of the semester she feels confident enough in her writing to learn about more ways she can improve. At the end of the semester, the teacher may choose to have a follow-up conversation about the feedback process. I have end-of-semester conferences with my students to discuss their participation grade and other aspects of the class; a conversation about feedback could fit well into such a “tie up loose ends” type of conference.

Through implementing an early semester conference about feedback, the teacher can give feedback knowing that she is working *with* students on their writing, rather than working independent *of* them. An equally important benefit is that this kind of discussion requires students to engage on a deeper level with their learning experience, rather than being passive receivers of feedback.

**Conclusion and Areas for Further Research**

My research into editors’ best practices coincides well with my interest in how writing teachers can deliver effective feedback to their students. The first two suggestions that Eaton and Rude give in their editing text *Technical Editing*, in a chapter titled “Collaborating With Writers,” are: 1. Participate early and 2. Clarify your expectations. Teachers can “translate” these two directives into opportunities for two kinds of conferences: Pre-project conferences and conferences in which the teacher and student discuss the kind of feedback the student will receive that semester.

Pre-project conferences give students a space in which to articulate their project ideas. Teachers can help students develop their ideas and can offer suggestions for a different topic, if necessary. Such conferences are also a form of “scaffolding” in which students work with manageable “chunks” of a project. Rather than putting off the brainstorming process to the last minute, students are forced to think about their topic well in advance of the project due date.

Much research exists that discusses the kind of feedback writing teachers should give to students. Because there are many different opinions on the matter of mode, quantity, and type of feedback, teachers should discuss with students the kind of feedback they want to receive, in conjunction with discussing the students’ writing goals for the semester.

In this paper I drew from the extensive study of Eaton et. al, which features findings that can guide editors as they write comments on writers’ work, such as specific word choice. Further research could be conducted that examines the relevance of those findings to teachers’ written or oral comments on student work.

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