Do You Care to Add Something? Articulating the Student Interlocutor's Voice in Writing Response Dialogue

> Diana Lin Awad Scrocco
New Voice

In this study, I use think-aloud protocol methods to determine how students respond to their teacher's conversational and nonconversational written feedback on their writing.

As a composition instructor who spent four years tutoring in writing centers before entering the classroom, I have always preferred *talking* about writing to *writing* about writing. My comfort zone has been discussions with my students during peer review sessions and conferences because I can offer advice and address my students' specific concerns in real time. Nonetheless, I recognize the time constraints many college composition instructors face and the impracticality of conferencing with each student in each class for each project. I also understand that written comments are convenient references when students must revise their work in a portfolio class. Thus, the prevailing model for teachers responding to their students' writing continues to be written critiques composed on students' texts.

This tug-of-war between spoken and written feedback has led me to two research questions for the current study: 1) What are students thinking as they are reading and considering their teachers' feedback on their writing? 2) How do students react to *conversational* and *nonconversational* comments their teachers write on their work? Perhaps if writing instructors better understand the thoughts that come to their students' minds as they are reading their teachers' written advice, they might develop a clearer sense of which types of comments stimulate students to think critically about their writing and which types of comments students scan dismissively. This awareness has the potential to help teachers make better decisions about how to compose commentary on their students' work.

Over the past several decades, scholars such as Peter Elbow, Richard Straub, Jane Mathison Fife, and Peggy O'Neill have emphasized the importance of teachers *conversing* with their students about their writing in the margins and in comprehensive remarks at the end of papers. Straub summarizes much of the well-known literature on conversational response quite simply: "Turn your comments into a conversation" (*Sourcebook* 28). This strategy for writing response suggests that teachers can construct the feel of an in-person discussion by expanding their written comments into open-ended, individualized questions and remarks on

Copyright © 2012 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.

specific passages in the student's text (28). Advocating students' active involvement in conversations about their writing, others scholars, such as Kathleen Blake Yancey, Nancy Welch, and Patricia Carini, have promoted engaging students in written and spoken reflection on their drafts and their teacher's comments.[1]

Although scholars encourage conversation in writing response, some theorists contend that instructors' response techniques often prioritize the teacher's opinions over the student's ideas. Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch contend that the so-called dialogue that unfolds on the student's text often resembles a one-sided diagnosis rather than an exchange of ideas. The result of this unbalanced dialogue manifests in teachers promoting their own interests and devaluing students' goals (158). Often, this "conversation" between teachers and students does not mirror a true discussion at all: the teacher provides a prompt, the student writes, and the teacher evaluates the text (Fife and O'Neill 312). Thus, many students have limited "learning and engagement throughout the writing process" (309) rather than two-way conversations that empower them to "construct a reality where they are writers" (316).

Research on spoken response contends that in-person conferencing and providing audio feedback on students' writing offers more conversational, detailed, and insightful guidance for students than written response. In an early study of audio commentary, Jeff Sommers suggests that recorded feedback enables teachers to explicate specific writing issues in the student's text, reference topics discussed in class, and offer more personalized feedback (52). Chris Anson corroborates Sommers's conclusion, arguing that audio commentary enables teachers to "play a more supportive role" (105) in students' writing process and can be a better alternative than written remarks (113). Through survey and case study methods, Cheryl Mellen and Jeff Sommers contend that using audio devices to comment on students' writing offers more feedback, an individualized and cooperative feel, and improved rapport between teachers and students (37).[2]

A movement in the field of writing response has advocated explicitly articulating student voices in the scholarship, and such researchers as Nancy Sommers and Straub have used surveys and interviews to assess the types of comments students appreciate. While surveys and interviews offer insight into how students perceive teachers' feedback, some have noted the limitations of these methodologies, including the difficulty of generalizing findings to students' actual experiences (Ferris 93). Dana Ferris contends, "There have rarely been any attempts to link student reactions to actual teacher or peer feedback or to student revision" (93). Moreover, Fife and O'Neill call for more contextual analyses of writing response that consider the real contexts in which students read and respond to their teachers' feedback, advocating "including student voices in discussions about writing" (302).

Some studies have given students a voice via protocol, interview, and observational analyses, providing more situated understandings of how students reflect on their teacher's feedback. Paul Prior's protocol study focuses on one student's reflections and actual experiences with his adviser's responses to his dissertation prospectus. Prior studies the student's initiation into a new discourse community by analyzing his reading, comprehension, and response to his adviser's written feedback, using

field notes, recorded conversations, drafts of the prospectus, and interviews (490). Protocol methods enable Prior to articulate the student's voice more specifically and contextually, providing an *in situ* understanding of how one student responds to feedback on his writing. Likewise, S. Richardson uses observations, interviews, and textual analyses of writing and feedback to assess students' reactions to and use of instructors' comments, concluding that students in portfolio classrooms passively accept their teacher's advice to achieve a higher grade (117). Brian Still and Amy Koerber also promote assessing teacher feedback using think-aloud methods to give insight into how students use teacher commentary during revision (206). They conclude that students find teacher feedback most useful when the commentary employs familiar terms, explains symbols, and provides solutions (225).

In an early think-aloud protocol study that identifies which *actual* written comments help students revise, Mary Hayes and Donald Daiker examine "how students respond to our responses" (1). Studying teacher feedback in a writing course focused on revision, Hayes and Daiker asked students to read aloud and analyze their instructor's written responses to their work, evaluating which comments they deemed most useful (1). Their findings show that positive feedback motivates students to revise, imprecise remarks perplex students, and brief comments complicate students' revision processes (4). Hayes and Daiker's protocol methodology gives students a more resounding voice in the scholarship than acontextual surveys and interviews, but very few researchers have responded to their 1984 call for more protocol studies. Furthermore, almost twenty years later, Fife and O'Neill maintain that "the students' voices and perceptions are still missing from these articles" (314). Hayes and Daiker's unanswered call begs the question: What does written feedback look like in the present culture of writing response, and how do students react to this feedback? The current study uses think-aloud methodology to explore one young composition instructor's written responses to student drafts and to ascertain whether her students respond to her feedback differently than the students in Hayes and Daiker's study nearly three decades ago.

The Current Study

The present study addresses scholars' calls for clearer articulation of student voices in the literature by allowing students to verbalize their perceptions of their teachers' feedback on their writing. Informed by Hayes and Daiker and by Peter Smagorinsky's method of protocol analysis, I examine four composition students' think-aloud responses to their teachers' written feedback on their work, and I attempt to represent what these students have to say in a dialogue about their writing. This methodology does not attempt to mirror a *spoken* conversation between teachers and students because, typically, teachers and students do *not* engage in oral conversations about formal written drafts. True turn-taking involves an interactive, back-and-forth exchange of ideas, so, for this study, I attempt to capture students' extended responses to instructor feedback, which mirror the lengthy responses teachers typically give to student texts.

This study's methodology differs from survey or interview studies because my participants read comments on their *own* writing for the very first time while I recorded them. Whereas a survey about the effectiveness of their teacher's comments would have given students time to consider how I would respond to their opinions, the think-aloud method aims to acquire a more authentic view of these students' initial perceptions of their teacher's feedback. My decision to have students do the think-aloud session during their first read of their teacher's feedback stems from my belief that students' initial reactions to their teachers' comments can determine whether students revise their work or feel discouraged to revise. If a student's first read-through of her teacher's feedback makes her feel defensive or overwhelmed, the writer may not feel motivated to reread and use the feedback for revision; if the teacher's feedback encourages thoughtfulness and elicits ideas, though, the student might feel more incentive to revise meaningfully.

In my analysis, I aim to determine what students contemplate when reading their teachers' comments on their writing and how students respond to *conversational* and *nonconversational* feedback. My definition of *conversational feedback* relates to Straub's "nondirective feedback," or "the least controlling types of commentary" ("Students' Reactions" 99), which Knoblauch and Brannon call "facilitative." Facilitative feedback focuses on global textual issues and responds with open-ended questions and comments that interpret the written ideas in a supportive way. My definition of *nonconversational feedback* is similar to Straub's "directive feedback," or "responses that present direct criticisms of [students'] writing or authoritatively call on them to make changes in their texts" ("Students' Reactions" 95). Knoblauch and Brannon point out that directive feedback attempts to control the student's text by mandating specific revisions and conveying a disapproving attitude toward the text. Specifically, I define *conversational feedback* as open-ended, interrogative, specific, and individualized to the writer; conversational comments ideally elicit a response from writers, encouraging them to brainstorm new ideas about the text or consider a different perspective on an issue in the text. I define *nonconversational feedback* as closed, critically declarative or imperative, brief, nonspecific, and directive, encouraging passive agreement and discouraging the writer from analyzing the advice.

The Class Context

The study occurred during the twelfth week of the spring semester at a mid-sized, midwestern university. I started by proposing my study via email to ten graduate student writing instructors who had recently taken survey courses reviewing the prevailing scholarship on effective response practices. I then determined which instructor's class schedule worked best with my project timeline and recruited student volunteers from this instructor's classes. I examined four first-year college students' think-aloud responses to written comments on paper drafts from their teacher, Carol,[3] a first-year doctoral student in rhetoric and composition with two years' experience as a composition instructor.

The students read feedback from their third formal project of the semester, which answered a prompt asking them to analyze a multimedia source in a four-page, MLA-formatted paper. Carol's prompt asked students, "What do you really see when you look at the particular pieces of media around you?" Students could either respond to a call-for-papers for a special undergraduate issue of the online journal *Kairos* by creating a multimodal project, or they could compose a traditional alphabetic-text essay. The two male participants, Nathan and Lenny, composed multimodal projects integrating text and images; Nathan's paper addresses the messages in automobile advertisements, and Lenny's examines why *Mario Kart DS* has gained popularity over other racing video games. The two female participants, Shannon and Marie, composed alphabetic-text essays; Shannon's paper examines how users navigate the social-networking website Facebook, and Marie's essay dissects profiles on the site MySpace. When I collected data, Carol estimated the grades of these students to range from an A to a C-, which suggests these students held relatively diverse academic standings in the course.

I interviewed Carol about her course structure and response strategies. Throughout the semester, her students submitted formal drafts of projects, engaged in peer review sessions, and received comments but no grades from Carol. At the end of the semester, students submitted a final portfolio with revisions of their formal projects, preliminary drafts, and process work. Carol explains that she responds by writing specific in-text comments and composing comprehensive remarks at the end of papers. Describing her response style as "conversational," Carol claims that she writes feedback by imagining that she is speaking with her students. Carol defines "conversational" written feedback as accomplishing the following:

1. asking writers open-ended questions about their ideas (e.g., "Why do you think this is?")
2. questioning specific passages (e.g., "How is it 'inexpensive'?")
3. referring to the student as a writer and herself as a reader (e.g., "All right, I'm still wondering what you are going to really talk about . . .")

Carol defines comments as "nonconversational" when they are directive (e.g., "Use this type of double hyphen."), impersonal (e.g., "Not MLA"; "Proofread"), or abrasive (e.g., "Fix your facts!"). Carol explains that she views conversational feedback as a productive means of encouraging students to ponder their strengths and weaknesses and consider how to revise their work.

On the day I collected data, I visited Carol's class toward the end of the hour and told her students that I was researching student opinions of teacher feedback. I explained that volunteers would be asked to read Carol's comments aloud while verbalizing their views of these comments. I asked participants not to read Carol's feedback until their appointment with me. During each student's private appointment, I began by giving instructions about think-aloud protocol (see Appendix A). During each think-aloud session, I audio-taped the student reading the teacher's comments aloud and thinking aloud. After each think-aloud session, I interviewed the student. I transcribed all think-aloud sessions and interviews.

Data Coding and Results

After transcribing the data, I developed a coding scheme of the students' think-aloud comments (432 total comments). I defined a student's "comment" as any t-unit within the student's think-aloud transcript. Informed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss's grounded theory coding, I read the students' speak-aloud comments and created descriptive codes, definitions, and examples portraying how

TABLE 1. Teacher Comments: Definitions and Examples of Subtypes

Category of Teacher Comment	Subtype of Teacher Comment	Definition of Teacher Comment Subtype	Examples of Teacher Comment Subtype	Frequencies of Teacher Comments	Percentages of Teacher Comments
Conversational Comment	Open-ended Question	An interrogative remark that seeks a lengthy answer or various answers, which are typically expressed using more than one word	• And, how does this allow you to communicate? • What was your ultimate conclusion?	51	23.0
	Open-ended Statement	A statement that encourages the writer to produce an extended answer	• More about why this is important. • I'm still wondering what, what you are going to really talk about.	20	9.0
Nonconversational Comment	Imperative Statement	A command that instructs the writer to enact a specific activity or implement a certain idea	• Proofread. • Tell readers what we are supposed to realize.	63	28.4
	Critical Declarative Statement	A declarative assertion that describes part of the text and typically assesses it as effective or ineffective	• I think your analysis of Facebook is definitely stronger. • This might put some readers on the defensive.	49	22.1
	Brief	A terse or abrupt comment, typically one or two words, that fails to convey a full thought	• Good • Unnecessary • Again, uncertainty	16	7.2
	Closed Question	An interrogative remark that seeks a specific one-word or very brief answer	• Who's they? • Do we? • What does this stand for?	12	5.4
	Symbol	A non-linguistic sign or mark	• Circled • Star • Smiley face	11	5.0
TOTAL Teacher Comments or "Reading Teacher's Comments Aloud"				222	100

these students read, processed, or perceived Carol's feedback. Approximately half of the students' speak-aloud comments (222 comments) consisted of the students reading Carol's comments aloud. I categorized Carol's comments as *conversational* or *nonconversational*, and within these categories, I coded them into subtypes (Table 1). I identified the other speak-aloud comments (210 comments) as the students' *responses* to Carol's written remarks, and I coded the ways these students reacted to their teacher's feedback (Table 2).

To determine the particular nuances of these reactions to Carol's written feedback, I then coded the students' Conversational Responses (80 comments) into subtypes representing *how* students reacted conversationally to Carol's remarks (Table 3); I also coded the students' Nonconversational Responses (130 comments) into subtypes representing the students' less dialogic reactions to Carol's remarks (Table 4).

To ascertain the categories and subtypes of student responses that followed Carol's comments, I then tallied the subtypes of "Conversational Responses" and the other categories of student responses that followed each of Carol's comments (see Table 5).[4]

Discussion

Open-Ended Questions and Statements Elicit Students' Dialogue about Global Issues in the Text.

Carol's conversational feedback—her open-ended questions and open-ended statements—elicits from her students more conversational responses (36 comments; 55.4%) than nonconversational responses (29 comments; 44.6%). These conversational responses tend to be the student's explaining his or her ideas or arguments more clearly (23 comments), deliberating revision plans (5 comments), and giving examples of ideas (3 comments). The students' nonconversational responses to Carol's open-ended questions and statements include voicing a lack of understanding about the written feedback (8 comments), attempting to understand the teacher's remarks (8 comments), and defending one's ideas (6 comments). These findings suggest that conversational, open-ended questions and comments about a student's text do elicit somewhat of a dialogue with student writers about *global* issues in their writing, such as engaging with one's ideas and structural decisions. Open-ended questions and comments urge students to brainstorm answers and refine their claims, which may productively influence students' revision processes.

These students' replies to Carol's open-ended questions often appear in the form of declarative *answers*, as an oral conversation might unfold. For example, when Carol asks Nathan, "Why?" in reference to his statement about the automobile industry's extreme efforts to sell vehicles, he responds, "It's a little ridiculous that they're, like, trying to sell cars so bad . . . /unclear/ like an '09 Impala, I saw on TV. There's a buy-one-get-one-free, so, for a car . . . I just think that's ridiculous." Nathan responds to Carol's open-ended inquiry by explaining and then providing an example of his contention; his response here mirrors how he might respond to Carol's question if they were having a conversation in person. Neutral in terms of

TABLE 2. Students' Speak-Aloud Comments

Category of Students' Think-Aloud Comments	Definition of Category	Examples of Category	Total Number Comments	Percent of All Comments
Reading Teacher's Comments Aloud	Reading the teacher's comments or symbols, or explaining what the teacher has written on the page	• 'I think this claim is a little weak.' • 'Very insightful. Good.' • She underlined 'Why?'	222	51.4
Nonconversational Response	Responding to the teacher's written comment by questioning, disregarding, struggling to understand, or passively accepting the suggestion	• It makes a lot, it makes the sentence flow a lot better • Nice • And my fact was not wrong	130	30.1
Conversational Response	Answering the teacher's question or clarifying an idea by responding with non-negative tone	• And I've seen, for instance, new, new Chevy commercial • Oh, that's just a little comment I made • In society today, most people only communicate through Facebook	80	18.5
		TOTAL Student Think-Aloud Comments	432	100

TABLE 3. Students' Conversational Responses: Definitions and Examples of Subtypes

Students' Conversational Response Subtypes	Definition of Conversational Response Subtype	Examples of Conversational Response Subtype	Frequencies of Student Conversational Responses	Percentage of Student Conversational Responses
Explanation of an idea	Clarifying an argument or notion in the text by providing additional description or justification	• Because, like, the economy's so bad, and everything else. • It's a little ridiculous that they're, like, trying to sell cars so bad.	30	37.5
Explanation of structural choice	Reasoning through a decision about arrangement or organization of part of the text	• Every paragraph has their reason why. • Exactly what I want to talk about in the introduction	18	22.5
Plan for revision	Admitting that something in the text needs to be modified or reworked	• I'll get rid of that. • I should . . clear that up a little bit.	12	15.0
Explanation of language choice	Explicating or defending one's word choice in the text	• 'We' is, like, everybody, not just her. • So that's why I said 'funds.'	11	13.8
Example of an idea	Illuminating a claim or concept in the text by offering exemplars	• And I've seen, for instance, new, new Chevy commercial.	9	11.3
		TOTAL "Conversational Response" Comments	80	100

TABLE 4. Students' Nonconversational Responses: Definitions and Examples of Subtypes

Students' Nonconversational Response Subtypes	Definition of Nonconversational Response Subtype	Examples of Nonconversational Response Subtype	Frequencies of Student Non-conversational Responses	Percentage of Student Non-conversational Responses
Defense of Ideas	Refusing to admit the merit of the teacher's comment by disagreeing with or attacking it using negative tone	• I don't understand why I have to define every little thing • I thought I only had one topic	28	21.5
Lack of Understanding	Questioning a comment or stating confusion about the teacher's content, symbols, etc.	• Not sure how, but I'll figure it out • I don't know what that's for . . . the paragraph above, below • Um, don't know exactly what that means	27	20.8
Attempt to Understand	Expressing comprehension of a mistake or weakness in one's writing that the teacher highlights	• It's not MLA format apparently • She doesn't like it when we say 'we' in papers because it kind of addresses the audience	23	17.7
Unquestioned Agreement	Briefly accepting the teacher's comment without defending oneself; claiming that one will change the text without explaining why	• So, I just . . . I'll define that • I guess I'll just explain that or revise it • I should definitely get rid of that one	22	16.9
Other	Saying filler words (e.g., okay, um); commenting to the researcher	• I don't have to go over all of 'em, do I? • Dang! • I'd have to read over my paper	15	11.5
Disregard due to Praise	Claiming that the teacher's comment can be ignored because it is positive or complimentary	• 'Good,' so I don't know if that's . . . if I can ignore that type of thing • I love when she gives me good feedback	9	6.9
Submission to Authority	Accepting the teacher's suggestion to revise by explicitly acknowledging the teacher's authority	• If that's her personal preference, I'll put it in there • To kind of write for what I think the professors are going to want me to do	4	3.1
Reference to Writing Process	Referring to lessons from class discussion, teacher conferences, or peer review sessions	• Like I said before, I didn't really proofread • We didn't do a peer review on this one	2	1.5
TOTAL "Nonconversational Response" Comments			130	100

tone, this comment answers Carol's query, which may prompt Nathan to clarify his ideas during revision. Similarly, when Carol points to one of Shannon's claims and asks, "What are you trying to say here?" Shannon responds with a nonnegative, dialogic reply: "That anybody can look on your [Facebook] wall and see what you're talking about with your friends." This response demonstrates how a teacher's open-ended question can encourage a student writer to develop a point, which may result in the student elucidating her argument as she reworks the draft later.

Although Carol is not present to hear her students' responses to her open-ended questions, her feedback serves the purposes Straub, Brannon and Knoblauch, and Welch have recommended. In fact, some of these students seem aware that Carol strives to establish dialogue through her commenting strategy. In her interview, Marie explains: "Usually Carol, when she comments on your paper, it's basically like she *is* talking to you. Whatever comes to her head first, I think that's what she writes down." Even though Marie knows that she cannot talk directly to Carol while reading her written feedback, she seems to feel as though Carol is attempting to discuss writing with her students. Also, although Marie mentions that she prefers *talking* directly with Carol during peer review, she finds her teacher's written comments useful because they mimic oral dialogue.

The open-ended statements that elicit students' conversational replies tend to be reflective, qualified suggestions that encourage students to provide answers. For example, in response to one of Shannon's points in her introduction, Carol comments, "I'm still wondering what . . . what you are going to really talk about in the fact that everyone uses it." To this open-ended statement, Shannon responds with a remark about her ideas and her structural choices: "Last time you told me to make certain points and . . . talk about them, so my paper would be longer. Now you're telling me to just stick to a certain topic basically." Here, Shannon compares previous advice Carol offered her on this draft with her current recommendation, thinking through how she can give sufficient details while keeping focused on her topic. Although Shannon has not yet strategized a plan for balancing these two objectives, Carol's open-ended comment seems to engage this student in some reflection about how to write descriptively while still concentrating on her core theme or thesis.

In response to a generalization by Lenny about the number of people who play a specific video game, Carol offers this open-ended statement: "I know plenty of people who don't . . . who don't or never have played this game." Lenny responds to her open-ended remark by saying, "Yeah, that's true. I should . . . clear that up a little bit." Again, the teacher's thoughtful statement uncovers an idea that the student might not have previously considered and prompts the student to think about how to revise; similar to Shannon, Lenny does not formulate a plan for revision during this first read-through, but his response suggests that after thinking about Carol's feedback, he might be receptive to clarifying his claim. Both of these examples demonstrate how Carol's open-ended remarks about specific passages encourage these students to think critically about their texts. Notably, an additional analysis of

TABLE 5. Student Response Types Elicited by Teachers' Comments (Instances)

Category of Teacher Comment (Frequencies)	Subtype of Teacher Comment (Frequencies)	Students' Conversational Responses and Subtypes Elicited by Teacher Comments (Frequencies)	Students' Nonconversational Responses and Subtypes Elicited by Teacher Comments (Frequencies)
Conversational Comments (71)	Open-ended Question (51)	Conversational Responses (27) • Explanation of an idea (19) • Plan for revision (3) • Example of an idea (3) • Explanation of language choice (1) • Explanation of structural choice (1)	Nonconversational Responses (20) • Lack of Understanding (6) • Defense of Ideas (5) • Attempt to Understand (5) • Other (2) • Disregard due to Praise (1) • Unquestioned Agreement (1)
	Open-ended Statement (20)	Conversational Responses (9) • Explanation of an idea (4) • Explanation of structural choice (2) • Plan for revision (2) • Explanation of language choice (1)	Nonconversational Responses (9) • Attempt to Understand (3) • Lack of Understanding (2) • Unquestioned Agreement (1) • Defense of Ideas (1) • Disregard due to Praise (1) • Reference to Writing Process (1)
Nonconversational Comments (151)	Imperative Statement (63)	Conversational Responses (26) • Explanation of structural choice (9) • Plan for revision (6) • Explanation of an idea (5) • Example of an idea (4) • Explanation of language choice (2)	Nonconversational Responses (40) • Unquestioned Agreement (13) • Defense of Ideas (7) • Other (7) • Lack of Understanding (5) • Attempt to Understand (6) • Reference to Writing Process (1) • Submission to Authority (1)
	Critical Declarative Statement (49)	Conversational Responses (9) • Explanation of structural choice (5) • Explanation of language choice (3) • Explanation of an idea (1)	Nonconversational Responses (37) • Defense of Ideas (10) • Lack of Understanding (9) • Attempt to Understand (5) • Other (5) • Unquestioned Agreement (5) • Disregard due to Praise (2) • Submission to Authority (1)
	Brief (16)	Conversational Responses (0)	Nonconversational Responses (10) • Disregard due to Praise (5) • Lack of Understanding (1) • Attempt to Understand (1) • Defense of Ideas (1) • Submission to Authority (1) • Other (1)
	Closed Question (12)	Conversational Responses (7) • Explanation of language choice (4) • Example of an idea (1) • Explanation of an idea (1) • Plan for revision (1)	Nonconversational Responses (7) • Defense of Ideas (3) • Unquestioned Agreement (2) • Lack of Understanding (1) • Attempt to Understand (1)
	Symbol (11)	Conversational Responses (2) • Example of an idea (1) • Explanation of structural choice (1)	Nonconversational Responses (7) • Lack of Understanding (3) • Attempt to Understand (2) • Defense of Ideas (1) • Submission to Authority (1)

these students' revisions would be needed to assess whether they *actually* understand and can implement Carol's advice.

Imperative and Declarative Statements and Closed Questions Limit Students' Responses

The imperative statements, critical declarative statements, and closed questions from Carol elicit far more nonconversational responses from the students in this study (84 comments) than conversational responses (42 comments). The students' conversational responses include their discussions of structural choices, comments about language choices, and analyses of the ideas in their texts. The students' more common nonconversational responses to Carol's imperative and declarative statements and closed questions include defending their ideas despite the teacher's critiques, voicing unquestioned agreement with the teacher, and verbalizing a lack of understanding about the feedback. These findings suggest that imperative and declarative statements and closed questions encourage these students to provide limited answers about surface issues in their writing instead of analyzing and engaging with their claims. They tend to be protective of their prose by opposing the teacher, or they passively accept the teacher's suggestions. In some cases, they fail to understand the teacher's suggestions altogether.

Carol's imperative comments on these drafts tend to elicit dialogic remarks from the students about surface-level issues in the text; although engagement in structural discussions could encourage global revisions to the student's text, Carol's imperative comments tend to promote her students to make superficial changes to their texts. For example, in response to one of Lenny's body paragraphs, Carol imperatively instructs, "Add one example from the above text." To this remark, Lenny replies, "And I can do that when I delete it." His dialogic reply focuses on a simplistic surface-level change that he plans to make rather than demonstrating independent thinking about which example might fit best in his paragraph.

Similarly, Carol's critical declarative statements tend to be followed by conversational replies about superficial aspects of the students' texts, such as word choice. For instance, Carol tells Marie about her incorrect use of an apostrophe through a declarative statement, "MySpaces is plural, not possessive, so. . . ," and Marie responds dialogically by explaining her surface-level choice: "I just put it there." Marie's terse reaction provides a brief justification for her punctuation but fails to engage her in any thought about the punctuation rule itself. In a comparable way, when Carol declaratively critiques Nathan's use of a visual by saying, "It [the picture] doesn't seem necessary," Nathan curtly replies, "Well, I only did it because we had to do it as part of the project." Nathan's dialogic answer to Carol's disapproving declarative statement does little to advance his thoughts about revision; instead, her statement elicits a brief, somewhat dismissive remark from her student.

Like imperative and declarative statements, when closed questions are followed by conversational responses, the responses are typically about surface issues. For instance, Carol's directive question about Lenny's pronoun use, "Why did we move from a 'they' to 'you'?" prompts Lenny to reply, "Well, I don't know. I guess

I'll just write 'they' or 'he' or 'she' instead." The point he vocalizes about his word choice suggests that he understands Carol's indirect instruction but not that he comprehends *why* his use of "you" is problematic or should be changed. Carol's closed question limits Lenny's answer and forces him to make a specific decision about his pronouns. Perhaps Lenny would have benefited more from an open-ended explanation of personal pronoun use in academic texts.

In addition to responding to Carol's nonconversational remarks with conversational responses about surface issues, these students also tend to accept Carol's instructive or directive suggestions mechanically. When these students unthinkingly agree with their teacher, they tend to accept her opinion as "right" without analytically examining the feedback and perhaps without even understanding the suggestion. Melanie Sperling and Sarah Warshauer Freedman discuss this phenomenon in their case study of a student who willingly modifies her writing according to her teacher's comments because "You write to make the teacher happy" (357). Most likely, the students in the current study perceive agreement with Carol as a means of earning a higher grade on their revision. However, unquestioned agreement and submission to authority reflect a passive approach to reading a teacher's feedback rather than an active engagement with her suggestions. These students' agreement responses fail to reveal whether they actually concur with the teacher's opinions or even understand *why* or *how* to implement the advice. Thus, Carol's directive comments seem to prevent student writers from genuinely engaging with their own writing process and progress.

Students' acceptance of Carol's nonconversational advice often appears in the form of brief agreement that they will employ her recommended changes. For instance, Lenny reacts to more than one of Carol's imperative suggestions with "No problem" and "I can do that." He does not attempt to make sense of these comments but eagerly consents to changing his text to follow Carol's advice. When Carol writes, "More about why this is important, and new paragraph," Lenny replies, "No problem." During his initial reading of Carol's feedback, her instructive remark telling him to explain why his claim is relevant does not encourage him to come up with a better explanation. Instead, her directive comment discourages Lenny's engagement with his ideas. When Carol tells Lenny to cut out a sentence because it is "unnecessary," Lenny answers, "I will cut it out 'cause it's unnecessary." Whereas Carol's open-ended questions encourage Lenny to explain himself and examine his assertions, her imperative statements seem to promote his passive agreement. Closed questions also stimulate unquestioned agreement by Carol's students, as in the case of Lenny, who responds to Carol's question about what something means by saying, "I'll put that in parentheses and explain what it stands for." Carol's closed question encourages her student to consider a very limited surface change rather than understand a principle about writing—in this case, that clarity has broken down for some reason.

A few times, these students overtly acknowledge that they will employ Carol's suggestions simply because she is the teacher, and they want to satisfy her so they can earn a higher grade. For example, when Carol imperatively recommends

that Nathan explain why a particular claim is "obvious" to him, he responds, "I guess I'll just explain that or revise it. I don't have any other choice." This remark implies that Nathan, aware of Carol's control over his grade, would rather make her recommended changes than challenge her or ask her to explain her advice. Later, when Carol advises Nathan to change one of his words, he replies, "And I guess I'm not allowed to use 'you' in this paper." Nathan does not seem to concur with Carol's suggestions, but he is willing to make the modification to please his teacher, suggesting his passive role in his revision process. When Lenny claims that he will make the proposed changes "To kind of write for what I think the professors are going to want me to do," he too explicitly announces that he will do what Carol says to appease her.

To some of these students, making the changes Carol suggests serves the most immediate purpose—to improve one's grade. Like the students in Richardson's study, the participants in the current study accept what their teacher deems "the 'correct' way to write and [resist] the notion of making independent judgments about their writing" (117). This passive approach to revision reflects how imperative or critical comments stifle students' engagement in their writing process. Directive, abrasive remarks that deter students from actively questioning and critically analyzing teachers' comments actually contradict the productive theories underpinning portfolio class structures.

Related to conclusions by Sperling and Freedman, Straub, and Hayes and Daiker, imperative and critically declarative comments seem to incite confusion among Carol's students. For instance, in response to Nathan's ambiguous claim about consumers recognizing what automobile advertisements convey, Carol instructs, "Tell readers what we are supposed to realize." Carol's imperative instruction here perplexes Nathan, as he replies, "I just don't understand," and then voices some defensive points about his argument. This example shows that nonconversational, directive statements can be difficult to decode and can elicit defensive responses from students. This finding also indicates that Carol could have better explicated *how* Nathan might clarify his claim to strengthen his assertion.

Brief Comments and Symbols Limit Students' Engagement with Global Issues in Their Writing

Brief comments and symbols written on the student's text by the teacher rarely elicit conversational responses from these students (2 comments). In fact, on twelve occasions, these students do not respond orally to brief or symbolic comments at all and instead moved on to Carol's next written remark. In other cases, brief feedback and symbols are followed by more passive reactions from students, such as disregard of positive feedback (5 comments) and lack of understanding about the feedback (4 comments). Students' passive responses to Carol's brief remarks indicate that terse and vague comments fail to stimulate students' thinking or engagement with their writing. Also, brief positive comments, like "Good," tend to be followed by students ignoring or discounting the comment. Brief negative comments elicit unquestioned

agreement or confusion, as in the case of Lenny, whose response to Carol's brief comment, "Again, uncertainty," is, "And, I don't understand this." In this example, Lenny cannot make sense of Carol's incomplete thought, similar to the participants in Hayes and Daiker's study. Perhaps a complete sentence or fuller thought would improve his comprehension, which other scholars have argued (Straub "Concept").

During their interviews, some students openly voice their preference for specific, elaborated comments, as Nancy Sommers's and Straub's studies have reported. During his interview, Lenny explains why he finds Carol's comments helpful to his revision: "I know what her comments are being applied to. And she gives specific examples, then possible, like, alterations I can do." Lenny values when his teacher highlights the passages to which her comments refer and illustrates her suggestions. During her interview, Marie claims that she appreciates comments that are detailed and clear because they help her to revise more effectively. These comments indicate that students regard individualized, personal written remarks as more helpful than brief comments or unclear symbols.

Conclusion

The current study suggests that open-ended, cooperative suggestions on students' drafts can encourage writers to brainstorm, critically consider their ideas, and plan revisions, whereas imperative, critically directive, and closed remarks that instruct students to implement particular changes may stifle their active engagement in their writing process. During their speak-aloud sessions, the students in this study appear to *want* to discuss their writing with their teacher because they respond dialogically to *both* conversational and nonconversational comments from her. When Carol offered nonconversational feedback (151 comments), a substantial number of the student responses were conversational (44 responses or 29%), suggesting that even when Carol did not attempt to engage her students in a discussion, they sometimes replied dialogically. More importantly, when the teacher presented her feedback conversationally, her students responded in a conversational manner (71 comments) half of the time (36 responses or 51%), showing that more often than not her students accepted her invitation for dialogue. In short, if this teacher aspires to engage her students in conversation about their writing, she should be offering them as much conversational feedback as she can.

To collaborate with our students more effectively, we must teach students how to respond to our feedback more dialogically so that they do not unthinkingly accept our suggestions regardless of whether they agree with or understand them. Advancing more dialogue with students could involve redesigning our courses to include several rounds of metawriting from students alternating with feedback from peers and teachers throughout the drafting of each assignment. We might expect that students' metawriting in the beginning of a semester might be vague and somewhat passive; however, as they practice asking for specific feedback and analyzing readers' commentary, their dialogic turns should increasingly engage them more actively in examining their writing and responses to their writing.

Because our students read and pay attention to our written feedback, we must continuously reflect on and assess our feedback strategies, using tools like Yancey's "dialectical" (6) reflection process. This strategy could involve teachers setting objectives for response, analyzing and revising their responses recursively, and attempting to assess whether their commentary on students' drafts has enabled learning (6). Although this self-reflection can take many forms, explicitly involving students in assessing our feedback is a critical step in determining whether we have been effective. With our students, we must create detailed prompts that ask them to write or talk back to us about our response to their writing. By providing a valued space for students to pose questions and assert opinions about their writing and our feedback, we allow them to practice scrutinizing and contesting suggestions on their work. In short, we must ask students how we're doing when we respond to their writing. Most importantly, we must continue to study writing response using methodologies that examine the situated ways students read and use our feedback to provide greater insight into what the student interlocutors in writing response dialogue would like to add to a decades-long conversation.

APPENDIX A

What I want you to do as you're reading your teacher's comments on your paper is to think out loud. When I say "think out loud," I mean saying everything that comes into your head. To do this, you will read your teacher's comments out loud, say whether you understand them or not, if you agree with the comments or not, if you like the comments or think the comments are unhelpful, if you are offended by the comments or find them complimentary, and so on. Say anything you think; I will not tell your teacher, and I will never use your name.

Try to make a comment or two about every comment on your paper. Make sure that you don't say *what you're doing*, just *what you're thinking*. So, you wouldn't say, "I'm turning the page now." But you might say, "I think that this point is helpful because I didn't know if I had a thesis in my paper."

Let's try a practice task. Choose one of these simple math problems: 840/5, 840*5, or 840+573. As you solve this simple math problem, say everything that comes into your head. Do you need a pen or paper while you read your teacher's comments? Do you have any questions about this process? Let's begin.

Acknowledgment

I am very grateful to Jeff Sommers for detailed, engaged responses to my manuscript.

Notes

1. Several scholars support engaging students in active reflection on their writing and their teacher's feedback on their writing. Yancey's *Reflection in the Writing Classroom* encourages "reflection-in-action" (105), which requires students to answer questions about their writing and "allows the writer to establish

a dialogue between [teacher and student]" (115). Similar to Yancey's approach, Welch recommends that teachers and students reflect on the text in the margins of the paper, each taking separate turns and communicating back and forth in asynchronous conversations about the text. Carini's technique involves *oral* reflections about students' writing, requiring writers and readers to analyze the text together in real time. For various reasons, many instructors do not use these innovative strategies for engaging students in reflection on their writing and instead rely on the dominant model for responding to students' writing in which the teacher composes comments on the draft, and the student reads the feedback without responding back.

2. Although some have argued that oral response represents one way to offer students clearer and more readily implemented advice on their writing, the majority of composition instructors still use written response as their primary method of providing feedback. Because written response remains the dominant paradigm, this study attempts to determine how instructors can improve their written commentary.

3. All names have been changed.

4. To identify which student response categories Carol's comment types elicited, I counted the specific student responses that followed particular teacher comments, using context clues to determine which student response was associated with which teacher comment. In some cases, a single teacher comment elicited more than one student response. When teacher comments and student responses were ambiguously connected, I did not count the student responses. Table 5 thus reports clearly linked teacher comments and student responses to determine the patterns in these students' reactions to their teacher's written feedback.

Works Cited

Anson, Chris. "In Our Own Voices: Using Recorded Commentary to Respond to Writing." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 1997.69 (1997): 105–13. Print.

Brannon, Lil, and C. H. Knoblauch. "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response." *College Composition and Communication* 33.2 (1982): 157–66. Print.

Carini, Patricia. "Dear Sister Bess: An Essay on Standards, Judgement and Writing." *Assessing Writing* 1.1 (1994): 29–66. Print.

Elbow, Peter. "Ranking, Evaluating and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment." *College English* 55.2 (1993): 187–206. Print.

Ferris, Dana. "Student Views on Response." *Response to Student Writing: Implications for Second Language Students*. Ed. Dana Ferris. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003. 92–116. Print.

Fife, Jane Mathison, and Peggy O'Neill. "Moving beyond the Written Comment: Narrowing the Gap between Response Practice and Research." *College Composition and Communication* 53.2 (2001): 300–321. Print.

Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine, 1967. Print.

Hayes, Mary F., and Donald Daiker. "Using Protocol Analysis in Evaluating Responses to Student Writing." *Freshmen English News* 13.2 (1984): 1–10. Print.

Knoblauch, C. H., and Lil Brannon. *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*. Upper Montclair: Boynton/Cook, 1984. Print.

Mellen, Cheryl, and Jeff Sommers. "Audiotaped Response and the Two-Year-Campus Writing Classroom: The Two-Sided Desk, the 'Guy with the Ax,' and the Chirping Birds." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 31.1 (2003): 25–39. Print.

Prior, Paul. "Response, Revision, Disciplinarity: A Microhistory of a Dissertation Prospectus in Sociology." *Written Communication* 11.4 (1994): 483–533. Print.

Richardson, S. "Students' Conditioned Response to Teachers' Response: Portfolio Proponents, Take Note!" *Assessing Writing* 7.2 (2000): 117–41. Print.

Smagorinsky, Peter. "The Reliability and Validity of Protocol Analysis." *Written Communication* 6.4 (1989): 463–79. Print.

Sommers, Jeffrey. "The Effects of Tape-Recorded Commentary on Student Revision: A Case Study." *Journal of Teaching Writing* 8.2 (1989): 49–75. Print.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 33.2 (1982): 148–56. Print.

Sperling, Melanie, and Sarah Warshauer Freedman. "A Good Girl Writes Like a Good Girl: Written Response and Clues to the Teaching/Learning Process." *Written Communication* 4.4 (1987): 343–69. Print.

Still, Brian, and Amy Koerber. "Listening to Students: A Usability Evaluation of Instructor Commentary." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 24.2 (2010): 206–33. Print.

Straub, Richard. "The Concept of Control in Teacher Response: Defining the Varieties of Directive and Facilitative Commentary." *College Composition and Communication* 47.2 (1996): 223–51. Print.

———, ed. *A Sourcebook on Responding to Student Writing*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2000. Print.

———. "Students' Reactions to Teacher Comments: An Exploratory Study." *Research in Teaching English* 31.1 (1997): 91–120. Print.

Welch, Nancy. "Sideshadowing Teacher Response." *College English* 60.4 (1998): 374–95. Print.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Logan: Utah State UP, 1998. Print.

Diana Lin Awad Scrocco is a doctoral candidate at Kent State University in the Literacy, Rhetoric, and Social Practice program, where she studies professional rhetoric and literate practices in a medical setting.

Call for Editor: *WPA*

The Council of Writing Program Administrators is seeking the next editor or editorial team for its official journal, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. The term is for three years, with possibility for renewal, with work beginning in Fall 2013; the new editor or editorial team will work with the current editorial team to publish content already in development for Volume 37.2 (Spring 2014), and will have full responsibility for content and production beginning with Volume 38 (Fall/Winter 2014 and Spring 2015).

Interested applicants should have the following qualifications: publications and expertise in the field of writing program administration and related areas; knowledge of the issues that have preoccupied the field, both historically and in the recent past; familiarity with the journal, an understanding of the role the journal plays in the field, and a vision for the journal's future; current membership in and a history of involvement with CWPA; strong editorial and organizational skills; and prior editorial and reviewing experience. We especially encourage applications from prospective editorial teams.

To apply, please submit an application letter explaining why you are qualified for this position and describing any resources or support your institution(s) will be able to provide (released time, secretarial support, startup funds, etc.) as well as resources you will request from CWPA. Applicants should also submit a current c.v. for each member of the prospective editorial team. If you are proposing an editorial team, please explain how you will work together on editing and production of the journal. Upon request, additional information about editorial responsibilities and workflow, journal finances, and production timelines will be made available to prospective editors. Address queries to Rita Malenczyk, Chair of the WPA Journal Editor Search Committee, at malenczykr@easternct.edu.

Send the application electronically as attached files to Rita Malenczyk, malenczykr@easternct.edu. **Deadline: September 1, 2012.** Members of the Search Committee will be available for phone consultations with prospective editors/editorial teams. We hope to finalize an agreement with the new editorial team no later than February 1, 2013.