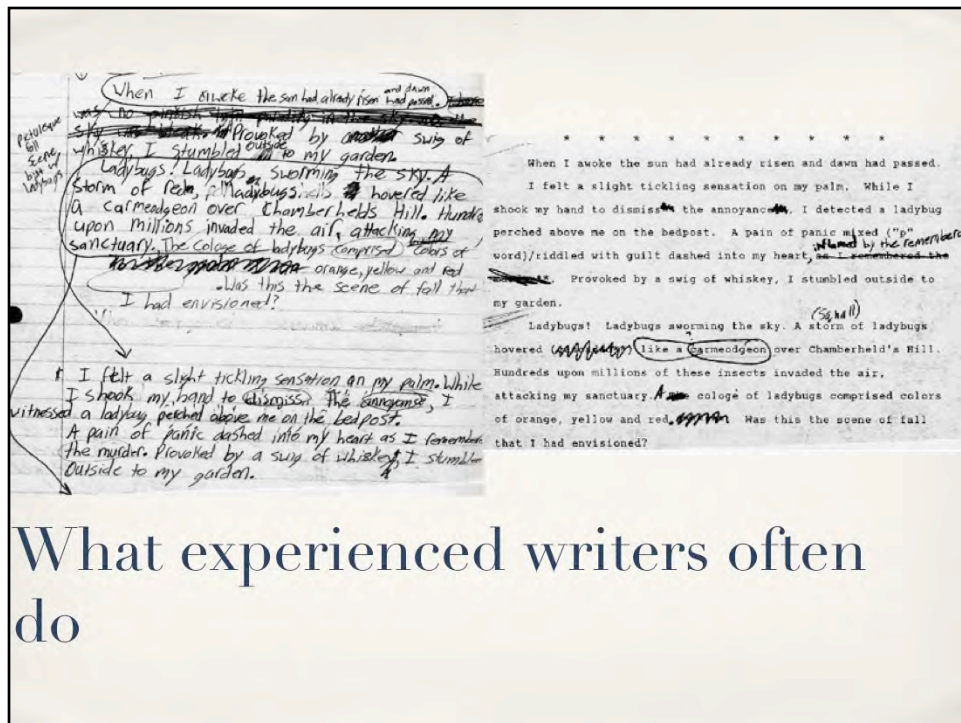# Responding to Student Writing

Some data and a conversation

2-20-13 ISLAS Presentation, mary Adler

This PowerPoint was part of an ISLAS presentation on Responding to Student Writing. Presenter notes are included below key slides.

For questions, feel free to contact Mary Adler at mary.adler@csuci.edu.

What experienced writers often do

Experienced writers make global (paragraph and multi-paragraph) changes while keeping an eye on the local (sentence-level) impact and needs.

They also keep track of their purpose and craft their writing for a specific audience, making changes in tone, content, and word choice to accomplish this.

What novice writers often do

> "In this compoysition, I define the young people as persons whose age is up to about my age and the old people as persons whose age is about my parents' age or who are members of the society. I will tell the difference between young people and old people, which is based on my experience and people around me, and which is focused by me as a young people."
>
> *through my eyes*

Novice writers tend to focus on the local (sentence level) and within that small space, they do three things: add words, take out words or phrases, and replace words with others.

Deleting is painful and usually only at the word level.

Novice writers may be unaware of their audience and somewhat vague about their purpose for writing.

What teachers often do
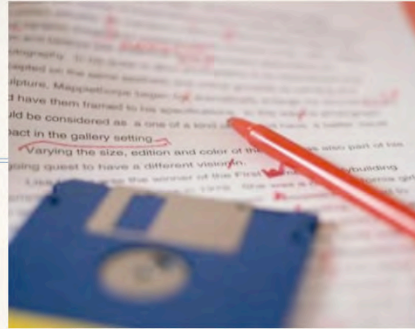
- Teachers "respond primarily to mechanics, language usage, grammar, and word choice as they mark student papers…

- the comments are usually on the students' final written products…

- In sum, students receive surface comments on their final products with their final grade" (Olson & Raffeld, 1987).

Research tells us that teachers tend to avoid substantive feedback and tend to comment on final drafts, rather than work-in-progress.

Consequently, students do not have a reason to use the feedback, because no revision is expected.

What students think about what teachers often do

A college study found that 89% of comments from teachers referenced errors or problems

- Teachers respond to my writing to tell me what I'm doing wrong.

- Responding to my teacher's comments helps me to get a better grade.

- I know my teacher wants me to [clarify, explain, etc.], but I don't know how to do it.

Here are some typical quotes from students when asked about their teachers' comments on their written work.

What can we do?

❖ Jot down a couple of ways that have worked for you in responding to student writing.

❖ Bring them up as we go along!

Think about how you respond to students' writing. What works? Where are you taking extra time without seeing benefits? (or worse, where might comments be negatively influencing students' feeling about writing in your course?)

We can adjust the timing of feedback

One key thing teachers can do is to adjust when they give feedback. Look at the image on the left. An artist (or writer) is likely willing to make a change there, when everything is still in flux and the motivation to keep shaping the piece is there. In the image at the right, we see a finished draft. Students may be willing to add a left here or take out a cloud there, but most are not going to move a tree or shift a mountain.

We can provide comments that...

- are specific and focused,

- tell why a change needs to be made,

- are non-judgmental,

- are positive in tone.

These are the kinds of feedback that students have told us are most helpful. "Good job!" is just as unhelpful as "needs work." Often phrasing your suggestions as a question will help. For example, rather than "unclear," try, "I am having trouble finding your thesis. What are you arguing here?"

A teacher reflects...

- "I learned that many of my comments were too vague. Terms such as "explain further," "more details needed," "too vague," or "develop idea" were foreign to many students. I learned that they need to be shown not only what needs to be improved in an essay, but also how to do it. Even though they understood the concept that they needed to add more details to their essays, I had not shown them examples of how they could successfully do that. A targeted comment such as, "Can you also include Romeo's view here?" usually will work better for a student than simply writing "develop" in the margin. One student told me later, "I don't know what you mean by clarify!" (Bardine, Bardine & Deegan).

This teacher's comments show us why a specific question is better than a vague comment like "explain further." If the student had known how to explain further, he/she probably would have done so already. So, how can they explain further? What else do you need to know? Peer feedback is super helpful here too.

Talk Back: Ask students to answer questions about your marks: (Yancey)

✤ a) What did the teacher like about your paper?

✤ b) What did the teacher suggest you change?

✤ c) What questions do you have about the comments? *or* What plans do you have now?

Kathleen Yancey suggests that when we return papers on which we have taken time to mark comments, we should give students a brief assignment that ensures that they will read and think about our comments. On this slide are three sample questions that you might ask.

Peer conferences can be great tools. This slide offers ways to selectively use them. Students seem to benefit more when the class has an explicit discussion before the conferences about their purpose and what readers and writers should do (and should avoid, like marking for error). Marking for error is not advised because often students compound the errors when they peer edit.

If you are concerned about student error, better to group the students by common error and have them work together to focus on just that one error. Or, teach a brief lesson on the error and have them take their own time to find the errors and fix them. Or, identify the type of error you are seeing, and ask the student to go to the writing center for help with that particular problem.

"Keeping Students at the Center"

+ Identifies student/faculty conferencing as a useful tool

+ Discusses diversity within second language learners and within student responses to feedback

+ Encourages students to try identifying their own errors (you confirm or provide suggestions or the rule)

+ Shows the "shaming" effect of over-correcting papers

The article referred to is called Building Editing Skills: Putting Students at the Center of the Editing Process, by Robin Murie. Published in **NEW DIRECTIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING, no. 70, Summer 1997. Available at the CSUCI Library.**