

Instructor Comments on Student Papers: Student Perspectives
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Abstract

In this study, I investigated how first-year writing students at a large Midwestern university responded to instructor comments on their papers. The research questions included: How do students understand comments? How do students move to revision based on these comments and what influences the process of revising? Although I am still in the process of analyzing the extensive data that I collected, results indicate that multiple variables are at play—many of which impacted the revision process. Notable among these was the frequency of confusion over comments and the preoccupation with “what the teacher wants.” Further, student interviews revealed significant learning and knowledge-making—of the kind we highly value in our field—that did not necessarily appear in their final drafts.

Summary

Subjects included 47 students from 12 different sections of a first-year writing course. I collected rough drafts with instructor comments, and final, revised drafts of the same papers. Students were interviewed twice, once right after they had received comments and again after they had completed their final drafts. In both interviews, students were asked to share their understanding of each comment and explain what they planned to do. In the second interview, students considered what they actually revised and what influenced revisions.

Perhaps the biggest issue was the challenge of coding, which the research team and I often felt missed the complexity and richness of what students were thinking about (and learning) as they worked.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Although I collected demographic data from students, I recommend that future studies involve more extensive research into what students bring to the task of revising their work. Data might include factors in students’ background and dispositions that contribute to student efficacy or that impact student attitudes both toward writing and toward their education in general.