

**Written feedback and revision:  
Some data from a L1 writing class**

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**Abstract**

Commenting on student writing is generally considered to hold a central place in both first (L1) and second language (L2) writing pedagogy. However, despite several decades of research on feedback and response, our understanding of its complex nature is still far from complete, which is due in part to methodological flaws that have made it difficult to compare results across studies. The present study aims to address this by applying a well-developed analytical framework to teacher comments and student revisions collected from a university L1 composition course in the United States. Comments were analyzed according to a framework that included length, textual referent, focus, mode, and salience; revisions were analyzed according to uptake and success. This analysis revealed both general patterns and a substantial amount of variation in the types of comments that the teacher provided as well as the revisions that followed those comments. Some of this variation was clearly associated with contextual factors such as mode of delivery (handwritten versus online commentary), sequencing of assignments and drafts, and individual student factors. It is concluded that teachers may comment more effectively by addressing a limited number of issues on any given draft in greater depth. Moreover, future research on commentary may benefit from both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Key words: composition, commentary, feedback, response, revision

**INTRODUCTION**

Responding to what individual students write is widely assumed to hold a central place in writing pedagogy. In both first (L1) and second language (L2) composition, books which aim to prepare teachers for writing courses regularly devote an entire chapter to instructor feedback (see, for example, Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; and White, 1994). Indeed, some writers, such as Straub (1999), have gone as far as to assert that responding to students' writing is the single most important aspect of what writing teachers do. Certainly there is widespread agreement that providing feedback is by far the most time-consuming and challenging task that instructors face. Moreover, despite early research which seriously questioned the usefulness of feedback in improving student writing (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985), interest in commentary has remained, and has motivated several distinct and productive lines of inquiry. Straub (1997) notes that

a theory of response is emerging, and research in composition is beginning to show what teachers have long suspected, hoped, or assumed: that students read and make use of teacher comments and that well-designed teacher comments can help students develop as writers. (p. 91)

The present study aims to extend this research by applying a well developed analytical model to teacher comments and student revisions collected from a L1 composition course at a large, state research university in the western United States. In addition to examining how students responded to different kinds of comments in their subsequent

revisions, I also examine how comments and revisions varied according to specific contextual factors (student, assignment and draft, mode of delivery). In short, this study investigates both the immediate effects of feedback and, more broadly, the dynamic interrelationship between feedback and its pedagogical context.

## BACKGROUND

Much of the research investigating written response falls into one of four categories: studies of the comments themselves, studies of the relationship between feedback and revision, studies of student responses to commentary, and error correction studies. Most relevant to the present investigation, however, are those which fall into the first two categories. Studies of commentary have typically collected large numbers of comments and subjected them to linguistic and rhetorical analyses. In a pair of companion articles, Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) and Sommers (1982) presented data from a study of 35 L1 writing teachers. Zamel (1985) used the same design with L2 writing teachers. All of these studies found that teachers focused mainly on form in their comments, that they made comments which were not text specific, that they often misinterpreted students' writing, and that they often "appropriated" it by taking control based on their own ideas about what the draft should look like. In a much more extensive study, Connors and Lunsford (1993) analyzed the comments of three hundred teachers on single drafts. They reported that teachers' comments rarely offered unqualified praise of students' writing, tending instead to focus overwhelmingly on problems and deficits.

More recent studies have built on these earlier efforts by developing increasingly fine-grained analytical frameworks for coding and categorizing comments. In a study of eight teachers of a pre-college writing course, for example, Anson (1989) proposed a framework of responding styles reflective of teachers' educational ideologies: dualistic, relativistic, and reflective. He suggested that reflective response is the most balanced and facilitative of writers' development. Studies by Sperling (1994) and Ferris et al. (1997) both looked at the comments of single teachers across time. In her study of a high school English teacher, Sperling (1994) employed categories which identified the teacher's readerly orientation, thus capturing the ways in which the teacher's comments constructed different experiences for different students. Ferris et al. (1997) collected a L2 writing instructor's written comments over an academic year, categorized them according to linguistic form and rhetorical focus, and then analyzed patterns that occurred across time, assignments, and students. Similarly, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) demonstrated how teacher comments varied according to student level and educational context (for example, university versus intensive English program).

Straub and colleagues (Straub, 1996, 1999, 2000; Straub & Lunsford, 1995) have examined and analyzed the commenting styles of well-known L1 composition scholars. Straub and Lunsford (1995) solicited comments from twelve compositionists on a set of twelve student compositions. They collected some 3,500 comments, which they then analyzed via a two-part framework consisting of "focus" and "mode." Straub extended this project through further analysis (Straub, 1996) and discussion of implications for teaching (Straub, 1999). He also collected and analyzed commented-upon drafts from the actual

classes of a second group of composition scholars alongside drafts from one of his own courses (Straub, 2000). Among the most striking findings of this research is the enormous variety of commenting styles exhibited by these experienced and innovative teachers. Comments varied widely in length, placement, tone, and focus. Nevertheless, some important commonalities emerged: all responders were selective about the issues they chose to address, and all were careful to leave at least some of the responsibility for deciding how to revise in the hands of the student writers. Based on this work, Straub (1996) has questioned the dichotomy between “facilitative” and “controlling” comments first proposed by Brannon and Knoblauch (1982), suggesting that all teacher commentary by its very nature is controlling to some degree. He has also proposed that effective commentary addresses not only the writing, but the writer as well, taking into account his or her overall development within the context of a course.

Studies examining the relationship between feedback and revision have typically employed experimental treatments or *post hoc* designs. Early experimental studies in L1 composition (Beach, 1979; Hillocks, 1982) looked at the effects of various feedback treatments on high school and junior high school students’ subsequent revisions. This research found that students who received feedback turned in higher quality revisions than students who did not, and that more specific comments led to better revisions as determined through holistic ratings of revised drafts. Continuing in this vein, Beason (1993) examined the first and final drafts of students in four university-level writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) courses using a detailed set of rubrics to capture the aims and criteria underlying the comments as well as the extent and focus of students’ revisions. He found that although students addressed over 90% of teachers’ comments, there were notable discrepancies between the criteria implied in the comments and those reflected in the revisions. For example, in response to a comment focusing on organization, a student might make a stylistic revision.

In L2 composition, Fathman and Whalley’s quasi-experimental study (1990) is the earliest attempt to link teacher feedback and revision. This study employed four treatment groups (no feedback, content-only feedback, grammar-only feedback, and feedback on content and grammar), and found that while all four groups showed significant improvement upon revision, the two groups that received content feedback improved substantially more than the others. Fathman and Whalley thus concluded that content-oriented feedback is important, but that it may not be necessary for teachers to separate content issues from grammar in their comments. This finding is supported by Ashwell’s (2000) study, which compared groups that received either content-focused feedback first, followed by form-focused feedback, or vice versa. Ashwell found no significant difference between the two groups (although it should also be pointed out that he found no significant improvement in the quality of the final drafts).

Other studies have preserved the relationship between specific comments and changes in subsequent drafts. Conrad and Goldstein (1999) collected comments from the writing of three ESL students over a semester and categorized them according to the typology developed by Ferris et al. (1997), and according to revision (successful or unsuccessful). Conrad and Goldstein did not correlate comment type with revision; however, they did find

that while students revised in response to teacher feedback over 80% of the time, more than one-third of their revisions were unsuccessful. Ferris's (1997) study of the comments of one teacher across two school terms reports a similarly complex picture. She found that longer, text-specific comments were more likely to lead to substantive, positive revisions, and that the majority of comments were followed by positive revisions. However, 34% of the comments were followed by revisions that had a negative effect on the quality of the draft. Finally, in an unpublished study, Bond (2003) analyzed comments and revisions for a formal business report assigned in three sections of a content course. He found that directive comments (or comments that suggested a strategy for revision) and salience (the number of times a comment was stated) significantly correlated with successful revision.

It has been pointed out (Ferris, 2003) that despite several decades of research on feedback in both L1 and L2 contexts, our understanding of the nature of feedback and of the types of feedback that contribute most consistently to the improvement of student writing and to students' development as writers, is still far from complete. More critically, it has been argued (for example, Bond, 2003) that much of the research on response has suffered from methodological flaws that have made it difficult to compare results across studies: coding schemes for comments have either been too broad to reveal any useful patterns, or have been too complex to be easily replicated; the relationship between specific comments and revisions has not been maintained or has been reported in imprecise terms; and the pedagogical context for writing has not been adequately accounted for. The present study, while limited in scope, aims to address these issues by applying a well-developed and replicable coding scheme to comments and drafts gathered from a single pedagogical context. The research questions are as follows:

1. How did comments vary from draft to draft?
2. How did comments vary from student to student?
3. How did students respond to comments in their revisions, and how did these responses vary across drafts and students?

## **METHOD**

### **Context**

The comments analyzed here were collected during the winter of 2004 from one section of a first-year (L1) composition course at a large, state research university in the western United States. The section was one of some thirty sections of the course, which itself was one of several courses that could be used to fulfill a university-wide writing requirement. As with the other sections, this section was taught by a graduate student teaching assistant completing a PhD in the English Department. Twenty-one students were registered for the course, seventeen of whom were native speakers of English. The remaining four were native speakers of Georgian, Korean, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. Five of the students were in their second year at the university, while the others were in their first.

The course employed a portfolio-based approach to writing instruction and assessment. During the term, students completed three assignment sequences, each of which

followed the same pattern: a written response to a primary reading, usually conducted as an asynchronous online discussion activity; a first draft, in which students were asked to apply the primary reading to another text, issue, set of observations, and so forth; and finally, a second draft. For these assignment sequences, a numbering scheme was used which will also be used herein to refer to students' drafts: the first stage of the first sequence was designated 1.1, the second stage 1.2, and so on. Thus, for example, the second stage (first full draft) of the third assignment will be referred to as 3.2. Students received no grades on their writing during the quarter. Rather, they were required to choose two of their second drafts (1.3, 2.3, or 3.3) to revise further and submit in a portfolio of all their written work for the quarter. They were then graded on the two final revisions, and on a reflective cover letter written to accompany the portfolio.

Students received commentary from the teacher (and from each other) at all stages of each assignment sequence. In the present analysis, however, I only consider the teacher's written comments on full-fledged drafts (that is, 1.2, 1.3, 2.2, 2.3, 3.2, and 3.3) because these afforded the opportunity of direct comparison with subsequent revisions. The mode of delivery for the comments is also worth noting. For the first sequence (1.2 and 1.3), comments were handwritten in the margins and at the end of each draft. For the second sequence, the teacher began experimenting with online submissions. She had students post their 2.2 drafts in an online review area with a commenting function which could be used to add comments alongside the drafts. For 2.3 and 3.2, she typed comments directly into students' electronically submitted documents. Then for 3.3, she decided to return to handwritten comments. As will be shown, these differences in delivery were associated with clear patterns in the comments, particularly those for drafts 2.2 and 2.3.

## **Subjects**

Fifteen students consented to have their drafts copied. From these, I chose a subsample of four students for the present analysis. The corpus thus included twenty-four commented-upon drafts, which yielded a total of 1091 comments. Subjects, who are referred to by pseudonyms, were chosen primarily based on their final grade in the course: Frank received the second highest grade in the class; Katia received the lowest; Dennis and Elizabeth received grades at just above the mean for the class. In addition, subjects were chosen to balance other background factors roughly according to the proportions of the whole class: two males and females, one second-year student (Frank), and one non-native English speaker (Katia, whose native language was Georgian).

## **Coding Framework**

The first stage of analysis was to separate the teacher's written feedback into single comments. Following Bond (2003), I defined a single comment as a unit of feedback which focused on a single aspect of a text and had a single focus and mode (see below). In the majority of cases, comment divisions corresponded to sentence boundaries. There was, however, a sizable number of instances in which sentence boundaries were unclear or there was a shift to a new focus and/or mode within a sentence. The following is an example:

You need a transition into quote awk shift who is this talking? (Katia, 1.2)<sup>1</sup>

This was coded as three separate comments: “You need a transition into quote,” “awk shift,” and “who is this talking?” All of the comments refer to the lack of a transition introducing a quote in the student’s draft. However, each has a different mode (defined below): the first is a command, the second a criticism, and the third a closed question. Less common were single comments which contained more than one sentence, such as the following from the same draft:

Long quote should be Block Qt. See MLA guidelines in course pack and/or Handbook. (Katia, 1.2)

This was coded as a single comment because both of the sentences refer to the same aspect of the text, and because the focus (correctness) and mode (command) are the same.

**Table 1**  
**Coding Categories**

Length	Textual Referent	Focus	Mode	Salience	Revision
Number of words	Located	Correctness	Correction	1X	Uptake
		Style	Criticism	2X	Success
	Organization	Qualified Criticism	3X		
	Content	Praise	4X		
	Context	Command	5X		
		Advice	6X		
		Closed Question	7X		
		Open Question			
			Reflective Statement		

After being divided into single units, comments were then coded according to the categories listed in Table 1. As will become clear, some of the coding categories (especially length and textual referent) are relatively objective whereas others (especially focus and mode) are more subjective, requiring interpretation on the part of the coder. Because it wasn’t feasible to use outside coders, I coded all comments myself, which must inevitably be seen as a limitation of the study. I have attempted to partially address this issue by presenting

<sup>1</sup>Citations following comments refer to the student and draft on which the the comment was written. In transcribing comments, I have maintained the teacher’s abbreviations, as well as her idiosyncratic punctuation and spelling. I have not, however, attempted to represent line breaks, which in some cases helped to clarify comment divisions. In this particular instance, for example, “awk shift” was on a separate line, thus reinforcing its interpretation as a single comment.

examples which demonstrate my own coding processes. In what follows, the codes within each category are defined and illustrated with samples from the corpus.

### *Length*

Length simply refers to the number of words contained in a comment. Abbreviations, acronyms, and symbols used to stand for words (such as “&”) were counted as single words. Punctuation and other symbols (arrows, underlining, and so forth) were not included in word counts. Editing marks unaccompanied by words or phrases (such as a strike-through) were counted as comments with zero words if they could be analyzed according to the other categories in the framework.

### *Textual Referent*

Textual referent (Bond, 2003) refers to whether a comment is “located” or “non-located.” Located comments were those that responded to an identifiable part of a draft (a sentence, paragraph, or section); non-located comments addressed the draft as a whole or the writer. In general, marginal comments were coded as located and end comments as non-located. There were, however, a few exceptions to this pattern, as in the following comment taken from among the end comments on a draft:

Also, your conclusion points to topics you did not cover, though they would be good examples I imagine. (Frank, 1.2)

This comment was coded as located because it clearly refers to a specific paragraph of the draft. At the beginning of another draft, the teacher wrote:

Where’s your writer’s response? (Dennis, 1.3)

This comment referred to a part of the assignment (separate from the draft itself) that the writer had not completed. Thus, it was coded as non-located.

### *Focus*

Focus (Straub, 2000) refers to the content of the comment—the type of issue that the teacher is attempting to point out in the student’s writing. As such, it includes categories that are generally considered to be important in teaching and evaluating writing, ranging from surface-level concerns (correctness, style), to the arrangement and development of ideas within a text (organization, content), and finally issues extending beyond the draft (context). Comments coded as “correctness” focused on grammar and mechanics, as well as formal conventions of paragraphing, formatting, and citation:

Fragment (Dennis, 1.3)

Article needed—a (Katia, 3.2)

Put image before Works Cited. (Elizabeth, 1.3)

Comments on word choice were coded as correctness if they indicated that a word was used incorrectly, as when Katia used the word “revealed” in her 2.3 when the sentence clearly called for “exposed.” “Style” designates comments on wording and structure within and between sentences, including word choice comments that focused on appropriacy (for

example, “colloq.”), as well as comments that asked the student to be more specific within a sentence:

Awk (Elizabeth, 3.2)

which is what? Explicit (Frank, 1.3)

How is this sentence a result of the earlier sentence? (Katia, 2.3)

“Organization” and “content” refer, respectively, to the overall arrangement of a text and its substance. Comments which focused on the thesis of a draft, its unity and coherence, its introduction or conclusion, were coded as organization:

Your intro is very interesting—though you will have to revise as your arg. changes. (Dennis, 1.2)

Your conclusion is not rhetorically doing what it needs to be doing here. (Frank, 2.2)

This should go just after you provide the example as evidence. (Katia, 2.3)

Give us signposts to tie together what aspects of lang you are examining, like here. (Elizabeth, 1.2)

Comments dealing with the ideas presented in a draft—its argument, development, support, and examples—were coded as content:

Great evidence here! (Frank, 2.3)

So are you claiming that language is being used to divide in this case? How so? (Katia, 2.3)

The final focus category, “context,” designates comments focusing on issues that extend beyond the draft. They may address the writer’s purposes, processes, experience, or development; they may also address the writing assignment, the draft as a whole, or the writer’s work in the course:

I suggest a visit to the writing center if you revise this essay. (Dennis, 1.3)

You seem to have a habit of writing a good first part and then not finishing at the end... (Elizabeth, 2.3)

Also look to assignment to be clear about requirements. (Katia, 1.2)

In keeping with Straub’s (2000) definition, comments which dealt with voice, tone, and audience were also coded as context, as were comments which referred to the activities, interactions, and other circumstances of the course:

Adjust your tone for your audience. (Frank, 2.2)

Good tone for this type of paper. (Dennis, 3.3)

I won’t say much on the rest of the intro since we workshopped it in class already. (Katia, 3.2)

During the coding process, context also became something of a catch-all category for comments which did not easily fit into one of the other categories. For example:



Up until you ask the final questions, this final paragraph is reminiscent of a movie review from Siskel and Ebert...thus opinion. (Frank, 2.2)

This particular comment seems to address word choice and sentence structure within the paragraph (that is, style) as well as tone. In cases like this, I made context the default category.

### *Mode*

Whereas focus refers to the content of a comment, mode refers to its form. For this study I have adopted Straub's (2000) scheme of analysis, which is a refinement of that used by Straub and Lunsford (1995). In defining mode, Straub (2000) argues:

First, the form of a comment strongly influences how the comment functions and what it comes to mean. Second, the form of a comment is not enough: any analysis of how a comment functions must consider, in addition, its voice and content—and the fact that the statement is made by a teacher to a student, with all the power relations that conventionally adhere in a such a classroom situation. Third, the meaning and control implied by any given comment may be influenced by the surrounding comments. (p. 79)

Although other studies have analyzed the linguistic form (such as mood) and function (such as “asking for information”) of teacher comments, the categories employed have either been too broad to yield significant differences among categories (for example, Bond, 2003), or too unwieldy, making them difficult to replicate and resulting in areas of overlap between categories (Ferris, 1997; Ferris et al., 1997). Straub's scheme is more appropriate for analyzing teacher comments because it aims to capture in detail the ways in which comments enact various student-teacher relationships (Straub, 2000). It is also aimed at practicing teachers and so is designed to make intuitive sense and to be easy to use. At the same time, as examples from the corpus demonstrate, this specificity may come at the expense of reliability in coding comments.

The nine mode categories (see Table 1) vary according to the level of control they exert over the draft and the student's writing. Among the most controlling are “corrections,” “criticism,” and “commands.” Corrections refer to comments in which the teacher simply changes the student's text by crossing a part out, replacing it with another, or inserting a word, phrase, or punctuation mark. Comments consisting solely of editing marks were generally coded as corrections. Criticism is closely related to correction in that it points out a clear problem in the writing. Correction symbols such as “awk” or “wc” (for “word choice”) were generally coded as criticism. However, whereas corrections usually had a correctness or style focus, criticism could also address content. For example:

Assumes people think these labels are cool or macho (weak warrant) (Frank, 1.2)

A sizable number of comments like this one pointed out problems with the assumptions underpinning the arguments of a given draft, and so were coded as criticism with a content focus. Finally, commands are comments in which the teacher tells the student directly to change something about the writing. As with corrections and criticism, commands most often focused on correctness and style, though they could focus on other areas as well. The following examples focus on organization and content respectively:

tell us that is your plan (Dennis, 2.2)

Connect this quote to your arg... (Elizabeth, 2.3)

Commands did not necessarily have to be in the imperative; they could also be coded as commands if they used modal verbs sufficiently strong enough to give them the force of a command, for example:

You need to cite after each qt and usage. (Frank, 3.3)

Comments which exert a lesser degree of control than those described above include “qualified criticism,” “advice,” “closed questions,” and “praise.” Comments coded as qualified criticism pointed to problems in students’ drafts, but softened the criticism in some way, for example by inserting a hedge or by signalling the teacher’s subjectivity:

This section seems very colloq and contrived (Katia, 3.2)

I am not convinced that this paragraph supports this as you say here (Frank, 3.3)

Comments coded as advice clearly suggested changes but also put some of the choice for making the change in the hands of the student:

This is a good spot for evidence, otherwise it looks like opinion. (Dennis, 2.2)

You may even find E&M useful to your discussion, since you are looking at a community of practice as well. (Elizabeth, 2.2)

Closed questions were those comments which, though cast in the form of a question, implied a criticism of the writing or that a change needed to be made:

Where is your Works Cited? (Katia, 2.3)

So what does this mean for your arg? (Frank, 3.3)

Comments were also coded as closed questions if they asked for information that the writer could be assumed to have:

Are you focusing on marathoners only? or Runners in general? (Dennis, 1.2)

Finally, praise refers to comments which presented a positive judgement of the draft. These comments were moderately controlling in that although they rarely suggested specific changes to a draft, they implied that the student was doing something right (and often that she ought to do more of it):

much better explanation in this draft. (Dennis, 1.3)

These qts serve as good evidence which you can develop further (Elizabeth, 3.2)

Good source of evidence to situate your discussion in classic rhetoric (Frank, 3.2)

Comments which exert the least amount of control over a draft include “open questions” and “reflective statements.” Open questions asked the writer to consider some issue (such as a counter-argument) but left the responsibility for deciding whether and how to change the text largely in his hands:

Who decides what is considered “logical”? (Frank, 3.3)

Could it also be an example of code-switching due to exposure to certain phrases growing up? (Elizabeth, 2.3)

The difference between open and closed questions was not always entirely clear. In some cases, the specific context (especially the comments immediately before and after) provided clues to whether a comment should be coded as an open or closed question. For example:

How are skiers a comm of practice? (Frank, 1.2)

Tell us connect to E&M (Frank, 1.2)

Without the command immediately following it (which tells the student to demonstrate how he is using the primary reading), the first comment would perhaps be difficult to categorize as either open or closed. In this context, however, it is clearly closed. At other times, though, such context was not present. Consider the following comments written at separate points on a draft:

How does this qt connect to your main argument? (Dennis, 2.2)

Do you have any sources to situate your claims about the German history to strengthen your point? (Dennis, 2.2)

Here the first comment was coded as a closed question, the second as an open question. In the first comment, the tone of criticism and need for the text to be changed is much more clearly implied. The second comment seems to suggest that the student *could* improve the text by making a specific change, but leaves that decision up to him. In coding questions, I made open questions the default category. That is, if it couldn't be readily determined which category a question belonged in, it was coded as open.

The final mode category, reflective statement, is also something of a catch-all category in that it includes all statements that are not overtly directive in some way, such as comments in which the teacher attempted to describe or interpret the draft, to act as a responsive reader, or to offer information or encouragement. For example:

so it looks like you will look at dialogue in this movie to make your arg...(Dennis, 2.2)

This doesn't look like a definition of this term... (Frank, 1.3)

For further discussion of this, there are plenty of linguistic studies about the /r issue for Korean and Japanese language speakers. (Frank, 2.2)

With revision, I can see this paper making a good argument that looks to the gaps in LG's argument. (Dennis, 2.2)

Also included in this category were those comments which explained earlier comments. The following two consecutive comments were coded as command and reflective statement respectively:

Transition needed here...(Dennis, 2.2)

You go into a scene without context (Dennis, 2.2)

### *Salience*

Salience (Bond, 2003) refers to the number of times the same piece or aspect of a text is commented on. For example, at the end of one paragraph, the teacher wrote the following two comments:

Connect to claim. (Elizabeth, 1.3)

Looks like categorizing within groups. (Elizabeth, 1.3)

Although these comments are clearly separate in terms of mode (the first is a command, the other a reflective statement), they both refer to the fact that the specific details within the paragraph are not tied explicitly to the main claim (thesis statement) of the draft. Hence, the first comment was coded as 1X, the second as 2X. Both located and non-located comments could be coded for salience of 2X or more.

### *Revision*

The scheme for coding revisions looked at each revision as a response to a specific comment (or set of comments) and analyzed it for its effect on the draft in terms of the issue addressed by the comment. Although many studies of commentary (for example, Paulus, 1999) have employed more detailed taxonomies for categorizing revisions, this has not yielded specific information on the effects of those revisions on drafts (Ferris, 2003). Moreover, because a principle aim of this study is to tie individual comments (and, by implication, particular comment types) to the presence or absence of revision, and because the coding taxonomy for the comments themselves is relatively complex, it is important to keep the coding of revisions as simple as possible. Highly interpretive categories on both sides of the feedback-revision cycle would seriously undermine the internal validity of the study.

The scheme used here is Bond's (2003) adaptation of Lyster's (1998) method of coding verbal uptakes. All comments on those drafts which were subsequently revised<sup>2</sup> were coded for uptake if they were followed by a revision. Uptakes were further analyzed as successful or unsuccessful. Successful uptakes were those revisions which addressed the issue identified by the comment. For example, on one draft, the teacher inserted the following two comments after a quote:

Tell us why this qt is here. (Frank, 3.2)

What is it doing for your argument? (Frank, 3.2)

In his 3.3, Frank added the following sentence after the quote: "This sentence lays down his argument and makes it clear what examples he must provide to prove his argument, namely defining invention and comparing that with discovery." Frank thus contextualized the quote more carefully so that he could go on (later in the paragraph) to draw a conclusion about the author's style of argumentation. Thus, the uptake was coded as successful.

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<sup>2</sup>It should be pointed out that each of the three assignments for the course was revised at least once and commented upon further, and that students chose two assignments to revise further. Thus, for each student, comments on five out of six drafts could be analyzed for revision.

The above example raises two further issues about the coding of revisions, the first of which concerns changes which can be related to more than one comment. The example provides an illustration of a case in which two comments addressed a single issue in the text. The subsequent revision, which also addressed the issue, resulted in a coding of uptake/successful for both comments. Throughout the coding process, I evaluated each comment separately for whether it was followed by a change, and if so, whether that change was successful at addressing the comment. A major revision could thus result in successful or unsuccessful codings for several comments depending on the nature of the comments themselves. The second issue concerns the overall quality of the drafts. Revisions coded as successful did not necessarily contribute to a more successful draft overall. To further illustrate both of these issues, in his 3.3, Dennis completely rewrote one whole paragraph, adding to it substantially and even incorporating parts of it later in the draft. Of the thirteen comments that the teacher inserted in the paragraph, ten were analyzed as unsuccessful. One of these was the comment "I am not clear what you mean here," which was written in response to the phrase "cultural shocker" in the draft. Dennis's 3.3 did not use this term; in fact, he omitted the entire example containing the phrase. His revision thus failed to address the comment, which suggested that he clarify the meaning of the phrase in some way (or substitute another). However, it is not clear that this omission negatively affected the quality of the draft; indeed, in the eyes of the teacher, it may have improved it by removing a somewhat informal-sounding phrase.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

After comments were coded, raw frequencies and percentages were tabulated in each set of coding categories (Table 1) and aggregated by draft and student. These data revealed clear underlying patterns, as well as a fair amount of variation in the way the teacher commented from draft to draft and from student to student, as well as the ways in which students responded to comments in their revisions. The analysis that follows highlights these patterns and variations according to contextual factors such as mode of delivery, sequence of drafts and assignments, and individual student.

### **Comment Variation from Draft to Draft**

The first research question asks how comments varied from draft to draft. Table 2 displays mean comment length and frequencies for textual referent (whether comments were located or non-located). Aside from the observation that this teacher tended to comment at length (she averaged over ten words per comment), we can also note that comment length and textual referent frequencies remain relatively stable until draft 2.2, when the teacher shifted to online commenting. The increase in comment length and percentage of located comments for draft 2.2 may have to do with the fact that the comments were typed into an online review area which involved selecting a section of the student's text and then commenting on it (thus automatically locating most of the comments). Moreover, for 2.3, the teacher began to use statements from the evaluation rubric for the course in her summary comments on the drafts. She had these in an online file for cutting and pasting into the drafts. The somewhat formulaic character of these kinds of comments may have led to the larger percentage of non-located comments for draft 2.3.

**Table 2**  
**Length and Textual Referent**

Mean Comment Length		Textual Referent					
		Located	%*	Non	%		
1.2	9.1	1.2	122	81	28	19	
1.3	6.7	1.3	166	81	38	19	
2.2	19.3	2.2	120	91	12	9	
2.3	11.9	2.3	189	78	53	22	
3.2	11.8	3.2	165	89	21	11	
3.3	9.3	3.3	166	94	11	6	
1.2-3.3		10.6	<b>Total</b>	928	85	163	15
			<b>Mean</b>	155			27
			<b>STD</b>	28			16

\*Percentages for separate drafts are based on the total number of comments for each draft.

**Table 3**  
**Comment Focus**

Draft	Corr	%*	Style	%	Org	%	Content	%	Context	%
1.2	34	23	13	9	12	8	81	54	10	7
1.3	63	31	34	17	9	4	82	40	16	8
2.2	6	5	27	20	13	10	58	44	28	21
2.3	37	15	47	19	16	7	106	44	36	15
3.2	42	23	34	18	6	3	83	45	21	11
3.3	17	9	47	27	5	3	96	54	12	7
<b>Total</b>	199	18	202	19	61	6	506	46	123	11

\*Percentages for separate drafts are based on the total number of comments for each draft.

Table 3 displays frequencies by comment focus. As can be seen, the largest percentage of comments overall have to do with content, a pattern which stays relatively consistent across assignments. Correctness and style, which represent the next largest percentages of comments, show a general pattern of increase from .2 drafts to .3 drafts (with the exception of correctness on the third assignment). Thus, while the teacher didn't strictly separate form from content in responding to the drafts, she tended to comment more on form on the second draft. Moreover, the low number of comments on correctness for 2.2 stands out, once again suggesting the influence of the mode of delivery, which made it difficult to highlight specific words and phrases as one might when commenting by hand. Organization and context represent the lowest percentages of the comments—so low, in fact, that any variations in these categories across assignments must be interpreted with caution. We can note, however, the sharp increase in the percentage of context comments with draft 2.2, an

increase which tapers off in 2.3 and 3.2 (in which the teacher typed her comments directly into students' electronically submitted texts) and then returns to a relatively low percentage for 3.3 (in which she returned to handwritten comments). This pattern suggests that typing comments may have encouraged a more discursive style of response—one in which the teacher provided advice or information not always directly related to the draft, much as one might in a student-teacher conference.

Comment Saliency (Table 4) shows little variation across the drafts. For the most part, the teacher commented once or twice on a given issue. Once again, the exception to this pattern is draft 2.2, in which the teacher was more likely to comment more than two times (and in one case seven times). This also supports the interpretation, suggested above, that commenting online may have stimulated a more discursive approach. Also, the total number of comments for 2.2 (132) is lower than the mean for all the drafts (181.5), suggesting that the teacher was more selective in her comments for this draft, focusing on a smaller number of issues and commenting on them in greater detail. Again, this may in part have to do with the nature of the online commenting system.

**Table 4**  
**Comment Saliency**

Draft	1X	%	2X	%	3X	%	4X	%	5X	%	6X	%	7X	%
1.2	122	80	27	18	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1.3	163	80	34	17	6	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
2.2	63	48	32	24	19	14	10	7	5	4	2	2	1	1
2.3	174	72	52	21	12	5	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
3.2	135	73	39	21	10	5	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
3.3	126	81	24	15	6	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>783</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.1</b>

\*Percentages for separate drafts are based on the total number of comments for each draft.

Comment mode (Table 5) shows less systematic variation across drafts. Draft 2.2 received substantially lower percentages of corrections and criticism, and higher percentages of advice and reflective statements, which again suggests the discursive character of those comments. Also, drafts 1.2 and 1.3 received larger percentages of corrections and commands, and smaller percentages of advice and (for 1.2) praise, suggesting that the teacher was more directive with her comments at the beginning of the course. In other cases, frequencies show fluctuations from draft to draft, but these are not readily interpreted according to the factors considered so far. For example, 2.3 received the largest share of praise. In order to further investigate possible causes of these variations, we need to turn to the teacher's commenting patterns for individual students.

To summarize, the teacher tended to focus the largest number of her comments on content, and to focus more on correctness and style on second drafts. Although her modes of commentary tended to be more directive at the beginning of the course, many of the mode categories exhibited no clear patterns of variation across drafts, suggesting that comment

mode might have been more tailored to individual students and drafts. Finally, the teacher's practical choices as to how to comment seemed to result in clear variations. In particular, online comments on draft 2.2 (and, to a lesser extent, 2.3 and 3.2) were more discursive in that they were longer, more likely to be located and more likely to include more than one comment on the same issue. Moreover, 2.2 received more context-focused and less correctness-focused comments. Finally, the teacher's use of set phrases from the course rubric on 2.3 appears to have resulted in more non-located comments for that draft.

**Table 5**  
**Comment Mode**

Draft Mode	1.2		1.3		2.2		2.3		3.2		3.3		Total	
	#	%*	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Corr</b>	17	11	36	18	3	2	8	3	5	3	11	6	80	7
<b>Crit</b>	17	11	33	16	11	8	37	15	34	18	21	12	153	14
<b>QualCrit</b>	10	7	17	8	13	10	21	9	19	10	14	8	94	9
<b>Praise</b>	4	3	15	7	8	6	41	17	8	4	13	7	89	8
<b>Comm</b>	30	20	37	18	13	10	28	12	34	18	15	8	157	14
<b>Advice</b>	5	3	6	3	20	15	19	8	13	7	17	10	80	7
<b>ClosedQ</b>	19	13	15	7	8	6	19	8	18	9	22	12	101	9
<b>OpenQ</b>	18	12	17	8	15	11	32	13	23	12	33	19	138	13
<b>RefSta</b>	30	20	28	14	41	31	37	15	32	17	31	18	199	18

\*Percentages for separate drafts are based on the total number of comments for each draft.

### Comment Variation from Student to Student

The second research question asks how comments varied from student to student. Table 6 presents total frequencies by student for focus and mode. Although these figures in themselves make for some ready comparisons, a more detailed picture can be gained by considering specific patterns of variation across the drafts for each student in turn.

#### *Frank*

Frank was the most accomplished writer of the four subjects based on his overall evaluation by the teacher. Frank was also the most mature writer: he was already in his second year when he took the course and, according to the teacher, took on creative and challenging topics in his essays, at times incorporating material well beyond the basic requirements of an assignment. The kinds of comments Frank received throughout the course do not immediately reflect this. For example, the teacher's most frequent focus of commentary for him was content (51%), followed by correctness (22%, the second highest percentage of all four subjects) and style (14%). The most frequent mode of commentary was reflective statement (20%), followed by command (14%). However, on particular drafts, Frank received relatively more comments on correctness and style and more commands. Correctness amounted to 32% of the comments on 1.2, 49% on 1.3, and 32% on 3.2; style amounted to 18% of 1.3. Commands amounted to 23% of 1.2 and 27% of 3.2. His first two drafts fit the general patterns noted earlier: the teacher commented more on correctness and



style on his second drafts (a pattern which was followed for his 2.2 and 2.3 as well), and was more directive in her comments at the beginning of the quarter. The increase in commands and correctness-focused comments for 3.2 may have to do, first of all, with the fact that this was the most difficult assignment of the course—both in terms of the primary reading and the expectations of the assignment itself. Also, this was an essay in which Frank took a more innovative approach, using outside readings that went beyond the requirements of the assignment. Although the teacher praised him for this in her end comments on the draft, her use of commands suggests that she may also have wanted to give him some more explicit direction than on the previous assignment.

**Table 6**  
**Total Frequencies by Student**

Student Category	Frank		Elizabeth		Dennis		Katia	
	#	%*	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Focus</b>								
<i>Correctness</i>	60	22	20	10	31	10	88	28
<i>Style</i>	39	14	17	9	76	24	70	22
<i>Organization</i>	11	4	20	10	19	6	11	3
<i>Content</i>	140	51	111	58	143	46	112	35
<i>Context</i>	22	8	23	12	43	14	35	11
<b>Mode</b>								
<i>Correction</i>	23	9	13	7	10	3	33	10
<i>Criticism</i>	27	10	11	6	40	13	78	25
<i>Qualified Crit</i>	17	6	21	11	29	9	29	9
<i>Praise</i>	31	11	29	15	27	9	2	1
<i>Command</i>	37	14	31	16	51	16	37	12
<i>Advice</i>	24	9	15	8	20	6	20	6
<i>Closed Quest</i>	25	9	10	5	37	12	33	10
<i>Open Quest</i>	34	12	28	15	45	14	28	9
<i>Ref Statement</i>	54	20	33	17	53	17	56	18

\*Percentages for separate drafts are based on the total number of comments for each student.

### *Elizabeth*

Although Elizabeth was assessed at slightly above the median in her grade for the course, the teacher remarked that she seemed to have more potential as a writer than her grade indicated. That is, she came into the course with a stronger set of skills and a more clearly developed sense of herself as a writer, but somehow failed to show much development in her writing for the course. The overall comment frequencies for her drafts reflect the teacher's recognition of her strengths. She received the greatest percentage of praise (15%) of all four students, fewer criticisms or closed questions, and fewer comments on correctness and style than the other students, suggesting that the teacher found her writing to be fairly well polished and controlled at the formal level. As with Frank, however, there was considerable variation in the teacher's commenting patterns on her individual drafts. For

example, all of her first drafts had more comments on organization, and she received more comments on style and more corrections, criticism, and commands on the final assignment (3.2 and 3.3). Again, this may have to do with the challenging nature of the assignment. Interestingly, Elizabeth also received more praise on her second drafts than her first drafts—even on 2.3, which she had left unfinished. It seems that the teacher was always careful to point out the strengths of her drafts even while noting problems, some of which were quite serious.

#### *Dennis*

As with Elizabeth, Dennis's final grade for the course was just above the class median. However, he didn't start out that way but rather substantially improved all of his essays on subsequent drafts, especially the ones that he submitted for his portfolio (final revisions of 2.3 and 3.3). After content (46%), the largest percentage of comments that he received focused on style (24%), while he received relatively few comments on correctness (10%). The largest percentages of his content comments were on 1.2 (73%) and 1.3 (59%). After that, he received larger percentages of style and correctness comments. In these later drafts, many of the teacher's comments focused on appropriacy of wording; although the comments were still concerned with the substance of his arguments, they were also increasingly concerned with telling him *how* to make a proper argument. Dennis received the largest percentage of context comments of the four subjects, and again, higher percentages in the later drafts. This is because the teacher not only commented on some of his other problems with the course (such as his failure to turn in a "writer's response" with his revisions), but she also told him several times to seek help with his drafts at the university writing center. As for comment mode, although Dennis received few corrections throughout the course, which also reflects less concern with correctness on the part of the teacher, he received more substantial percentages of directive comments (commands, criticism, closed questions) and reflective statements (which were mainly context comments). He received more commands at the beginning of the course (1.2 and 1.3) and generally low percentages of praise, except for 3.3, in which 14% of the comments were praise comments. Here the teacher noted that his revision had been a great improvement over 3.2, which she had labeled "borderline unacceptable."

#### *Katia*

Katia received the lowest overall evaluation for the course. Her final grade was well below the mean for the class (and just above the lowest possible passing grade); moreover, according to the teacher, her drafts demonstrated persistent problems which seemed to be exacerbated by the fact that she was, for some reason, unable to invest much time or effort in the course. The overall patterns in the comments reflect these problems as well as the fact that she was a non-native English speaker. Compared to the other subjects, she received large percentages of commentary on correctness and style. She also received the least praise and the most criticism, much of which pointed out grammatical errors or disfluencies in her writing. As with the other subjects, there was considerable variation in the comments on Katia's individual drafts. She received very few comments on correctness for 2.2 (3%) and 3.3 (11%). For the first two assignments, she received larger percentages of style and correctness comments on the second draft, and larger percentages of content comments on the

first draft. For the third assignment, however, this pattern was reversed, with 3.3 receiving the largest percentage of content comments of all the drafts (56%). This increasing focus on content may reflect the teacher's frustration that Katia did not seem to be making substantive changes to her drafts as she revised them. The teacher's end comments on 3.3 begin as follows:

This paper has not improved much through revision. The problems are many of the same ones—such that some comments seem to be left unaddressed. (Katia, 3.3)

In summary, the overall patterns of commentary for individual students (as presented in Table 6) often mask variations in commentary across the drafts for each student. Although the teacher certainly seems to have chosen different approaches to commenting with each of the four subjects, she also adapted her comments in response to a range of factors as the course progressed. These included specific problems and successes on the various drafts, issues that cropped up persistently throughout the course, and issues related to each student's development as a writer.

### **Revision Patterns**

The final research question asks how students responded to comments in their revisions, and how these responses varied from draft to draft and student to student. Table 7 displays frequencies and percentages of uptakes and successes for each student and each draft, as well as totals for each student (the two rightmost columns), totals for each draft (the bottom two rows), and totals for all comments (the bottom right corner). Although the overall uptake rate (52%) does not vary greatly for individual students, we can note that Frank has the highest uptake percentage (59%) and Katia the lowest (43%), as we might expect from the students judged most and least successful by the teacher (indeed, Katia's lower response rate may have contributed to the teacher's lower evaluation of her). It should also be pointed out that three of the students (Frank, Elizabeth, and Dennis) did not revise 1.3 for their portfolios. Katia, on the other hand, chose to revise 1.3 instead of 2.3. Thus, the totals for 1.3 represent Katia's uptakes, with the uptake percentage based on the number of comments on all drafts. Likewise, the totals for 2.3 represent Frank's, Elizabeth's, and Dennis's uptakes. These totals must therefore be interpreted with caution. For example, if we just look at the draft totals, a general pattern appears to emerge in which comments show greater rates of uptake on first drafts (1.2, 2.2, and 3.2) than second drafts. However, while this pattern seems to hold for individual uptake rates on 2.2-2.3 (Frank, Elizabeth, and Dennis), it does not hold for Katia's uptake rate for 1.3, which is actually greater than that for her 1.2. Finally, the success rate for uptakes varies somewhat across drafts and individual students. 3.2 has the lowest success rate of all the drafts, perhaps reflecting the students' difficulty with that assignment. Elizabeth and Frank have the most successes overall (77% and 75% respectively), and Dennis the least (58%). This again may reflect the varying degrees of maturity and writing experience that these students seem to have brought to the course. As in the previous section, however, it is helpful to examine each student's uptake and success patterns in turn.

**Table 7**  
**Uptake and Success**

Draft	1.2		1.3		2.2		2.3		3.2		3.3		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Frank</b>														
<i>Uptake</i>	31	71	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	19	66	39	56	30	68	41	89	160	59
<i>Success</i>	27	87	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	13	68	32	82	17	57	31	77	120	75
<b>Elizabeth</b>														
<i>Uptake</i>	17	63	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	14	88	28	56	30	73	17	74	106	55
<i>Success</i>	14	82	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	13	93	19	68	23	77	13	76	82	77
<b>Dennis</b>														
<i>Uptake</i>	29	78	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	52	91	9	15	41	98	36	71	167	54
<i>Success</i>	15	52	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	33	63	5	56	36	71	25	69	97	58
<b>Katia</b>														
<i>Uptake</i>	26	62	47	71	21	70	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	36	61	5	9	135	43
<i>Success</i>	15	58	37	57	12	57	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	21	58	5	100	90	67
<b>Total</b>														
<i>Uptake</i>	103	69	47	23	106	80	76	31	137	74	99	56	568	52
<i>Success</i>	71	69	37	79	71	67	56	74	80	58	74	75	389	68

\*Uptake percentages were calculated based on the total number of comments the student received on a draft. Total uptake percentages for students were based on the total number of comments each student received. Total uptake percentages for drafts were based on the total number of comments for all students on the draft. Success rates were calculated as a percentage of the given number of uptakes.

Table 8 displays uptakes and successes for each subject aggregated by comment focus and mode. Before turning to individual student patterns, some overall trends can be noted. The focus categories show little variation in either uptake or success rates, with the exception of a lower uptake rate for context. This no doubt has to do with the fact that context is at the least directive end of the commenting spectrum. Within the mode categories, praise shows a strikingly low uptake rate, presumably because praise comments also rarely provide specific directions for how a text should be changed. We can also note that some of the more explicitly directive types of comments (corrections and closed questions) have higher uptake rates. Corrections and closed questions also have noticeably higher success percentages. In the case of corrections, this may have to do with the fact that the vast majority of corrections are minor surface changes to a text; that is, they explicitly direct changes that are relatively easy to make.

*Frank*

Content-focused comments seem to have been the most useful for Frank overall: they constitute the largest percentage of the comments he received (see Table 6), and are associated with relatively high rates of uptake and success (71% and 70% respectively). Although comments in other focus categories have higher rates of success, they also have lower uptake rates. Also, there are much smaller numbers of comments within these categories (Table 6), thus making the resulting percentages more subject to fluctuation. For example, Frank only received a total of eleven organization comments across all his drafts; of

**Table 8**  
**Uptake and Success by Comment Type**

Student Category	Frank				Elizabeth				Dennis			
	Uptake		Success		Uptake		Success		Uptake		Success	
	#	%*	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Focus</b>												
<i>Correctness</i>	28	47	26	93	13	65	13	100	19	61	15	79
<i>Style</i>	20	51	16	80	11	65	11	100	47	62	26	55
<i>Organization</i>	5	46	5	100	12	60	8	67	11	58	4	36
<i>Content</i>	100	71	70	70	60	54	36	60	68	48	40	59
<i>Context</i>	7	32	3	43	10	44	8	80	22	51	12	55
<b>Mode</b>												
<i>Correction</i>	9	39	9	100	8	62	8	100	6	60	4	67
<i>Criticism</i>	17	63	13	77	7	37	7	100	22	55	15	68
<i>Qualified Crit</i>	10	59	7	70	11	52	9	82	16	55	9	56
<i>Praise</i>	2	6	1	50	9	31	9	100	0	0	0	0
<i>Command</i>	21	57	17	81	18	58	13	72	29	57	18	62
<i>Advice</i>	19	79	15	79	11	73	5	46	14	70	9	64
<i>Closed Quest</i>	20	80	15	75	6	60	4	67	24	65	17	71
<i>Open Quest</i>	26	77	16	62	14	50	10	71	27	60	14	52
<i>Ref Statement</i>	36	67	27	75	20	61	11	55	28	53	11	39

Student Category	Katia				Total			
	Uptake		Success		Uptake		Success	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Focus</b>								
<i>Correctness</i>	49	56	17	35	99	50	62	63
<i>Style</i>	28	40	20	71	94	47	61	65
<i>Organization</i>	4	36	1	25	28	46	16	57
<i>Content</i>	45	40	21	47	230	45	148	64
<i>Context</i>	6	17	4	67	39	32	23	59
<b>Mode</b>								
<i>Correction</i>	24	73	21	88	42	53	37	88
<i>Criticism</i>	31	40	20	65	72	47	49	68
<i>Qualified Crit</i>	9	31	2	22	37	39	19	51
<i>Praise</i>	0	0	0	0	8	9	7	88
<i>Command</i>	16	43	10	63	74	47	51	69
<i>Advice</i>	5	25	2	40	38	48	23	61
<i>Closed Quest</i>	14	42	12	86	60	59	45	75
<i>Open Quest</i>	11	39	6	55	67	49	38	57
<i>Ref Statement</i>	23	41	17	74	94	47	58	62

\*Uptake percentages were calculated based on the total number of comments in each category. Success rates were calculated as a percentage of the given number of uptakes.

these, he responded to five, and all five of his responses were successful (hence the 100% success rate). In general, he got fewer comments on correctness, style, and organization,

responded to them around half the time, but was usually successful when he did. Frank's uptake and success percentages for content, on the other hand, vary quite a bit from draft to draft. His uptake rates for 2.2 and 2.3 are 59% and 60% respectively, whereas those for 3.2 and 3.3 are 96% and 91% respectively. However, his success rate for 3.2 (48%) is the lowest of any of his drafts (which may again reflect the challenges of the assignment, as well as Frank's own risk-taking approach to it).

From the perspective of comment mode, Frank's uptake and success percentages fluctuated quite a bit from draft to draft, as did the percentages of comments in each mode. However, his 3.2 shows greater success rates (in comparison with overall percentages for his drafts) for commands (86%) and closed questions (100%, though it should be noted that there were only three comments of this type on the draft). In contrast, he was less successful at responding to reflective statements (50%), open questions (33%) and advice (33%). In short, on this draft, which was clearly a challenge for him, Frank maintained his usual high uptake rate, but was less successful at responding to less directive comments.

#### *Elizabeth*

Compared with Frank, content-focused comments appear to have had more variable results for Elizabeth. She had strikingly high success percentages for correctness-, style-, and context-focused comments as well as for corrections, criticism, qualified criticism, and praise (see Table 8). However, this may be a function of the low numbers of comments in those categories, or low uptake percentages. For example, Elizabeth responded in her revisions to only seven criticisms (37%), but she was successful with all of them. This seems to be the case with the other categories as well: she did not respond to those kinds of comments consistently, but when she did respond, she was usually successful. Content comments, on the other hand, do not show a clear pattern. Elizabeth responded to 11 (65%) of these on 1.2, but was only successful with 4 (36%) of them (which may be indicative of problems with the draft that led her to decide not to revise it further for her portfolio). For 2.2, she responded to 8 out of 9 content comments and was successful with all of them; on the following draft, however, she responded to 17 (63%) out of 27 and was successful with 9 (53%) of them. 3.2, which had almost the same number of content comments (25), shows a similar uptake and higher success percentage (64% and 69% respectively). 3.3 also has 9 content-focused comments, 8 of which Elizabeth responded to, with a success rate of 50%. These fluctuations suggest that Elizabeth may have encountered quite different compositional problems for each assignment and draft. However, it is unclear whether these problems have to do with the assignments themselves, with Elizabeth's own development as a writer, or with contextual factors not considered here.

#### *Dennis*

As noted earlier, Dennis had the lowest overall percentage of successes (58%) of the four subjects (though not the lowest percentage of uptakes; see Table 7). This can be accounted for by relatively low uptake and success rates in categories representing larger percentages of comments. For example, his content-focused comments, which constitute 46% of all of his comments, show 48% uptake and 59% success; similarly, reflective statements, which represent the largest percentage (17%) of the comment modes, show 53% uptake and

39% success. This contrasts with higher uptake and success percentages in categories with fewer comments to start with, such as correctness, correction, advice, and closed questions. Though it should also be pointed out that this pattern does not hold across all categories (as with organization; see Table 8), we can also note that, with the exception of advice, the more explicitly directive comments tend to be associated with higher success rates. By contrast, none of Dennis's praise comments were followed by revisions (although he received a total of 27, or 9%). He was more likely to respond, and to do so successfully, to comments that gave him explicit direction.

As with Elizabeth, Dennis's uptake and response percentages fluctuated a great deal across the separate drafts, including those for categories with relatively more comments to start off with. For example, content shows high uptake rates for 1.2 (81%), 2.2 (93%), 3.2 (100% of a total of 13), and 3.3 (70%), and high success rates for 2.2 (92%), 2.3 (67%) and 3.3 (64%). Style-focused comments show similar fluctuations (for example 85% uptake and 53% success on 2.2, but no uptake on 2.3, which had 17 such comments). Again, it is unclear whether these variations reflect issues specifically related to the assignments and drafts, or to other factors.

### *Katia*

The comment focus categories that seem to have had the greatest results for Katia are style and, to a lesser extent, correctness and content; context also has a relatively high success percentage (67%), but this represents 4 out of 6 comments followed by uptake (see Table 8). Style shows high uptake rates for 1.3 (77%) and 2.2 (100%, which represents five comments), as well as high success rates on 1.2 (100%, which represents 2 comments), 2.2 (4 out of 5, or 80%) and 3.2 (80%), thus boosting the overall percentages for that category. Content percentages are likewise boosted by relatively high uptake and success for 2.2 (72% and 54% respectively) and high uptake for 3.2 (71%). Within the mode categories, the most effective comments for Katia were corrections, criticism, commands, closed questions, and reflective statements, all of which had uptake rates comparable to or greater than her overall uptake rate of 43% (Table 7). As with Dennis, we can see that most of these types of comments are explicit and directive (the exception being reflective statements). By contrast, advice shows little uptake, and praise none at all. The relatively high rates for corrections and criticism are largely accounted for by 1.3 and 3.2. For 1.3, correction shows 78% uptake and 94% success; criticism shows 75% uptake and success. One possible reason for this may be the fact that 1.3 was completed and turned in toward the beginning of the course, whereas the final revision was turned in at the end, giving Katia more time to polish the draft (it can also be noted here that correctness-focused comments also had a relatively high uptake rate of 75% on this draft). 3.2 also has high uptake and success rates, but also much smaller numbers of comments in those categories. Correction, for example, shows a 100% uptake and success rate, which represents a single comment in that category on the whole draft.

In summary, once again some general patterns can be noted in the overall rates of uptake and success. First, students responded to the teacher's comments in their revisions about half the time (52%), and their responses were successful 68% of the time. This response rate was largely maintained for the focus categories, with the exception of organization and context. In the mode categories, there was more variation, with the more

explicit and directive modes (correction, criticism, command, closed question) tending to garner more uptakes and/or successes. Second, across the drafts, overall uptake and success rates tended to be greater on first drafts than second drafts, although this trend did not always hold for individual students (for example, Katia's 1.3). Finally, uptake and success patterns varied quite a bit from subject to subject. Content-focused comments were the most effective for Frank, the most highly evaluated writer of the group, whereas they were variably effective for Elizabeth, and minimally effective for Dennis and Katia. With a few exceptions, all four students tended to have greater success with correctness- and style-focused comments, although their uptake rates for these categories varied. In the mode categories, once again there was a good deal of variation among the students. Although praise was the clearest overall "failure" in terms of stimulating uptake, none of the other categories was equally effective for all students. Frank, for example, shows high rates of uptake and success for most of the mode categories, whereas Elizabeth shows high uptake, but less success, with advice and reflective statements. Dennis shows the most uptake and success for corrections, criticism, qualified criticism, commands and advice (though some of these categories had low numbers of comments to start with), and less success with reflective statements. For Katia, corrections were most effective, but she was less likely to respond to criticism, commands, closed questions, and reflective statements, all of which constituted substantial proportions of her comments.

As demonstrated above, when uptake and success rates on students' individual drafts are examined, the general patterns break down even further. For example, Dennis and Katia, were more successfully responsive to content-focused comments on particular drafts, while other drafts show strikingly low uptake and success by comparison. On the other hand, Frank, who was usually good at responding to content-focused comments and reflective statements, seems to have had more trouble doing so on 3.2. In many cases, the factors associated with these variations are not recoverable from the data presented here, and so it is only possible to speculate on them. This suggests the limits of quantitative analyses of commentary and points to issues that might be more fruitfully examined by means of a qualitative studies.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest several implications for both research and pedagogy. Concerning research, the results presented above suggest first of all that the coding framework employed herein is a potentially useful one in that it covers a range of practical and theoretical issues immediately relevant to writing teachers (how much to comment, what areas to focus on, how to comment, and so on). At the same time, the study remains limited by the fact that outside coders were not used. Because of the complexity of the framework (particularly the focus and mode categories) it needs to be validated through the establishment of inter-rater reliability and through application across a variety of teaching contexts (including both L1 and L2 settings). Given this validation, however, there are at least two different directions that future research could take. One direction would be to establish more rigorous statistical correlations between comment types and other factors (especially revision, but also mode of delivery, ability level, and draft). This would illuminate broad relationships among commentary, revision, and context. Another direction is suggested



by the specific variations in comments and revisions across individual students' drafts, the causes of which it has only been possible to speculate on here. These issues could be more fruitfully investigated through qualitative studies incorporating observations and interviews (as indeed some researchers have already begun to do; see Brice, 1998; and Hyland, 1998). Such research would provide a necessary complement to correlational studies by exploring in detail the particular strategies and resources that individual students and teachers bring to the comment-revision cycle.

Concerning pedagogy, the implications are rather less clear cut. In comparison with other studies (Bond, 2003; Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 1997) the overall uptake rate for the subjects used in this study (52%) is quite low. Moreover, content-focused comments, which represent the largest proportion of all of the comments (and presumably the largest time commitment on the part of the teacher), had an even lower uptake rate of 45%. This finding, taken together with those of similar studies, merely serves to underline the point that even under the best of circumstances, teachers cannot realistically expect students to respond to every comment that they write. Even the student who responded to comments most often and most successfully (Frank) seemed to have problems using the comments on certain drafts. Moreover, one of the more effective drafts in terms of overall uptakes and successes (2.2) was also one which had fewer, more detailed comments. This lends support to a well-known principle in writing pedagogy: that teachers would do best to provide in-depth commentary on a small set of issues for each draft/student. As for the types of comments most associated with uptake and success, this study has identified no clear "winners" either in the focus or mode categories. However, certain of the more explicit and directive modes were clearly more effective at stimulating changes on subsequent drafts. For example, corrections and closed questions had greater uptake and success rates than the other categories; commands and criticism also had reasonably high success rates. Even Frank, who generally responded well to most comments, had greater success with the more explicit comments on the draft that was clearly a challenge for him (3.2). Although it is important to keep in mind that the effectiveness of commentary cannot solely be measured in terms of its tendency to encourage changes on subsequent drafts (as it has been here), the findings of this study suggest that specific and directive commentary can be useful, especially when writers are struggling with an assignment.

In short, while the use of commentary in writing classes is a complex issue both for teachers and researchers, the study and practice of feedback remains a worthwhile, indeed necessary, endeavor. Clearly, commentary which is effectively designed and placed can stimulate students to make positive changes in their writing and to develop as writers. As we refine our understanding of teacher commentary, the variables that influence its effectiveness, and its relationship with the other elements of the writing classroom, we not only develop practical guidelines for how teachers can effectively manage this most challenging of tasks, we also develop richer theories of response which in turn enrich our theories of written communication in general.

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