

# TWO'S COMPANY, THREE'S A CONVERSATION: A STUDY OF DIALOGUE AMONG A PROFESSOR, A PEER-WRITING FELLOW, AND UNDERGRADUATES AROUND FEEDBACK AND WRITING<sup>1</sup>

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## Two's Company: Teacher Feedback on Student Writing

A single teacher's comments on student writing may feel less like a readerly interpretation of a text than directive instructions for writing "better," closing possibilities for conversations about writing. Instead, when an instructor opens a space for feedback from multiple voices, the resulting dialogue could gesture toward the plurality of readings possible for one text and create a space for a writer to exercise and articulate choice. As a writing fellow in an art history class at an urban, private, religiously-affiliated university, I worked with the professor to provide feedback to student writers that modeled a multi-person conversation around their writing. Using Microsoft Word's "Review" function, the professor and I commented on both student writing and each other's comments. At the end of the semester, I reviewed these comments and noticed an interesting record on the page. These collaborative comments, along with e-mails and my logs from conferences with students in the University Writing Center, reveal the development of a conversation that recognizes a multiplicity of readerly interpretations. This method of feedback has the potential to invite students and teachers to enter into an interactive and stimulating discourse that re-positions the authority of both, encouraging students to more freely discuss their writing as authors.

Harvey Kail describes the most dominant model of learning as, "a teacher teaches a student" (595). The former possesses knowledge and therefore the power to teach and evaluate a student's learning. So, standing alone, a teacher's comments on students' written work may take on an authoritative absoluteness that obscures the complexity of readers' relationships with texts. This authority may render what should be a dialogue between the teacher and student-author, a "monologue," compelling students to either respect or disregard "suggestions" without critique and causing students to be insecure about their authorial ownership (Fife and O'Neill; Haring-Smith 124;

Holmes 174-175; Sommers; Welch). When a single teacher provides written feedback, he or she often moves the draft only in the direction of his or her interpretation, creating one possible future for the work and closing off possibilities for other "realities" of that draft (Welch 374-382). In addition, students treat writing assignments as displays of understanding and information-gathering skills, rather than as a forum for grappling with unique, interesting ideas. Student papers are usually written for a "fake audience," for the teacher alone, who will not *read* but judge, and academic standards of objectivity often require the student writer to "pretend" that there is no existing relationship between him or herself and the teacher, subverting recognition that the teacher is a subjective reader (Gopen 22-26; Lillis 120-122).

Writing centers complicate this linear model of teacher-reader and student-writer by creating a bend in the pathway of knowledge transfer: writing tutors as additional audience members multiply the interpretations that surround a writer's text (Kail). The writing tutor is not simply another judge figure because, according to North's "The Idea of a Writing Center," writing centers focus on talk with writers, rather than texts. Writing center talk transforms that linear knowledge transfer into a recursive process in which knowledge "seems to be backing up, moving around through a system shaped like an errant plumbing job," in which a teacher's directive authority as sole reader may be destabilized (Kail 597). More importantly, talk with a tutor is not talk with a teacher. Instead, tutors occupy the liminal space of authority between peer and teacher, from which they may initiate talk about students' intentions and identities as writers (North 442).

Faculty-tutor collaborations can be productive for the faculty member, the tutor, and the students, providing opportunities for faculty development, but also for re-negotiating the teacher-student model within a course (Pemberton 93). The Writing Across the Curriculum Writing Fellows program at my university pairs one University Writing Center undergraduate consultant with a faculty member, and

together, Writing and Faculty Fellows work to design and implement a curriculum that fosters greater emphasis on writing within one course.<sup>2</sup> As tutors, peer-Writing Fellows occupy that space between the professor and students, and working with a particular class, Writing Fellows can help students to retain ownership over their own writing in that class and beyond (Haring-Smith 124; Soven 58). The professor and Writing Fellow share authority over teaching writing throughout the semester, so when the Faculty Fellow and I both provided feedback on students' written work, we interrupted the typical linearity of feedback and the authority we each held. Commenting as subjective readers, we responded with our own impressions, describing, as Elbow states, "what happened in [us] when [we] read the words this time" (85). In addition, commenting as multiple readers provided the writer with "a wider range of reactions to offset the one-sidedness of a single reaction"—especially a teacher's authoritative singular reaction (Elbow 121). This method of feedback asked student writers to consider various options and opportunities for their writing and for their identities as writers.

### Collaborative Commenting

When we interviewed each other during the initial pairing process, the professor told me that she was planning to revise her Twentieth Century Art History course. So, when we began our work together, we wrote four major writing assignments for the semester: a personal reflection, in which the students were asked to introduce their interest in both art and writing; a visual response describing their personal reflections on a work of art; a visual analysis, in which they were to adapt the visual response paper into an "objective," thesis-driven analysis of that work; and a ten-page research paper on a topic of the student's choice. The students would be required to meet with me between the second and third assignments and before the final research paper, but were encouraged to do so more often.

The professor and I also decided to provide feedback on written work together. For each writing

assignment, students were instructed to send their papers via e-mail to both the professor and me. We decided in advance who would provide the first round of comments. So, upon receipt of the assignments, either the professor or I began to comment using Word's "Review" function, which formats comments as bubbles in the right margin. As each paper was finished, the first commenter e-mailed the document to the second commenter, who then provided her own feedback on both the paper and the previously-added comments and sometimes edited the existing comments if appropriate. All papers were returned to the professor for review and for any necessary final changes to the comments, and then were sent to all students at the same time by e-mail, without a grade listed. Grades were later assigned when hard copies of the papers were handed back in class.<sup>3</sup>

The comment-conversation that I study in this essay did not develop immediately. In the beginning of our collaboration, comments are often more sparse than on later assignments, especially in the case of agreement. On earlier papers, when the second commenter agrees with the first, only the first comment is left as "authority" (see Fig. 1, from the personal reflection assignment), while on later writing, both commenters voice opinions, even if they are in agreement (see Fig. 2, from a research paper). As we become more confident in our individual, readerly voices, we more often elaborate upon what the other commenter has said, demonstrating that even our concurring ideas are subjective.

In the first example (Fig. 1), an excerpt from the students' first writing assignment, I ("AH") commented first, here on the student's word choice, and the professor ("ff") makes her agreement known by the absence of her own comment, deferring to my comment as the "correct" revision. In retrospect, there are a number of ways to read this student's word choice, "selfish," without needing to change the word itself. If the professor had commented with her interpretation of the student's choice, whether affirming my comment or not, the student may have been prompted to reflect on her own authority to

Figure 1: Student Personal Reflection Paper

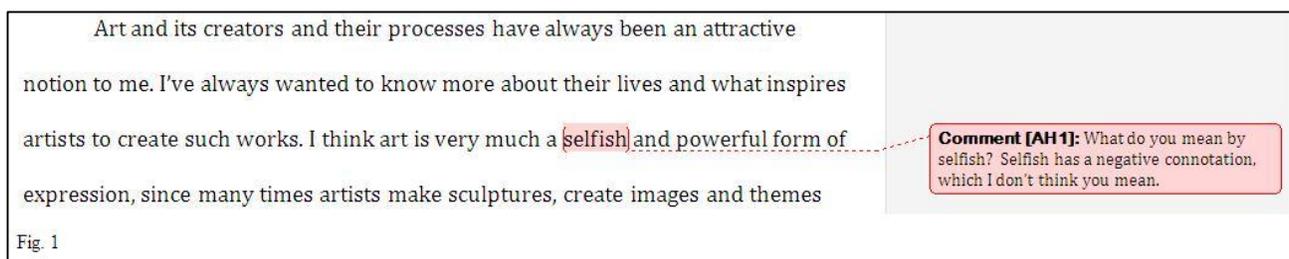


Fig. 1

Figure 2: Student Research Paper

It is well known that Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso [had each others' techniques in mind] while creating their own paintings, which clarifies their complex relationship. Although, it seems that Matisse was a bigger influence on Picasso, it was not that way at all. Matisse would create masterpieces and Picasso would mater ?? his masterpieces. This was influential to Matisse

**Comment [ff3]:** How do you know? This is not common sense. Also did they really have each others techniques in mind?

**Comment [AH4]:** Despite the doubt Dr. expresses above, and a bit of confusion caused by referencing their "complex relationship," this is a good opening idea that brings your topic to the forefront of the reader's mind.

Fig. 2

choose this word or another. Like the problem of one teacher's "monologue," this early feedback insisted on a correct way of using writing knowledge. The second example (Fig. 2) comes from a student's research paper. Comment [AH4] builds on [ff3], supporting the "doubt" raised in the latter, but stating that, "despite" this, there is the opportunity for a positive reading of this opening sentence. My comment provides a less prescriptive possible direction for revision, whereas if the professor's comment had stood alone, the student may not have considered how this idea works positively in her paper. This difference within the comments might allow the student to see friction and connection between subjective readings, within which the student can make choices and take ownership of his or her writing.

### Three's a Conversation: Tracking Shifts in Attitude, Engagement, and Understanding

At the conclusion of the semester, several students in the class seemed particularly affected by the increased focus on writing, especially in relation to feedback on their papers. In this section, I trace patterns in two of these students' investment in their authorship through their actions and talk about writing beyond the page. I argue that a major factor contributing to their greater interest was the presence of that on-paper feedback conversation.

One particular student came to the class excited and eager to work on his writing. Already talkative in

the classroom and an engaged writer, the student expressed insecurity about his ability to be coherent, organized, and intelligent in his writing. He made two appointments with me before beginning his visual analysis paper and stayed an entire hour for each appointment, discussing his ideas and expressing his concerns about his paper (Hug, 16 Mar 2011<sup>4</sup>). On the day the visual analysis assignment was due, he e-mailed me to request a quick second opinion before he submitted his paper.

In the excerpt from this student's visual analysis assignment below (Fig. 3), both the professor and I comment on his writing style and content. In these comments, the professor and I both comment on the location of the student's thesis statement, but we express different readings. I bring to my interpretation of his paper our conversations in sessions, while the professor's comment, though worded more strongly, is less certain in its advice. This student questioned his own ability to write in an "academically correct" style because, as he stated in his sessions with me, he viewed the professor and me as "experts" on writing. Our comments, however, demonstrated that our opinions were subjective and based on readings of *his* work. The feedback therefore asked him to rely upon his own expertise to evaluate his intentions and possibilities for his thesis statement.

When scheduling a meeting with me for his research paper, he held off until he felt he had a draft completed that satisfied him. It was apparent that he was more comfortable with those aspects of writing

Figure 3: Student 1's Visual Analysis Paper

of exposed canvas which are speckled into the black field. Ultimately, the feeling of a natural world is created through the actuality of the artificial, in this case oil paint on canvas.

**Comment [AH5]:** Great description!

**Comment [AH6]:** I'm not sure if this placement of your thesis is optimal for convincing your reader right away. Perhaps a separate introduction, explaining would serve your purpose better.

**Comment [ff7]:** Is this, possibly, your paper's thesis? If so, it should be stated at the outset of the paper.

Fig. 3

that had concerned him before, such as organization, and, according to my report of our session, he defended his composition choices with knowledge and conviction. He was still receptive to talking, but his newfound confidence and self-awareness allowed him to engage in our conversation as a student-author rather than only as a student. In this conference he was notably more satisfied with his writing decisions and actively reacted to my suggestions based on *his* experience as the writer of his paper (Hug, 28 Apr 2011).

Although this student became more confident in his identity as a writer, he was actively interested in learning from the course, and he consistently exceeded assignment expectations. It is important to note that students who enroll in Writing Fellows courses have thus far not been made aware of the Writing Fellows component until the first day of class, so there are often students who are averse to the emphasis on writing in the course at the beginning of the semester. For example, another student, a second-semester freshman, began the course extremely reluctant to accept help from either the professor or me. Following an aggressive argument with the professor during class, she failed to attend a scheduled meeting with me for her visual analysis assignment and e-mailed me several days later, on the paper's due date, attempting to reschedule in order to meet the

professor's requirements for grading. When we finally met, the student repeatedly expressed feeling "dumb," in the class and in her writing. We discussed her writing strengths and places for improvement, and she did participate in the session, but she was fixed on the idea that she did not meet the professor's standards for performance in the class. She confessed to me that she felt she could not talk to the professor. I felt that there was little exchange in our conversation, and she seemed unable or unwilling to listen to most of my suggestions regarding her concerns with the course or her paper.

Her visual analysis paper, however, was returned to her with *many* comments, emphasizing that the professor and I were committed to the three-way relationship around her writing. Comments were generally unified in an affirmative reading of the text while still providing a record of two individual readers.

On the first page alone (see Fig. 4), there are ten comments from both professor and Writing Fellow, engaging intently with the student's writing. Our concentrated dialogue here functions as a conversation with real participants. For example, in comment [AH5], I bring to my reading the conversation from our session, during which we discussed that particular sentence as her thesis. Also, in both the professor's and my comments, there is crossover between "content" and "writing" as we each read both "sides"

Figure 4: Student 2's Visual Analysis Paper

the they are formed, create a sense of motion **that really can catch someone's attention**.

This painting is relatively large and it is not framed. The colors all do **blend well**

**together**, even though there are some are brighter and darker tones throughout this

piece. This painting consists of oil paints on canvas. **Picabia** uses many various

elements of color, different uses of lines and, especially, different methods of creating

space throughout the overall **composition**.

Looking at this painting close up, **you** may notice the brush strokes to be very

smooth. One may also see different objects looking at it close up, **rather than looking**

**further away**. The painting looks like a **random** bunch of organic shapes. [Stepping

away from it], the viewer may see objects such as a microphone, stairs, a bird, and a

blue yin-yang shape. Some of the shapes together form a music scene with the

microphone located towards the left, near the center. Also, the grey curved stripes look

like sound waves going deeper into the canvas, which gives this painting a sense **of**

**Comment [AH2]:** You seem to be saying something stronger than that it is just eye-catching. Do you feel that this phrase got across the strength of the piece that you wanted to express here?

**Comment [ff3]:** Interesting observation!

**Comment [AH4]:** What does this mean? Again, be as specific to the thought in your head as possible!

**Comment [AH5]:** I'd like to see one more sentence here, carefully stating your thesis, since the sentence that does appear to encompass the thesis that we discussed (the third sentence) gets lost in the middle of your introduction.

**Comment [ff6]:** I agree with the above comment: your introduction of the work is solid and appropriately general in its observations - which orient the reader. However you need a "zinger" of a statement, to let the reader know where you will be taking the paper your argument.

**Comment [AH7]:** Avoid second person.

**Comment [AH8]:** This construction does not make sense, since the subject is "one."

**Comment [AH9]:** Is there a more respectful way to say this?

**Comment [ff10]:** Maybe you need to assume the authority in your voice as a write to just 'step away' and share your strong, clear observations. - i.e. without telling us you are stepping away SHOW us that you have stepped away through your description. (i.e. This shows good use of writing to think through your ideas; in a rewrite you would arrive at the perspective/distance you want to set up to interpret the work for the reader/viewer.

Fig. 4

of her text to understand her meaning. Our comments demonstrate our reading of her paper as an authored text with interpretable meanings, rather than as a display of information or a performance for a grade. Within this conversation, the student was eventually able to find much more confidence to think about and discuss her writing.

Shortly after the next writing assignment, the research paper, was handed out, this student scheduled an appointment with me. She came with a “broad idea for her paper, but no thesis and no research done” (Hug, 6 Apr 2011), but she was enthusiastic about her topic. The student showed a much stronger concern for her writing in this session, engaging in a dialogue with me about possibilities for her paper, although she also still communicated insecurity in meeting the standards of the assignment. Less than a week after our meeting, she e-mailed the professor to continue discussing her topic.

Although she became discouraged by the amount of research necessary for her paper, she met with me again two days before the due date with a partial draft written, evincing greater investment in this paper than in the last. We had a productive, lengthy conversation about her argument and how she could prove it to her readers (Hug, 27 Apr 2011). Whereas the early step of thinking about writing her analysis paper created resistance and anxiety, she approached her research paper much more independently and initiated a conversation about her ideas.

The paper that she handed in showed engagement with her subject matter, her writing process, and her research. After receiving her paper with our feedback, she responded to these comments in an e-mail to the professor and me. In this e-mail, she communicated more effectively than she had in past discussions about her writing; her writing is calm, purposeful, and demonstrates respect for our opinions as her readers but also for herself as author. Her message reveals a much clearer understanding of her own writing in her ability to talk about her choices and attitudes. She states that, instead of an e-mail, she would have liked to join our comment-dialogue, but that she does not know how to create comment bubbles. Her reason for writing is that she feels offended by a particular comment that her title seemed unprofessional, because she had considered it to be thoughtful and clever, playing upon the theme of her paper. She reflects on this choice within the context of the text she handed in and within the context of her process of researching and writing the paper, including both her triumphs and frustrations. She ends the e-mail by thanking us and stating that our comments will be useful to her in future papers, and signs off, “Respectfully.” The

increased focus on writing and the opening of a space in the course for the student to take authority as a writer seemed to encourage her to respond to us in a way that she did not feel comfortable to before, and, although she was hampered from entering the comment conversation itself, she chose to situate her response within our feedback.

Both of these students were able to develop their identities as writers and then enter the conversation that took place around their writing because of the collaborative attitude with which writing was approached within this course, most visible in the three-way conversation around writing. While the increased focus on writing created fruitful interactions between each student and me, between each student and the professor, and between the professor and me, it was via the comments, which included the two instructors and a student in his or her writing, that a dynamic and complex conversation was established. This on-paper conversation encouraged students to enter off-paper conversations, using their authorial position to conscientiously discuss their writing outside the text itself.

### **Comments on Collaborative Commenting**

Despite the benefit that some students gained from our method, because of the exact form of our collaborative commenting was developed throughout the semester, and because I only observed this conversation *after* the conclusion of the course, there are several aspects of this method that may require revision in future implementation.

The first issue that becomes apparent in studying the data from this course is the sheer volume of comments produced by two commenters. Some students anticipated extensive feedback considering the intensive focus on writing; for example, following a writing center conference, one student e-mailed me to ask for more feedback when she felt that we did not discuss her paper sufficiently. However, for many students, opening a document to find a wall of comment bubbles is intimidating. Richard Beach and Tom Friedrich write, “too many comments can overwhelm students, suggesting the need for teachers to prioritize their comments by responding selectively to those aspects of a text that are perceived to be the most problematic” (227). However, two individual commenters may find it more difficult to come to an agreement on “the most problematic” elements of a text. Each commenter may read certain aspects of the student’s writing differently and feel that comments are necessary. In addition, as was perhaps the case for the second student above, students may be shut out of

the conversation because of this wall of comments around their papers.

Another major concern is the absence of the student-author's voice in the initial conversation about his or her writing. Although my feedback often took into account meetings with students, I could not speak for their experiences making choices as they wrote. Welch's method of "sideshadowing" requires students to comment on the development of their papers before the teacher reads it, which gives authors greater ownership over their work and shapes the way the teacher interprets the text. This perspective was noticeably missing from our feedback conversation unless students voluntarily responded *after* receiving papers back. As an experiment, after visual analysis papers were returned, students were given the optional assignment to participate in a "Comments-to-Comments" exercise (Berzsenyi): students were instructed to choose several comments to respond to individually, on a separate piece of paper. Only two students participated, and even for them, the exercise proved a dead end. In reality, "Comments-to-Comments" still only allowed students to be involved in the conversation after it had already begun between professor and Writing Fellow. If the students in this course were given the opportunity to speak or write to us about their texts earlier, perhaps the professor and I would have seen increased and earlier engagement.

Finally, outside factors, such as relationships in the classroom, may have influenced how students were affected by our commenting method. Two students especially exemplify this: One student demonstrated a lack of respect for the professor and the feedback she gave on the student's writing. Although this student trusted me as a peer and a friend, she did not like the professor's teaching style and approach to the course material and often expressed dissatisfaction with all of the feedback on her papers. Conversely, another student who was a senior showed distrust and disregard for me as a peer writing tutor, possibly because I was two years younger than she was. She became more resistant to my help throughout the semester, and she was unengaged in any conversation about her writing, even with the professor whom she liked and had taken classes with previously. Therefore, students' personal opinions of the professor or the peer-tutor or of classmates or material appears to have a strong effect on their response to this method of feedback overall.

## Conclusion

Using this feedback method, the commenters began to read students' writing as texts with a multiplicity of available interpretations. The professor and I interacted with student writing in an unusual way, taking into account the other's reading, and as such, the existence of other readings and responses. We worked to diffuse the singular "monologue" teacher commentary can become and turn it into a dynamic dialogue among all of us—the professor, the student's writing, and the writing fellow, and then eventually, the student-author. It is easy for a teacher-commenter to fall into a monologue derived from authority as grader, "expert," and singular reader, but this method turned our comments into an *exchange* that centered on the students' texts. Utilizing this method, or a version of it, teachers, writing tutors, and students may discover a way to approach texts that returns some authority to the writer, and yields a more useful, and more intriguing, three-way conversation.

## Notes

1. This research was originally presented at the 2012 Conference on College Composition and Communication in St. Louis, MO as part of "A Gateway to Professionalization: An Undergraduate Researcher Poster Session," the organizers of which I would like to thank for giving me the opportunity to share and further develop this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Anne Ellen Geller, Dr. Susan Rosenberg, and Dr. Harry Denny for their invaluable encouragement, guidance, and support at every stage of this project; Dr. Neal Lerner and Lauren Williams for help with references; and Jon McGinn, Sandra Nelson, Cassandra Richardson-Coughlin, Emily Gotimer-Strolla, and Meghan P. Nolan for all of their comments, both collaborative and monologic, as I wrote and revised this article.
2. There are no designated upper-level writing intensive/writing enriched courses at this institution.
3. The absence of an immediate grade may have also compelled students to engage with comments as a measure of teacher assessment. And, this prevented the contextualization of feedback that happens when a grade is given, which Gopen discusses (23), and lessened the effects of the teacher's authority as evaluator.
4. Student work, University Writing Center session reports (from WOnline), and my reflections on them are used with IRB approval through the Fellows program. Students gave written consent for portions of their work to be used without identifying information.

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