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COMMENTS TO COMMENTS:  
TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN WRITTEN  
DIALOGUE ABOUT CRITICAL REVISION

I liked the Comments to Comments exercise because I had a chance to respond directly to your ideas on my assignment. I had an opportunity to give you my feedback and explain what I did and why I did that. Normally, I would have tossed the paper aside after you handed it back, but this made me actually sit down and analyze it.

Anonymous Technical Writing Student

Effective teacher feedback increases students’ awareness of the choices they can make and have made in a piece of writing and enables them to discuss those choices with others. Like many writing teachers, I continue to search for the most effective methods of teaching students revision strategies through my feedback to their writing. However, I have felt that the unidirectional nature of the traditional teacher feedback and student revision of drafts process produces limited results in terms of actively involving students in rhetorical analysis that results in more effective text. As the technical writing student notes in the epigraph above, students are not typically required to articulate a rationale for their choices or offer an explanation, defense, justification and reconsideration of those choices. In turn, they are not taught to critically analyze their texts, on which successful revision practices are based. Even the most provocative and sensitive teacher comments generally ask students to comply with the teacher’s evaluations and suggestions in revised texts, often without a genuine understanding of the intent of the teacher’s feedback. Simply put, there is no meaningful dialogue about the paper between teacher and student, which means that students do not learn the

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internal dialogue of self-critique needed for performing critical revision on their own. Instead, students associate revision with dependence on a teacher's authoritative evaluation.

Like many teachers, I've used student-teacher conferences to discuss revision with students. However, I've had moderate success engaging them in active, critical discussion. Students have shown difficulty talking freely, specifically, and spontaneously in real-time conversation about revising their texts. Without a conceptual vocabulary to "talk" about writing, students can not critically discuss their writing in terms of thesis statements, topic sentences, language conventions, support, audience, appropriateness, purpose, and so forth. Once students understand this language, they can put this new literacy into practice in intercommunication with teachers and their peers. Creating what Peter L. Mortensen calls a "talk-back" form of interaction between student-writer and teacher-reader could give students the voice and agency to respond to the traditional authority figure. Also, such interaction with teachers engages students more actively and critically in their own writing processes, an important component of successful writing, as Pamela Gay, Kathryn Evans, Andrea Lunsford, Helen Rothschild Ewald, and Richard Beach have noted. However, just as with learning any new form of literacy, students need exposure and practice with the language of revision before they feel confident and proficient enough in the discourse to use it in oral communication.

With the goal of developing students' revision literacy and practices, I developed a dynamic, critical revision method that allows students some time to reflect on their texts and to think about responses to my feedback before entering into discussion and collaboration with me. This essay describes the Comments to Comments assignment, an asynchronous, written collaboration between teachers and students that is designed to teach students to develop, analyze, articulate, reconsider, and explain their revision ideas. Comments to Comments begins when students write their first drafts and I write feedback directly on their papers. The feedback provides marginal and end comments to identify and discuss specific rhetorical strategies, organization, syntax, semantics, and mechanics issues in their texts—both global and local revision concerns. Second, I return student papers with feedback and explain the Comments to Comments assignment requirements with the aid of a handout of instructions, which illustrates how to respond to my feedback in a dialogue format (see Appendix A). Third, after students transcribe verbatim all of my feedback on their papers, they must carefully consider, and responsively respond with discursive disagreement with the assignment, questions, document that rest student about the written dialogue, I Comments. Final writing to the stud ends but oral conv the assignment rec both students are discussion and re Comments with st me time later in th my feedback are a subsequent assign teaching revision successful in all w trial and error that

**Teachers in Writing Classroom**

While Pam dialogue with stu Writing Classroom students into a dial argues that basic v a structured form of the teacher's eval important for stud of frustration, dis emotional and me This is why I do after returning pag after they've had before I discuss t engaged in writi comments and di emotion-focused conviction about
and responsively reply to each prompt. More specifically, students respond with discussion about their choices, justification for agreeing or disagreeing with my interpretation of their writing, interpretations of the assignment, questions, challenges, and so forth. What results is a written document that resembles a play script of dialogue between teacher and student about the student’s text. To encourage active participation in the written dialogue, I assign students a grade for completing Comments to Comments. Finally, the fourth step involves teacher’s second response in writing to the student’s reply comments. Here, Comments to Comments ends but oral conversations and collaboration could continue. Granted, the assignment requires a bit more consideration, time, and writing from both students and teachers in order to achieve a rich and focused discussion and revision process. However, performing Comments to Comments with students once at the beginning of the semester has saved me time later in the course because oral conversations, peer revision, and my feedback are clearer and more meaningful to students as they revise subsequent assignments. While I consider this assignment to be useful for teaching revision to less experienced students, it has not been equally successful in all writing classes. I will discuss the long, tedious process of trial and error that I went through as I refined and adapted the assignment.

**TEACHERS IN WRITTEN DIALOGUE WITH STUDENTS**

While Pamela Gay has argued for a similar approach to written dialogue with students in her 1998 essay, “Dialogizing Response in the Writing Classroom: Students Answer Back,” my approach to inviting students into a dialogue of critical revision differs. More specifically, Gay argues that basic writing students initially need to “vent” their feelings as a structured form of response in addition to providing a general reaction to the teacher’s evaluation of their writing. Similarly, I agree that venting is important for students to move emotionally beyond their initial reactions of frustration, disappointment, and even anger into more productive emotional and mental states for performing critical rhetorical revision. This is why I do not begin revision dialogue with students immediately after returning papers to them with grades. I wait a class session or two, after they’ve had some time to reflect on their writing and my feedback before I discuss their grades, my comments, or the evaluations. While engaged in writing Comments to Comments, students respond to my comments and discuss their own texts directly and specifically in a less emotion-focused revision dialogue than Gay suggests—one with conviction about rewriting and collaborating.
On the one hand, I do agree with Gay that students should have the opportunity to express their concerns, confusion, and frustration about an assignment and their performance of it. On the other hand, I think such dialogue should be a part of the general discourse of the writing classroom throughout the writing process. Instead of an initial reaction to the paper's grade, I call students to provide responses of disagreement to specific points of my feedback along with reasoning to articulate a developed, critical discussion. If, after writing many points of reasoned disagreement a student feels that my evaluation was too severe, they are invited to make an argument for it. In fact, students have persuaded me to change my assessment through substantiated reasoning, which amounts to successful, critical dialogue about their writing.

The Rough Evolution of Comments to Comments

Over the past six years, my approach to giving feedback in Comments to Comments has developed significantly in accordance with my goals, my evaluations of students' written dialogues, and with students' anonymous critiques of the revision assignment. As Nancy Sommers explains, teacher feedback should motivate students to revisit their texts with curiosity and involvement: "The challenge we face as teachers is to develop comments which will provide an inherent reason for students to revise; it is a sense of revision as discovery, as a repeated process of beginning again, as starting out new, that our students have not learned" (156). Further, feedback should strive to invigorate students' inquiry into concerns of audience, purpose, terminology, conventions, genre, and form to comprise a critical revision process, as James Porter suggests. In addition, teachers should address the language mechanics and format issues. Also, feedback must be given with care to produce generous responses that are specific, reflective, challenging, and critical as opposed to vague, overly general, and ambiguous, as Chris Anson and Michael Robertson have argued in their essays. In turn, students are challenged to think and dialogue about their writing in a substantive manner. The following lists present types of feedback and response that develop into the written interaction of Comments to Comments:

Types of Teacher Feedback

- Questions that suggest expansion, clarification, explanation, persuasion
- Remarks which reveal instructor's understanding of the students' texts so that student writers can evaluate whether that

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- Identification of a mechanical problem in a specific sentence with a request to explain the error of standard English and to correct the sentence
- Praise about what is working well accompanied by questions that ask students to explain why that element works well

**Types of Student Responses**

- Revised words or sentences accompanied by an explanation or the student’s agreement with the suggestion or interpretation of the text
- Reasoning for disagreeing with instructor’s suggestion or interpretation of the text
- Discussions of successful writing strategies that respond to instructor’s praise
- New directions for revision that were not initiated by the instructor

While these lists represent the current dialogue guidelines, when I began teaching Comments to Comments, my feedback did not elicit a critical reflection on student writing. I will address several of these problems that interfered with productive dialogue and how I modified the assignment to overcome the obstacles.

**Instructor’s Handwriting**

One problem with written dialogue involved my handwriting. In an effort to be more time efficient while grading papers, I quickly wrote comments to student’s writing because I had so much I wanted to share with students. However, what resulted was sloppy handwriting that students could not always read. In addition to hindering students’ ability to dialogue with me, carelessly written communication hurt my ethos. In fact, it was quite embarrassing as one business writing student referred to my handwriting as “an ancient Egyptian sign system.” Bottom line, my written remarks needed to be more carefully written so that my students could decipher them without translation from me. In turn, students ask for clarification occasionally instead of regularly.

**Students with Low Revision Literacy**

Students also had trouble understanding my feedback when they lacked a working knowledge of revision literacy. In other words, students must be able not only to read the words but also to understand the meaning
of the questions, rhetorical concepts, and suggestions for revision in order to respond to them appropriately and completely. After having gotten some responses such as “I'm not sure what you mean by this” and “I'm not sure how to respond to this comment,” I decided to provide a class session for students to begin the assignment. During this period, I explain the requirements thoroughly and provide a handout of instructions and examples of productive revision dialogue. Further, I review overhead slides that present several types of comments and responses from previous students to illustrate teacher-student collaboration. Encouraging all students to read through each of my comments, I then address each student individually, asking if they have any questions and if I can clarify any aspect of my feedback. I agree with David L. Wallace; it is important to emphasize that students learn to write purposefully, evaluate their performance in terms of that purpose, and reconsider their strategies to produce more successful writing for a target audience. Ideally, the teacher feedback should help students to assess their rhetorical effectiveness and to revise their writing with purpose and audience in mind.

Marginal or End Comments?

While I have debated over the placement of feedback on student papers, as other scholars have, I decided that marginal comments are necessary for basic writers, while end comments are effective with more advanced writers, who have fewer sentence-level revision concerns than less experienced writers. For example, those basic writers who write sentence fragments, run-ons, and comma splices have difficulty identifying them on their own in their writing when I wrote end comments. End comments would vaguely indicate the presence of mechanical errors somewhere in the paper without giving enough guidelines for inexperienced writers to revise them. (I'll address revision dialogue about language mechanics a bit later in this essay.) Also, I found that I wrote superfluous description just trying to identify or reference the section of their text to which I had a comment. It was an inefficient use of feedback time and space. The clarity of marginal comments stems from their specificity, and students no longer give me the responses of confusion such as “what part of my essay are you talking about?” or “I'm not sure where you mean.”

A Teacher Learning to Let Go of Authority

Trying to helpful, I tended to be too directive about what I thought students should do to revise their work, instead of letting them think it
through. In turn, I limited students' critical thinking processes for revision. Further, I wasn't prompting students to perform rhetorical criticism of their texts; rather, I was making their decisions for them and then telling them what to do, which completely undermined my desire to encourage critical thought. To address this problem, I started to write feedback that was inquisitive and interpretative rather than directive. For example, I commanded a revision regarding focus by writing, "provide a thesis statement." As a change, I have articulated a prompt about thesis statements for a female composition student by writing, "I don't see a thesis statement that indicates the main point of your paper. Could you write one or revise a sentence that you think suggests your main point?" With this shift in sentence function, I received much more elaborate responses from the student who could explain what she thought was her thesis statement and add a new or revised thesis statement to convey the focus of her paper. My goal here was to encourage the student to dialogue with me about what a clear thesis is and why it is clear or not clear for a specific audience in a specific text. Given this, I was able to write a prompt that engaged the student in a critical decision about how effectively she was communicating the main point of her essay instead of placing her in a passive subject position.

Students Not Elaborating

When students did not elaborately respond to my feedback, I couldn't gauge whether or not they understood the assignment, conventions of essay writing, mechanical rules, or the like. Further, I could not understand what rationale or learned practice was underlying their decisions, which would help me respond more appropriately to their revision strategies. Therefore, my follow-up reply wasn't very responsive to why the student made specific choices. For example, when I praised students for their writing, students often responded with a simple "thank you." More specifically, when I used the vague praise of "good detail," I couldn't be sure that the writer was consciously providing details that supported topic sentences. The point is that my comment of "good detail" did not evoke a conversation. In fact, it stifled conversation in its definitive evaluation and lack of inquiry into student views or decisions behind the inclusion of a given detail. Now, I follow-up my praise with a question that asks students to explain how an element functions in the essay. For example, "good detail" is followed up with "Why are good details important to topic sentences?" As a result, students provide reasoning that reflects their understanding of how details illustrate and
support the sub-points provided in a topic sentence. In another example of praise about the inclusion of a clear thesis statement, I asked a male writing student, “What does your thesis statement let your popular magazine audience know about what your essay argues?” Here, the student must rethink the power and clarity of his thesis statement in terms of the audience, emphasizing a rhetorical perspective. Through this inquiry process about writing and rewriting, I can reinforce conventions of composition and strategies of argumentation to make writing more conscious for each student.

**Learning to Phrase Questions so That Students Explain**

After I learned to phrase suggestions as questions, I still received responses that expressed uncritical compliance. For example, I would ask a composition student, “how about including an example of the benefits of training with a professional to be more persuasive?” To this question, the student responded with “ok.” Clearly, I have not engaged the student in an act of critical discussion about how and why to revise the text. Therefore, I now add to my suggestions a follow-up question or questions such as “Why do you think I’ve made that suggestion” or “Do you agree or disagree and why?” More specifically, I provide a suggestion for revision and request a rationale for such a revision strategy. For example, I wrote to a technical writing student on a cover letter for a resume, “Why might explaining the significance of your work experience here help support your topic sentence and increase your credibility?” Instead of supplying students with my rationale for a suggestion, I ask students to critically think through possible strategies, effects, and reasons for revising the work, which is how I characterize critical revision. As an appropriate and complete response, students must provide verbatim what additions they would include, and make clear to me that they are not simply complying with my suggestion. Rather, they must show conviction through elaboration and reasoning that the decision to revise in a specific manner is a result of their own critical thinking process with their own goals in mind. Without these inquiries, I was inadvertently emphasizing the finished product of writing rather than the process of critical revision. The following are examples of original feedback, student responses, and my follow-up comments:

*Instructor’s Feedback:* Perhaps you could make this paragraph more meaningful to less experienced readers by saying what the pieces or some of the pieces of equipment do in terms of the process of beer brewing. What do you think?
Student Response: I definitely think it would make the paper more interesting and flow like a well-developed paragraph containing more explicit information. Ex. The first piece of equipment that you might find in your kitchen is a brewpot. A brewpot needs to be made of stainless steel or enamel-coated metal that is not chipped. (nontraditional basic writing student)

Instructor Follow-up: Excellent, thorough revision discussion here!

Instructor Feedback: Where's your thesis? Would you write one?

Student Response: Weather forecasting will always be a challenging occupation, but with the help of radar, Doppler Radar, and computers, predicting weather has become more accurate over the years.

Instructor Follow-up: Excellent thesis with clarity about where you are heading with this essay.

Having to rationalize a revision decision will increase the internalization of revision inquiry and strategies. In other words, students learn by doing the work of critical revision.

Inviting Students to Disagree

A few years ago, a couple of students expressed disagreement with my feedback and did so in an intelligent, critical response. After recognizing the value of encouraging this kind of critical thought, I began to invite students to disagree with my feedback, if that's how they felt. While a few students lacked good reasons for their disagreements, most disagreements resulted in productive dialogue when students thought critically outside of my suggestions and in terms of their own rhetorical goals. While disagreement is invited, substantiation or justification for the student's alternate position is required, just as an instructor's comments need justification. Instead of simply expressing compliance and telling me what they think I want to hear, I encourage students to critically think through what they want for their own writing, what they mean, and how they want readers to think about their subject. Further, such justification and clarification enables me to better understand a student's purpose and reasoning, which may not have been obvious while reading the paper. In some cases, students' disagreement has convinced me that their reasoning makes more sense rhetorically than what I had in mind. In other cases, the students' disagreement indicates some misunderstanding of the
assignment or my comment. The following are examples of my original feedback on their papers, their disagreements with my feedback, and my follow-up comments:

_Instructor's Feedback:_ Why did you change paragraphs? You continue to talk about regulations regarding basketball baskets in the second paragraph. Explain. Agree/disagree?

_Student Response:_ I thought I should change paragraphs because I was talking about the past and then I started to talk about the present. (Basic writing student)

_Instructor's Follow-up:_ Ok. Good explanation. For revision, make sure that your topic sentences reflect your change in time frame.

_Instructor's Feedback:_ Performance effect of lowering a truck? Does it give a smoother ride or the like? That would mean more to someone like me who doesn’t know much about customizing trucks—your target audience.

_Student Response:_ I answered the question later in the essay. Therefore, there’s no need for revision. (Basic writing student)

_Instructor's Follow-up:_ Ok. I see that you do address this later. My comment anticipated the significance of the process of lowering a truck, which you do address successfully at a later point.

_Instructor's Feedback:_ Why change paragraphs? Explain why or why not.

_Student Response:_ The reason for changing paragraphs is because I got this information from two different sources. Not only that, the one paragraph shows the effects on male smokers and the other shows the effects on female smokers. After your explanation in class, I now know that I need to do some revision on my topic sentences so that I clearly explain that one paragraph is about men and the other is about women. Also, I need to show more details on the subjects “male” and “female” in each paragraph. (Composition student)

_Instructor's Follow-up:_ exactly!

_Instructor's Feedback:_ Could you elaborate on this theory (of how the mysterious contents in the briefcase might be an Academy Award Oscar statuette)? It seems more realistic.
Student Response: I don’t believe in this theory at all. I refuse to believe that the briefcase, something that bogged the greatest movie minds contained an Oscar. It’s not something that could cause people to get killed over. (Basic writing student)

Instructor’s Follow-up: Ok. That’s logical reasoning provided here. You sound firm in your belief with a strong voice that is missing from other parts of the essay. Put this in the paper to provide a strong refutation against this theory; it’s persuasive.

What’s a pleasure for me to see is that student disagreements are generally written in a strong voice and reflect students’ commitments to their writing and to their rhetorical goals. On the one hand, some disagreements reinforce in students what their goals are and how to achieve them better. On the other hand, other disagreements express a misunderstanding about the assignment or my comment, which I could then clarify for them by referring to the assignment requirements or by explaining what I intended by my comment. Regardless, in disagreement, students show they care enough about their text to disagree with me and negotiate the rewriting, reshaping, and re-imagining of their work.

Dealing with Mechanics

In terms of discussing the revision of language mechanics, I realized that I needed to address conventions and guidelines with inexperienced writers. As Robert Connors, Mina Shaughnessy, and others have argued, mechanical errors are rhetorically significant in the construction of ethos as writers meet discourse community expectations. Years ago, I would make “x” markings to indicate some form of mechanical error in that sentence without blatantly identifying the error so that the student would have to think about it. However, in response, I received some reactions of confusion that never developed into critical dialogue such as “I’m not sure what’s wrong here” or blind guesses such as “Is it a fragment?” Then, I came to believe that inexperienced student writers need more specific feedback than vague circles around an error or markings without information about the mechanical error. However, they also need more active revision work than what comes with the instructor’s correction of an error, which students gloss over or completely ignore, and, therefore, do not learn to recognize or correct.

As a new strategy, I decided to name the mechanical error in an identified sentence. However, inexperienced writers would still be con-
fused about revising since many don’t have the vocabulary for understanding some mechanical errors by name. For example, on one student’s essay, I indicated that a sentence was a comma splice, asking the student to edit the sentence. When the student responded to my prompt, he wrote, “I don’t know what this is,” and provided a new sentence that produced another comma splice error. Clearly, I had to address at least some of the common grammatical errors instead of just assuming or expecting that writing students know what they are and how to correct them. In fact, I began introducing revision by reviewing some of the common mechanical errors. Then, if they still made the errors in their papers, I would state the error in the sentence and ask students to review by referencing that type of error in their style manuals, explain why it is grammatical, and rewrite the sentence with the correction. For further assistance in this endeavor, I suggest going to my office hours and/or to the Writing Center. The following is an example of dialogue with a basic writing student about language mechanics:

Instructor’s Feedback: Why is this a fragment? Please revise the sentence.

Student Response: The subject was missing which is necessary for a complete sentence. The sentence should read, “Baking in the sun all day, I got very burned.”

Instructor’s Follow-up: Good work.

Having students take the time to reference resources on mechanics and explain why their writing reflects an error in mechanics helps students to recognize that kind of error and learn the appropriate conventions for the first time. The following is an example of a revision dialogue with a basic writing student who did not fully answer my prompt and, in turn, also didn’t really learn what was grammatical about his sentence:

Instructor’s Feedback: Why is this a run-on? Revise the sentence.

Student Response: DNA is a perfect tool for law enforcement agencies to have especially with the criminals getting more advanced it gives the police an advantage.

Instructor’s Follow-up: This is still a run-on. Let’s work in my office on how to correct run-on sentences, which combine two or more sentences without proper punctuation.

As with the above example, the dialogues about mechanics can reveal a lack of understanding about the type of error and provide an opportunity to develop skill in that area, which might have gone neglected by the students.
student without such prompting from me. Other students may have typos, which simply show a lack of proofing and editing. Generally, students respond to typo comments by bashfully acknowledging a "stupid mistake" that was overlooked in error. Then, they must correct the typo. Calling attention to these surface level mistakes helps reinforce good proofing and editing practices that should occur during the final stages of revision to build a credible ethos.

Learning to Convey Suggestions Clearly
When students occasionally gave thin and unreflective responses, I realized that my comments mistakenly conveyed a neutral attitude about a missing, key element. For example, the following exchange with a composition student illustrates my miscommunication:

_Instructor's Feedback:_ I'm not sure where your thesis is.

_Student Response:_ It's in my first sentence, second paragraph.

What I meant by this vague comment was that it was a problem of clarity, purpose, and focus that I could not find this essential feature of an essay, the thesis. The second sentence of his essay was not an arguable claim. What I was hoping the student would have done with my comment was to realize that he had not written a clear thesis statement and that he would provide one for the revision dialogue and subsequent draft. However, the lack of direction and nonchalant tone of my comment did not facilitate such a response. I had not clearly communicated my assessment, suggestions for revision, or my expectations for further dialogue. With some embarrassment, I responded to the student by acknowledging my lack of clarity, requesting revision of the thesis, and stating its importance in an essay:

_Instructor's Follow-up:_ I realize now that my comment is vague. What I should have said here is that the fact that I can't identify a thesis means that I need you to clarify what you are arguing by writing a clearer thesis. Why do you think that your lay magazine readers should easily understand the main point of your essay in terms of persuasiveness?

In this follow-up comment, I admit my error to the student, which I believe creates a less authoritative relationship and, therefore, further enables more genuine collaboration between us. Also, I ask him to revise so that he would better achieve his own goals of readers' understanding of and adherence to his main argument—a rhetorical analysis of the student text with the student.
Praise, Praise, Praise!

An important counterpart to discussing weaknesses in a student’s writing is to identify strengths as well, a strategy I incorporated into Comments to Comments. Since praise encourages students to overcome writing apprehension (Daiker 105) and offers “the psychology of positive reinforcement” (Irmscher 150), students develop more positive attitudes about their writing. Also, praising student writing lets students know that they are doing things well, which reinforces effective writing strategies, as Macrorie, Hirsch, Shaughnessy, and Diederich have argued. However, my early forms of praise were typically vague comments of “good” or “yes” in the margins. After receiving simple expressions of appreciation for the compliment rather than a critical dialogue, it was obvious to me that students need to develop an understanding of what is “good” writing within specific contexts so that they can use that strategy again in future writing. In turn, I modified my praise feedback by identifying the strength of the text with comments such as “clear thesis.” However, in response, I consistently received unreflective responses such as “thanks” or “The book shows us to do it this way.” This student demonstrates attention to the book as a reference to disciplinary writing but does not express an understanding of how or why this strategy operates for the community or purpose. Thus, I needed to modify my praise in order to stimulate critical thought about why a particular sentence or strategy works well in a student’s paper. In turn, I started to include a question along with the praise to stimulate discussion of the reasons the rhetorical element served the paper’s effectiveness. However, responding to praise often perplexes students because they don’t see a need to reply to a compliment with which they are in agreement. Therefore, I had to explain that even my praise necessitated their analytical responses. Addressing my praise of their written work directly helps students to realize how good a paragraph, detail, or the like actually is. I want students to recognize when and how they have moved closer to their rhetorical goals with effective writing, conclusions they may not have realized during the drafting of their papers. Clearly, the realization of one’s strengths as a writer enables greater confidence in that writing ability. The following exchanges about praise are with three basic writing students:

Instructor’s Feedback: This scene came to life for me because of your vivid description of the cabin fire using active verbs and expressive adjectives. How did you decide to write these details?
Student’s Response: I carefully selected these words in an attempt to recreate for the reader the energy that was apparent at the time and which caused me to act with fear, anger, and finally action.

Instructor’s Follow-up: Clear reasoning!

Instructor Feedback: Good topic sentence! Why are topic sentences important to paragraphs and essays?
Student Response: Topic sentences let the reader know that the subject is changing and also keeps them interested.
Instructor Follow-up: Yes!

Instructor Feedback: Great Title! Why are great titles important?
Student Response: The title got your attention and it stated what the essay was going to be about. It is also a fun one!
Instructor Follow-up: yes! I agree!

Such student responses indicate analysis of rhetorical strategies, which lead to an understanding of how to produce particular effects for readers in subsequent writing tasks. Also, focusing on strengths celebrates what students have accomplished, which helps to change the instructor’s role from authoritative corrector of mistakes to writing collaborator and encourager.

What’s the Final Word?

As a revision strategy, instructors can use Comments to Comments either as the final act of revision on a paper or in conjunction with final rewrites to be submitted for a grade. The decision to follow-up Comments to Comments with a graded, revised draft depends on instructors’ time constraints and on their desires to achieve or to do as Julie Jung suggests, disrupt closure to students’ revision processes. Worth noting, students typically prefer to revise the draft after Comments to Comments in order to achieve the finished, improved text. In fact, when I have not asked students to turn in a revised essay after Comments to Comments, they report less satisfaction with the assignment and have criticized me for not requiring the follow-up revisions in the text. Several students associate improvements in their writing when they see the evidence before them in their final papers as compared to earlier drafts. As a result of this critique, I started to include a second draft in the project, which further reinforces
the importance of revision as an ongoing process. After all, if students feel
good about their writing, they will write more and become more confident.

COMMENTS TO COMMENTS: MIXED REVIEWS

For the past six years, I have taught Comments to Comments in a
wide variety of writing courses that included basic writing, standard
composition, honors composition, technical writing, and business
communication. However, I adjust my feedback and expectations to suit
the course and the level of student writing, which produces different forms
of written dialogue, collaboration, and revision. In fact, my method of
adapting the assignment for each course was developed in part by
anonymous student feedback on the assignment. Students from the full
range of writing courses answered the question, “Has Comments to
Comments been an effective method of learning to revise your own
writing? Why or why not?” In the introductory technical writing classes,
students overall found the assignment to be useful and could complete the
assignment without much difficulty. With more advanced writers, the
assignment can feel like busy work because they have already interiorized
much of the kind of revision dialogue in which I would engage them. The
advanced business writing students, for example, completed Comments to
Comments with thorough elaboration about their writing choices and with
a greater percentage of disagreements with me than less experienced
writers provide. Both of these factors reveal that they have had more
experience with writing and that they have more direction in terms of how
they wish to formulate their documents and why. Therefore, I no longer
use Comments to Comments with the senior level students. Instead, I’ve
found that Comments to Comments makes a discernable difference with
less experienced writers. Discussions of subsequent drafts and
assignments reveal experimentation and practice with their new literacy
and elevations in their confidence and interest in their writing. Also, in the
technical writing classes, students learn the discourse of communities of
science and technology, which is unfamiliar, formal rhetorical territory. I
find that Comments to Comments calls students to apply the technical
writing concepts from our textbook in written dialogue, and, therefore,
incorporate those terms into their own work. It’s exciting to see student
writers’ anxieties about writing diminish as they learn to talk about the
assignments, ask questions about writing for an audience, and discuss how
they plan to fulfill the requirements and their own purposes.

While students continue to have criticisms about the assignment,
they generally fall into one of two types and are few in numbers. A small
percentage of students expressed a preference for speaking with me rather than writing with me their dialogues about revision. Among the basic writing students surveyed, only four students out of eighty either considered Comments to Comments to be as useful as or less useful than oral conferencing. I encourage these more face-to-face communication-oriented students to come to my office for individual conferencing at any point in the revision process. The second criticism is that Comments to Comments takes a long time to complete, which is accurate if the student is responding specifically and elaborately in revision. For example, one student identified having trouble referencing the style manual to learn about a mechanical rule and explain how to revise the sentence. Another student stated that there were a lot of comments to which to respond, which made the assignment lengthy. Despite these relatively few criticisms, other students reported that Comments to Comments “wasn’t that hard,” was a “good learning tool,” and “was very fun talking about something I know about [myself].”

Overall, student feedback suggests that I continue to use Comments to Comments for teaching revision in classes with less experienced writers. The following kinds of positive feedback clearly prevailed among the students’ responses and motivated my continued application and modification of the assignment:

Yes, I think it makes you think about why you do certain things and how to do them right. Many times you don’t know why you are making certain revisions but this makes you think about why you are doing them. Doing this allows you to understand revising better, therefore, being better at it in the future. (Basic writing student on essay assignment)

Instead of just reading and probably ignoring your comments, I had to analyze what you were saying, think about the effect of the comment on my document and then decide how to go about either implementing the comment or telling you why I felt the comment wasn’t good for me and my purpose. It made reason out my decisions for putting certain things in my document. I think this helped me to develop a more readable, scannable, and attractive technical document. (Technical writing student on resume assignment)

I believe I learned more from doing the Comments to Comments than I have from just revising rough drafts. It made
me think of more than one technique of revising. Instead of coming out and stating how to fix the work, the students are told what is wrong and they must figure out how to fix it. (Basic writing student on essay assignment)

I do believe that the Comments to Comments assignment is a good idea because it gives you a good amount of time to answer the questions with a good response as well. I also think that it might be a good idea to revise the resume and have it graded a second time to make it an even better copy. (Technical writing student on resume writing)

This feedback gave me the sense that students understood the goals of the assignment as well as the benefits of revision on their writing. Also, they wrote that they enjoyed talking about themselves and in “writing the play script.” Further, students indicated satisfaction with the in-depth exchange about their writing, which focused on aspects of persuasion and convention.

Overall, the main difference between how I’ve used Comments to Comments in the various writing courses is the kind of feedback I give and, in turn, students’ responses. On the one hand, in sophomore writing classes such as the technical writing classes, my feedback is focused on rhetorical issues—meeting audience expectations and document-form conventions, and achieving writing objectives. On the other hand, in first-year writing courses, my feedback addresses assignment requirements, essay features, paragraphing, mechanical errors, and the use and documentation of research sources. As student writers across courses, cultures, and writing contexts have varying needs for improving their rhetorical effectiveness, even within a given course, I have to adjust the revision dialogue to meet those needs. Those needs become apparent to me as I get to know them in class with writing assignments, one-on-one conferencing, and in-class interaction. For example, with ESL students in my technical writing classes, my comments focused on their language mechanics related to writing in a second language, which differs from basic writing language mechanics issues. In sum, how I practice and implement Comments to Comments in writing classes is always under review and adjustment to individual students and their writing.

More on Comments to Comments

Future work on this pedagogy includes methods for assessing changes in students’ awareness and application of revision. At this point,
while I have considered setting up test classes as control groups, too many variables make any attempt to correlate changes in their papers with their completion of Comments to Comments inconclusive. As it continues to evolve, this creative and critical pedagogy will focus on students' awareness of how they write, why they write, to whom they write, and ways that their writing can become more effective.

As Robert Probst argues, teacher feedback should involve students in a "shared commitment—they are not opponents sparring in a linguistic ring, the student attempting to slip confusions and inadequacies past the teacher, and the teacher attempting to catch, label, and castigate all the flaws" (70). Accordingly, Comments to Comments is a collaborative model of student-teacher revision; students are more likely to perceive instructors as being on their side, working on their behalf, rather than as an obstacle to overcome, psyche out, figure out, or manipulate in order to earn the desired grades. The sense of team spirit becomes a strong part of the complex power relationship between students and instructors. Further, teachers' feedback should suggest that student writing matters enough to warrant a collaborative revision endeavor. Calling students to actively dialogue with instructors about their writing makes it difficult for even resistant students to be apathetic. Such repeated readings are encouraged by the revision dialogue of inquiry, discussion, and negotiation between teacher and student. Through this experience with revision, students develop a literacy that makes face-to-face conferencing and peer review more productive and meaningful. Furthermore, with practice, the language of revision dialogue becomes the internal dialogue of self-critique, therefore, making a more resourceful writer.

Echoing Dawn Dreyer's purposes in teaching revision with students, I designed Comments to Comments to invigorate in students an attitude toward writing that involves self-awareness, effective communication with others, and interest in their own writing—all of which fuel repeated readings, reconsideration of original plans, and assessment of current and new directions in writing.

Lehman, Pennsylvania

APPENDIX A

Comments to Comments

General Instructions to Students
Please read my comments carefully. The comments may be in the form of a question, a suggestion for revision, a compliment on an aspect of your writing that is effective,
an affirmation that you included an important point or feature, or a response that reflects how I am reading/understanding your text. For this assignment, respond in detail to all of my comments on your paper as if we are having a written conversation about revision. My purpose is that you come to a deeper understanding of how to achieve your own goals in writing and those of an assignment.

Format
For clarity, type my comment to which you are responding. Then, type out your response to that comment, a format that will resemble a play script/dialogue. Submit this assignment along with the paper being critiqued.

Examples of Thorough Responses
This assignment is designed to create an intense and interactive revision process. In order for us to achieve this, you need to respond in detail, revealing your writing decisions and the reasoning behind them. There are three main types of responses students can give to the feedback: 1) providing revisions and explanation of reasons for agreement with my feedback, 2) justification for disagreement with my suggestions for revision, and 3) explanation of your successful writing strategy. Here are some examples of thorough responses to my comments:

Instructor Comment: Could you expand on this concept of retribution and explain how it supports your main argument about injustice in our contemporary law courts?
Example of Student Response: My revised sentences would read, "Retribution involves the just punishment for the crime. With the bureaucracy and loopholes of the legal system, justice rarely can prevail. Therefore, vigilante justice is the only real form of justice." Adding this would clarify the connection between the vigilante example and my point about the weaknesses of our justice system.

Instructor Comment: Great job setting up your paper's main point and purpose with this story!
Example of Student Response: I felt that Sarah's story would help establish a need for addressing this issue of unwanted children and state facilities. It's a factual story which will be persuasive to my audience, providing details to show the problem with emotional impact.

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