

## Research or Faculty Development? A Study of WI Faculty Commenting Practices

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Research conducted by writing program administrators (WPAs) is little understood. It rarely produces the “hard data” that some policy makers desire in order to justify funding the teaching of writing; it rarely produces the scientifically significant statistics that grant reviewers expect in order to support further study of writing practices. But WPA inquiry, however “soft,” can provide practitioners with valuable pieces of information about the complex puzzle of teaching writing to college students and can inform reflective practice and policy making. Information collected by WPAs, however constrained by the specifics of each teaching situation, can stimulate the healthy self-consciousness at the heart of faculty development.

Policy makers and grant reviewers need to understand that collegiality and professionalism inevitably constrain the kind of information available to WPAs. Policy makers and grant reviewers need to understand why the research methods employed by WPAs are appropriate and why it may be unrealistic to expect “hard data” from controlled studies with independent variables. But WPA practitioners need to embrace the methods available to them to ask and answer such important questions as “Do our teachers actually do what we ask them to do?” and “Do our teachers’ written comments help students make substantive revisions?”

We at the Campus Writing Program at the University of Missouri oversee a well-established writing across the curriculum program that requires each undergraduate to take at least two writing-intensive (WI) courses in order to graduate. These courses are taught by faculty “in the disciplines,” so that a WI course in engineering is taught by the professionals who know best how to write in engineering: tenure-track engineering professors. We justify our program in part on the assumption that writing stimulates thinking, and that revising writing stimulates critical re-thinking. Whether revision

works, though, hangs on the quality of the feedback students get from their busy professors. Do our WI faculty in fact provide the sort of substantive feedback that we recommend in our workshops? Do they actually practice what we preach? And how would we know, since collegiality and professionalism limit the degree to which we can directly observe the written commentary of our WI faculty?

We, like other WPAs, offer workshops about commenting, make recommendations, have informal conversations, and look at papers that come our way. Once in a while, we conduct a semester-long qualitative study of a single course. We have indirect access to a great deal of information, but we have direct access to very little. That is, we have information obtained indirectly through course proposals, course evaluations, anecdotal observations, interviews, conversations, and surveys. We may even have information obtained directly from an occasional study. But we rarely have direct access to even a random sampling of all the writing produced in WI classes in a given semester or to a random sampling of the faculty comments on the student writing. Any WPA inquiry into commenting practices is limited to self-selected participants. It can provide a useful check on our assumptions, can function as part of a larger system of checks and balances, and can suggest patterns and possibilities. It cannot, though, provide positive proof of the efficacy of any single commenting method and cannot support unqualified generalizations.

To explore the general question of the nature of WPA inquiry and the particular question of commenting practices at MU, this article will explore the findings of a two-semester faculty/TA survey of commenting practices. The survey results are not generalizable, given the small sampling of self-selected respondents. Likewise, the survey is only one small piece of a much larger puzzle of faculty development. The survey is, though, representative of WPA inquiry that says *something*, however qualified, about commenting practices, and also serves as a valuable piece of ongoing faculty development.

### THE CHARACTERISTICS OF WPA INQUIRY

In the Galapagos Islands of academic inquiry, isolated research methodologies have evolved in different disciplinary contexts to address different needs, different questions, different purposes. If scientific methodologies provide tentative answers about the material world, humanistic scholarship keeps alive enduring questions that have not yet been settled. WPA inquiry, too, keeps alive enduring questions that teachers of writing need to ask themselves, again and again—and that self-questioning is at the heart of faculty

development. But WPA inquiry has a practical side as well. It must narrate what has already happened in other specific programs so that each WPA can make informed decisions—as informed as possible. WPA inquiry is, as Muriel Harris argues, a kind of applied social research (10). It “begins with questions arising from local practice and local conditions” (2) and proceeds with an array of methodologies, including interviews, ethnographies, surveys, textual analysis, and case studies, that keep alive critical self-consciousness. It cannot yield scientific facts; it can, however, yield a body of observed patterns that can then facilitate practical problem solving in other writing programs.

WPA inquiry about commenting practices leans toward the humanities to the extent it stimulates individual faculty to reflect on their own commenting practices in order to better understand themselves, their students, and their students’ language. WPA inquiry about commenting leans toward the sciences, both social and natural, to the extent it embraces empirical methods to collect data to solve practical problems. As a relatively new form of inquiry, it has antecedents in other multi-methodological social science research in which the inquirer is a participant subject and which is rooted in particular, not universal conditions. WPA inquiry became “species specific” with defining documents, such as Ernest L. Boyer’s 1990 *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, a 1994 Modern Language Association document “Making Faculty Work Visible: Reinterpreting Professional Service, Teaching, and Research in the Fields of Language and Literature,” Janangelo and Hansen’s 1995 book *Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs*, and a 1996 Council of Writing Program Administrators document defining the intellectual work of WPAs. In their 1999 book, *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher: Inquiry in Action and Reflection*, Shirley K Rose and Irwin Weiser characterize WPA inquiry by these nine qualities:

1. It is informed by theory and research in composition, rhetoric and related fields.
2. It both acknowledges and questions values widely shared by WPAs.
3. It is worthwhile and ethical.
4. It is rigorous and systematic.
5. It addresses the questions that prompted it.
6. It can withstand peer review.
7. It is documented in program records.
8. It is circulated at the institutional site and may be circulated more widely.
9. Its conclusions enable WPAs to justify decisions. (vii-viii)

## A GRIM HISTORY: NEED FOR EFFECTIVE COMMENTING PRACTICES

It is almost an article of faith that writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs promote critical thinking because, it is assumed, faculty provide written feedback, which then prompts students to re-think their written arguments. Is this assumption warranted by current practice? To investigate the degree to which WI faculty do provide effective feedback entails some risks. WI faculty risk initial embarrassment if they expose to WPAs their early attempts to comment on student papers. WPAs risk having to qualify the cherished assumption that WAC programs promote critical thinking. Given a vast literature suggesting that all too often English teachers' comments are ineffective, though, WPAs should not be too surprised if WI teachers' comments are only moderately helpful.

If, as David Schwalm suggests in a November 24, 1999, post to WPA-L, "most instructor time is wasted through response strategies that are both inefficient and ineffective," the problem might trace to several causes. As Winifred Hall Harris and Charles Kline claim in separate studies nearly a quarter-century old, instructors often say one thing and do another; that is, the kind of comments that instructors say are most important address higher order issues (e.g., logic, argument), yet the kind of comments that instructors actually write focus on lower-order issues (e.g., spelling, punctuation). More recently, Bruce Maylath makes a similar claim in "Do We Do What We Say? Contradictions in Composition and Grading." Not only are there gaps between theory and practice, there are gaps between a teacher's meaning for a given comment and a student's interpretation of it (Cohen, 1987; Hillocks, 1982). C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, in a 1981 article, note that "individual teachers can make superficially similar comments bearing vastly different connotations" (2). Several studies in the 1980s, including Ruth Jenkins' 1987 self-study, suggest that, unless comments are specific and focused, students are unlikely to benefit from them (see also Burkland and Grimm; MacAllister; Mallonee and Breihan; and Zellmayer). These studies corroborate Nancy Sommers's claim in "Responding to Student Writing" that, by and large, teachers "do not respond to student writing with the kind of thoughtful commentary which will help students [. . .] think about their purposes and goals in writing a specific text" (154). Even when teachers are inclined to establish priorities and write easily understood, assignment-specific comments, teachers may be little rewarded for doing so. Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford wryly observe in a 1993 article that teaching conditions work against effective commenting and that student revision exists in theory more than in practice.

Most of the literature just cited focuses primarily on the commenting made by English teachers. Fewer studies exist about commenting in WI courses, partly because such inquiry is inherently interdisciplinary and complex. On one hand, WPAs are in a somewhat limited position to evaluate the comments of professors in other disciplines—unless the WPA has special knowledge of the discipline. On the other hand, professors in other disciplines, however sincerely interested in their teaching, reap few professional rewards for reflecting upon and writing about the ways in which they comment on student papers. Moreover, WPAs, who depend upon the good will and mutual trust of colleagues in other disciplines, must be sensitive about not overstepping their authority, which makes difficult the possibility of conducting direct studies of commenting practices. The occasional study of commenting in the disciplines is likely to be informal and anecdotal. However, what scholarship exists complements the scholarship about commenting in composition. For example, Mallonee and Breihan note that, while faculty in different disciplines may agree on certain “errors,” they have widely varying solutions to those “errors.” Willa Wollcott notes that “the issue of evaluation, which can be troublesome under the best of conditions, is especially problematic with content-area writing” (154).

If commenting practices at the University of Missouri (MU) are as weak as this body of literature suggests they might be, then we should expect our undergraduates to be dissatisfied with their writing-intensive courses, at least in hindsight. However, individual course evaluations in addition to a major retrospective survey of our recent graduates suggest that WI courses at MU are well taught.<sup>1</sup> Presumably, commenting practices in WI courses at MU are, if not ideal, far from terrible. How shall we reconcile the likelihood of weak commenting practices with favorable course ratings—and how might commenting intersect with other factors in prompting revision in WI courses? What exactly do MU faculty do?

### DESIGN OF THE MU SURVEY ON WI FACULTY/TA COMMENTING PRACTICES

To explore what commenting habits are currently in use by our WI faculty, we designed an open-ended, twenty-question survey and mailed it to all faculty teaching WI courses in Fall 1999 and Winter 2000, approximately one hundred instructors each semester. We also created an electronic form of the survey and e-mailed faculty and their TAs the URL so that it could be completed on-line. Ninety-five individuals responded. Although we cannot boast the sampling procedures that would make this survey statistically sound, we defend research procedures that preserve the dignity and autonomy of

our WI colleagues. That is, we did not impose the survey on anyone who chose not to cooperate with us, just as we generally subordinate our research agenda to our collegial administrative mission. We have, then, less a basis for making a strong, empirically-supported claim than we have a reality check on our basic assumption that our WI courses foster critical thinking, in part through the written dialogue between student and instructor.

A point of clarification might be in order: We entitled our survey “A Survey of WI Faculty and TA Grading and Commenting Practices.” Perhaps we should have omitted the term “grading,” but we felt the term offered writing-intensive faculty a familiar point of reference. The terms grading, commenting, responding, feedback, and assessment each have particular meanings in composition literature, as Speck and Jones indicate in their review of the literature. “Commenting” and “responding” typically are used interchangeably, but “feedback” is used only to refer to comments on drafts in progress, not to comments on final drafts. Speck and Jones further note that “responding” is beginning to eclipse “commenting” in composition literature. We would like to further distinguish between editing, which we defined as corrections of spelling, punctuation, usage, and grammar, from all other kinds of commenting, which most likely focused on content, logic, or organization. All of these terms are to be distinguished from “grading,” which refers to the ranking of a written product, not to the suggestions to help improve the work in progress.

Nonetheless, we used “grading” in the title of our survey. The ninety-five respondents represented more than a third of the MU faculty and TAs associated with our Campus Writing Program in the 1999-2000 academic year. Given our unscientific sample and findings, no tables or graphs will be presented in this article; however, an in-house report with several dozen tables and as many graphs is available upon request (Pattonmd@missouri.edu).<sup>2</sup> The results suggest, predictably enough, that our writing-intensive faculty spend too much time on lower-order issues (editing) and not enough time on the higher-order comments most likely to bring about substantive revision and critical re-thinking of the content and logic. Nonetheless, some of the findings are unexpected and others affirm the basic vitality of our WAC program.

#### **FACULTY DEVELOPMENT OR RESEARCH?**

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the commenting survey is that participants took the time to think about their commenting in a systematic way and brought to a level of conscious awareness their own practices. Even if participants merely thought about the survey questions and never reported their own practices, the survey would have served a purpose, a modest form

of faculty development. By answering questions that distinguish between editorial comments and comments that prompt substantive revision, a professor could draw her own conclusions about ways in which she might alter her commenting practices in the future. By answering questions about time spent on commenting and amount of revision witnessed, professors might draw still other conclusions.

The participants, however, did report their practices and enabled us to consider their practices both in terms of our program goals and in terms of a larger body of composition and WPA research. Modest as this study is, it does meet the criteria for WPA research set forth by Rose and Weiser: It is informed by research about commenting; it both acknowledges and questions the assumption that WI courses prompt critical thinking with teacher feedback; it addresses an important question in an ethical manner; it is as rigorous and systematic as conditions within our writing program permit; and it addresses the questions that prompted it. To be considered for publication, this manuscript has been subjected to peer review and any reader is welcome to request our survey data. Irwin Weiser urges local, institutional studies such as this to be valued as *research*—and not, “as is too often the case—as service or administration” since it yields “large amounts of data demanding the same careful analysis and critical interpretation as any other empirical project.” (97) Although the MU survey findings cannot be generalized as fact, they do raise questions, including these:

- Do WI faculty find sensible the commenting practices advocated in our faculty workshops?
- Do WI faculty use the commenting practices advocated in our faculty workshops?
- Can we explain a preoccupation with editing (over comments that prompt substantive revision) in terms of a learning curve, whereby faculty, like their students, need repeated guided opportunities to refine their commenting practices?
- Should we find new ways to provide WI faculty opportunities to discuss and refine their commenting practices?
- Should we revise our assumptions about commenting practices, given differences between composition course goals and WI course goals?

## QUESTIONS, PATTERNS, AND SURPRISES

*Do WI faculty find sensible the commenting practices advocated in our faculty workshops?*

Certainly, effective commenting is not limited to one single method. Sentence-level feedback from a skillful writer can be immensely helpful in prompting revision of content as well as style. However, most writing-intensive teachers are not rewarded for taking the time it takes to provide this kind of feedback and simply will not take the time. If time is limited, then the conventional wisdom is even more important, and our anecdotal evidence suggests that faculty agree. We join Chris Anson, John Bean, Edward M. White, Richard Straub and Ronald Lunsford, among others, who advise faculty to consider these principles when commenting on drafts in progress:

- Prioritize: Address content and logic (higher order issues) first.
- Be specific: Tie specific questions about content and logic to specific places in the text or to specific places in the assignment (purpose, audience, criteria).
- Respond as a reader: Identify places in the text where the chain of reasoning breaks for you.
- Address lower order issues (sentence structure, formatting, punctuation) selectively, perhaps by noting patterns of error or by closely editing only a small part of the paper.

Judging by oral feedback, end-of-semester conversations, and written evaluations of our faculty workshops, these principles seem to make sense to most MU faculty. Our anecdotal evidence suggests that these principles are comforting to WI faculty who worry that they aren't qualified to "teach writing" or that they don't have time to "correct" their students' papers. Nothing in the survey results suggests that faculty resist any of these principles, at least in theory, and we are not inclined to question the basic wisdom of these principles.

*Do WI faculty use the commenting practices advocated in our faculty workshops?*

Given what composition literature already suggests about commenting, we should not be surprised that our MU faculty reported spending what we consider a disproportionate amount of time editing. Overall, most instructors reported editing a lot. While senior faculty reported more editing than others did, faculty rank did not seem to be a significant factor. We were disappointed but not surprised that so many faculty reported making only

one to three written comments per paper. We also were not surprised that senior faculty were more likely to assign one or two traditional papers per semester, while junior faculty were more likely to embrace the microtheme model with multiple assignments. There was, incidentally, considerable scatter among nonregular faculty.

Also within our expectations was a correlation between length of papers and time spent commenting. Overall, most faculty reported receiving an average of three to four pages for the first draft of their first assignment. Senior faculty, who were more likely to assign fewer papers, were predictably more likely to receive longer papers. And, predictably, senior faculty who were somewhat more likely to assign fewer but longer papers spent somewhat more time commenting per paper. However, we were somewhat surprised that assistant professors spent nearly as much time per paper as full professors. Given that assistant professors tended to assign more, shorter papers, this suggests that they spend more time commenting over the course of the semester. We may need to find ways to help assistant professors use their time more efficiently. The data also suggest that GTAs spend more time commenting on papers than faculty, but we do not know what portion of the entire paper load in each WI class is handled by the professor. It is possible that some faculty merely look over and add to comments already made by their GTAs and that we should not, therefore, interpret the number of minutes per paper they report as the sole feedback received by their students.

We expected that faculty with smaller classes spent more time commenting per paper. That seemed to be the case. This may be an indirect measure of student class rank: It is likely that lower level students are in large classes for nonmajors and they are getting less feedback, while upper level students are taking WI courses in their major and are getting more discipline-specific feedback. It may be that, regardless of the importance of the course, faculty tend to be more committed to upper level courses for their own majors and that that is reflected in the time spent commenting on papers. Likewise, students may be more committed to writing for courses in their majors and may solicit more teacher feedback.

Even though we found predictable some of our findings, we were somewhat surprised by seven others:

- There may be a point of diminishing returns in time spent commenting.
- Perhaps the number and nature of assignments are better predictors of revision than the number of minutes spent commenting. WI faculty may be doing an admirable job of “teaching writing” if they simply challenge students to think about problems in the dis-

cipline, especially if they “challenge writers to deepen and complicate their thought at a level appropriate to their [the writers’] intellectual development” (Bean 252) by posing a few carefully thought out, content-specific questions.

- Class size, while correlated with time spent commenting, did not correlate with the number of papers assigned. We expected more papers in the smaller classes, but that was not the case.
- While most large WI courses did use scoring guides, almost half of those WI courses with one hundred or more students did not use scoring guides. We do not assume that scoring guides are essential in general, but we suspect that it is difficult for professors of large enrollment WI courses to articulate expectations for writing assignments and to maintain common grading standards without scoring guides.
- Most faculty reported writing four or more comments (beyond editing) per paper. Full and assistant professors reported making more written comments than associate professors did. Perhaps competing responsibilities for associate professors make teaching WI undesirable. It was somewhat disturbing that about 30% of faculty overall (and 50% of associate faculty) reported making only one to three written comments. While it is possible to target the most important conceptual issues in one or two comments, we suspect that most students need more written feedback.
- Some WI faculty are from Lake Wobegon. Amazingly, 100% of faculty who spent ten minutes or less commenting on papers believed that they had above average grading standards.

Again, while these observations are grounded in local, limited conditions at MU, they enable us to work, as Kathleen Blake Yancey and Meg Morgan note, “toward a more generalized construct or prototype of that problem and of ways to address it.” Yancey and Morgan continue, “As WPAs, then, not only do we seek to understand the particulars of our own local contexts, but also we seek in them generalizable issues pertinent to the discipline at large.” (81) Communicating these findings can, as Chris Anson and Robert Brown suggest, “help us to understand the complex relationships between our unique work in the academy and the traditions, ways of working, and kinds of recognition that the academy values.” (151) That is, communicating research findings not only helps other WPAs make informed decisions within their programs, but also helps the profession as a whole establish itself within the academy.

*Can we explain a preoccupation with editing (over comments that prompt substantive revision) in terms of a learning curve, whereby faculty, like their students, need repeated guided opportunities to refine their commenting practices?*

Our survey leads us to qualify a basic assumption about commenting, that teachers of writing-intensive courses foster critical thinking by commenting on first drafts of students' papers and by asking students to then revise their thinking. Still, the survey provides a basis for seeing the art of commenting as developmental and for viewing the comments from the most experienced or seasoned faculty as rhetorical, or context- and criterion-based. Muffy Siegel suggests that inexperienced teachers of writing focus on form more than on content, which is consistent with our informal observations of first-time teachers of writing-intensive courses, especially when those teachers come from highly quantitative fields. Siegel's finding is consistent with Chris Anson's subsequent 1989 study, in which he analyzed teacher comments according to William Perry's developmental scheme. (Anson reduced Perry's original nine positions of intellectual development to three stages: dualistic, relative and reflective.)<sup>3</sup> Dualistic comments tend to be right/wrong and grounded in absolute authority; relative comments, while not grounded in right/wrong thinking are grounded in no standard at all; and reflective commenting is good/better/best commenting grounded not in absolutes but in specified criteria. Anson found that neither dualistic nor relativistic responders provided useful feedback, while reflective responders did. This, too, is consistent with a rhetorical model of responding, in which the most sophisticated responders provide audience- and context-specific feedback based on specific criteria.

If, as our survey suggests, there may be a learning curve for commenting, then faculty need to assign at least two revised papers to refine commenting skills enough to elicit revision. Moreover, faculty may need an opportunity to discuss their commenting strategies with fellow professors and writing professionals so that mere practice does not reinforce ineffective practices. If that is the case, and if we take most of the "bad news" and consider it from a developmental perspective, then we have reason to speculate that commenting will become more effective and more efficient over time if faculty are provided some support.

The challenge for WPAs then becomes understanding the different needs of first-time writing intensive instructors and seasoned instructors in learning how to make meaningful, substantive comments that are specific and focused enough to foster substantive revision. From this more optimistic stance, we might also consider that, while nearly one third of the MU respondents reported seeing little significant revision in their students' writing, roughly two thirds of the respondents did.

*Should we find new ways to provide WI faculty opportunities to discuss and refine their commenting practices?*

When we view students as novice writers, we don't confuse inexperience with incompetence. A novice will learn, given a chance to develop. Likewise, if we view faculty new to the teaching of WI courses as novice commenters, we shouldn't see them or their commenting as doomed. Perhaps they need not only opportunities to revise their comments, but also time to rethink their philosophical assumptions. They may work through stages parallel to Perry's scheme of intellectual development, in which they first see commenting either in black/white terms, as a matter of correcting errors, or in a completely subjective and whimsical way, with no heed to standards. Eventually, WI faculty may come to understand commenting as a criteria-based means of evaluating student writing within a given context for a given purpose. Just as freshman writers need patient teachers who help them work through developmental stages, full professors may also benefit from dialogue with colleagues and WPAs.

Specifically, we need to understand the limits of a faculty WAC workshop. That is, WAC workshops are necessary but not sufficient: other learning opportunities are needed, too. If the professor is new to the practice of writing comments on students' papers (i.e., if the professor is a novice experimenting with a new genre of writing), he or she will probably need some sort of feedback to better understand the kinds of comments that are most effective. The negative feedback that might come from trial and error or from student evaluations could lead the professor to give up prematurely. Intervention from WPAs could take several forms, including these:

- One-on-one private conversations.
- Brown bag lunch seminars focused on commenting.
- Surveys soliciting good, better, and best comments (indirectly asking the faculty member to evaluate his or her own commenting).
- Focused workshops on refining those factors that may set the context for the written comments: evaluating course expectations, designing problem-based assignments that match course expectations, articulating assignment criteria, and developing primary trait scoring guides.

WPAs need to consider not only the students' writing processes and need for reflective practice, but also professors' writing processes (for assignments, for scoring guides, for comments) and need for reflective practice. In "Reflective Reading: Developing Thoughtful Ways to Respond to Students' Writing," Anson argues that "more useful for developing response strategies

are workshops that invite participants to bring in actual samples of students' writing from their own classes, on which they have made either formative or summative evaluative comments" (317). In such workshops, participants might discuss the context for writing (the student, the curriculum, what had happened previously, what prompted this particular assignment); the written commentary (the style, focus, length, effectiveness); and their own justifications for privileging one style of commenting over another for a particular purpose. Activities such as these might help faculty move from dualistic response to more reflective practice.

*Should we revise our assumptions about commenting practices, given differences between composition course goals and WI course goals?*

Perhaps the most surprising finding of our survey was the possibility that there is a point of diminishing returns in time spent commenting. Half of the respondents reported spending well over fifteen minutes per paper, and one fourth of the respondents reported spending over twenty minutes per paper. That is, over three-quarters of the respondents reported spending at least fifteen minutes and maybe many more minutes commenting per paper. However, respondents who reported spending more than twenty minutes per paper did not see more substantive revision than those who reported spending only ten to twenty minutes per paper. The data suggest that there may be a point of diminishing returns in time spent commenting, although we fully recognize that the survey sample is small, that standards for judging "substantive revision" vary, and that the research instrument is measuring only a perception of substantive revision.

If in fact there is a point of diminishing returns in time spent commenting, this might be a unique feature of writing-intensive courses (relative to composition courses). It is possible that revision in writing-intensive courses is less closely tied to the feedback loop than is the case in composition courses because the teacher's authority rests on more nonwriting issues. Students' motives for revision in writing-intensive courses might be affected by non-writing-related factors, such as how interesting the subject matter is to the student, how relevant the course is to the student's major and career choice, what the teacher's reputation is, and how motivated the student is to do well in the course—independently of the writing. In courses where writing is a means rather than an end in itself, it is possible that the most important factors affecting revision are the most important factors for teaching the course well in the first place, again, independently of the writing.

We also need to help faculty understand that the "conversation" about writing begins with the assignment, may include other class discussion besides that which the student commits to paper in writing, and continues

with the professors' feedback, which in turn should encourage, not discourage, further response from students in revised drafts. If teachers of writing-intensive courses lack confidence in their ability to write comments efficiently and effectively, they might capitalize on other parts of the "conversation." Writing-intensive faculty might actually save time commenting by investing a little more time designing good problem-based assignments with a clearly-identified audience, purpose and task. Writing-intensive faculty might save time by addressing some issues with the whole class or by providing a short exercise in something most students are struggling with, perhaps appropriate documentation for the discipline. But even learning to save time takes time.

## CONCLUSION

Nick Carbone and Margaret Daisley argue that there's a rhetorical paradox in responding to writing: On one hand, we teach students to think carefully about audience, purpose, and contexts; on the other hand, we often respond to student writing as if student texts were detached from any audience and context. As Yancey and Brian Huot plea in "Construction, Deconstruction and (Over)Determination: A Foucaultian Analysis of Grades," we need to admit how variable evaluation is, to acknowledge our doubts, and to continue to study our practices—to approach responding rhetorically and thoughtfully. From our perspective, there is no danger in admitting that commenting and evaluating depend not on absolute, universal standards, but rather on a set of context- and audience-specific criteria and that there will be variability whenever the criteria are not made explicit. The challenge, then, becomes making the grading criteria as explicit as possible. Given a set of criteria, grading is not that arbitrary at all and local judgment probably is superior to national norms.

Put another way, our challenge is not so much to do anything new, but to keep on guiding new writing-intensive faculty from a dualistic perspective of responding to a more reflective, rhetorical method. Edward White, in *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher's Guide*, offers a heuristic for the writer of writing assignments, including task definition (6). We need to help guide faculty from a generic, universal sense of standards (which might be right but are hopelessly general) to a context-specific set of standards and to let those standards guide the commenting and responding on student drafts. This is especially important in writing-intensive courses, partly because faculty may overestimate what their students know about the unique features of writing in that discipline. Scoring guides can help communicate the unique features of the discipline and of the assignment.

But, even if WPAs patiently practice what they preach and adopt a process-based, rhetorically sensitive model for teacher commenting, WPAs won't fix all the old commenting problems, once and for all. A certain tension is inherent in the teaching/learning relationship and isn't likely to be diminished, even in the most supportive environment. Still, WPAs can create an environment in which committed teachers who seek feedback are encouraged to experiment with and are reinforced for developing more rhetorically-sound comments. With patience and perseverance, WI faculty may develop more effective commenting practices and may foster critical thinking. With patience and ingenuity, WPAs may perpetuate the action-reflection cycle central to faculty development. This action-reflection cycle—not controlled experimentation in artificial settings—needs to be embraced as the key to WPA inquiry.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See "The Campus Writing Program Alumni Survey," a telephone survey designed by Marty Patton and conducted by Kenneth Fleming, Center for Advanced Social Research, Fall 2000. The Center for Advanced Social Research (School of Journalism, 135 Neff Annex, Columbia MO 65211) includes among its clients The Ford Foundation, The Center for Disease Control, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trust, and numerous state agencies. The survey results are available upon request: PattonMD@missouri.edu.

<sup>2</sup> See "A Survey of WI Faculty and TA Grading and Commenting Practices," conducted by Marty Patton, Campus Writing Program, Fall 1999 and Winter 2000, available upon request. PattonMD@missouri.edu

<sup>3</sup> See Perry, W. G. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. (Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988).

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