Rhetoric of Teacher Comments on Student Writing

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The role of rhetoric in establishing an educational mood or environment has become a topic of interest for many contemporary educators. In teacher education, there is a focus on how a teacher's attitudes, behaviors, and persona can affect—positively or negatively—the ambiance of the classroom. Julie Peterson Nelson et al. of Brigham Young University have analyzed the effect of implementing praise notes in a middle school as a means of preempting negative behaviors and encouraging positive ones. These praise notes (given to students and recorded administratively in the school district) have been associated with decreased disruptive behaviors, increased on-task behavior, increased classroom motivation, academic success, augmented student self-esteem, and closer teacher-student relationships (119–20).

The importance of this behavioral research validates an extension of the same concept into the realm of teacher-student communication in higher education. Since aspects under discussion can influence the learning environment—and consequently, the students—experts in composition have begun to research how written communication between teachers and students affects the learning experience by altering rapport, environment, expectations and, ultimately, student performance. Especially in larger classes, teachers' comments on student work constitute a large percentage of the one-on-one attention a student receives. Teachers dedicate many of their working hours to grading and commenting on student work. Extensive research is necessary to validate the time teachers invest in responding to student work and to confirm that students are not largely disregarding teacher input (Wiltse 126). The foundational research of Nancy Sommers concludes that "what is said in [written] comments and what is done in the classroom mutually reinforce and enrich each other" (155). Written communication between teachers and students is inevitably linked to student performance and classroom behaviors.

The present study replicates Dana Ferris's study of classroom rhetoric via one method of professional communication between teacher and students: teacher commentary on student papers. Ferris has analyzed student revision using the measures of the length, types, use of hedges, and text-specificity of teacher comments on rough drafts. The rhetoric that an instructor applies in comments is hypothesized to correlate to the students' decisions to revise thoroughly and their ability to do so. The present study includes primary research conducted with a section of Analytical Reading and Writing (WRT 102), a required first-year writing course at a small (5,000 students), private college in south central Pennsylvania.[1] Teacher comments on ten mid-draft student papers are categorized according to length, type, use of hedges, and text-specificity. Subsequent student revision is analyzed given the classification of the comments. The results of this study are compared to those Ferris found in her 1997 study at California State University. This research draws conclusions about the best method for teachers to employ in their comments on student writing to maximize the potential for revision.

Review of the Literature

Researchers of composition and pedagogy alike have analyzed written teacher commentary to gauge effective modes and rhetoric. To judge effectiveness, it is necessary to define the purposes of teacher comments. In addition to promoting the aforementioned classroom values (motivation, success, self-esteem, and instructor-pupil relationships), there are other purposes of teacher comments. One twofold purpose is to improve the written draft and to enhance the student's abilities as a writer (Willingham 10). In addition to improving the student's writing, it is also important that the student gain self-efficacy in creating a product that is both thoughtful and correct (Wiltse 128). According to Wiltse, constructive criticism is associated with an increase in students' self-efficacy beliefs. When student writers are confident in their ability to write and motivated to invest themselves in their work, they are more likely to create a better product. Conversely, apprehension about writing (which is frequently linked to ineffective teacher commentary) is a predictor of a less developed product (Wiltse 129). Although the improvement of the draft is an important purpose of in-process drafts, teacher commentary on a final draft has the annexed responsibility of explaining the student's final grade. Students expect the comments they receive throughout the paper to coincide with the final summative comment and the numerical evaluation. Although most of these responsibilities of teacher commentary are difficult to gauge numerically, comment-revision analysis relates the rhetoric of the teacher's comments to the degree to which the student revised the draft.

Teacher Tendencies

The results of these analyses have been fairly conclusive in determining which rhetorical choices are most effective in promoting student revision. Additionally, students themselves have contributed their perceptions of what works well and what does not. Students are easily frustrated when they receive papers back from teacher review with the infamous river of red ink embanked on their hard work. According to Wiltse, when teacher comments are copious, students are often discouraged, paralyzed to the point of being incapable of revising (128). However, teachers are prone to many other methods of commenting that can be equally problematic for student revision, and even detrimental to individual students.

Appropriation. Sommers claims appropriation of student text to be one of the most troubling of all commenting practices (149). Appropriation is characterized by the teacher contorting or misunderstanding the student's purpose in the text and making suggestions based on these inaccurate perceptions. Although these misunderstandings could be easily cleared up in a face-to-face conversation, the misguided instructor comments remain unless such a conference is arranged. The student is then torn between the ethical appeal of the teacher's knowledge and intuitive confidence in the original paper. When the student receives teacher comments, the rhetorical situation is irrevocably changed. As Sommers describes it: "In the beginning of the process, there was the writer, her words, and her desire to communicate her ideas. But after the comments of the teacher are imposed on the first or second draft, the student's attention dramatically shifts" (150). According to Willingham, appropriation can largely be avoided if one poses comments as questions rather than presuming one's initial perceptions to be accurate (11).

Text-specificity. Expanding upon the practice of appropriation, some teachers rewrite passages of student papers. This level of hyperspecificity certainly does not improve the student's writing abilities. Although the teacher might consider the rewritten phrases more concise or eloquent, the student begins to rely heavily on the teacher for intensive support in the revision process. More fre-

quent, however, is the teacher's lack of specificity. After grading many essays, teachers often resort to trite phrases or vague advice. Willingham claims that teachers employing vague comments evade their responsibility to describe or demonstrate what precisely is problematic about the construction (11). Vague comments also have a potential to insult the student—the connotation is that the student is not worth the time it would take the teacher to explain. Sommers illustrates the irony of a teacher making a vague request for students to "think more about what [they] are thinking about" (152). In these situations, teachers regard the flaws as self-evident and are asking students to revise something without explaining the error they perceive in the original text. Teachers must find a tenuous balance—neither appropriating the student's work nor offering ungrounded and empty suggestions.

Mitigation. Associated with the specificity of text is the concept of posing comments in a nondirective manner. The use of hedges allows the student agency in making the necessary changes, and in doing so, produces a sense of ownership. Rather than commenting in the form of an imperative statement, the teacher can cushion the suggestion with a lexical hedge (e.g., *maybe, please, might*), a syntactic hedge (e.g., *Can you . . .? Consider . . .*), or positive softeners (e.g., *Your argument is strong, but . . .*) (Ferris 321). These courteous phrases can allow the student to remember that the comments are coming from the teacher, as an extension of their classroom relationship, rather than through a voiceless, nameless textual entity. Not only affording the student the power of decision, these comments also allow the student to "save face" while taking responsibility for the writing (Treglia 83). According to Treglia, hedged comments tend to improve the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the writer (70). However, these results have been hypothesized to be mixed in some conditions. It was projected that L2[2] students would be confused by mitigated comments, although Treglia's research suggests otherwise (83). Overall, hedging of teacher comments is considered to improve the student's perspective on the project.

Hierarchy. Another obstacle encountered in teacher-student communication via written feedback is the issue of differentiating between the comments' levels of importance. According to Wiltse, global feedback refers to a suggestion that encompasses a profound change in argument, evidence, arrangement, or thesis, for example. In contrast, local feedback consists of the correction of a mechanical or grammatical error (127). Because many teachers are distressed by student disregard of standard grammar and mechanics, they become obsessive about correcting such errors rather than challenging important global issues of the paper (Willingham 13). Students then struggle with contradictory messages. Since editing for mechanics is a polishing process rather than a developmental process, students tend to believe the only issues their papers have are the grammatical corrections. The resulting confusion from the myriad of higher-order concerns (global) and lower-order concerns (local) can be ameliorated in a summative comment in which the teacher has the opportunity to explain the nature of the changes (Willingham 12). Additionally, lower-order concerns are often associated with less complex revision processes, so students are willing to exert a little effort to make a positive effect (Treglia 81).

Contradiction and confusion. Students complain not only about the number of comments they receive on their papers; they are also frustrated by the apparent contradictions that arise in teacher feedback. Treglia suggests that teachers' "vague directives" center on surface issues, provide arbitrary corrections, outright contradict other requests, and fail to demonstrate the degree of specific revision necessary (68). The missing elements of clarity and specificity in teacher comments hinder the student's ability to revise effectively. Wiltse claims that part of the problem

students have interpreting teacher comments stems from a misunderstanding of their purpose. Among the specific types of comments that students struggle to decipher for revision, the most difficult (and the least likely to be addressed in revision) are those requiring analytical skills (usually global comments). Examples of such comments include "clarification of the logic of an argument, development, or connecting of ideas" (Treglia 78). Sommers provides a sample of student writing with teacher commentary that demonstrates this principle of confusion. While the teacher's feedback includes marginal comments such as "Avoid 'It seems,'" "Be specific," and "Be precise," there are also more global suggestions included (such as "Think about your reader" and "Thesis statement needed") (152–53). While the local revisions suggest that the text is fixed and needs only light edits, the global requests for revision contradict the idea that the text is finished. When students are unsure about how to respond to teacher feedback to revise their writing, they become apprehensive about the writing process. In Wiltse's study of collegiate journalism students, degree of writing apprehension was the best predictor of how well the students were able to incorporate global commentary into revision, surpassing predictors such as writing self-efficacy beliefs and outcomes expectation (127). Thus, confusing or contradictory comments are detrimental to a student's ability both to revise and to develop as a writer.

Tone. To counteract discouraging messages, the tone of the teacher comments should reflect a genuine desire for the student's development both as a writer and as a person. Although comments that are negative or—worse yet—personally insulting are presumed to be oversights rather than intentional barbs, Willingham suggests that offensive comments often indicate that a teacher is not sure what the problem is with the paper (11). Even though ideally these issues of confusion could be resolved through face-to-face conferences, it is rarely practical to dedicate sufficient time for personal interaction. By viewing written comments as an extension of the rhetoric of the classroom, teachers are able to apply principles they would normally employ in face-to-face interactions, such as a tone of politeness, affirmation, and acknowledgment of the student as an individual. With this concept in mind, teachers can direct comments to mirror the tone they would assume in a face-to-face relationship, thus permitting the development of a profound rapport with the student.

Student Expectations

In addition to analyzing which teacher practices have proven in research to be effective, it is also useful to consider student expectations to determine how teachers should respond to student writing. Discussing the inferences of previous studies, Treglia claims that students prefer comments that are detailed, clearly phrased, factual, and encouraging (69). Treglia cites a study in which L2 students appreciated alternative methods of receiving feedback, such as peer reviews and oral conferences. L2 students particularly desired feedback that affirmed that their work was "in line with the assignment" (69). According to Treglia, L1 and L2 students hoped to receive both global and local feedback. In terms of type or tone of commentary, they preferred to be given advice and explanations in the form of open-ended questions (69). These findings suggest that students wish to be actively engaged in a dialogue throughout revision.

Outcomes of Feedback

The purpose of teacher commentary on student writing exceeds the goal of improving the paper. More importantly, successful revision skills improve the writing self-efficacy beliefs of the student, contributing to greater confidence and thus to increased prowess in writing (Wiltse 130–31). In turn, self-efficacy beliefs are strong predictors of motivation; with confidence in writ-

ing should come the motivation to write. Wiltse discusses the hypothesis that positive experiences with revision reduce the student's paralyzing apprehension about writing (131). According to Treglia, an additional aspect of the usefulness of teacher commentary is the development of students' thinking skills and personal investment in their writing (82–83). Teacher comments should prod the student to think more deeply about the logic and meaning of the content. These acquired thinking skills facilitate expression of thought and ideas. Teachers' comments should also foster the students' ownership of their writing. When students are invested in their work, they will be self-motivated and ultimately create a better product (Treglia 71–72).

The Current Study

Given the clarity of the research on teacher commentary, the question arises of whether this theoretical information is actually applied in practice (Sommers 149). Are teachers employing an appropriate tone of address? Are they hedging? What type of comments are they using? Are they communicating the hierarchy of concerns, encouraging global revision in addition to mere local changes? Several studies in the past have attempted to answer this question. The benchmark study of this type was done by Dana Ferris of California State University in 1997. Ferris analyzed the aim and form of 1,600 comments on first drafts of college-level L2 students (319). The students' final drafts were also analyzed to determine the degree to which the commentary influenced revision. These results yield tentative conclusions about the effectiveness of rhetorical choices in teacher comments to promote student revision. Since the publication of this study, imitative research has been performed in different educational settings throughout the United States. The present study is a reflection of Ferris's study and attempts to characterize how effective particular rhetorical choices in teacher commenting are in motivating student revision. Differing from Ferris's research in scope and depth, the present study attempts to offer a comparison between Ferris's findings and those attained here, in order to provide a foundation for intriguing comparison and discussion.

Methods

The analyzed writing samples were collected at a small, private college in south central Pennsylvania, from a first-year composition class called Analytical Reading and Writing (WRT 102), a course in which the researcher served as a writing fellow (an upperclassman who qualifies to assist first-year writing courses). The professor of this course is experienced in writing pedagogy and taught middle school English before taking this position, where she teaches Introduction to College Writing (WRT 100) as well as WRT 102. Most of the thirty students in this spring semester section of WRT 102 were first-year students, but there were also several sophomores and two juniors. The analyzed teacher comments were taken from ten papers (nine from L1 students, one from an L2 student), to which the professor had responded electronically via Microsoft Word's review features.

In order to facilitate direct comparison between Ferris's and the current study, the researcher employed the same measures by which Ferris analyzed both the teacher comments and the degree of student revision (see Appendix A). Among the ten student papers, there were 238 teacher comments. These comments were characterized according to length, type, use of hedges, and text-specificity. Comment types were: ask for information/question, make a request/question, make a request/statement, make a request/imperative, give information/question, give information/state-

ment, make a positive comment, statement, or exclamation, and make a grammar or mechanics comment, statement, or imperative. These classifications describe both the purpose and the form of the comment. Hedging and text-specificity were evaluated as binary functions (0 = no hedging/1= lexical, syntactic, or positive softening; 0 = generic/1 = text-specific). For example, the following comments were rated as shown:

- "This is an example of persona. How would you characterize it?" This comment is average length, give information/question, not hedged, and text-specific.
- "Why? Explain further." This comment is short, make a request/imperative, not hedged, and not text-specific.

The next step was to examine the resulting student revision, evaluating the effects of each first-draft comment (see Appendix B). Revisions were categorized by both the student's effort (degree of change) and the effect of the revision on the overall paper. In distinguishing the degree of revision, a change was considered substantive, as opposed to minimal, if the revision affected more than one sentence. The evaluated effect of the change on the paper was categorized as positive, negative, or mixed. Combinations of these ratings resulted in seven potential categories of student revision: 0–6.

Results

Comment characteristics were classified into the previously mentioned categories (length, type, use of hedges, and text-specific comments) to reveal commenting trends and determine which trends promoted student revision (see Table 1). The ten student papers yielded 238 comments, an average of 23.8 comments per paper. In terms of length, 72.27% of the comments were between one and five words long, ranking as "short." In the average category, 17.65% of the comments were six to fifteen words; the remaining 10.08% were over sixteen words long.

Table 1: Characteristics of Teacher Commentary

CHARACTERISTICS	Number	%
Length		
Short	172	72.27
Average	42	17.65
Long	16	6.72
Very Long	8	3.36
Type		
Ask for information/question	5	2.1
Make a request/question	33	13.87
Make a request/statement	11	4.62
Make a request/imperative	47	19.75
Give information/question	10	4.2
Give information/statement	5	2.1
Make a positive comment/ statement/exclamation	13	5.46
Make a grammar/mechanics comment, question, statement, or imperative	114	47.9
Use of Hedges		
No	212	89.08
Yes	26	10.92
Text-specific Comments		
No	114	47.9
Yes	124	52.1
Total Comments	238	100

The most common type of comment in the present study was grammar/mechanics feedback (47.9%). The second most common type, make a request/imperative, constituted 19.75% of the comments; however, the make a request/question category came in a close third at 13.87%. No other category constituted more than 6% of the total comments, although the positive comment came closest (5.46%).

Mitigation was applied only in 10.92% of all of the comments. The remaining 89.08% of the comments were not hedged in any of the three types of mitigation (lexical, syntactic, or positive softening). In terms of text-specificity, the results were fairly evenly split: 47.9% were not text-related; 52.1% were directly text-specific.

The degree of student revision was classified into seven categories according to the extent and effect of the revision (see Table 2). The most prevalent type of revision required minimal effort and yielded a positive effect. Students expended a small amount of effort on edits that were easily instituted. Unfortunately, the second most frequent response was a lack of response: students made no change. The least common type of revision was substantive change. Only 3.78% of the revisions resulted in substantive change. Overall, the effect of revision was rarely negative (only 4.62%); however, revision did occasionally result in mixed effects (19.75%). For the most part, revision resulted in a positive effect on the overall paper (56.3%).

Table 2: Revision Rating

	Number	%
No change	46	19.33
Minimal change/negative effect	11	4.62
Substantive change/ negative effect	0	0
Minimal change/mixed effect	44	18.49
Substantive change/ mixed effect	3	1.26
Minimal change/ positive effect	128	53.78
Substantive change/positive effect	6	2.52
Total	238	100

Relating the type of comments to revision results in useful information about the ways teachers can provide feedback to maximize revision (see Table 3). The types of comments that most commonly led to positive change were in the categories ask for information/question and give information/statement (both 80%). Another comment type that led to positive revision was grammar/mechanics commentary (68.42%). Students are able to process grammatical changes without experiencing profound problem-solving difficulties since they are simply implementing the changes the teacher suggested. Two other effective types of commentary were make a request/question and make a request/statement (both 54.55%).

However, in some cases of revision, the effect of the changes was mixed. In this type of revision, the student usually made the suggested change but introduced an inconsistency within its context. The comment type most likely to elicit mixed results was the make a request/imperative (31.91%). Close behind, give information/question resulted in mixed effects in 30% of its occurrences. The least likely type to result in mixed effects was the positive comment (7.69%); however, the make a request/question also rarely resulted in mixed results (15.15%).

Although student revision rarely resulted in negative effects on the overall paper, there were some situations in which the corrections were detrimental to the project. Only three comment types

Table 3: Relationship Between Comment Types and Revision Ratings

	Revision Ratings													
	No change		Minimal change/ negative effect		Substantive change/ negative effect		Minimal change/ mixed effect		Substantive change/ mixed effect		Minimal change/ positive effect		Substantive change/ positive effect	
Comment Type	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Ask for information/ question	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	20	0	0	4	80	0	0
Make request/ question	5	15.15	5	15.15	0	0	5	15.15	0	0	18	54.55	0	0
Make request/ statement	3	27.27	0	0	0	0	1	9.09	1	9.09	6	54.55	0	0
Make request/ imperative	12	25.53	4	8.51	0	0	13	27.66	2	4.25	15	31.91	1	2.13
Give information/ question	3	30	0	0	0	0	3	30	0	0	3	30	1	10
Give information/ statement	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	20	0	0	4	80	1	20
Make positive comment, statement, or exclamation	11	84.62	0	0	0	0	1	7.69	0	0	1	7.69	0	0
Make grammar/mechanics comment, question, statement, or imperative	11	9.65	2	1.75	0	0	19	16.67	0	0	78	68.42	3	2.63

resulted in negative effects: make a request/question (15.15%), make a request/imperative (8.51%), and grammar/mechanics comment (1.75%). In some instances, students refrained from revising altogether. The comments least frequently addressed in revision were positive comments, which is logical because the comment did not contain any suggestions or directives. According to the research, students are very unlikely to make changes to improve sections that a teacher has already approved (Treglia 69). Ironically, the second least commonly addressed comment type is make a request/statement (27.27%) and make a request/imperative (25.53%). Although here students are being directly asked by the figure of authority who will assign them a grade to make a specific change, they are often likely to disregard that request. See Table 3.

In addition to relating comment type to student revision, it is beneficial to analyze the correlation of rhetorical characteristics of comments to subsequent student revision (see Table 4). The highest percentage of positive revision was related to short comments (62.8%), and the lowest correlated to comments of average length. Very long comments correlated most frequently to mixed results (62.5%), and short comments were the most rarely associated with mixed results (15.11%). Long comments resulted most frequently in negative revisions (6.25%). Comments of average length were the least likely to be addressed by student revision. Long comments, on the other hand, were most likely to effect change in student papers (ignored in only 12.5% of cases).

Table 4: Relationship Between Other Comment Characteristics and Revision

	Revision Ratings													
	No change		Minimal change/ negative effect		Substantive change/ negative effect		Minimal change/ mixed effect		Substantive change/ mixed effect		Minimal change/ positive effect		Substantive change/ positive effect	
Characteristic	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Length														
Short	30	17.44	8	4.65	0	0	26	15.11	0	0	104	60.47	4	2.33
Average	13	30.95	2	4.76	0	0	9	21.43	3	7.14	14	33.33	1	2.38
Long	2	12.5	1	6.25	0	0	4	25	0	0	9	56.25	0	0
Very Long	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	62.5	0	0	3	37.5	0	0
Use of Hedges														
No	36	16.98	8	3.77	0	0	38	17.92	2	0.94	124	58.49	4	1.89
Yes	9	34.62	2	7.69	0	0	6	23.08	1	3.85	6	23.08	1	3.85
Text-specific Comments														
No	24	21.05	5	4.39	0	0	23	20.18	2	1.75	57	50	3	2.63
Yes	21	16.94	6	4.84	0	0	21	16.94	1	0.81	73	58.87	2	1.61

Comments without hedging were more likely to result in positive revision (60.38%), less likely to result in mixed effects (18.86%), less likely to result in negative effects (3.77%), and less likely to be ignored in the revision process (16.98%). On the other hand, comments with hedging were less likely to result in positive student revision (26.93%), more likely to result in mixed effects (26.93%), more likely to result in negative effects (7.69%), and more likely to be ignored in the revision process (34.62%). Although these comment qualities are correlated only to revision, it would appear that the hedges were ineffective in producing the desired effects.

In terms of text-specificity, comments directly related to the students' writing yielded more positive revision results (60.48%), fewer mixed results (17.75%), slightly more negative results (4.84%), and a smaller percentage of ignored comments (16.94%). In contrast, comments that were not directly grounded in the text resulted in fewer positive results (52.63%), more mixed effects (21.93%), slightly fewer negative results (4.39%), and significantly more ignored comments (21.05%). This finding suggests the importance of providing direct reference to student writing while commenting. For additional information, consult Table 4.

Discussion

To relate the findings of the present study to the review of literature, this section compares this analysis and Ferris's. Initial comparisons relate the proportions of type and characteristics of comments (as in Table 1). The present study reveals significantly more short comments (72.27% compared to 44%); however, there is a similar distribution of comment length between the two studies in that there are significantly fewer long and very long comments in comparison to the average and short comments. Ferris's study found that the most prominent type of teacher comment is the ask for information/question (31%); however, the present study revealed that only 2.1% of the comments sought information in the form of a question. The bulk of the comments in the present study centered on the grammar/mechanics type (47.9%), while Ferris's study accumulated only 18% grammar/mechanics comments. The second most frequent type in the current study is the make a request/imperative (19.75%), while Ferris's study yielded only 7% in this category. However, there was some similarity; the present study's third most common type, make a request/question, is, at 13.87%, comparable to the 12% in Ferris's study. In short, the present study revealed a greater proportion of short comments, fewer questions, more grammar issues, and more requests than did Ferris's study.

The use of hedging seen in Ferris's study is quite similar to the proportion of hedging found in the present study. While Ferris's study reported hedging at 15%, the present study found hedging to be used 10.92% of the time. However, there is quite a stark contrast between the two studies in terms of text-specificity. The present study showed text-specific commentary evenly split with generic commentary (52.1% specific, 47.9% generic); however, Ferris's study reported significantly more specific comments (82%) than nonspecific (18%).

In comparing the revision ratings in the two studies, there are several key differences (as in Table 2). The most remarkable deviation is in the extent of the revision. While the present study records substantive change at only 3.78%, Ferris's study suggests that there were extensive changes made for 41% of the occurrences of teacher feedback. While only 47% of Ferris's recorded comments resulted in positive change, the present study shows the positive effect of revision at 56.3%. Ferris records a 5% negative effect, while the present study records a comparable 4.62%. The present study records that only 19.33% of comments resulted in no change whatsoever, and Ferris

claims 36% for this category. However, the present study recorded more mixed effects than Ferris did (19.75% compared to 12%). In short, the present study resulted in less substantial revision, a higher rating of successful revision, and fewer instances of no revision.

The final step—arguably the most relevant comparison between Ferris's study and the present research—is an analysis of how the type and characteristics of comments relate to student revision (as in Table 3).

• *Ask for information/question* garnered 80% minimal change/positive results in the present study, but only 18% in Ferris's study. In both studies, there were few negative results for this comment type. This type is difficult to compare between the studies since Ferris had significantly more comments in this category; however, the present study showed more successful revisions in this category.

• *Make a request/question* resulted in a 54.55% positive effect in the present study and a similar 55% in Ferris's study. The present study recorded 15.15% negative results, while Ferris recorded only 4%. However, again, Ferris recorded more "no change" results than did the present study. This comment type was generally successful but was left unaddressed rather frequently.

• *Make a request/statement* recorded a 54.55% positive change in the present study and 62% in Ferris's study. Both studies recorded little negative effect in this category. Both studies reported a similar percentage of "no change" results from this category: 28% (Ferris) and 27.27% (present). Although this comment type was more successful in Ferris's study than in present one and generally has a high percentage of "no change," the positive revision statistics are fairly heartening.

• *Make a request/imperative* claimed a 34.04% positive change in the present study and 72% in Ferris's study; its negative effects were miniscule: 8.51% (present) and 6% (Ferris). Unlike in the previous categories, the present study recorded significantly more "no change" results in this category than Ferris did (25.53% and 12% respectively). This type was far less successful in the present study than in Ferrris's, as evidenced by the lower positive revision percentage and higher rate of "no change."

• *Give information/question* resulted in somewhat positive results in both studies: 40% (present) and 27% (Ferris). This type constituted the largest percentage of mixed effects in Ferris's study (56%). No negative effect was reported in either study for this type, and the "no change" category recorded 18% (Ferris) and 30% (present). This comment type overall appears to be less beneficial than others, as indicated by the higher percentage of mixed results and mediocre amount of positive change.

• *Give information/statement* recorded positive effect in the present study (100%); however, it recorded only 48% positive effect in Ferris's study. Ferris additionally recorded 12% negative effect and 18% "no change." Thus, it was far more successful in the present study than in Ferris's.

• *Make a positive comment* resulted in little positive change in either study: 7.69% (present) and 4% (Ferris). In the present study, there was no negative effect, and Ferris recorded only 3% in this category. The largest percentage of this type in both studies resulted in no change: 94% (Ferris) and 84.62% (present). Overall, positive comments resulted in few changes at all, although the little change that was recorded was more positive than negative.

• *Make a grammar/mechanics comment* recorded a 66% positive effect in Ferris's study and 71.05% in the present study. A negative effect of only 1.75% was shown in the present study,

with 4% in Ferris's research. There was a relatively small percentage of this type of comment that remained unaddressed: 22% (Ferris), 9.65% (present). Generally, the grammar comments were frequently addressed and led to positive revision.

In addition to correlating comment types to revision, analysis reveals which rhetorical characteristics were most beneficial in promoting revision. *Short comments* had positive results more frequently in the present study (62.8%) than in Ferris's (30%). The negative results were similar for both studies: 4.65% (present) and 4% (Ferris). Almost half (49%) of the short comments Ferris recorded resulted in no change, while a mere 17.44% were ignored in the present study. Short comments were more frequent and more successful in the present study than in Ferris's. *Average-length comments*, then, were more effective in Ferris's study than in the present (54% and 35.71% respectively). Negative effects were minimal for both studies: 4.76% (present) and 6% (Ferris). More average-length comments were not revised in the present study (30.95%) than in Ferris's study (24%). *Long comments* attained far more positive results in the present study than in Ferris's study (56.25% and 28% respectively). Ferris records a 6% negative effect, and the present study records a similar 6.25%. However, Ferris records far more "no change" than does the present study in this category (42% vs. 12.5%).

Nonhedged comments were largely successful in both studies: 44% (Ferris) and 60.38% (present). Negative effects were relatively low for both: 6% (Ferris) and 3.77% (present). While 38% resulted in no change in Ferris's study, the present study yielded only 16.98% no change. *Hedged comments* proved more effective in promoting positive change in Ferris's study (54%), but they were less beneficial in the present study (26.93%). They were only 3% negative in Ferris's study but 7.69% negative in the present study. While only 25% of Ferris's hedged comments were left unchanged, 34.62% of them in the present study were left unrevised. Hedged comments appeared to be more successful in Ferris's study than in the present study.

Generic comments in Ferris's study resulted in positive change only 26% of the time; however, they were positive in the present study at a rate of 52.63%. Similar negative results were achieved in both studies: 4% (Ferris) and 4.39% (present). Such comments remained unaddressed 21.05% in the present study and 65% in Ferris's. *Text-specific comments* yielded positive results at a rate of 60.48% in the present study and 52% in Ferris's study. Negative results were recorded 4.84% of the time in the present study, and a similar 6% negative effect was seen in Ferris's study. Ferris saw a high rate of no revision (30%), while the current study had a mere 16.94% no change.

Conclusion

While many of the results of this study were similar to those of previous research, there were several key differences. In nearly every category, Ferris's study included more "no change" responses than the present study. It appears that the first four types of categories—ask for information/question, make a request/question, make a request/statement, and make a request imperative—are fairly effective in promoting positive change in a student's revision. Positive comments are least likely to be revised because the students do not want to change anything the teacher has already approved (Treglia 69). The most discernible differences were in the unexpected amount of grammar/mechanics comments. However, these comments were more effectively revised in the present study than in Ferris's. This difference may be attributed to the L2 students in Ferris's study. Native speakers are likely more empowered to make grammar corrections. However, it was interesting that Ferris's L2 students responded more successfully to hedged comments than did the L1

students in the present study because the research suggests that L2 students might be confused by hedging. In accordance with Treglia (83), this study suggests that the type of comment is a stronger predictor of revision than the comment characteristics are; however, this study also suggests that some comment traits improve the potential for positive revision. Despite minor differences, the present study largely agrees with previous studies about the beneficial practices of teacher commentary.

Several limitations may have affected the results in this study, accounting for its differences from previous studies. One of the most evident differences between the current study and the one done by Ferris is the fact that most of the students in the latter were L2 learners; the students in the present study were, with one exception, native English speakers. Discrepancies might also be attributable to the limited sample. Had the sample been larger, the law of large numbers might have nudged these statistics nearer those already published in the field. Perhaps the most significant cause of inconsistencies is that the classifications in this study were analyzed by only one person, whereas there were several researchers reviewing the same papers in Ferris's study. Another limitation in the research was that all of the papers were from the same professor, which allows teaching quirks to affect the results significantly. The rhetorical context of the comments themselves may also affect the results. These comments were performed electronically, whereas the Ferris study was conducted on handwritten comments. The fact that thirteen years separate this study from Ferris's may suggest as well a generational change in teacher commenting and pedagogical approach.

While this study's scope is limited, it nevertheless demonstrates the effects of teacher comments on revision. There is a great need for additional research because there is still much to learn about how a teacher can promote enhanced student work and better student writers.

APPENDIX A
Analytic Model for Teacher Commentary

A. Comment length (number of words)
    1. Short (1–5 words)
    2. Average (6–15 words)
    3. Long (16–25 words)
    4. Very long (26 or more words)

B. Comment types
    1. Ask for information/question
        Example: Did you work out this problem with your roommates?
    2. Make a request/question
        Example: Can you provide a thesis statement here? What did you learn from this?
    3. Make a request/statement
        Example: This paragraph might be better earlier in the essay.
    4. Make a request/imperative
        Example: Mention what Zinsser says about parental pressure.
    5. Give information/question
        Example: Most states do allow a waiting period before an adoption is final. Do you feel that all such laws are wrong?

6. Give information/statement
   Example: Iowa law favors parental rights. Michigan and California consider the best interests of the child.
7. Make a positive comment, statement, or exclamation
   Example: A very nice start to your essay! You've done an impressive job of finding facts and quotes to support your arguments.
8. Make a grammar or mechanics comment, statement, or imperative
   Examples: * Past or present tense?
   * Your verb tenses are confusing me in this paragraph.
   * Don't forget to spell-check!

C. Use of hedges
- 0 No hedge included
- 1 Hedge included
  * Lexical hedges (e.g., *maybe, please, might*)
  * Syntactic hedges (e.g., *Can you add an example here?*)
  * Positive softeners (e.g., *You've raised some good points, but . . .*)

D. Text-specific comment
- 0 Generic comment (could have been written on any paper)
  Example: Nice intro.
- 1 Text-specific comment
  Example: Why is the American system better for children, in your opinion?

APPENDIX B
Rating Scale for Revisions

- 0 No discernible change made by student in response to this comment
- 1 Minimal attempt by student to address the comment, effect generally negative or negligible
- 2 Substantive change(s) made by student in response to comment, effect generally negative or negligible
- 3 Minimal attempt by student to address the comment, effect mixed
- 4 Substantive change(s) made by student in response to comment, effect mixed
- 5 Minimal attempt by student to address the comment, effect generally positive
- 6 Substantive change(s) made by student in response to comment, effect generally positive

Notes

[1] The Institutional Review Board at York College reviewed and approved this study.

[2] L2 students are those whose first language is not English. Conversely, L1 students are those whose first language is English.

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