

### A Response to Robin Martin

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In her work “Rhetoric of Teacher Comments on Student Writing,” in volume 8 of *Young Scholars in Writing*, Robin Martin discusses the correlation between teacher comments and student revision. When measuring the degree of each revision, Martin considers the student’s effort and the number of sentences affected by the revision. However, she overlooks an essential purpose of teacher comments—prompting students to consider the overall messages of their works. Thus, in response to Martin’s insights on student revision, I will discuss how the rhetoric of meaning-making, a concept used by several writing theorists, can contribute to both the rhetoric of teacher comments and the students’ responses to such remarks. In particular, I contend that since detailed, text-specific comments motivate students to reflect on the meanings of their pieces of writing, such comments should be the focus of the revision process.

Meaning-making, which Ann Berthoff defines as finding “the forms of thought by means of language,” can be applied to teacher comments in order to determine effective rhetoric (293). According to James Slevin, strong textual support is the essential quality of successful meaning-making (60). Evidence strengthens and validates underdeveloped ideas; moreover, it serves as a basis for an argument. Therefore, teacher comments that pose text-specific questions would most likely allow for better meaning-making, since they reveal flaws in the logic of a work. In her article, Martin states that text-specific comments produced positive results at a rate of 60.48% and 52% in the two studies she examined; perhaps this trend is the result of the meaning-making that these types of questions inspire (26). In fact, questions that focus on the “shifting character of meaning and the role of perspective and context” allow students to participate in what Berthoff calls interpretive paraphrase—continually asking, “how does it change the meaning if I put it this way?” (296). According to Berthoff, questions like “What do you mean here?” and “What is the author trying to say?” are critically useless and generally produce weak and shallow responses (296). As a result of their passive nature, these types of questions do not force students to consider how they can improve or change the messages of their works. On the other hand, questions such as “If the author is saying X, how does that go with the Y we heard him saying in the preceding chapter—or stanza?” should be the focus of teacher comments (296). Such text-specific, comprehensive questions allow writers to consider the overall content of their writing.

Meaning-making does not only influence teacher comments; it can also shed light on students’ responses to comments. When explaining the issue of the hierarchy of teacher comments, Martin asserts that “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” (18). Grammatical corrections do not force students to think deeply about their writing, so oftentimes, they simply replace “revision” with “editing.” Simply replacing words and inserting

missing commas do not force students to break out of their comfort zones or to deeply think about their writing. Consequently, they lose opportunities to develop as critical thinkers and form connections with their writing.

Possibly, students focus on correcting grammatical mistakes because teacher comments do not provide them with a stimulus to delve below the surface of the work. In fact, Martin states that “the bulk of the comments in the present study centered on the grammar/mechanics type,” which suggests that there was a lack of questions that allowed the students to think about their works on a level necessary for successful analytical writing (24). Additionally, she asserts that these comments produce positive revision, because “students are able to process grammatical changes without experiencing profound problem-solving difficulties since they are simply implementing the changes the teacher suggested” (22). However, since these corrections are void of “profound problem-solving difficulties” and they simply allow students to mindlessly go through the revision process, I would argue that such revisions are, in reality, not significant. In order to produce successful critical pieces, students must be confronted with stimulating, challenging questions that prompt them to think about how each word contributes to the messages and purposes of their works.

To guide students towards reflecting on the meaning-making of their works, teachers can supplement their marginal comments with end comments. Given that students tend to misconceive revision as an incorporation of teachers’ edits, extensive marginal comments can draw them away from considering their own decisions and purposes in writing. The comprehensive nature of end comments allows teachers to reflect on the paper as a whole and to discuss the “important global issues of the paper,” thereby directing students away from exclusively participating in editing (Martin 18). While marginal comments offer feedback that pertains to a specific line or phrase, end comments can provide insight on whether the message of the piece was effectively conveyed. Furthermore, they offer teachers the opportunity to explain how issues reflected in certain marginal comments affect the overall meaning of the student’s work. Therefore, end comments can encourage meaning-making in ways that marginal comments cannot.

Teacher commenting is a significant part of the writing process; actually, strong writing thrives with the input and suggestions of teachers. For that reason, we must consider what types of teacher comments are truly effective in producing successful student writing. Enhanced meaning-making is a fundamental goal in student revisions, so teacher comments should revolve around this objective. Perhaps if we deviate from trivial comments and instead focus on text-specific, provocative ones, we can inspire meaningful student writing.

### **Works Cited**

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- Slevin, James. “A Letter to Maggie.” *Teaching Composition*. Ed. T. R. Johnson et al. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008. 59–64. Print.