

COMMENTS AND THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT:
INVESTIGATING STUDENTS' RHETORICAL RELATIONSHIPS TO
INSTRUCTOR RESPONSE

By

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ABSTRACT

Jane Mathison-Fife and Peggy O'Neill, along with Nancy Summers, have decried the lack of student voices in composition studies' literature on teacher response.

Responding to these researchers' concerns, I present three exploratory case studies of student readers of commentary within their classroom contexts. Using reading theory's insight that the interpretive act is always both subjective and socially situated, these case studies demonstrate that a richer literature on written feedback is possible through a consideration for student perspectives and for the cultural, institutional, and instructional factors that influence their understandings. At the same time, these case studies also illuminate the complexity and the value of students' readings of commentary within their classroom spaces.

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INTRODUCTION

At first glance, responding to student writing is a simple thing. Though instructor response can take various forms—writing, conferences, audio files—the textual movements are the same: students turn in papers, and in return their instructors provide them with feedback and possibly a grade. But the simplicity of this movement belies complexity. Because instructor response grows out of a one-on-one relationship between teacher and student, it can potentially take the form of a reciprocal conversation premised on mutual understanding and trust. But despite this ideal, any student—and we’ve all been students—who has felt confusion or chagrin in response to feedback knows that things aren’t always so rosy. My interest in student understandings of commentary initially grew out of my professional concerns as an instructor. I wanted to know what contributes to student understandings about, and occasional mistranslations of, my own exceedingly helpful advice.

When I began my study, I set out to answer the following question: *How does a small sample of basic writing students in Western State Universities summer bridge program perceive of their instructor’s commentary about their texts, and in what ways are their perceptions related to the classroom context of which they are a part?* I asked this question because I wanted to gain an understanding, however partial, for the initial factors influencing classroom response situations. But aside from this goal, I also wanted to converse with students because I felt a real concern that the conversation about commentary has been taking place “almost entirely from the point of view of the teacher

and teaching, not from the point of view of pupils and pupiling” (Pratt 181). In reviewing the literature on response it’s easy to get the impression that instructors are not only an influential, but perhaps the only meaningful, part of classroom response situations. So even as I became interested in the study of feedback because I was curious about what students gained from the hours I spent responding to their work, I also wondered what a more pluralistic conversation about commentary could look like.

To begin answering my question, I developed a study based on Jane Mathison-Fife and Peggy O’Neill’s insights—which are also central to reading theory---that student understandings of commentary are inseparable from their institutional and personal contexts. I’ll briefly describe the methodology underlying my research here, though I intend to unpack it further in chapter two. I conducted a multi-modal, qualitative, exploratory case studies of three basic writers and their rhetorical understandings of commentary. I observed a summer session of English 90, “Developmental Writing,” during the five weeks it was in session. I then conducted follow-up interviews with three student volunteers to gain insight into their understandings of instructor feedback. Because Mathison-Fife and O’Neill, Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, and Nancy Sommers all express a concern for the lack of student voice in the literature on teacher response, I conducted my exploratory study to better understand the variables that influence their response situations.

In my first chapter, I consider the existing literature on teacher response. Using Knoblauch and Brannon’s classificatory scheme which divides this literature into three camps—descriptive, hortative (or advisory), and experimental—I discuss the contributions previous researchers have made, while also identifying a potential for richer inquiry through a consideration both for classroom context and for student perspectives.

I then consider the theoretical lenses I use to focus and analyze the results of my primary research. These lenses include reading theory and a regard—influenced by Pratt—for the classroom as a mediated space.

In chapter two, I use key insights from reading theory—that personal concerns and context impact interpretation—to illuminate how one student, Gordon (I use pseudonyms throughout this thesis), understood his instructor’s feedback within his classroom space. I write this chapter as a publishable article, so I reiterate relevant sections from chapter one, unpack my methodology, and discuss the classroom I observed. I use my case study of Gordon’s rhetorical readings to demonstrate that a consideration for students’ classroom spaces and their perspectives should inform future studies on response.

Chapter three builds off chapter two’s demonstration of reading theory, as I consider the rhetorical readings of two other students—Kayla and Jordyn—within their institutional and cultural contexts. While acknowledging that I cannot fully account for all of the variables impacting these students’ readings, I demonstrate how these readings represent a microcosm for students’ broader material and social anxieties at the university. I conclude chapter three by suggesting that while there is immense potential for future research into student response, the productive challenge of student diversity means this research will resist straightforward conclusions.

My application of reading-theory to student response situations points toward both the potential and the challenge of commenting on student writing, but it isn’t possible for me to discuss all of these potentials and challenges within my first three chapters. Because of this, in my fourth and concluding chapter I reflect on my thesis, and

discuss how it has complicated my thinking as a writer, researcher, and instructor. I discuss the implications of my study, and the necessity for future research.

Providing feedback to students is at once one of the most personal, and one of the most challenging, activities that classroom instructors engage in. Taken as a whole, my work here underscores the complexity of instructor response by describing it in an under-represented light—through a consideration for the perspective of students. Though responding to students is and will continue to be difficult work, by more carefully considering their diverse perspectives we can begin understanding our practices in a more nuanced way.

CHAPTER ONE:
CONSIDERING THE POTENTIAL
FOR A RICHER LITERATURE ON INSTRUCTOR RESPONSE

In this chapter, I discuss how my study on commentary is situated within and is in conversation with the literature on teacher response. Knoblauch and Brannon provide the initial organizational scheme for this chapter by dividing the literature on teacher response into three camps: descriptive, hortative (advisory), and experimental. Though this classificatory scheme is imperfect—descriptive research is in some ways hortative, and vice versa—these categories provide an initial frame of reference for discussing both the contributions and gaps in the rhetoric surrounding commentary. The fourth segment of this chapter describes contextual research that more closely resembles my own, while the fifth introduces the theoretical lenses I use to narrow and interpret the results of my primary research.

Descriptive Research

According to Knoblauch and Brannon, descriptive research identifies the rhetorical and ideological features of written response. This work provides instructors with a frame of reference as they consider the intersections between their feedback and their values. At the same time, descriptive research provides only a partial account of instructor's commentary. As Mathison-Fife and O'Neil state, the methodology of this research is focused largely on textual forms and minimizes the importance of context

(“Listening to Students,” “Moving Beyond the Written Comment,” and “Re-seeing Research on Response”).

Both Thomas Batt and Summer Smith have published influential articles in the descriptive category of teacher response. In “The Rhetoric of the End Comment,” Batt analyzes the rhetorical strategies deployed by an instructor named Margaret in two of her end-comments. He locates her commentary within a facilitative style developed by Richard Straub, and concludes by suggesting that close textual analysis of other instructors’ response styles is needed, so that compositionists can better “understand the means of persuasion available to us as authors of the end comment” (221). Batt acknowledges that his work builds off and extends the work of Smith, who uses a much larger sample to classify the end-comment as a genre. The purposes of these two authors’ papers are still different in important ways. While Batt analyzes the rhetorical strategies deployed by a single instructor, Smith works to describe the structural attributes that distinguish the end-comment as a form of communication. Smith concludes her article by speculating that consistency between instructors’ end comments might divest them of meaning.

Both Batt and Smith acknowledge the influence of Robert Connors’ and Andrea Lunsford’s “Teachers’ Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers.” In this article, Connors and Lunsford provide a broad historical overview of teacher response practices prior to the process movement; they then describe the state of teacher response in 1993. Connors and Lunsford led a team of researchers as they analyzed three-thousand marked papers and discerned patterns in teacher’s written commentary. Connors and Lunsford found that

[the] papers and comments revealed to them a world of teaching writing that was harder and sadder than they wanted it be... a quarter [of the papers] got no personal comments at all, a third of them had no real rhetorical response, and only 5% of them had lengthy, engaged comments of more than 100 words. (214)

Connors and Lunsford conclude their article with a call to conduct further studies in to teacher response as a genre, conceiving of this as a “starting point for analysis of instructional constraints, for the ideologies of teacher response, and for the ethos of this particular teacher-student interaction” (219). Descriptive research in the vein of Connors and Lunsford provides a frame of reference for understanding the visibility of instructor values as they respond to student texts. While Mathison-Fife and O’Neil correctly point out that a sole emphasis on the textual form of commentary misses a crucial part of the response situation—the context—it’s still important to remember the substantial value compositionists can take from understanding, as Connors and Lunsford state, the values and constraints underlying their textual practices. The perspective gained through descriptive research, however partial, helps to contextualize practitioners’ consideration for their own written feedback.

Hortative Research

In hortative research about teacher response, experienced instructors describe what they consider to be a set of best practices. Knoblauch and Brannon point out that hortative research is problematic because it rarely includes student voices (“The Emperor (Still) Has No Clothes” 6); their concern resembles that of Mathison-Fife and O’Neill, who argue that hortative research deemphasizes the manner in which students’ subjective concerns and contextual spaces influence their interpretations. Despite these criticisms,

hortative research provides a framework through which instructors can make local decisions within diverse classroom spaces.

Straub is one of the leading figures in hortative research on teacher response. In both “The Concept of Control in Teacher Response,” and “The Student, the Text, and the Classroom Context,” Straub critically analyzes the rhetorical comments left by teachers on students’ texts and offers suggestions for improving comments. Similarly, in “the Concept of Control,” Straub complicates the directive-facilitative binary that informs much of the literature on commentary. In Straub’s view, it isn’t entirely possible to avoid directing students or otherwise appropriating their texts, especially considering the inherent power-asymmetry of classroom response situations. To resolve this complication, Straub advises that “the best responding styles will create us on the page in ways that fit with our classroom purposes, allow us to take advantage of strengths as teachers, and enable us to interact as productively as we can with our students” (“The Concept of Control” 248). Similarly, in “The Student, the Text, and the Classroom Context,” Straub argues that effective teacher response is self-reflective, that it invents the teacher-as-reader in a conversational way, and that it accounts for the particular classroom contexts in which response is situated. While Straub both champions and problematizes a facilitative style that addresses student rhetorical choices, he also attempts to develop a framework through which practitioners can be deliberate and intentional about their practices.

Straub’s discussion about written commentary parallels advice laid out by both Nancy Sommers and Lad Tobin. In “Responding to Student Writing” Sommers states “we comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves” (148). She contrasts her idea of

teacher response to its actual practice, especially considering that instructors occasionally appropriate student texts, are confusing, or emphasize mechanical correctness at the expense of other concerns. In contrast to this purely directive style, Sommers argues that successful commentary needs to reinforce what is said in the space of the classroom, and make use of “the teacher’s voice—an extension of the teacher as reader” (155).

Sommers' emphasis on the teacher as a concerned and caring reader mirrors Lad Tobin's advice in *Reading Student Writing*. Tobin speculates as to what could happen if instructors were to read their students' essays as though they were literature: in other words, as though their work embodied meaningful nuances, multiple valid interpretations, and intentional conflicts of style and form. By speculating in this way, Tobin reminds instructors that they can take a richer view of students' writing as they respond. Whereas Straub and Sommers are concerned with how instructors project their voice as an understanding reader, Tobin concerns himself with the process through which instructors come to project that voice.

Taken as a whole, hortative research provides a valuable framework through which first-year composition instructors can continue responding to student work in a meaningful and thoughtful way. Sommers, Straub, and Tobin are all concerned with the importance of instructor intentionality, and their advice helps practitioners make appropriate rhetorical decisions within their local contexts..

Experimental Research

While descriptive and hortative research are concerned largely with the forms and the values embodied by teacher response, experimental research is concerned with measuring the effectiveness of commentary by tracking changes in student-drafts. This

body of research has been criticized by Knoblauch and Brannon, who argue it relies on a problematic “myth of improvement” as a “justification for advocating response to student writing or for preferring one kind of teacher commentary over another” (“The Emperor (Still) Has No Clothes” 11). In Knoblauch and Brannon’s view, experimental research risks over-simplifying the complexities of students’ interpretive acts and the intentionality of their drafting processes—primarily by reducing these student processes to a set of discrete and measurable objects. Despite this objection, experimental researchers such as Dana Ferris, Marilyn Ruth Sweeney, and Nina Ziv, point toward a type of student interpretation as they trace student changes to their writing in response to instructor requests. Further, experimental research provides valuable data for practitioners as they make decisions about their commentary. This is especially true, considering that all three researchers show instructors need to consider their students’ experience as writers when determining the level of feedback to provide.

In “The Influence of Teacher Commentary on Student Revision,” Dana Ferris surveys over one-hundred and ten papers written by forty-seven advanced ESL students, and looks specifically for the manner in which marginal and end comments influence their revision choices. Ferris found that ESL students are better at utilizing directive rather than facilitative commentary as they revise their drafts, and also that they prefer specific over general comments (330-331). Ferris’s study differs from researchers like Straub, because it focuses as much on student behavior as instructor practices. Ferris demonstrates that instructors should consider the developmental level of students as they make decisions about their commentary.

In a manner similar to Ferris, Marilyn Ruth Sweeney also looks at how feedback influences revision. Working with developmental writers, Sweeney provides

authoritative and directive feedback with one class, and used a more question-oriented or facilitative style with another. Sweeney classifies these approaches as deductive and inductive respectively, even as she acknowledges that the boundaries between these two categories can be blurred. Sweeney finds that students in her deductive group made three times as many teacher directed changes during revision, but concludes that both types of feedback were at least moderately useful (217). Ultimately, Sweeney suggests taking advantage of the strengths inherent in both inductive and deductive feedback by blending the two approaches in the basic writing classroom (217).

In a manner similar to Sweeney and Ferris, Nina Ziv also conducted a study that focused on the how teacher commentary affects the revision practices of four college freshmen. Ziv finds that less experienced students need more explicit direction than more experienced students, and she advises taking this in to account when determining the types of feedback to provide (106-107). Together, Sweeney, Ferris, and Ziv make a compelling case that teachers need to consider the experience of their students when thinking through their commentary. At the same time, because experimental research focuses largely on the changes students make as they respond to feedback, this research only provides a partial view of the response situation. The incomplete, though extremely valuable, perspective of experimental researchers suggests we consider the often invisible rhetorical readings of students within their classroom spaces.

Contextual and Perceptual Research

Though experimental research provides a lens through which instructors can consider their practice of written response, this lens forms an incomplete picture on its own. Experimentally focused studies are well-represented in the literature, but this

research tracks student changes in their drafts at the expense of developing a fuller picture of their actual perspectives. Researchers Mathison-Fife and O’Neill, and Sommers, discuss the potential of considering classroom context and student perceptions when discussing teacher response.

In several articles, Mathison-Fife and O’Neill argue that contemporary research in teacher response avoids a consideration of “classroom context and the complexities of interpretation it suggests” (“Re-Seeing Research on Response” 274). Mathison-Fife and O’Neill specifically object to research that “looks only at teacher written comments apart from their context, including reflections by students” (275), and consider whether or not students interpret commentary differently than researchers or their professors suppose (277). In “Moving Beyond the Written Comment,” Mathison-Fife and O’Neill contextualize their concerns, arguing that post-modern reading theory problematizes the idea that written commentary has a definitive meaning apart from context. In this article, Mathison-Fife and O’Neill argue that we must consider classroom spaces and the relationship between teacher and pupil in any study that concerns itself with written feedback (306). For the most part, Mathison-Fife and O’Neill’s consideration of reading theory provides the groundwork for my own study, and this is a point I return to in chapter two.

Sommers also emphasizes the importance of considering the classroom context and lending credence to student voices in the research on teacher response. She states that “in our professional literature about responding, we too often neglect the role of the student in this transaction... by focusing, almost exclusively, on the role of the teacher” (249). In contrast to the instructor-oriented view of response embodied in the literature, Sommers argues that to see “comments through the eyes of college students is a

kaleidoscopic experience” (249). She states that student voices can greatly enrich the existing discourse. Mathison-Fife and O’Neill, along with Sommers, have opened a new line for inquiry by addressing a particular gap in the literature on teacher response.

Theoretical Lenses

While Mathison-Fife and O’Neill, along with Sommers, point toward an opportunity to enrich the existing literature on response, they do not provide a sufficient theoretical framework—on their own—to inform my study. In this section, I discuss post-structuralist reading theory developed by culturally-oriented researchers to illuminate my primary research on commentary. My purpose here is to provide an introduction to the body of theory I’m working with, but I defer unpacking my ideas fully until their relevant chapters.

Reading theory suggests that students interpret feedback through the lens of their classroom contexts and subjectivities; but this theory encompasses a diverse set of researchers including Louise Rosenblatt, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, and Doug Brent. There are differences among these theorists: for instance, Holland looks at reading as a psychological process, whereas Iser is more concerned about the influence of context, mostly historical, on interpretation. Brent nonetheless summarizes the diversity of reading theorists when he describes the consensus view that reading is a rhetorical act—one that is directed inward toward the self. According to Brent’s summary of reading theory, readers’ understandings of texts are influenced by their subjective concerns, as well as by the contexts in which their reading takes place.

There are potential complications that arise from my application of reading theory to the field of teacher response. For example, Rosenblatt and other reading theorists

discuss “aesthetic” texts such as literature, and not “efferent” texts such as commentary. Yet Rosenblatt acknowledges that there is at least some interplay between these two categories—that the difference between them is a question of degree, rather than of type. Similarly, as Brent argues, what “reader-response critics say about the aesthetic reading act... is strongly echoed in what cognitive theorists say about the efferent reading act” (26). Both aesthetic and efferent readings are subject to variability in interpretation.

Another potential complication of my using reading theory is that the ideas of “subjectivity” and “context” are incredibly vast. I partially address this complication through a methodological focus on isolated parts of classroom context and student perspectives, but I require an additional theoretical lens to more fully understand student interpretations. Because of this challenge, in my third chapter I consider the classroom as a mediated space in which “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in context of a highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 175). Pratt’s description of the classroom as a contact zone, in which often different points of view meet and influence one another, provides a starting point to consider how students interact with and respond to their commentary.

Though this first chapter has been largely concerned with addressing the potential and the gaps of the professional discourse about teacher response and also explaining my particular theoretical lenses, it’s also important to discuss why addressing student interpretations of commentary might be in some way valuable. A lack of student voices in the literature about commentary is not just an academic or an ideological concern; it also distorts how commentary is viewed. Knoblauch and Brannon describe a fatalistic perspective that has taken root in the literature on response:

empirical research has been unable to identify meaningful development, falling back on the 'significance' of error corrections, while the advocacy scholarship has been disinclined even to try, preferring instead to offer vague and unexamined assurances that a preferred method will produce beneficial results. (11)

The inability to substantiate advice on commentary has caused many practitioners to question its utility. At a more abstract level, the search for a preferred method of response backgrounds the plurality of methods that diversity among students' interpretive acts and classroom contexts suggests. My exploratory research demonstrates that considering local concerns and the perspective of students allows space to pursue further research.

CHAPTER TWO:
COMMENTS AND THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT:
INVESTIGATING STUDENTS' RHETORICAL RELATIONSHIPS
TO INSTRUCTOR RESPONSE

For most—if not all—first-year composition instructors, writing commentary to students is labor intensive and mysterious work. As practitioners, we mark student essays in various ways. In response, our students read and interpret our marks *in some way*. But while the practice of instructor response has been addressed in the literature (Batt, Connors and Lunsford, Ferris, Knoblauch and Brannon, Sommers, Sullivan, Straub, Sweeney, Tobin, Ziv), the complexity of students' interpretive acts in relation to that feedback is under-represented. Nancy Sommers addresses this concern when she states that seeing “comments through the eyes of college students is a kaleidoscopic experience” and argues for the inclusion of more of their voices in our literature (“Across the Drafts” 249). Similarly, Jane Mathison-Fife and Peggy O’Neill address the importance of reading theory in accounting for students’ interpretive acts: in multiple articles, they state both that student subjectivities and an awareness for their classroom context are crucial to understand the practice of instructor response (“Listening to Students,” “Moving Beyond the Written Comment,” and “Re-seeing Research on Response”). In this paper, I build from the insights of Sommers, Mathison-Fife, and O’Neill, as I demonstrate how a consideration for student perspectives can help complicate our professional discourse on response practices. I describe my contextual

and exploratory case study of a basic writing student and his rhetorical readings within his classroom space. By reflecting on my case study, I then demonstrate how a shift of emphasis away from instructor response, and toward *student response*, allows space to frame new and interesting questions.

Like many studies in composition, this study initially grew out of my professional concerns as an instructor. In my second semester working as a graduate teaching assistant and instructor of record, I felt confident—prematurely—that I’d developed an effective style for my commentary. I was heavily influenced by Straub: I sandwiched criticism with praise, addressed my students’ rhetorical choices, and was as facilitative as the realities of my inexperience allowed. Yet as I talked with my students about their writing, I realized that students experienced my commentary in unpredictable ways. Many of my students’ interpretations of my comments were constructive and positive; but for the moment, I’ll discuss only what was then my area of concern, which were those conversations that demonstrated some form of errant translation. One young woman, who had written a paper on feminism, interpreted a marginal comment from me as meaning an entire section discussing her personal experience was “rant-like” and needed to be cut. Another student, an African refugee and non-native speaker of English, was extremely concerned about failing my course and interpreted even soft criticism (“I like the idea you’re getting at here! :) Could you clarify by...”) through the pronounced lens of his insecurity. For him—and considering what I learned about his difficult educational background, his perspective was understandable—textual response could *only* signify failure. Because of this, I abandoned textual forms of response with him almost entirely and we began conferencing instead. Yet, I realized in my conversations with other instructors that my experiences were in no way atypical. Nor was my consternation. In

practice, a drift between student interpretations and instructor intent can be minimized but is inevitable.

My initial experiences with student response raised challenges; these challenges have been partially addressed in the professional literature on response. Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon—whose classificatory scheme I’ll be using—divide this literature into one of three camps: “descriptive,” “hortative,” (or advisory) and “experimental” (“Introduction: The Emperor (Still) Has No Clothes”). Though I’ll occasionally depart from the overall thrust of Knoblauch and Brannon’s argument, their categories provide an initial frame of reference for considering some of the general contributions and the gaps of the professional rhetoric surrounding commentary. For instance, descriptive research by Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford, Thomas Batt, and Summer Smith analyzes the textual practices of instructors; it facilitates a better understanding of the visibility of instructor values in their response. This research still poses a challenge because, in the words of Mathison-Fife and O’Neil, the research itself is highly “acontextual”: reading-theory tells us that a declarative written “transition need here” unpacked and explained during conferences means something different than the same comment left unexplained. Similarly, hortative research conducted by Straub, Lad Tobin, and Patrick Sullivan provides valuable theoretical frameworks through which instructors can respond meaningfully and thoughtfully to their students’ writing. At the same time, this hortative research is narrated largely, though not exclusively, from the perspective of the instructor (Knoblauch and Brannon): by focusing largely on the importance of instructor practices, it risks discounting the equally important role of the students’ contextual spaces and their interpretive acts (Mathison-Fife and O’Neill). Finally, experimental research introduced by Dana Ferris, Marilyn Ruth Sweeney, and Nina Ziv, among others, explore the types of

commentary that enable students to make substantive changes, both grammatical and rhetorical, to their drafts; these studies provide important reference points for practitioners as they make choices within the contingent and rhetorical spaces of their classrooms. But as Knoblauch and Brannon state, experimental studies are often premised on a problematic “myth of improvement” as they evaluate the effectiveness of comments (“Introduction: The Emperor (Still) Has No Clothes” 11). Experimental studies risk missing those parts of student learning which are not somehow visible through changes on drafts. As a new instructor, I grappled with how I could write my comments—despite intense time-constraints—to make my values more visible. Similarly, I wrestled with the differences, and also the similarities, between facilitative and directive commentary (see Straub “The Concept of Control in Teacher Response” and Sweeney “Relating Revision Skills to Teacher Commentary”). And, ultimately, I mystified over what effect—if any—all my work was having in my multi-draft composition classrooms. But I came to realize, as I refined my response practices, that I had very little idea of how my feedback was actually experienced by student readers. Pointing out the productive challenges of descriptive, hortative, and experimental research does not in any way invalidate these studies’ significant contributions. Instead, a lack of student voices in the literature on teacher response suggests an opportunity to explore new avenues for inquiry, and also to envision a more full-bodied discussion about our commentary.

The practice of instructor response is premised on the act of reading—both for the instructor and for the student. And because student response to commentary is an interpretive act, contextual and subjective, Mathison-Fife and O’Neill argue that much of current literature on response runs counter to “what we know about reading and making

meaning” (“Moving Beyond the Written Comment” 306). Mathison-Fife and O’Neill make extensive use of post-modern reading theory, which tells us that students’ subjective concerns and their contexts influence the way they read (Brent, Tobin, Iser, Holland, Rosenblatt). As Louise Rosenblatt states:

The reading of a particular work at a particular moment by a particular reader will be a highly complex process. Personal factors will inevitably affect the equation represented by book plus reader. His [or her] past experience and present preoccupations may actively condition his primary spontaneous response. In some cases, these things will conduce to a full and balanced reaction to the work. In other cases, they will limit or distort. (*Literature as Exploration* 75)

Reading theory suggests a multiplicity of interpretive acts—a certain messiness in how students respond to their instructors’ writing. While a plurality of student perspectives does not in any way diminish instructors’ professional responsibilities to be caring and clear, it is valuable to consider the manner in which student subjectivities and their contextual spaces complicate our response practices.

The Case Study: Design and Methodology

To better understand how classroom context and subjectivity impact student readings of instructor commentary, I conducted a qualitative, multi-modal, and exploratory case study of a basic writing classroom at a Western State University. In a manner similar to what Mathison-Fife and O’Neill suggest, I observed this basic writing classroom and took descriptive field notes whenever it was in session. I paid attention to such characteristics as how a discussion of student writing and commentary was framed, how particular students were interacting among themselves or with their teacher, and what qualities of good writing were emphasized during instruction. The class I observed took place as part of a summer bridge program, and I spent forty-eight hours in this

classroom taking notes as it met over the course of five weeks. At the same time, I followed up on my classroom observations by conducting interviews with three student volunteers; I asked these students to review their instructor's commentary and also to share their thoughts. The three students I interviewed had extremely hectic schedules—balancing off-campus jobs and an accelerated course-load—but I was able to spend between two and five hours conducting two to three interviews with each of them over the course of the semester. I focus on just one student—Gordon (I use pseudonyms throughout this article)—here, and I chose him because he shared the most information with me over the course of the semester. I nonetheless found that the sophistication basic writers bring to the practice of interpretation is remarkable, and that their perspectives merit our close attention at the same time that they raise complications for further inquiry.

As with any research project, there were limitations to the scope of my study. Through the interviews that I had with students, I realized that a consideration for the classroom context and for students' relationships with their teacher, though valuable, was not in themselves sufficient to explain the variables which impact interpretation. As Mathison-Fife and O'Neill point out, "other factors, such as race, gender, age and class (to name just some of them) may also contribute to a student's response to their teachers comments" ("Listening to Students" 194). One can't entirely account for interpretation without having a sense for a person's full subjectivity—a sense that would be impossible to achieve. Finally, though Laura—the instructor—held facilitative conferences with her students after each draft, I was unable to access these conferences due to a concern for preserving the anonymity of student participation. Because of this, I had to rely on

Laura's description of how she used these conferences, as well as the recollections of her students.

Gordon's Classroom Context

Classroom context is crucial to understanding how students interpret their teacher's commentary; but it is difficult to define which aspects of the classroom context, specifically, are important to consider. For example, it's necessary to maintain an awareness of what students themselves bring to the response situation: their previous experiences with education, their perspectives on writing, or even how they engage and disengage socially from their class. I intend to address these concerns in a later section of this article, when I describe my interviews with Gordon. But for now, at least, it's important to discuss the class I observed in terms of the instructor, Laura's, intentions and practices. In this section, I address some factors that affected her classroom context—such as the purpose of the Summer Bridge Program at my university, or how departmental requirements for English 90 were implemented within her classroom setting.

As I mentioned previously, the basic writing classroom I observed took place as part of a Summer Bridge Program. The program description states that its purpose is to “strengthen your [the students'] academic skills, build your confidence, and get you off to a successful start.” Students are selected to attend based on several criteria: they're asked to list their academic strengths and weaknesses and also to submit a personal statement “expressing your desire to attend [Western State University], your commitment to the program and justification as to why you should be selected as a participant in the program.” Potential students are screened by the program's director, who evaluates the

applications and tries to bring in students who have the greatest chance for academic success. Students are only invited to apply for the program if they would otherwise gain probationary admittance to the university based off such factors as their high school GPAs or their ACT/SAT scores.

Within this context, Laura worked to achieve the departmental course goals for English 90, “Developmental Writing.” These course goals state that at the end of the term, students will:

- Have confidence in themselves as writers and readers within a college environment;
- engage in a multi-faceted process of writing, that includes invention, development, organization, feedback, revision, and editing/proofreading;
- be willing to use multiple strategies to view, revise, and edit their evolving written texts over time, moving from writer to reader based prose;
- produce writing that has a beginning, middle, and end developed with relevant details and examples;
- produce writing in a format appropriate to its purpose;
- read actively and critically and engage in a dialogue with a text;
- edit their work for mechanical errors to the extent that, while perhaps not “perfect,” surface features of the language do not interfere with communication.

These course goals are ambitious for a five week bridge program with a class-size of twenty-five students. But with this being said, Laura relied on a framework influenced by Mina Shaughnessy, Peter Elbow, and David Bartholomae (she expressed admiration for these researchers during interviews), and emphasized the course goals that would

facilitate the most growth for her students as writers: helping them gain confidence in their work, understand writing-as-process, structure and develop their drafts, and engage critically with complex texts.

In conversations with Laura, I learned that both the types of writing assignments and her grading structure were designed—particularly—to help her students gain confidence in their ability to write. Students produced three essays—or unit projects—of three to five pages during five weeks. These essays included a literacy narrative, an analysis of their role as students at the university, and a statement of belief modeled after NPR’s “This I Believe” series. Laura had her students write about their experiences because “most of them are comfortable telling their own stories;” in other words, she worked to ease her students in to modes of academic thought. The course assignments strongly emphasized personal expression. For example, when students requested clarification about their coursework, Laura would offer advice but also emphasize that she “[wanted] to keep this as open as humanly possible for you,” or that “it’s your story, so you need to write it like you would.”

Laura also structured her grading system so as to help improve student confidence. In accordance with policy set by her First Year Writing Program, Laura ran a multi-draft portfolio based course. All three of her students’ major essays were submitted to her for a round of commentary, but traditional assessment was postponed until students re-submitted their revised work in a final portfolio. Laura still assigned points to her students’ intermediate drafts because she felt that for many of them, “anything that has value needs to have points attached to it... it’s as annoying as can be.” But rather than grade students on the content or structure of their essays, Laura instead assigned points based on easily measurable and reasonably objective criteria: page length,

MLA formatting, and whether or not students came close to addressing their assigned topic. As she told her students at the beginning of the semester, “If I tell you to do a rough draft and then put a grade on it, that’s a bit like slapping you across the face.” Essentially, Laura used the structure of her course and her grading to help students accomplish reasonably defined goals—to have successes they could point to— during the semester. The intent behind Laura’s facilitative structures was to help basic writing students chip away at their powerful internal critics.

As important as the context and general structure of Laura’s course, was how she positioned herself rhetorically in front of her students. On the first day of class, she had students write letters introducing themselves and expressing their concerns about writing. Laura wrote substantive, specific, and personalized letters back to each student and addressed the points they raised. During interviews, Laura consistently emphasized that she viewed this first day activity as crucial for developing the personal, caring, and trusting relationships that facilitate student growth.

Aware that many basic writing students have had profoundly negative experiences with education in the past, Laura also worked to diffuse potential mistrust whenever she interacted with students. She downplayed the authority invested in her by the university: specifically, by asking students to call her by first name, or also by describing her office as “on the margins of hell... it smells like feet.” She also joked with students and brought in the occasional story about her family. Though this display of humor and humanity should not be unusual, it had a profound impact on Laura’s students and framed their readings of her comments. It’s telling that Laura was at one point described by a student as “human,” though in opposition to what, I’m not sure. Further, the students I interviewed felt that Laura was legitimately and truthfully committed to facilitating their

success, regardless of whether they agreed, fully understood, or disagreed with her perspectives about their writing.

At the level of instruction, Laura consistently emphasized the course-goals related to critical thinking and well-detailed writing. Her choices for reading assignments were taken from David Bartholomae's *Ways of Reading*, so they were difficult for her inexperienced readers to interpret. During the unit on literacy narratives, Laura had her students read Richard Rodriguez' "The Achievement of Desire;" and during the unit on education she had her students read Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." Students would then draft responses to these complex works, in addition to discussing them during class. For student responses and their three major unit projects, Laura strongly emphasized the need for detailed writing in response to the words of others, and she conducted activities—largely guided peer-workshops—to unpack this idea throughout the semester. By the end of the term students had worked through a number of complex readings, and the need for well-illustrated writing in response to them had become something like a mantra.

Laura also situated her commentary in positive terms and worked to avoid mistranslation. Unsurprisingly, considering her large class size and the condensed time-frame in which she worked, much of her in-text and marginal commentary could be criticized as overly-directive or potentially confusing: "comma splice," "smoother transition needed here," "fragment," "watch verb tense shift." But Laura emphasized in interviews that she feels basic writers do need a little more direction than other students, which is a position that some of the research supports (Ferris, Sweeny, Ziv). Crucially, Laura also held facilitative one-on-one conferences with students after each of their drafts: she held these conferences to avoid mistranslation, and also to compensate for the

time-constraints surrounding her written feedback. Laura used conferences to go over what she had written, translate her concerns in a friendly way, and generally to check with students to make sure they understood what she was saying. She also worked to get a sense for what students' goals were with their writing, so that she could situate the conferences in response to them. She consistently emphasized her desire to have students take ownership of their writing, and her conversations had a substantial positive impact on her students. Their translations of her written feedback were framed by these one-on-one sessions.

To summarize, three things dominated the response situation in Laura's class. First, her substantive focus on helping her students gain confidence in their writing, both through her grading structure and her focus on individual narratives. Second, her rhetorical performance, which constructed her as an empathetic and understanding reader. Third, her dialogue with students during conferences. A typical class session in Laura's classroom was productive and busy: students spent most of their time discussing complex texts via whole-class and small-group discussions, workshopping one another's writing, and freewriting. Her work in the classroom underscores how adjunct professors facilitate student writing and development despite the less-than-ideal workloads, class-sizes, and time-constraints prevalent in first-year composition classrooms. At the same time, the positive interpretations many students ascribed to Laura's commentary justifies the idea that classroom context is often as important to students as the written feedback they receive.

Gordon's Rhetorical Relationship to Laura's Commentary

What I found as a result of my interviews with Gordon, was that he enriched his understanding of Laura's commentary by reading it through the lens of his subjective concerns. As Gordon interpreted Laura's feedback, he pulled in contextual information—multiple conversational strands—from personal experience, discussions with family, and prior educational settings. At the same time, as the semester progressed and Gordon became more secure with his writing, he also began to make complex rhetorical decisions based on the intersection between Laura's commentary and his subjectivity. The complexity of Gordon's rhetorical reading reveals the pronounced—though often invisible—student learning that takes place in response to teacher commentary. My case study of Gordon demonstrates the manner in which classroom context and subjectivity have pronounced influence on student readings of their instructors' feedback.

Gordon is an eighteen year old African-American who came to Western State University from southern California. His family is reasonably prosperous; his father works as a manager at Wal-Mart, and his mom attends university courses while working part-time. Despite his family's middle-class status, Gordon was profoundly alienated by previous experiences with education and writing: "My teacher just came in, and he was like 'this is the homework. Do it. All right. Sit down. Be quiet. All right.' [Freire] called it the Banking Method. I just call it the jailhouse method." Though Gordon acknowledged having had some good teachers in the past, he consistently returned to this image of the "stonewall" or non-interactive teacher throughout our interviews. Further, he connected his prior teacher's inattention with his own disengagement from school: "you can't talk, you just sit there, and listen to somebody else talk, all day, all day... I think I had a notebook like this thick, with doodles. In class." In addition to being

disengaged from his high school context, Gordon also lacked a set of positive writing experiences to fall back on at the beginning of the term. Though his mother had purchased him a journal during the summer of his senior year, he initially “thought it was a joke... I didn’t really take it that serious.”

Gordon’s negative perception of previous educational contexts and writing had diminished his regard for teacher feedback. Early in the term, I asked him what sort of commentary he’d received on papers in high school:

As far as um, feedback on my papers. I don’t know. I don’t want to down high school education, but there’s some teachers out there, they’re just ‘yeah, whatever.’ It’s just, you turned in a paper... teachers just happy enough that you actually did your assignment.

Wanting to get more information, I asked Gordon about previous feedback again, yet he never was able to articulate having received valuable instruction in high school. He instead turned toward a discussion about what his mother had taught him: “I really am trying to like, think of something, so far as my teachers gave me feedback. But yeah... my mother is probably my biggest English teacher.”

As Gordon’s mother worked toward her BA, she also used her college education to help him improve his writing. Gordon’s family stepped in to provide him what they felt the school curriculum lacked. Gordon explained why his mother felt this was necessary:

one thing... my Mom always stressed, is that the way you speak, is the way people are going to look at you. You can come in looking like a bum off the street, but if you start using big words, and you start spouting off these nice conversations people look at you a lot different... I know how to speak, [but] as far as writing goes, I’m still learning.

Gordon came from a family that valued education and felt it translated into economic or social success. Though I got a sense of this from our initial interview, it was only later

that Gordon explicated on the type of feedback his mother had given him. This feedback included both low-level concerns such as grammar, and higher-level concerns such as structure and form. At the same time, Gordon expressed a certain lack of receptivity to his mother's feedback, implying that he occasionally thought she was "crazy."

Perhaps because he linked higher-education to economic mobility, Gordon perceived Laura's class and his role at college differently than he had his high school experience. This was an important initial frame for his response situation. In regards to Laura, he states: "Yeah, I do feel like she actually um, does give a damn, that you make it out of English 90. Because she doesn't seem like she wants to see you there, again, as much as the student doesn't want to be there." At the same time that Gordon expresses an ambivalent desire to avoid English 90 in this statement, he also expresses an appreciation for his personal relationship with Laura. Further, Gordon felt that he needed a university education to "move up in the world" and that "if you feel like you want your education, no matter, hand down how shitty your teacher is, you're going to get your education." In other words, a confluence of personal attention and the ownership Gordon took for his learning facilitated his development in English 90.

Despite Gordon's positive regard for his college education, his perspective did not always appear to translate in to what he was doing in the classroom. He spent most of his time in the back corner of the room—in what Ira Shor refers to as its "Siberia"— and would occasionally fall asleep. Though Gordon was quite productive during peer-workshops on occasion, I also recall one instance when he and another student didn't even appear to read another's drafts. Instead, they spent the class period talking about social concerns. Gordon was the type of student who might be negatively labeled in typical classrooms. He was committed to, yet occasionally appeared disinterested in, his

experience at the university. But despite the visible markers of his in-class performance, he also showed a great deal of thoughtfulness and concern for his writing as it matured over the course of the semester.

Early in the term, Gordon submitted a short response to Richard Rodriguez’s “Achievement of Desire” to Laura. This short response was graded traditionally, as opposed to the three longer papers. At the top of the page, Laura had written “7.5/10” and as an end comment she had left “Needed to focus more on examples from the reading. Paragraph breaks.” At first glance, this comment appears problematic—it doesn’t even quite seem to refer to the student as its recipient. Yet Gordon was able to use contextual information to begin deciphering and enriching this response:

Gordon: I had felt like I did good job writing this paper, but apparently not... I was trying to figure out, well she wrote, she told me in the response... why I got 7.5 out of ten. She said you need you need to focus more on examples from the readings, paragraph breaks.

Jeremy: ... How do you think you would go about fixing that though? Like, from what Laura is saying?

Gordon: I guess my biggest thing is I just, making sure that I go, that I give enough detail about why these things relate... so I just threw in a quote, but I didn’t say why they related. So that’s kind of like handing a guy a key, but not telling him what store it goes to. So, I just need to tell, like give a little more information about why that relates to how I feel or what happened.

Gordon is interpreting the commentary through the lens of a previous class discussion, in which Laura had talked about the need for students to integrate and respond to authors’ language in their reading responses. Previously, she had had them do activities in which they would select specific rather than global areas of an author’s work, and then respond to it. So during in-class activities her students would react to a particular passage, and the nuances of an author’s meaning, rather than the “gist.” Partially because of this in class work, Gordon is actually making observations that my English 102, “Introduction to

College Research and Writing,” students have had trouble with. In this case, Gordon’s translation of Laura’s commentary was substantively enriched by his knowledge of previous lessons.

During the same interview, Gordon discussed his first unit project, on which he had received twenty-five out of twenty-five points. The point value associated with the unit projects was based on reasonably objective criteria such as MLA formatting, and Laura did make her assessment criteria visible to her students. Gordon still seized on his grade:

And in the next paper I got, I think uh, it was detailed. It was detailed. Um, I got twenty-five out of twenty-five. And it was because I didn’t, like, I wouldn’t say, “I walked in to the library and it was quiet,” then switch off to another subject... every single situation I put detail on, I detailed it. I went in depth. [Before] it was like, I was spitting facts, but I wasn’t telling why this was fact. So it wasn’t fact. It was actually just opinion... I pretty much gave them [the reader] the icing, and I need to give them the cake.

Gordon was at this point using a limited amount of information from Laura’s commentary to weave a coherent narrative—a narrative which came to profoundly influence his work. The need for well-detailed writing became a trope that Gordon returned to throughout the semester.

Gordon later explained that his concern for detail—though it was something he picked up from the class—was also something that his mother and he discussed as a concern:

I was talking to my mother about it, about how my teacher told me the detail issue, and she was saying that that was what my biggest problem was in high school. That I would just try to write like, whatever I have to say. And then jump on to another sentence about a different subject. But she was like no, just every sentence is pretty much like a thesis. You have to support it with facts right after you write about it, you can’t just leave it like “the dog is mad.” And then jump on like “I like basketball.” Well, why is the dog mad? So you have to put in support. So that’s what my writing is becoming. I’m learning to put more detail in to everything I write, just after.

This statement from Gordon is interesting for at least three reasons. First, it demonstrates and clarifies his understanding of what detail actually is. Second, it shows that he is beginning to connect a concern for detail with other areas of his writing: relating it to thesis statements, structure, and form. Third, it captures Gordon's recollections of how his mother helped him extend his learning in response to his course material. The term detail has at this point become an organizing trope through which an under-prepared writer can articulate and complicate his understanding of writing processes. Gordon combined textual information—from commentary—with rich contextual information—from the classroom, conferences, his family, and his previous experiences—in order to produce meaning. The textual and contextual components of Gordon's initial response situation exist dialectically.

I spoke with Gordon again later in the semester, after he'd completed and received feedback on his "This I Believe" essay. By this point, he was still having difficulty organizing his papers and expounding on various topics at length, but there were still significant areas of improvement in his writing. Gordon was breaking his papers down into paragraphs, the majority of which seemed reasonably substantive. He had also made strides with grammar, clarity, and voice. Perhaps because of these improvements, Gordon began to speak about more rhetorical concerns as he took some ownership over his drafts. He left this note for Laura on his paper:

This paper was really difficult for me personally because I wrote about a personal topic. This was difficult because I am not comfortable with opening up through my writing yet so writing about what I believe was not my comfort zone.

I had a problem writing this story because I couldn't piece together my details and what I was trying to say.

Despite the short length of Gordon's note, it demonstrates how his awareness of and consideration for writing had changed. It's interesting that he only briefly mentions the formal features of writing—detail, organization—and instead emphasizes a consideration for audience and topic. I found that his writing was inhibited by both these features of the rhetorical problem. I say this largely based on my follow-up interviews with Gordon, though I also observed a sporadic under-development—occasional truncated paragraphs, short sentences—in his writing.

Gordon explained his concerns about audience during our interview:

So I wanted to know, if I wrote this paper, that at least I could put it in a way that my reader could, you know, uh, how do you say, relate... I think that's what made it difficult. And another thing, just writing my beliefs on a piece of paper, because um... I dunno, you wouldn't just lend out your social security number to anybody. So you wouldn't just tell what's personally going on to anybody, like through a piece of paper. So guess I gotta open up.

Gordon was uncomfortable with this piece simply because he was aware that it was actually going to be read. As he was writing about the death of his grandmother, this discomfort was deeply connected with yet distinct from the topic of his essay. He later explained the difficulty that he had with this point:

When I was writing the paper I started thinking about her, and like the good times, and how she passed away. And I'm like uh, I don't feel like writing about this. I do not feel like reliving this through this paper. I barely reread the paper, after I wrote it, because I didn't want to read the damn paper to tell you the truth.

Taken together, these comments demonstrate how a deeply personal subject matter can lend itself to intense discomfort about audience. They also suggest that Gordon had begun moving beyond a purely mechanical consideration of writing, and toward a nascent if unarticulated consideration for his rhetorical situation. But looking back at his note to Laura, it seems significant that Gordon foregrounded concerns with his paper being read by using the phrase “open up;” this at least partially backgrounded his

difficulty with topic. This apparently minor distinction reflected Gordon's priorities and framed his response situation. Later, it deeply influenced how Gordon revised his draft.

Though Laura's marginal commentary to Gordon was largely concerned with mechanics and grammar, she also left this end comment in response to his note:

The strength of this draft is the details. You wrote about a very personal experience and I appreciate how difficult that can be. Near the beginning you make several different statements of belief. Try to make sure that your specific belief is the focus, especially in the beginning. Slow down and develop your thoughts completely.

There are several key points to this comment. First, Laura suggests that Gordon is doing well with his use of detail—a bit of praise that he picked up on and of which he was extremely proud. At the same time, Laura addressed Gordon's difficulty writing about a personal topic. Her request for Gordon to “slow down and develop your thoughts completely” addresses his challenges developing those areas of his draft which he found uncomfortable.

Gordon's concerns for revision during the final portfolio were framed by Laura's response, but he chose which portions of her commentary to emphasize or de-emphasize based on his personal concerns. He picked up on Laura's audience-related concerns about whether he had really addressed the assignment prompt, which was to discuss belief. At the same time, he also chose to de-emphasize Laura's request for more development, as his subject matter was painful. As we discussed his revisions, he stated:

Yeah, this was supposed to be a belief paper. I kind of didn't really state my belief. Like I say here, “life's trials and tribulations make us who we are.” I wish I had my other paper with me right now, but um, that isn't really what I was trying to get at. I was trying to say that, but what I was trying to say was that um, those trials and tribulations; I believe that if we give up on our goals we will never succeed in being who we are. So when I redid the paper, I tried to make my beliefs stand out a little bit more, instead of just being some random sentence.... I spent almost no time really on this paper [during revision]... from what [Laura] told me about the paper, the only thing it was lacking was the ‘I believe’ section.

In response to Laura's positive feedback, Gordon becomes less intensely concerned about detailing. At the same time, he shows a pronounced desire to "make my beliefs stand out a little bit more" while also de-emphasizing Laura's request to "slow down and develop your thoughts completely." These revision decisions derive from two mutually contradictory urges: 1) the desire or the need to satisfy his teacher and the assignment prompts; 2) his own desire to avoid lingering over the details of his grandmother's life and death. In other words, as Gordon made decisions about revision, he mediated between both Laura's desires and his own needs. Though his apparent lack of emphasis on revision is disheartening when viewed from the standpoint of an instructor, he does seem intentional about those areas of his drafting process that he's deciding to ignore, and also those elements of Laura's commentary which he is choosing to emphasize.

Gordon's responses to Laura's commentary were heavily influenced by his classroom context and his own concerns as a writer. Though his performance in his classroom occasionally seems a bit uneven, this in no way diminishes the complexity of his readings of Laura's feedback. Gordon drew connections between his coursework and the broader context of his experience and prior learning. Making these connections enabled him to infuse an ill-defined signifier—"detail"—with a rich and valuable meaning. At the same time, Gordon made intentional rhetorical decisions in response to Laura's comments based partly on his subjectivity. At times he chose to engage with his instructor's concerns; at other times he chose to resist them. The crucial point, is that these acts of mediation and resistance were both intentional and rhetorical. They demonstrate Gordon's learning as a writer, and this learning was pronounced. As Gordon

himself stated: “I’m crazy about it [this class]. Here I am, five weeks, learned more than I did in twelve damn years of school.”

Implications: A Richer Literature on Teacher Response

At the least, my case study of Gordon demonstrates that classroom context is key to understanding the effectiveness of textual response. For example, Laura’s in-text commentary could be criticized as directive or unhelpful. Statements such as “paragraph breaks” or “slow down and develop your thoughts completely” lack the specificity and rhetoricity Straub and others have championed. And during my interviews, I did find that students were sometimes unable to articulate how they could put similar statements from Laura into practice during revision. Nonetheless, a consideration for Laura’s classroom space complicates evaluating her feedback through a consideration for its textual forms alone. Intensely aware of the time-constraints surrounding her written response, Laura emphasized conferences and developed her course-structure to facilitate student learning. The former helped to reinforce Gordon’s motivation while also mitigating the impact of Laura’s assessment: despite directive textual suggestions, Gordon clearly felt he was working in a safe and supportive environment. Similarly, Laura’s course-structure provided Gordon with a signifier—“detail”—that he infused with rich meaning. Laura managed the context surrounding her textual response in order to reinforce her pedagogical goals. And she did so because she was aware of her time constraints.

Laura’s management of the classroom context productively complicates the existing hortative and descriptive research, at the same time that it makes the value of sustained contextually-based case studies like mine more visible. Much of the hortative literature on response suggests that textual feedback should reinforce instructors’

pedagogical goals within their classroom context (Straub, Sullivan); the hortative literature is nonetheless consistent in eventually emphasizing text over context. This, despite the fact that, as Mathison-Fife and O'Neill state, "in order to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers' written response, more research studies need to begin to examine these complex pedagogical practices, taking into account the full context in which composing/response/ revision/evaluation occurs" ("Moving Beyond the Written Comment" 304). Gordon's perspective and Laura's practices reinforce Mathison-Fife and O'Neill's point. Gordon's rhetorical reading of Laura's commentary—his student response—underscores the importance of considering students' contextual classroom spaces. Such a consideration for classroom context in the hortative literature could lead toward advice that more clearly balances a desire for effective textual response with an awareness for instructors' classroom demands, institutional constraints, and actual practices.

Similarly, descriptive research that concerns itself primarily with textual feedback also misses a key part of the classroom response situation. Mathison-Fife and O'Neill are intensely concerned with contextuality, especially as they argue that much of the current literature on response "assume[s] that students' interpretations of their comments would be the same as theirs, or that the students' interpretations aren't as important" (307). Batt addresses Mathison-Fife and O'Neill's concern in the "The Rhetoric of the End Comment;" he specifically acknowledges that contexts inform texts, while at the same time stating—correctly—that this point does not undermine his ultimate goal: to more "fully understand the means of persuasion available to us as authors of the end comment" (221). Similarly, Connors and Lunsford consider their descriptive study as a "*starting point* for analysis of instructional constraints, the ideologies of teacher response, and for

the ethos of this particular teacher-student interaction” (219, emphasis mine). They acknowledge that further studies, potentially using an array of methodologies, need to be conducted before we can understand the full scope and meaning of instructor response practices. Gordon’s rhetorical readings demonstrate that existing descriptive research can be enriched through a more fine-grained analysis of the classroom contexts underlying textual feedback.

Finally, my contextual case study complicates existing experimental research similar to that conducted by Ferris, Sweeney, and Ziv. Depending on instructor priorities, students making changes to their drafts in response to feedback can have substantial value. But Gordon makes visible the student learning and reflection that can take place in the absence of these changes. Though Gordon did not always comply with or fully understand Laura’s requests, he did learn from and reflect on his feedback intentionally. While Gordon’s learning was not always fully visible to Laura in his revisions, his learning was still present. Gordon’s perspective imparts a more multi-dimensional view of student response than much of the current experimental research affords. When it comes to feedback, the sole criterion for instructor success should not be what students do with their texts. In many cases, instructor success might be more accurately measured through considering how students are actively thinking about and reflecting on their texts, regardless of changes.

The concerns I raise in this section are only partial. The complications posed by Gordon’s experience still suggest that a richer literature on commentary is possible through a consideration of classroom context and the perspectives of students. Though the existing literature has been invaluable to my own formation as a reflective and

responsible practitioner, a consideration for student perspectives and classroom context will lead toward our having a much richer discussion.

As Knoblauch and Brannon point out, uncertainty in the classroom is just one of the things “that teachers learn, and ought to learn, to live with” (“Critical Teaching and Dominant Culture” 21). Though instructors can and should influence student writing, a literature on response that incorporates reading theory can remind us that a multiplicity of perspectives and differing points of view—in other words, a certain unpredictability in student response—is not only intractable, but can also inform our pedagogies. In my exploratory case study of a writer’s rhetorical reading of his commentary, I find that he is often engaged, thoughtful, and concerned, regardless of whether or not he explicitly agrees with or fully understands all of the feedback he receives from his instructor. Because students respond to feedback intentionally yet unpredictably, a shift in research emphasis toward student response is necessary to understand the variability, potential validity, and complexity of how students’ form meaning within their classroom space. Gordon’s experience underscores the need to embed a deeper consideration for classroom context and the perspective of students in future research.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE KIDS ARE(N'T) ALL RIGHT?

STUDENT MEDIATION AND RESISTANCE OF COMMENTARY

In the previous chapter I used reading theory to describe how Gordon understood Laura's response within his classroom context. Building off this work, I now turn toward a partial consideration for two other students—Kayla and Jordyn—and the wider social, material, and institutional contexts that also inform the interpretation of feedback. By considering the influence of context in this expanded way, I show that student mediation and resistance of commentary complicates the pedagogical goals of instructors, both because this mediation is intentional, and because it is difficult to account for in its entirety.

The various factors that inform students' textual interpretation cannot be fully defined or pinned down—and because my understanding of the students I interviewed is partial, I want to spend a brief moment explaining this chapter's interpretive track. The general academic tendency, which is represented in the literature on instructor response, is to assume a tone of certainty through writing: to isolate and account for complex phenomenon. This is useful, depending on the author's purpose. Yet a consideration for context through the lens of reading theory can also lead toward a holistic consideration of students' interpretive environments and the challenge of their perception. Rather than narrowing in on a small aspect of the response situation, as I did in the last chapter, I'm deciding here to demonstrate and make visible the uncertainty that practitioners grapple

with inside their classrooms. In the same way that the challenge of teaching resists the imposition of a firm narrative arc, the practice of student response is interesting not despite, but because of, its ambiguity.

Mina Shaughnessy suggests instructors “become [students] of new disciplines and of... students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence” (“Diving In” 7), and it's in her spirit that I illuminate some of the variables informing resistant student readings. It is through understanding, however partial, the complexity and intentionality of student response that instructors can better grapple with their challenges in the rhetorical spaces of their classrooms.

Grappling With Instructor Response: Kayla and Jordyn’s Readings

In a manner similar to the previous chapter, in this section I describe two students, Kayla and Jordyn’s, rhetorical readings of Laura’s response. I continue to draw connections between the subjective concerns of these two students and their readings, especially in light of how these concerns contextualize their responses to Laura’s feedback. Though Kayla and Jordyn’s readings provide evidence for the manner in which student readings complicate the pedagogical goals of instructors, I defer a discussion of this evidence—preferring instead to present it—until the concluding section of this chapter.

Kayla

Kayla is an eighteen year old African-American who, like Gordon, came to Western State University from Southern California. She seemed to have been intensely disaffected by her previous experiences with education: “It’s weird coming from, because

I took AP classes in high school, and it was more ‘just follow the structure’, Ok? ‘Here’s the assignment. Do this’. If you don’t do it how they like it, it’s not correct.” But in contrast to Gordon, I would later learn that Kayla’s previous experiences with education were having pronounced, lasting, and presumably negative effects. Kayla spoke powerfully about her disenfranchisement in her second unit essay:

When I thought of education, I thought of cults. Something about being told what is right or wrong, left me with an uneasy feeling in my body... In English I was taught structure. It seemed to be the only thing I was graded on. Again, I felt ignored... I started to push away from the information that was being injected in to my brain. I wanted to experience life.

Initially, Kayla perceived college differently than she had high school. In contrast to her disassociated imagery about previous classrooms, she described Laura as someone she “really liked” before going on to explain that “she’s very open to people’s suggestions and opinions... we’re actually interacting and she’s communicating back with us.” Kayla would keep this positive first impression of Laura throughout the semester. At the same time, Kayla was also disconnected from the majority of her peers —“not as much connection as I had with my other classmates in high school here”—and talked during interviews about how her experience with “education kind of pushed me away from wanting an education.” Toward the end of the term, I accidentally learned from Gordon—the only other African-American in the class and her close friend—that she wasn’t entirely sure, despite having received good grades, whether college was entirely “for her.” Though this perspective is common among students during their first year, the effect seemed particularly pronounced with Kayla.

Kayla seemed to be thinking through, over the course of the semester, the strict conformity that had been expected of her in high school. It’s surprising how deeply the experience seems to have affected her: “Assigned seating in every class at exactly the

same time Monday through Friday caused my life to feel repetitive and draining. Again I had this feeling of conformity. I felt I had no choices in my life. I wanted my life to be my life.” In opposition to this view, she talked about what she expected or desired from Laura’s writing course during our first interview: “I just I love creative writing so I am hoping for just lots of writing about different things. Not as much structure on my writing... just [to] make it more effective for me.” When I later asked Kayla what she felt Laura would value or devalue about her writing, she again discussed creativity, though she had not yet received any feedback: “Right now I’m thinking she’s gonna value just creativity, more opinions, less structure. Devalue, I guess, I think just not being very specific.” There was a strong basis for Kayla to have this perspective about Laura’s class. During the first week, Laura had consistently discussed her desire for students to tell their stories and share their narratives.

To some degree, Laura’s commentary to Kayla on her second unit essay seems to resemble the forms of high school commentary which Kayla had earlier critiqued: “comma splice,” “a better title,” “smoother transition needed here,” “Is this paragraph fully developed?” Kayla nonetheless strongly emphasized the more facilitative conferences she had with Laura during our interviews: “First, she kind of asked me how I felt about it, and what I felt I needed to improve upon. And then she kind of incorporated her remarks in to mine, to make it, just a stronger paper all together.” The conference framed Kayla’s response to her commentary at the same time that it facilitated her positive interpretation: “She really liked that I gave a lot of detail... she just likes creative thinkers, those who don’t follow strict structure.” When I asked Kayla why she felt this way, she pointed toward Laura’s short written praise—“great description”—about the

introduction, in which Kayla described school as though it were a military setting. She then emphasized that it was a point the two of them discussed during conferences.

Despite Kayla's stated appreciation for Laura, as our interview progressed I noticed that she seemed apathetic or distracted. When I asked about the areas for improvement Laura had pointed out, Kayla seemed almost fatalistic: "I knew. I knew what she was going to say." It's unclear to me whether this statement is related to Kayla's discouragement in response to Laura's commentary, or whether it is related to Kayla's description of her writing process: "I just waited until the last minute on that one. I sat down and just kind of wrote. And filled in the blanks. It's not my best." At the same time, as Kayla discussed potential ideas for revision, she was unable to move beyond a stated desire to "fix" the areas for improvement Laura had pointed out. Her understanding of how she would implement said fixes was extremely difficult to pin down and she didn't really move beyond surface-level concerns. If Laura had asked for a smoother transition in a particular spot of Laura's paper, Kayla was able to state that she'd improve it, but she was not able to articulate the strategy she would use or how she would apply this strategy elsewhere in her work.

Despite the challenges arising from Kayla's rhetorical readings of Laura's commentary, Kayla saw her coursework in a positive light and felt it facilitated an improvement in her writing. During our first interview, Kayla told me that she had taken "nothing at all" from her high school instruction. In contrast, her description of how her writing had progressed in Laura's classroom was more nuanced:

Yeah, [my writing is] changing a lot. Especially with this, the last essay assignment. How it's so open, and you can write about anything you want. So that's really nice. That's what I like to write about, is what I want to write about. So that, that was fun, and um she's helping me to kind of clarify my writing. So she's, I read it a little more clearly than I used to.

Though it was occasionally difficult for me to understand exactly how Kayla was applying and interpreting Laura's commentary, she took value from it. At the same time, from having looked at her writing over the course of the semester, I can attest to the development that took place.

Toward the beginning of the term, Kayla told me that she didn't "want any education at all, trying to force myself, saying OK, I need to strive. Just get myself to get education." And though she was struggling with her role at the university and felt disconnected from many of her peers, she often demonstrated a high level of commitment. Kayla spent the semester mediating in a space delimited by both her aspirations and her constraints. Her composition and her readings of commentary demonstrate this struggle.

Jordyn

Jordyn is a nineteen year old student who came to Western State University from Memphis. She was highly committed within the classroom space; at the same time, despite her commitment, I was often surprised by how deeply ambivalent she felt toward the aims of education. She wrote about how she "never wanted to go to school, but always wanted to work" and argued real-world experience was intrinsically more valuable to her than time spent in the classroom. Like many students, she seems to have entered the university primarily to get credentialed in order to move forward in a career. This is completely understandable to me. I learned during interviews that in order to reach the workplace where she cashiered, Jordyn utilized public transit for about two hours each day. When we had our second interview toward the end of the term, Jordyn

also explained that she hadn't "had a day off, between school and work... for five weeks." Jordyn exemplifies the difficult personal sacrifices students often make to pay for their education and potentially move up the economic ladder.

Jordyn was generally compliant with Laura's requests throughout the semester. At the same time, I was somewhat surprised—during interviews—by her intense resistance to the requests made of her. The tension she felt between submission and compliance first surfaced when I asked her about her previous writing experiences in high school:

First semester, I was too headstrong, and I was like 'No, I'm not doing it. I'm going to be my way.' And since I was struggling that first semester, second semester I got an A—I went from a D to an A—because I went, I went along with what he wanted... It wasn't enjoyable in his class at all. It was enjoyable when you went along with what he said, because then he wouldn't make your life hell.

Though Jordyn had adapted to the reality of a particular class in high school, she was deeply resentful. She continued by describing the forms of the commentary she had received: "he just completely tore apart our essays... couldn't use opinions or experiences... I always thought the teacher was just very power hungry."

Like Gordon and Kayla, Jordyn seemed to perceive Laura's class differently than she had high school. In describing Laura, Jordyn said "She's awesome basically. She's one of the best English teachers I've had... with her, I know she'll give me actual feedback that I can use." Because this was early in the semester, I asked Jordyn why she felt this way:

on our essays and work that we turn, she like writes us little notes. Like that she's looking forward to working with us, that she understands our frustration and stuff. Personal, little notes, on that. What we turn in.

And though Jordyn eventually shifted somewhat, in terms of how she perceived Laura's commentary, she never completely lost this first favorable impression of her classroom space.

When we met later in the term, Jordyn and I decided to discuss her first unit essay because it was the one that she had had the most trouble with. By this point, there was some apparent tension between Jordyn's initial expectations and the feedback she was receiving. For example, when we'd first met, Jordyn had told me that she wanted to work on "length requirements... like what should I talk about without going completely out of the box." She'd also talked about how "Laura's class is perfect for me... I'm going to look back on her class and be like 'Hey, I learned that in English 90'." In contrast, by the end of the semester Jordyn was talking about "stupid length requirements" and how classes were "really dumbed down for where I am." She was on edge.

In the essay we discussed, Jordyn had written about visiting the Martin Luther King and Elvis Presley museums, and how these visits had helped fuel her love for history. As per the assignment requirements, she tied this in to education by talking about how what she learned in these spaces "can help me in the *real world*" (emphasis hers). In response to Jordyn, Laura wrote the following end-comment:

Jordyn—I think the basic idea that you want to convey in this essay is apparent. I think you need to clarify your focus and look carefully at the organization of your ideas. Your goal is to have ideas connect to each other smoothly, so the reader can see the significance of your experience. You also need to focus on developing the specific details that support the main idea of the essay. Emphasize your connection to history and how experiencing history first hand has fueled your love for history.

Jordyn was somewhat confused by what this end comment meant: "I don't really get that part of her feedback. Just because I'm like, well my whole essay is my connection with

history and why I love it and all that other stuff.” At the same time, Jordyn seems to have been trying to find some way to put Laura’s commentary in to practice: “[Laura is] just trying to tell me to add more detail... so I need to add more detail, and why I love history, and like that kind of stuff.” Jordyn seems to be interpreting Laura’s commentary in light of classroom discussions that emphasized the need for illustrative examples. At the same time, Jordyn also somewhat contradictorily discussed both how she hadn’t read Laura’s marginal commentary--“I haven’t gone through and read these little side notes that she’s put in there”--and how she preferred them over end-comments: “I’d rather her like completely, like there’s writing all over the paper. Then I know what needs to be fixed and what needs to be done.”

I describe Jordyn’s apparent contradictions because throughout our interview she seemed to oscillate between accepting, resisting, and disregarding Laura’s feedback. I was having trouble making sense of this, but later in the same interview Jordyn and I discussed—almost as an aside—her unit three assignment, on which she had yet to receive feedback:

I hate length requirements. Absolutely hate them... Like with my third [essay], it’s probably three pages and a quarter. And it’s supposed to be four pages. Four full pages. But I got my point across... My mom read the essay, Stacy read the essay, I had another friend read my essay. They’re like ‘I think it’s fine. What’s wrong with it?’ I’m like, ‘it’s not four full pages.’ So, but everyone said that there was nothing else that I needed to add. So that’s what it’s going to be, tough... She’s going to tell me it needs to be longer.

Jordyn was proud, assertive, and had difficulty mediating between Laura’s concerns and her own. She was hard-working and occasionally reflective; at the same time, she had difficulty fully understanding the intentions underlying Laura’s feedback. By the time I interviewed Jordyn—perhaps because of a hectic schedule—she really just wanted to be finished with the portfolio and the course. This isn’t to suggest that Jordyn didn’t take

any value from what Laura had taught her. In our final interview, she expressed to me that she had. It is meant to suggest that some confluence of confusion, the classroom context, a hectic schedule, and resistance made Jordyn far less receptive to Laura's feedback than she may otherwise have been.

Implications: The Challenge of Student Mediation and Resistance

When considering my case studies of Kayla and Jordyn, it would be too easy to fall back on negative stereotypes. Without an understanding of these students' educational and personal contexts, both could potentially be criticized for unintentional or unwarranted responses to their instructor's feedback. This criticism is consistently seen in composition classrooms as even thoughtful instructors decry the occasional invisibility of student compliance with their commentary. To some extent, this criticism of students is also mirrored in the experimental research on response, insofar as it assumes student compliance with requests is a primary measure of the effectiveness of feedback. A consideration of student response nonetheless complicates these familiar value judgments. Though Kayla and Jordyn's rhetorical decisions in response to Laura's feedback may be problematic from the point of view of experienced compositionists, these students' decisions are at least partially understandable, especially when viewed through a consideration of their previous educational contexts, their inexperience writing, and their difficulty balancing the demands of university instruction alongside their more personal concerns.

Mary Louise Pratt reminds us that the classroom is a mediated space in which "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 173). At the same time, theorists such as Fen

Shen—who wrote about her difficulties managing voice and identity in American composition classrooms, as a result of her upbringing in China—remind us of the difficulties students face as they enter the university and learn new modes of speech: new idiolects. The body of work I briefly cite here underlines the importance of respecting the multi-faceted identities, languages, and experiences of our students. This body of work also reminds us of the challenges we face as we conduct the necessary work of guiding students into new discourse communities at the university.

In large part because our classrooms are a mediated space, student resistance toward commentary is unsurprising. Nonetheless, what is surprising about Kayla and Jordyn’s understandings of commentary, is the *degree* to which the contextual and subjective space surrounding feedback is, at the level of perception, indistinguishable from its textual form. Laura managed her commentary through a focus on conferences and her classroom space; she did this to facilitate her feedback being received positively. Yet her commentary reverberated with Kayla and Jordyn largely in terms of their subjective concerns and their previous experience. Authorial intention was only a part, and I suspect it was a small part, of the response situation in Laura’s class.

Based on my interviews, I obviously can’t describe the contextual or cultural characteristics that influenced Kayla and Jordyn’s perception of feedback—or their subjectivities—in their entirety. But starting with Kayla, what I can say is that she viewed her commentary in a more-or-less prescriptive way and that this correlates with her viewpoint about education more generally. For whatever reasons, Kayla viewed education as a regimented and disciplined structure that opposed her expression of creativity. This view is mirrored in her response to commentary, insofar as she is largely concerned with complying with Laura’s requests. In the language of instructors, Kayla

could potentially be criticized for failing to take ownership over her writing. Alternately, maybe her withdrawal from her texts is itself a form of resistance. Yet, to fully describe what's happening with Kayla using this sort of language lacks explanatory power.

Perhaps Kayla just learned the lessons of her previous educational contexts too well.

Similarly, Jordyn's subjective concerns and contextual space also complicated her reception of Laura's feedback. Jordyn wrote about and discussed her preference for "real-world" as opposed to academic experience. She also showed pronounced resistance toward complying with the requests of both previous teachers and Laura. This resistance may have been apparent in Jordyn's simultaneous preference for and disregard of Laura's marginal comments; it was certainly apparent in her decision to disregard length requirements for the final unit. It's notable that Jordyn didn't make decisions in regards to the latter lightly; she spoke with several people and had them read her work before turning in her short draft to Laura. Because of her simultaneous concern for and rejection of the details of her assignment, I can say that Jordyn was at once both invested in and resistant toward parts of her education.

As I reflect on Jordyn's experience, I wonder how much of her resistance of Laura's commentary is related to a deeper hesitance toward leaving her world outside the university behind. The English department does not value brevity; workplaces do. Instructors are occasionally mysterious with their end comments; employers just want things fixed. Jordyn's occasional resistance toward Laura's feedback seems—at least in part—like an understandable clash of culture. At the same time, this clash was decisively influenced by Jordyn's difficult employment situation and a lack of free time away from the university.

To a large extent, my reading of Kayla and Jordyn's response situations is influenced by my knowledge of what happened with them as they continued on through English 101. At the end of these students' second semester, and after their grades were posted, Laura and I met to discuss my descriptions of Kayla and Jordyn. Laura recognized her students, who had followed her into their second semester. She told me that Kayla had—by the end of English 101—pulled back from her texts entirely. Whereas at the beginning of English 90 Kayla's writing was rich with vivid description, by the end of English 101 her work had become completely mechanical. Kayla withdrew from her classroom contexts and her writing, emotionally if not physically. Similarly, it wasn't clear to Laura whether Jordyn was still at the university at all. By the end of English 101, she was talking about how some confluence between work, illness-in-the-family, and personal concerns might cause her to leave.

Kayla and Jordyn's responses to Laura's feedback are in some ways a microcosm reflecting their subjective concerns within broader institutional and structural contexts. Mathison-Fife and O'Neill suggest that context and subjectivity decisively influence interpretation, and Kayla and Jordyn's readings of response illustrate the degree to which Mathison-Fife and O'Neill's perspective rings true. At the same time, Knoblauch and Brannon have discussed the disturbing inability to account for the effectiveness of commentary ("The Emperor (Still) Has No Clothes"). But perhaps this lack of apparent, if not actual, effectiveness is unsurprising. Considering the social frameworks that inform the practice and interpretation of texts, we may be expecting our short notes to accomplish entirely too much. We can't always expect our comments to be received as they're intended; they represent just one part of the response situation.

It is difficult, actually impossible, to fully account for or describe the factors that influence student response using a single theoretical lens. Students do not exist in isolation from any part of their contexts: as Mathison-Fife and O'Neill suggest, cultural, personal, linguistic, social, and other factors inform student readings. Though our viewing commentary "through the eyes of college students" is and will continue to be "a kaleidoscopic experience" (Sommers, "Across the Drafts" 249), student perspectives also challenge our pedagogies in ways difficult to anticipate. Kayla and Jordyn showed remarkable growth in their writing in the span of just five short weeks; yet through my interviews with them, I learned that their remarkable concern and dedication was not without its challenges. Student mediation and resistance suggests the opportunity for future research concerning student perspectives on response; it also suggests this research will resist conclusion.

CHAPTER FOUR:
REFLECTING ON AND RECONSIDERING
A RICHER LITERATURE ON RESPONSE

In the previous chapters, I discussed the subjective and social factors affecting three students—Gordon, Kayla, and Jordyn’s—rhetorical readings of Laura’s commentary within their classroom context. But because my understanding of students and their classroom contexts is itself subjective, I’ve decided here to discuss a small part of my experience through an informal reflection. I then describe, in separate sections, both some of the conclusions raised by my case studies and the potential for further research.

In reflecting on my culminating semester, it’s useful to start with a single experience, which has in some ways become like a symbol.

At some point during my final term, I met with Laura at the University Starbucks and we discussed my thesis draft and her response to it. We were, in many ways, two mismatched figures. Myself, a graduate student: youngish but not young, beat up clothes, and unkempt hair. Laura, an adjunct: middle-aged, respectably dressed, and decidedly better groomed. We set a scene marked by considerable ambiguity. She was naturally concerned that my thesis should accurately depict her, and I was myself worried that my ideas were fair to all the various parties involved. Laura and I came together because we

placed value on the words I'd written, and we were both concerned about the problem of representation. Yet we were strange partners engaged in a strange business.

The content of my conversation is less important to me now than how I felt about it. Uncertain. Throughout my thesis project, I've been surprised by the manner in which writing about actual people—as opposed to texts—dramatically shifts the ethical and the moral quandaries involved. Naturally, the readings in my case studies are all in some way distortive: I've described both students and Laura through the lens of my own subjectivity, and without really knowing them. It's nonetheless been important to me, that in my writing, I at least *attempt* to describe my subjects in terms that they might be able to recognize.

I lead off with my concerns in this area because they drove the majority of the productive challenges and the complications that informed my study. I suppose I could write about the more usual and predictable troubles that assailed me as a graduate student: the late nights, the constant readings of articles, the times where I had to—out of necessity—temporarily cut out both family and friends. But that's predictable. What I was most surprised by, in writing my thesis, was how the challenge of representation can somehow impel the construction of some seventy odd pages of scholarly text.

It's difficult for me to take too fine grained a view as I look back over the past year and a half. But I can say that the challenge of representation has changed me in some ways. When I began my study, it was because I was extremely curious about the question of perception: having taken a seminar on Samuel Beckett during my first semester, I was interested in the play of meaning and unmeaning embodied by language. But whereas Beckett looked at this play and saw mostly despair, for the students I interviewed—and myself—the confusion of language is essentially a generative force.

Even as student readings of commentary—and my readings of them—are in some ways distortive, these distortions are firmly rooted in our social contexts and perhaps our identities: these are inevitable, often happy, things. In effect, at least at the level of representation, I've been concerned to show that the challenge of mistranslation is perhaps just the plain-old-vanilla result of translation itself. The drift between instructor intentions isn't just inevitable; it can in many (though not all) ways be constructive.

I'm not sure if my struggles with representation—not only of basic writers, but of Laura and myself—looked all that pretty. As I wrote my thesis, I spent most of my time attending less to the meaning of my text, and more to the various meanings that audiences could potentially draw from it. For example, some months ago, I flirted with the idea of linking the perspectives of the students I interviewed more explicitly with the classroom of which they were a part. As I considered this track I did so by using theoretical perspectives on the problem of transfer. Unfortunately, as I wrote my way into this particular analysis, I realized that the social epistemic theories I was using were heavily rooted in opposition to the Expressivist modes of instruction that I was observing. Out of respect, I didn't want to take this same oppositional stance—but I couldn't find a way past it. So I discarded a relatively large body of my work wholesale, and I started over.

In smaller ways, generating and discarding material was my process throughout writing my thesis. In some cases, I'd describe a classroom encounter and then—only after the fact—realize that I was using language which carried implicit criticism of students. Though I admit students do on occasion need to be criticized, this didn't seem defensible considering the nature and the purposes of my study. In other cases, I'd just use my sources brashly: I'd triumphantly steamroll over Straub with what seemed like an airtight argument. None of these acts were fully intentional; you just wind up doing

wonkish, strange, things when you write. Yet I do think the oppositional mode of writing, at the same time that it is so common, is mostly trash. So the trash heap for this work is probably at least half as long as the work itself.

As I look over these challenges, can I at least say I learned something from them? I hope so. Otherwise, either the process of getting my MA has just been a hassle, or maybe I've just been a huge grump. So yes. I learned things. Through working with actual people I experienced—rather than just paying lip service to—the surprising ethical weight of words. I came to care far more about precision than I have in the past; I often discarded pretty phrases simply because they didn't seem to be true. At the same time, simply working on a longer document changed my writing in unpredictable, albeit uneven, ways. I'm pretty sure the attentive reader could screen over this document and identify areas that were created either towards the beginning or the end of my process. It's impossible for me to know now whether whatever has changed has marked an improvement or not, though I suspect it has or at least will. (As an aside, this final chapter was indeed written last. Future grad students: take heed! By this end of the thesis writing process, it will take you at least four times longer to write a simple sentence than it did at the beginning. You'll be blind to your work.)

As a final note, I've been asked by several people whether my study has informed my own practice as a commenter on student writing. My study's purpose was to describe and begin accounting for student perspectives, but I respect the values underlying this question. I'll briefly comment on it here. Student interpretations of commentary are complex enough, that it's doubtful whether a single set of best practices even exists. Instead, there are various sets of valuable practices that are themselves dependent on the vagaries of local context, the instructor, and their relationships with their students.

Considering this challenge, it may be better to focus on the process we take to commenting, rather than on the product itself. Talk with students rather than at them. Even if you happen to disagree with them. That's the real bullet-point. The take-away.

There were other key conclusions to my study. As Mathison-Fife and O'Neill predict, a consideration for student response complicates the assumptions engrained in our professional discourse. The effectiveness of instructor feedback cannot be assessed through a consideration for its textual forms alone; contextual factors such as the classroom space, student backgrounds with education, and the relationship between instructor and student, are also decisive to the formation of meaning. So on the one hand, existing hortative and descriptive research can be enriched through a consideration for how instructors—such as Laura—manage the contextual spaces surrounding their written feedback. *Though it is meaningful to discuss the textual forms of commentary, it is often more meaningful to discuss these forms in light of the contextual spaces which impact student interpretation.* On the other hand, a consideration for student response also complicates the experimental literature. Looking for student changes in their drafts, in response to commentary, measures a type of interpretation but misses others; both experimental and qualitative studies are necessary to understand student perspectives in a more multidimensional way. Continued inquiry into student response can continue to build on the existing discourse on feedback: complicating and refining, though by no means refuting, it.

At the same time that a consideration for student response enlivens our professional discourse, it can also encourage our reflection at the level of practice.

Gordon, Kayla, and Jordan all made intentional decisions as they read and interpreted Laura's feedback. But they did not read this feedback purely through the terms—either textual or contextual—that Laura set. Rather, these students' readings were also influenced by difficult-to-access subjective and social factors such as their experiences with education, their backgrounds, and their thinking about their places at the university. Though it's not possible for me to fully account for variables impacting student interpretation, my study demonstrates the surprising degree to which students form meaning independent of their instructors' actual feedback or their classroom space. This productive challenge of student diversity and meaning formation limits our power as instructors. But this limitation—if taken into account—can usefully encourage a dialogic and reflective, if occasionally challenging, practice of classroom management. Though instructors often have to assume the mantle of authority, at the level of reflection our best stance will continue to be one of considerable uncertainty.

The methodology, theoretical lenses, and the process of my study were all focused on accounting for or otherwise highlighting the diversity of students' interpretive acts. Yet strangely, by so clearly privileging student response in my case studies, I partially deprivileged the actual practice of instructors. Because of this limitation, future sustained inquiry should continue to acquire comparative data on instructor practices and their impact on student response. In the "Rhetoric of the End Comment," Batt argues that we need to better understand all of the possible "means of persuasion" that are available to us (221), and these means of persuasion include our management of the contextual spaces surrounding our written feedback. To some degree, Laura's students understood

commentary in terms that she herself had set: they discussed commentary in terms of their self-expression, for example, or otherwise emphasized the overall structural development and detail of their writing. The vocabulary these students were provided, to account for their writing, was exceedingly useful. At the same time, their experience suggests that a different classroom emphasis—perhaps on discourse community knowledge, or even a current traditional approach—would have had different effects. The important thing for us, as researchers, is to continue exploring what these effects might be and how they might play out.

My study also begins to highlight—though it does not fully explore—the impact assessment and instructor authority have on student interpretations. This insight, also, suggests the usefulness of future case studies. The degree to which both Kayla and Jordyn were simultaneously able to respect Laura as a person, and also to occasionally feel either chagrin or distrust toward her commentary, is surprising. Though I'm sure this phenomenon was present in Gordon as well, both Kayla and Jordyn more clearly reacted both to Laura-as-person and Laura-as-teacher: they held a double-image of her in their mind. This complication led me to question the degree to which not only the classroom space, but also the broader context of the institution and culture, has a sustained effect on student learning. The structures in which instructors are themselves caught up—with their rituals of assessments, and a certain transactional view of education—necessarily complicate what we are able to achieve within our classrooms, or otherwise through commentary. Future research that more closely analyzes student perspectives in response to these specific challenges—perhaps eliciting their thoughts about assessment, in light of their views on commentary—could demonstrate both the theoretical and the pedagogical implications of power asymmetry within our classrooms.

My case studies of Gordon, Kayla, and Jordyn make visible the complexity of students' interpretive acts within their classroom spaces. And it is precisely this complexity of student interpretation that the literature on response needs to more fully account for. While understanding student response situations within their classroom context in their entirety will remain impossible, acquiring even a fragmented view for these response situations and for student perspectives will better prepare instructors to make contingent and rhetorical decisions within the space of their classrooms. Describing the classroom as a mediated space suggests the coming together and mutual influence of multiple and perhaps divergent points of view. This is difficult work. Yet accounting for and cultivating this diversity of perspectives is at once the challenge, and the potential, of first-year writing.

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