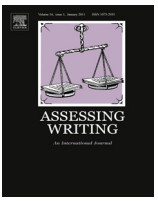
Assessing Writing 19 (2014) 6–23

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Assessing Writing



Responding to student writing: Teachers' philosophies and practices

Dana R. Ferris*

University of California, Davis, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 9 October 2013

Keywords:
Response
Feedback
Teacher philosophies

ABSTRACT

Reviewers and researchers have been investigating response to student writing for several decades. To what extent have these research findings influenced teachers' real-world practices? Beyond investigating teachers' mechanisms for providing feedback, this study aimed to examine what is behind those choices: What principles guide teachers, and how were those philosophies formed? Do their practices appear to be consistent with their views about response? The teachers' voices have been the missing link in the research base to date. There have been surveys of student opinion about response and text analyses of teachers' comments, but only rarely have teachers themselves been utilized as primary informants in studies on response.

The present study utilized a mixed-methods approach to examine the research questions. A team of researchers surveyed ($N = 129$) and interviewed ($N = 23$) community college and university writing instructors from the same geographic region—volunteers who had responded to an online survey—about a wide range of practices and analyzed examples (3–5 texts per interview participant) of these informants' written responses to students. The results showed variation across instructors and some discontinuity between teachers' self-reported response principles and their actual practices, as demonstrated in their own written commentary.

1. Introduction

For writing instructors, responding to student writing is a critical endeavor that is often fraught with frustration and uncertainty: What do I look for? How do I provide feedback in ways that are

* Tel.: +1-530-752-0778.
E-mail address: drferris@ucdavis.edu

1075-2935/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2013.09.004

motivating, specific, encouraging, and clear? How do I ensure that students attend to and effectively learn from the feedback I provide or facilitate? Am I doing more work than my students are? How do I manage the time and energy demands the response task places upon me? Despite these self-doubts, few writing instructors would argue that they should stop responding to student writing, so researchers examine the purposes, processes, and effects of feedback in order to better understand this important and ubiquitous pedagogical practice (see, e.g., Anson, 1989; Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Ferris, 1995, 1997, 2003; Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Ferris, Liu, & Rabie, 2011; Goldstein, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Leki, 1990; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Sommers, 1982; Straub & Lunsford, 1995; Straub, 1999, 2006; White, 2006; Zamel, 1985). These scholarly efforts have led to various "best practices" recommendations that have been widely disseminated in materials for writing instructors and used in pre-service teacher preparation and in-service workshops, but little is known about how those suggestions or prescriptions have influenced classroom practices. Do writing instructors in the "real world" conceptualize and execute their feedback systems in the way experts say they should?

1.1. "Best practices" recommendations from composition research

1.1.1. Overview

The most substantial research on response to student writing appeared in the 1980s and 1990s (for reviews, see Ferris, 2003; Goldstein, 2005; Liu & Hansen, 2002). Researchers have examined the focus and form of teacher written commentary, including its apparent effects on students' subsequent writing; peer response groups and their effects; teacher–student writing conferences; and a number of questions related to error correction or written corrective feedback. These issues have primarily been investigated in two ways: through text-analytic description (with "texts" including student texts, teachers' written comments, and transcripts of writing conferences or peer feedback group discussion) and through surveys of student opinions about or reactions to various feedback practices. Through these primary studies and various chapter- and book-length reviews (e.g., Ferris, 2003; Goldstein, 2005; Liu & Hansen, 2002), a range of suggestions about "best practices" for response to student writing have emerged (see Fig. 1), and these suggestions are often used in teacher-preparation courses and in-service workshops. (This list is heavily indebted to a very cogent summary in an article by Lee (2008, pp. 70–71), but it includes ideas from other sources as well.)

1.2. Teacher views of response to student writing

As already noted, previous research on response to student writing has yielded many helpful insights and indeed produced the "best practices" suggestions for response shown in Fig. 1. However, a sizable gap in the research base has been consultations with teachers themselves about *what* they do with regard to feedback and *why* they do it that way (Ferris, 2006; Goldstein, 2001, 2005).

There are a few exceptions to this generalization. Straub and Lunsford's (1995) book-length study, *Twelve readers reading*, elicited not only written commentary on student texts from twelve renowned experts in composition studies but also reflection from these scholars about why they responded as they did. While this research yielded both a useful analytic framework for commentary and interesting insights about these instructors' approaches to response, it is important to observe that these were hand-picked teacher respondents, chosen because they were highly respected writing experts. It cannot be assumed that they represent the views and practices of a broader cross-section of instructors from a range of backgrounds teaching writing in a variety of contexts.

There have been a few other studies over the years in which classroom instructors have been asked about their responding practices. Researchers in one small early study (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990), conducted with three teachers and nine Brazilian students of English as a Foreign Language, triangulated data collection and analysis by interviewing teachers and students as well as examining student texts with teacher commentary, finding that teacher and student assessments of teacher response were consistent with observed responding behaviors. In a study of writing conferences, Newkirk (1995) reviewed recordings of teacher–student conferences with the instructor, finding that at some points the instructor and students had different goals for the interactions. In several recent