Pandemic Pedagogy:

A Case Study of Commenting Practices in a Pandemic

By

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Chapter 1 – Section 1 – Introduction

With you I stand in hope
That God will save us from ourselves
Every cry a wasted moment
Until another day is lost
Even lands we once called home
Lie undiscovered and unknown
Only heaven's silence for an answer
And did our laughter, did our tears
Have some purpose after all?
Did we toil in vain in hope
That wisdom came from what we'd done?
Even lands we once called home
Lie undiscovered and unknown
Only heaven's silence for an answer
VNV Nation, "Genesis"

At this point, COVID-19 has ravaged much of the globe, and forced every human institution to adapt to a "new normal." Universities were not exempt, and neither were their first-year writing programs. The pandemic response and political upheaval it generated touched every aspect of human life. This case study sought an answer to a question: did the pandemic reach our commenting practices on student work, too?

In early March of 2020, I sat at a bar celebrating my birthday. We didn't know the world was going to change the next day, at least here in the United States. The feeling of the evening was best encapsulated by the notion that we'd all have a drink and wait for this all to blow over. At the time, I was finishing my course work for my master's, and that included two independent studies, one on composition theory and the other on empirical research methods. The goal of the two was to generate an IRB approved study to write my master's thesis on (this document). I wasn't exempt from the ravages of COVID-19; this study had an entirely different focus initially, one designed to recruit students and teachers, and engage in reflection on how students perceived their instructors' feedback and to gather instructors' impressions on how they were perceived. I

was in the middle of IRB approval for that when COVID-19 struck. My life, my study, the very fabric of my reality shifted in response. I went on to suffer mightily; I'm not the 'me' that started the study that led to this document. Working in retail to support myself through my program, I inevitably ended up with a case of the same disease that upended our world. The disease itself didn't break me, but afterwards, for months, walking to my car tired me out. I don't feel that I'm as smart as the man that started this. As such, I proceeded through the study we had to entirely reinvent as a different man. The one similarity I know I share with that man, the one that wrote that study, is the absolute fear of receiving commentary on my writing. I know this to my core, because, as I write this, I fear the same, and despite every bit of reading I have done on commenting practices, whether they made it into this document or not, I have never internalized the notion that writers are better for having been read. With those significant caveats in mind, I'll now explain what that study became.

The methods for this study, like all things in 2020, had to adjust to the new normal described. I recreated the study to be modular in participation, to allow for instructors to simply submit comments as a baseline of participation. Thereafter, there were options for further participation including interviews, clarification emails, and checks on their representation within the study. I still regret abandoning all student participation in the study, as I feel like the information that could have been gathered there would have been invaluable. The coding scheme I formulated was based on *12 Readers Reading*, though it was designed to be a simplified version for one researcher. After multiple passes of coding, it reached its own layers of complexity. The methods section of this document will give a full account of the approach.

Given that this study started its life on a path aimed at commenting practices, though particularly focused on reflective practice, it's no surprise that the literature presented offers the

greatest range and most succinct presentation of best practices for commenting that I have found. While this is a tiny case study, hopefully in a long line of studies towards a better understanding of commenting practices, my sincere hope with this document is, at the very least, to provide a multifaceted understanding of commenting practices that exceeds this moment, or at least explains our thought until this moment. My conclusions may seem sad in the absence of the luminaries that precede me, but the realities of commentary evade simple prescriptions.

The results for this small case study were generated through the simplified lens that *12 Readers Reading* offered that one man could operate. The findings that can be found are almost entirely quantitative. I purposefully avoided critique of particular comments, as whatever ethos the literature could lend to one man reading comments could offer, I hoped to provide. I went through two iterations of original coding, along with a third phase that was entirely validation, but I am one man with one set of perceptions. Future researchers should most certainly include teams for interrater reliability.

The findings of such a small study are obviously limited. Certainly, a more contiguous baseline study than *12 Readers Reading* is required. Despite that obvious, twenty-five-year limitation, there isn't a study with the exact same measures, nor circumstances, to be found. While small measures of change were discovered between assignments, it is impossible to declare sweeping generalizations without further evidence. This study, first and foremost, should be an indicator that two things need to happen: 1. a greater baseline of generalizations need to be made about instructor commenting practices and 2. a baseline needs to be truly delineated to make a case for differences between pre-pandemic and post-pandemic pedagogy.

This is a small, tiny, unimportant study in a long history of studies on commenting practices. I wanted it to be about reflection between instructor and student. Circumstance

dictated that I instead determine if pandemic and sudden isolation conditions instead impacted

commenting practices. Preliminary evidence is mixed, with study wide findings being within

range of *12 Readers Reading*, however, I believe that there are differences in study design and

circumstances that the field needs to address through further research. Or, as I quoted, I hope that

wisdom came from what we've done.

Chapter 1 – Section 2 – Literature Review

Modern composition research (and humanity more broadly) has not contended with a

global pandemic. In order to begin to address that gap, this literature review will look at research

on commenting practices with the following focuses: the concerns comments address and the

ways they are executed, best practices for commenting, students' responses to feedback, the

rhetorical context of commenting on student work, and the particular context generated by the

coronavirus in the Spring 2020 semester. By reviewing these factors, this case study should be

able to make suggestions for further review and research regarding the pandemic's effects on

commenting practices (if any). As the Spring 2020 semester had an abrupt shift to online

learning and instructors and students alike had to cope with the various stresses generated by the

pandemic, measuring changes in commenting practices should give insight into whether

commenting practices are impacted by said conditions.

What We Comment on and How: Surface Concerns, Global Concerns, and Types of Feedback

By design, comments are meant to address a shortfall in writing or offer suggestions for

improvement. Chris Anson explains that error itself is "socially determined, temporal, and highly

relative norms in the construction and reception of written texts" ("Social Construction" 6),

which suggests an inherent difficulty in comments serving their purpose. Worse yet, teachers are

relatively good at highlighting an issue, but very frequently the "fix" and nature of said issue will

net significantly different responses from different instructors (Wall and Hull 274). For

simplicity's sake, there are two main types of concerns: surface and global. When instructors

comment on surface concerns, they are commenting on matters of grammar, diction, syntax, or

other mechanical focuses. In contrast, commentary on global concerns revolves around

organization, ideas, and rhetorical context. The field of composition research has largely settled on the notion that global concerns are of greater importance, but a brief review of both is worthwhile.

One of the pitfalls of a focus on surface concerns is best encapsulated by Searle and Dillon, "The message about language which seemed to be communicated was that it doesn't matter what you say; what matters is how you say it" (65). This notion leads to one conclusion; commentary should avoid surface level concerns until the penultimate draft (if at all) (Sommers, N. "Responding" 150). Interestingly, instructors often focus on surface concerns over global concerns (Anson and Anson 12), but this could be due workload. A one-page essay from 150 students might generate as much as twenty hours of work (Dusel 214) and commenting on global issues could require thrice that time (Dusel 217). Many have suggested that students' grasp of surface issues will improve via writing more and reading more—familiarizing themselves with the "code." David Bartholomae makes an argument for the inclusion of ESL research in the composition cannon, suggesting that gaining skills in specific discourse conventions is much like learning a new language and will produce the same sorts of errors (256). Bartholomae's point brings Dana Ferris to the table. Ferris points out that L2 (those learning English as a second language) did not learn grammar and syntax from global revisions alone and that they wanted their grammar to improve for professional reasons (43). She also found that, with consistent application, surface level concerns could be addressed more productively than composition research would lead a reader to believe (Ferris 43).[1] Generally, students respond better to indirect (Ferris 63), coded (Ferris 150) corrections, but there is an argument for uncoded corrections

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[1]My own experience corroborates this. While it is a slog and not particularly fun for anyone involved, grammar, syntax, word choice, etcetera can be improved with consistent effort in the classroom. I found it most productive to do this with supervised, in-class writing assignments where I moved from student to student and discussed what they wanted to say with each.

allowing them to "access the metalinguistic data they may have learned" (Ferris 150). It is worth noting that Ferris admits that different types of surface level errors respond to correction at different rates (146). Furthermore, students want it (Ferris 103), though Ferris herself points out that survey research on commenting practices – particularly to glean what students want – might be suspect (93). In all likelihood, given the option for more of any sort of feedback, students will opt for more. It is not, however, much of a stretch to imagine that someone could write a perfectly constructed (on the surface) piece of writing that makes no actual sense.

Such a possibility is likely partially responsible for why composition research largely landed on granting greater, if not total, focus to commenting on global concerns. Perhaps the most notable scholars on commenting practices, Nancy Sommers and Richard Straub, advocate for a focus on content over clarity and correctness (Sommers, N. "Responding" 155, Straub "Students' Reactions" 92-93, Straub and Lunsford 347). In fact, 94% of instructors agree that conceptual/global feedback is the most important (Anson and Anson 15), though surface concerns receive equal treatment from novice (such as a student's peer) and expert responders alike, expert responders are more likely to point out global concerns (Anson and Anson 20). It is no wonder that the field largely agrees with this focus; global revisions are usually absent in novice writers' revisions (Sommers, N. "Revision Strategies" 52, White 211). Bringing back Bartholomae, struggling with academic discourse, or any facet of writing, is likely to generate error. Fortunately, "trial-and-error makes for more success in the long run because it is accurate, specific, individual, and timely" (Moffett 242), and over time, with focused responses over several drafts or assignments, instructors can help students improve on specific aspects of their writing (Hillocks, Jr. 91, Diederich 224), regardless of the type of concern. As noted in the opening of this paragraph, the rest of the responsibility for the field's shift to global concerns are

largely a matter of common sense: writing is an act of communication. Writing in the academic context should largely mirror the types of rhetorical situations that students will find themselves confronting in the future. Thus, the focuses of commentary and the skills that instructors ought to focus on should be the global and rhetorical issues that students have yet to fully develop.

What about the process of responding? How long should comments be? As for the process by which comments come to be, Anson offers the most succinct explanation:

"Good teaching requires a highly complex process as we read, collect impressions, formulate an internal response, choose which of the many impressions and ideas the student should receive, and then decide what form the commentary should take, how long it should be, and what language and style it should be rendered in" ("Reflective" 373)

This process will be addressed further in the Best Practices and Rhetorical Context sections of this literature review, but this understanding is worth noting now. One might believe that there is an optimal comment length, but the literature offers a relatively mixed response. Students might not respond well to exceptionally short feedback (Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 271), but large amounts of feedback might be ignored (Crisp 573). Others have found that length had no conclusive effect (Straub and Lunsford 6), or that the appropriate amount varied in accordance with the stage of the writing process (Hillocks, Jr. 90), or, risking being ignored, that extensive feedback inculcates audience awareness (Kehl 251). Most students do read feedback (Higgins et al "Conscientious" 57, Straub "Students' Reactions" 93), however, they typically spend between up to five minutes and less than fifteen minutes reviewing feedback (Crisp 577, Higgins et al "Conscientious 57). The average reading speed of English-speakers is 236 words per minute (Warren). Being generous on the low end, that might suggest comments should not exceed 1180 total words (which is a few more words than this literature review to this point), however,

comments should encourage rereading of one's own writing and reflection contextualized by the comments. With the same generosity, equal parts reading comments and their own work would suggest a cap of approximately 590 words, but it is likely lower from a practical perspective. As this speculation may prove, a conclusively optimal length is elusive.

Structurally, comments take two forms: marginal comments and end comments. As their names may suggest, marginal comments are in the margins (or notes running alongside the students' text in a Word document) and end comments are provided at the end (or in a separate document altogether). Students tend to want marginal and end comments (Stiff 24), but they may prefer end comments—perhaps because they see them as more conversational (Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 234). Those ideas are not new; they have been in circulation since the 1950s (*Kentucky English Bulletin* 225). Confoundingly, students might attempt to implement marginal comments more often than end comments (Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 239), though Straub and Lunsford once again report that comment position had no effect (6). These mixed results could be the result of end comments failing to have a high degree of specificity and analysis combined with textual references to the student's work (Kehl 254-255), or, as Nancy Sommers put it, "Marginal comments present a record of a reader paying attention—high-lighting a draft's attributes while conversing with its writer" (*Responding* 16). On the other hand, end comments might be more beneficial to students of lower ability (Stiff 23). There is no conclusive winner; both have their benefits.

Straub and Lunsford's *Twelve Readers Reading* brings the final pieces of this section together. They establish a continuum from most to least controlling: authoritarian (critical/controlling), directive (firm guidance), advisory (suggestion-making), Socratic (closed-question-posing), dialectic (open-ended questioning to open dialog), and analytical (reader

reflection on their understanding of the writing) (192-193). Straub and Lunsford seem to prefer the less controlling end of that spectrum, however, as Straub himself points out elsewhere, even the most indirect form of commenting may be perceived as an order in the hierarchical classroom context and good commentary does not eschew any particular mode—it is the judicious use of each that matters most (Straub "Concept of Control" 247). In a different study, one finds that the distribution is less than ideal: approximately three quarters of instructors cast themselves in the role of judge (Anson "Response Styles" 343-344), with the remaining quarter split between those that acknowledge the subjectivity of their response (but don't offer much more than a casual response) (348-349) and those that address a variety of concerns without being overly critical, nor do they ignore the fact that language use has conventions (352).

In a pandemic context, none of these structural concepts change in any meaningful way. That is to say that teachers still comment on surface or global concerns, be they in the margins and/or at the end, in varying lengths, and in a variety of modes. It is, however, worth seeing if an instructor's modality suffers a dramatic change in response to an abrupt shift from in-person to online instruction, and under new stresses from social distancing and increased anxiety.

What We Think We Know About Best Practices and Students

No discussion of best practices can begin without asking "are comments the best way to give feedback?" Several scholars suggest oral feedback might be superior as it makes feedback a conversation and allows real time understanding checks (Bitchener and Knoch 324, Dusel 214, Shaughnessy 287). As will become a recurring theme, students want both (Ferris 103). An immediate counterargument presents itself: students cannot take a conference home with them and reread it as they revise. Determining which is superior exceeds the scope of this work, but justifying written responses is an important step in establishing a framework for best practices.

Straub exhaustively lists[2] more than most could aspire to in "The Student, the Text, and the Classroom Context: A Case Study of Teacher Response." Much of Straub's list can be taken at face value without much disagreement. Immediately following this paragraph will be a table that covers best practices that are not particularly contentious. Notions with greater debate will follow thereafter.

Best Practices	
Feedback should be timely[1], otherwise students won't have time to reflect.[2]	1. Crisp 578, Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 272, Higgins et al "Conscientious Consumer" 62, Hyland 181. 2. Higgins et al "Conscientious Consumer" 55
Feedback should be in line with assignment criteria,[1] which should reinforce core course concepts.[2]	1. Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 272 2. Sommers, N. "Responding" 155, Hyland 181, Phelps 60
Comments should use the same language as course instruction.	- Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 272
Vague comments should be avoided.[1] Comments should not be overly impersonal or riddled with jargon.[2]	1. Sommers, N. "Responding" 153, Higgins et al "Conscientious" 56, Hyland 181, Straub "Students' Reactions" 94 2. Higgins et al "Conscientious" 56, Straub "Students' Reactions" 93, Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 237, Ferris 93
Handwritten comments should be avoided.	- Crisp 578, Higgins et al "Conscientious" 56
Comments should be in full statements.	- Straub "The Concept of Control" 129
Students should be coached about when/how much feedback they'll get, including	1. Bitchener and Knoch 328-329, Crisp 578

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2   "Turn your comments into a conversation. Create a dialogue with students on the page. Do not take control over the text: instead of projecting your agenda on student writing and being directive, be facilitative and help students realize their own purposes. Limit the scope of your comments. Limit the number of comments you present. Give priority to global concerns of content, context, and organization before getting (overly) involved with style and correctness. Focus your comments according to the stage of drafting and relative maturity of the text. Gear your comments to the individual student behind the text. Make frequent use of praise. Tie your responses to the larger classroom conversation" (23-24)

expectations of use.[1] This should be done throughout the writing process, even before writing begins.[2] Absent an explicit classroom reference, most attempts to utilize comments fail.[3]	2. Higgins et all "Getting the Message" 274, Crisp 578, Moffett 242 3. Sperling and Freedman 120
Feedback should be a dialogue[1], and students should be coached to read it that way.[2] This requires a rejection of the typical hierarchy in favor of lending experience.[3] This conversation should be a continuous negotiation of meaning to stimulate revision.[4]	1. Bitchener and Knoch 238-329, Willingham 11 2. Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 238, Higgins et al "Conscientious" 62, Straub "Students' Reactions" 92-93, Sommers, J. "Enlisting" 334 3. Probst 77 4. Onore 232, Anson "Response Styles" 333
Don't just highlight error without explanation;[1] it should give them a sense of where they are/where they are going.[2] Though this might be effective for surface issues.[3]	1. Anson "Social Construction" Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 272, Kehl 253 2. Anson and Anson 13 3. Bitchener and Knoch 328
Comments should address 2-3 issues at a time.[1] There are only so many things a student can learn from revising one draft.[2] Diederich offers a modified approach of three positive responses, and one aimed at improvement.[3]	1. Straub "Students' Reactions" 92-93 2. Sommers, N. *Responding* 4 3. Diederich 223
Comments should have draft-specific focuses[1] (revision for first drafts, transfer for final drafts).[2]	1. Sommers, N. *Responding* 5, Straub and Lunsford 364, Anson "Reflective Reading" 366, Straub "The Concept of Control" 129, Ferris 119 2. Sommers, N. *Responding* 5
Feedback should promote self-regulation[1] and push students towards being their own editors.[2] Instruction should include those goals, along with giving them tools to read their own work as they'll be assessed.[3] These goals could lead to transfer.[4]	1. Anson and Anson 13, White 212, Probst 77, Onore 247 2. Willingham 10 3. Sommers, N. "Responding" 150 4. Sommers, N. *Responding* 2
Comments should get students to see language as code.	- Bartholomae 263
Comments should generate audience awareness.[1] Teachers highlighting their reactions to student writing help to generate this awareness.[2]	1. Sommers, N. "Responding" 148, Kehl 251 2. Elbow "Teacherless" 269

Much is made of praise; one could be forgiven for assuming that more is better. The interplay of praise and criticism and their effects on motivation is far more complex than the idea that "positive reinforcement is essential" might suggest. Praise should not be withheld until the "Ideal Text" is achieved (Gee 44, Straub "Students' Reactions" 92-93, Ferris 119), as students are aware of the quality of their submissions and are looking for praise from teachers (Diederich 222). That said, unqualified praise is bad (LaBrant 205), as praise should help students repeat positive moves (Dusel 217), and, additionally, when praise is not written under these auspices, it can come off as a manipulative form of directive commentary (Murphy 84). Proper praise may lower students' apprehension with writing, offering them the opportunity to feel a sense of accomplishment—resulting in increased motivation for writing (Daiker 156). It is therefore essential to strike a balance between praise and qualified criticism (Anson and Anson 13).

Striking that balance requires writing teachers to adopt a particular reading style. Student papers should be read for "intentional structures" – a generous sort of reading afforded published professionals, but not often students – and those intentions should be respected (Bartholomae 254, Brannon and Knoblauch 159, 163-65, Straub "Conversation" 342, Anson "Reflective Reading" 365). The reality students are more likely to face is the one Shaughnessy points out: teachers are more likely to be correcting student work than *reading* it (84), or, as Straub and Lunsford suggest, reading a peer's work results in a very different set of fixations (9). As feedback ought to be a conversation (see chart), it might be best to explicitly ask students to explain their intentions (in a conference or in writing) (Anson "Reflective Reading" 371). Respectful readings in this vein should aid instructors in delivering revision-oriented commentary.

It is almost universally accepted that teacher comments between drafts produce good results in revision (Beach 53, Brannon and Knoblauch "Students' Rights" 159, Sommers, N. "Responding" 150, Sommers, J. "Enlisting" 334, Straub "Concept of Control" 129). It could be beneficial to include a hierarchy of revision tasks (Sommers, N. "Responding" 150), likely as an end comment (Willingham 12-13), and the importance of the listed tasks should be textually proportionate to its relative position within the hierarchy (Dusel 216). To be effective, these comments must provide adequate reasoning (Anson "Social Construction" 15-16) Problematically, students may not want to change their drafts because teachers might not have articulated the value of revision (both to write better and to learn via writing) (Onore 240). While not a direct refutation of the notion that commentary has benefits in revision, students might add more issues between drafts than they resolve (Crisp 575), which may lead some to conclude that responding to students' drafts can have unpredictable results.

The greater danger of revision-oriented commentary is the possibility of appropriating student work. Feedback should not hijack students' papers by being too prescriptive, as this can shift students away from honoring their intentions and towards simply aiming to please their teachers (Sommers, N. "Responding" 150-154, Sommers, J. "Enlisting" 334). Giving students actual prose risks it remaining beyond logical revision (Willingham 11). As mentioned earlier, this is why Straub and Lunsford argue for generally avoiding authoritarian feedback (347) in favor of question-posing aimed at understanding (Dusel 218, Knoblauch and Brannon "Responding" 298). Sadly, it is not as simple as resigning oneself to or resisting appropriation (Spencer 48). Teachers often perceive a position of power (Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 271), made worse by some students' utilitarian motivations (i.e., grades=jobs) leading them to seek directive commentary (Higgins et al "Conscientious" 59) and the fact that comments need

enough specificity to be actionable (Hyland 181). Given the teacher's position, any commentary will exercise some control (Murphy 84). Sadly, students might find the sort of indirect feedback this would seem to encourage as confusing. Some students can readily explain writing choices they have deduced will please their teachers (Sperling and Freedman 122). This implies some will feel a rhetorical imperative to do exactly that while writing, which creates a need to differentiate between making rhetorically expedient choices and improving their writing more broadly (Sperling and Freedman 128). There is an oblique counter to these concerns in the form of a question: "How much is a text self-authored? How much is it coauthored (quite literally) with the teacher or other readers who influence choices during the composing process" (Phelps 55)? Furthermore, what of assignments themselves? Certainly, they influence students' writing choices. Students also do not have an inborn desire to revise – responding to commentary via revision is, at least to some extent, a teacher-pleasing activity (Ferris 104).

The question of "to appropriate or not to appropriate" is a faulty one. Straub provides a better question: commentary intrinsically "indicates that something needs to be attended to" (Straub "Control" 148) and "the question, then, is not *whether* the teacher—or any responder— should assume control over a text; the question is *to what extent* the teacher" should exert said control (Straub and Lunsford 191, emphasis original). Once again, students do crave some directive handholding and schooling as a structure (including writing as a process) are, to some extent, inherently designed to lead and guide students.

Speaking of students, it is important to consider what is known about the target audience of comments. Much of this section might appear to have a negative orientation, and, as such, it is crucial to start any categorization of students with two caveats. First, it may go without saying, but students are individuals – no amount of generalizing will perfectly address every conceivable

version of student an instructor may encounter. Furthermore, students' motivations can fluctuate in a context specific way and gathering student perceptions of commentary via survey research is an imperfect measure (Ferris 93). Second, irrational as some of their writing choices possibly appear, they are governed by logic. Student writing is "systematic, coherent, rule-governed behavior" (Bartholomae 257) and, as with any linguistic pursuit, "proceeds through imitation and innovation, and matures with practice" (Dusel 213). Teachers may forget that students have not yet developed their same writing proficiencies or discourse literacies (Shaughnessy 39), thus students might have been conditioned to believe that teachers are more concerned with their immediate mistakes than their development as writers (Hyland 186). Students and teachers alike may forget that learning any skill can only happen through practice, and error is not only inevitable, but generative (Moffett 249). Students are likely do uptake threshold concepts of writing from their instructors' responses (Anson and Anson 22), albeit there might not be a linear tie to future production (Crisp 574), nor is it certain that comments themselves account for this learning (Elbow "Options" 197).

Part of students' issues with learning to write can only be ameliorated by exposure therapy; students tend to autocorrect readings of their own work because they do not see code as code (Sommers, N. "Revision Strategies" 46). A more generous position is that they are adroit at finding issues, but they lack the tools to resolve them (Moffet 239). What they lack is the sort of instantaneous, constant feedback they receive from speech acts (Elbow "Teacherless" 261). One remedy is consistent feedback to their writing from the same people, which will give students insight into whether their writing is understood as intended (Elbow "Teacherless" 262). Getting that feedback is not without its own conceptual barriers. Students often overestimate their understanding of feedback (Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 238, Murphy 86, Elbow "Options"

197), and the function of and intent behind feedback might elude them without explication (Crisp 574, Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 274). As most are likely to attempt to follow perceived or explicit instructions (Sperling and Freedman 121), they will likely attempt to enact changes suggested by comments with or without understanding them (Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 241). The issues addressed in this paragraph and the one before it point to one common issue: students have an experience gap that needs to be addressed by writing more. Before proceeding through more discussions about students, here are some additional basic qualities to consider:

Students	
Young writers recently out of high school are thought to have unsatisfactory writing skills.	- Dusel 212, Kehl 250[3]
Students often have heavy workloads (like instructors)	- Higgins et al "Conscientious" 55
There is no significant difference between male and female students' perceptions of comments.	- Gee 43
Most students believe feedback can or does help[1] and most do appreciate it.[2]	1. Hyland 182 2. Ferris 103
Students are usually anxious before receiving feedback, but typically agree with their instructors.	- Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 236-237
Students' interests in directive comments tend to fall as a semester progresses and they may seek help less as the semester progresses.	- Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 230
Students are hesitant to make changes to things that are not commented on.	- Sommers, N. "Responding" (152)

Students' experiential gaps also include their understanding of discourse as a concept, along with the conventions of academic discourse. Students view words as units of discourse (as opposed to sentences, paragraphs, and beyond), thus see revision as a matter of lexical substitution to avoid linguistic redundancy (though not conceptual redundancy) (Sommers, N. "Revision Strategies" 46-47). This could be attributed to the notion that vocabulary is what separates them from academic discourse (Shaughnessy 188), which is one attribute of the problem, but this notion is

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3   I highlight these older sources to point out that this is a long-standing thought – John Warner's *Why They Can't Write* (2018) does a recent deep-dive far beyond the scope of this project.

simplistic and ignores the ways of thinking that accompany acculturating to academic discourse. These conceptual misunderstandings cause students to miss the key opportunity revision offers— the ability to further develop their ideas—resulting in an early attachment to their theses and introductions causing disruptions as the paper gets away from them (Sommers, N. "Revision Strategies" 48, 51). Once again, students do not have an innate desire to revise (Ferris 104), suggesting that their baseline understanding of writing is a product-focused one, rather than a process-focused one.

How then are instructors to engage students' motivations if those motivations are not naturally in line with contemporary composition theory? It is commonly believed that students only care about grades, making their motivations extrinsic by nature (good grades get good jobs), which could lead to only achieving a surface level understanding of the concepts instructors are trying to inculcate (Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 270-271). One potential cause could be capitalism; students see college as a service they pay for to meet those extrinsic ends (Higgins et al "Conscientious" 59). One simple alternative is a negative association loop wherein students feel bad receiving punishment (a bad grade) and thus feel bad about their inability to access academic discourse now and lose motivation (Shaughnessy 124). Higgins et al also suggest some alternatives to their previous assertions: students want grades and feedback, and they may have some intrinsic motivation for deep learning, too (these are not mutually exclusive) ("Conscientious" 58, 61). Regardless of any given student's particular innate motivations, those motivations need to be engaged with, incentives must be given to improve, and it is pivotal that they come to believe that their work will be taken seriously (Bitchener and Knoch 328, Brannon and Knoblauch "Students' Rights" 159), as they have an emotional investment in their writing and expect returns on that investment (Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 272). A simple, yet

elegant solution might be to get them to like their writing "enough to work and struggle with it" (Elbow "Ranking" 189).

This returns the focus to criticism and praise, though from the students' perspective this time. Some find that criticism reduces average word count production from students, as does a lack of feedback (Gee 42, Sommers, N. *Responding* 5). In contrast, Straub and Lunsford found that the praise to criticism ratio had no measurable effect (6). Straub independently suggests that criticism is fine, so long as it is in the form of guidance and not unnecessarily harsh ("Conversation" 344). Students like praise but find it unproductive (Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 234, Straub "Students' Reactions 95). Finding it likeable yet unproductive is likely indicative of a broader, systemic problem. Students often see teachers as judges (Spencer 43), thus they see commentary as things to be corrected and associate it with the assumption that their teachers do not like their writing (Sommers, N. *Responding* 3), and are happy to point out the notion that teachers often have this reputation (Straub "Conversation" 343). One study points out that only six percent of comments reviewed contained praise (Daiker 154), while another found that there is a slightly more generous distribution of twelve percent in theirs (Straub and Lunsford 182-183). While there is no research to support this, it does not seem outside the realm of possibility that there is a negative feedback loop happening within education. Six to twelve percent seems to be a relatively low level of positivity for students to develop the sort of "liking" Elbow described. Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest point out that students believe the purpose of teacher commentary is "suggestions and constructive criticism" (233). Those can be productive, however, that could, with nearly no mental gymnastics, be rewritten to say: "find and fix problems." Elbow would likely corroborate this reading, suggesting that instructors fall into this

loop and prolong the myth that students are growing worse with each passing year, while students beg for more as that is all they have come to know ("Ranking" 192).

While this potential negative feedback loop is speculative, there is certainly no avoiding the fact that students interpret comments through a variety of lenses, including contextualizing them with former teachers' commenting practices, and their new instructor's ethos formed within the classroom context in addition to their commenting practices (O'Neill and Fife 194, Elbow "Options 197). These factors could manifest a long-term decline in morale; receiving poor grades over many years may have discouraged some from trying, resulting in not applying themselves, and therefore receiving more bad grades (Dusel 215). With the previous paragraph's explanation of students' negative notions of feedback, and the notion of years of morale and motivation in a death spiral, it is not particularly surprising that students cling to teachers' responses over their peers' (Beach 52). The delicate dance described in best practices for not appropriating student work confronts an ugly truth: students' might place so much value on their teachers' input that they believe teachers have the right to impose their will on student writing (Sperling and Freedman 123). Ferris partially confirms this notion—students trust their teachers' feedback above all others' — but suggests this might be a more benign craving for or respect for authority (113). The reality is the tie between writing ability and background, be it social, cognitive, or scholastic, is not entirely understood and likely cannot be in any definitive way (Anson "Response Styles" 333).

Enacting these best practices, even under ideal circumstances, would prove to be a Herculean task. Some may pursue perfection, while others grow despondent at the gulf between them, their workplace reality, and the tightrope placed before them to that perfection. There is no reason to suppose that teachers or students are purposefully withholding effort or talent.

Similarly, there is no reason to suspect that a global pandemic would have a positive impact on either teachers or students. This study, then, is not intended to find faults and flaws, but rather to see what the impact of the pandemic was on individual teachers' commenting practices and gather a snapshot of the impact on the department. The relative changes found between pre-pandemic and intra-pandemic comments might be able to arm the department with the knowledge to combat those realities and find fruitful avenues for future research. However, while teachers' best efforts and students' struggles have had a look in isolation, there is still a need for further review of the interplay between the two.

The Context We Comment In: the Student, the Teacher, and the Comments

Feedback, regardless of quality, quantity, position, focus, mode, or any other discussed factor will certainly teach students one thing without fail: students learn what their instructors value in writing through their comments (Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 241, Searle and Dillon 57). The evaluative school context also complicates matters, perhaps perverting the actual impact of felt reader response—outside that context, writing is neither made, nor broken by reader response (plenty of people hate the classics) (Elbow "Teacherless" 279). In school, however, teachers' comments might be significant enough to impact students' sense of worthiness (Sommers, N. *Responding* xi). Perhaps the only way to learn to write is by writing—certainly, skills do not appear via spontaneous genesis. There must be a corollary to this; "Writers improve by *being read" (*Anson "Reflective Reading" 361). As a (hopefully) communicative act, writing's primary function is to convey meaning to an audience. In that same way, comments are an act of writing, attempting to pass understandings along to the original writer. These issues, be they structural or sociolinguistic, provide the most difficult barriers yet. There is an interesting

metacognitive loop generated – comments are attempting to overcome these issues, yet they also reinforce them.

The structural reality of the student-teacher hierarchy, and the evaluative context of school more broadly, can further warp the authority issue. Even if an instructor is perpetually on guard about respecting a student's intentions and authorial authority, and the student knows they are meant to be cultivating those things, there is still the possibility that simply being too fervent in this effort can generate a passion or knowledge gap that reinvokes the selfsame hierarchy (Sommers, N. *Responding* 17). That entirely ideal scenario ignores the fact that the evaluative context makes the complete dissolution of the hierarchy impossible (Onore 242), though that is not to suggest that an effort should not be made. Students are not only contextualizing their understanding of comments in the context of previous instructors' comments, but they are also more than likely, within the first-year writing context, receiving interdepartmental conceptions of "good writing" and the function of feedback from departments that neither have a vested interest in composition pedagogy, nor do they understand how these students later turn up in their departments unable to produce perfect prose within their specific discourse conventions (Crisp 578, Elbow "Options" 199). Speaking of other classes and departments, both students and teachers are frequently overworking themselves, and, in the case of the instructors particularly, large class sizes and heavy teaching loads can cause teachers to provide lower quality feedback (Anson and Anson 13, Higgins et al "Conscientious" 62). Perhaps a first-year composition instructor manages to avoid any of the issues previously mentioned, they may well assume past knowledge (perhaps from local high schools) that is not actually part of their curriculum (Sperling and Freeman 117). Even simple mistaken assumptions, such as a lack of attendance to office hours or the idea that high performing students do not need as much help, can cause

teachers to provide lower quality feedback (Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 273). The interrelation of instructor ethos and the way students read comments can complicate issuing prescriptions of any sort and can complicate assessment of how comments are functioning (O'Neill and Fife 196). Finally, just as students must struggle with their motivations surrounding writing, instructors need to be weary of the toll these issues can take on their morale. Should they lose their passion in the face of these issues, they may forget that "*good writing teachers like student writing* (and like students)" (Elbow "Ranking" 190). By Elbow's definition, not liking students (and their writing) enough to struggle through overcoming communicative barriers would essentially negate potential positives.

Escaping all the issues discussed thus far would still leave the most fortunate of instructors with potentially the most difficult barrier of all—the sociolinguistic difficulties that cannot be escaped when engaging in communicative acts. Just as instructors might read student texts against an "Ideal Text," students may also carry some conception of "Ideal Commentary" that neither side ever communicates to the other (Stiff 24). The very act of grading may require comparison to an "Ideal Text," which would be counterintuitive in a world after the Process Movement (Elbow "Options" 197, Phelps 50). Even if an instructor shares Elbow's disdain for traditional grading, White brings us back to reality: there's no escaping judgment in a world with grades, as they must be entered if the administration asks for them (203). Barring that, there is the fact that meaning-making for the audience is a "non-negotiable aspect of composing" (Onore 247). A failure to understand a student's work, and therefore adequately respond to it, will pass along a sort of pseudo-judgment. Supposing an instructor could somehow work around all these issues, they manage to fail a different responsibility: somewhere along the line they likely are

obligated to help students come to terms with that fact that writing has rules and conventions (Wall and Hull 285).

While there may yet be some amount of acknowledgment and communication that could circumvent the first round of issues, the second set is the proverbial immovable object. The cultural baggage found in the vast majority of intersectional issues (race and gender, as examples), also must interact with live emotions, identities, power structures, and subjectivity of all involved (Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 273, Anson "Reflective Reading" 361). Student and teacher interactions, perceptions, and reflections on both, can shape student perception of commentary (O'Neill and Fife 191-192). Teachers' subconscious reactions to student writing could impact their responses in ways no one could document, explain, or control (Elbow "Teacherless" 265, Anson "Reflective Reading" 361). The impact of the instructor's current state of mind, context under which commentary takes place (on an empty stomach, for instance), and knowledge of the student, their writing, or their topic can further trigger subconscious reactions (Anson "Reflective Reading" 361), and those subconscious reactions may very well be conditioned by evaluative standards from outside the instructor, be they "cultural, institutional, disciplinary, [or] departmental" (Anson "Reflective Reading" 367). The inescapable power differential also makes commenting intrinsically problematic (Straub "Control" 235, Brannon and Knoblauch "Students' Rights" 158).

The final complication is not the failure of any instructor; it is a failure of corporeality and medium. Perfect objectivity is impossible (*Kentucky English Bulletin* 229, Elbow "Options" 197, Probst 78), the only form of feedback currently available is imperfect human feedback (Moffett 235). Though because writing is a form of human communication, the only way to test or improve one's ability is to pass it through human readers attempting to decipher it and give

feedback on it (Moffett 241). There is the potential to capitalize on this and galvanize students to write while fully aware that their political and cultural realities cannot be escaped, only engaged with (Anson "Reflective Reading" 370). It is possible, too, that acknowledging subjectivity can mitigate the damage dealt by perceptions of objectivity (Phelps 60). The medium, language, and all uses of it, are interpretive acts that depend on a lot of shared assumptions (Elbow "Teacherless" 275-277, Probst 68-69). Progress for students learning to write and instructors learning to write comments is neither linear, nor can it be simplistically measured due to the complexity of meaning-making during textual analysis (Knoblauch and Brannon "Responding" 309). The limited conception of teacher as judge can compound this problem, notably because it can convince some that they are truly objective (Probst 73, 75).

Insurmountable though they may appear, and realistically be, there are three approaches available to composition teachers that might mitigate the effects of the above complications. Education broadly, and writing instruction specifically, are trying to bring students into the fold of shared epistemological values and enable them to effectively engage with and write in academic discourse (Anson "Response Styles" 339). To facilitate that goal, it would be best to inculcate the idea of shared meaning-making (wherein the reader is doing their best to understand and the writer is doing their best to be understood), which is why, at its root, feedback should be a discursive loop between instructor and student (Onore 237, Murphy 81). The second available avenue is reflective practice. Instructors should regularly consider how feedback comes to be, how students understand assessment culture, and the learning context generally (Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 272). Furthermore, introspective reflection ought to note the types of errors the instructor finds most annoying or tones that annoy them (Anson "Social Construction" 8-9, *Kentucky English Bulletin* 225), particularly to avoid becoming the

aforementioned judge (Straub "Students' Reactions" 92-93). Not only should instructors be

reflective, they should involve students in reflection (Murphy 83), perhaps by having students

write a response to feedback (Sommers, N. *Responding* 11). The ultimate goal of reflective

practice would be to move from an evaluative approach to a developmental one, and this can

only be done through reflection on one's own practices and the interplay between their

interactions with students and the interpretive nature of textual analysis (Phelps 59, Anson

"Response Styles" 333), or, put another way, teachers should be researchers of their own

pedagogy (Wall and Hull 286). The last option can be boiled down to "do the best you can."

Elbow eloquently encapsulates this sentiment: "The right or best comment is the one that will

help *this* student on *this* topic on *this* draft at *this* point in the semester—given her character and

experience" ("Options" 198). If that is not inspiring enough, Straub says something similar,

along with a justification for continuing to try: "Even if there is not one right way to respond to

student writing, even if successful response is a matter of individual style, surely there are better

and worse ways to respond—and even wrong ways to respond" ("Control" 149).

Commenting on Writing in a Pandemic: What Do We Do Now?

Within this final section, some tentative ideas regarding the difficulties the Spring 2020

semester imposed will be explored. First, the abrupt shift from in-person to online instruction

must have been a monumental undertaking. Instructors that may have never taught online before

may have found themselves in the unenviable position of their first attempt being under duress

and with abbreviated training at best, and no training at worst. What can be said for certain is that

there are known issues about shifting instruction online. Switching to online instruction can be

difficult due to the asynchronous nature and the ever-shifting software platforms can prove

problematic for the uninitiated (Hewett et al 41). There is also a workload modification

component, as online instruction is necessarily more text and reading intensive for both students and teachers (Hewett et al 55). WPAs should also provide online writing instruction training that effectively negotiates the nuanced differences between in person and online instruction (Hewett et al 66). Additionally, student and instructor engagement with an online course is deeply important; when either is lacking, students tend to fail or withdraw (Hewett et al 123). Despite these concerns, there are some noted benefits to working in an electronic capacity. Student learning improves via e-comments (in line comments in Word, as an example) over traditionally written comments and faculty in this study report that they feel they can deliver more detailed and higher quality feedback (McCabe et al 177).

Preliminary "notes from the field" regarding instruction during the pandemic mention mostly negative issues, however, some note silver linings. In a community-based research and composition class, one wherein a great deal of in-person work is typically expected (Hall 250), the writer suggests that they imagined field notes and interviews would become problematic (Hall 251). However, Hall writes that students were surprisingly adroit at moving online and interacting with communities electronically (251). It is worth noting that students suggest that they suffer in the isolation that the pandemic necessitated, and that online work often feels isolating by nature due to the separation between students, their peers, and their instructor (Hall 252). Mandalaki and Daou point toward instructors feeling employment insecurity (229), gendered issues cropping up (particularly childcare expectations for women) (232), and the fact that "home" does not always offer the assets onsite learning might (notably space, good internet connection, and freedom from distractions) (233). Oliveria and Wargo ponder the relationship between social ties and shared literacies, particularly questioning how does one learn academic discourse so distanced from the origin of said discourse (709)? Workman et al indicate that

increased stress (general) and administrative workload (in the form of considerably more email) are concerns, comparing the change to running thirty different independent studies, instead of one class (143). Yoo, like Mandalaki and Daou notes feelings of job insecurity among faculty and staff (194) and corroborates Workman et al's position regarding increased baseline anxiety, adding the notion that increased news consumption related to COVID-19 was to blame (194).

Reviewing the breadth and depth of composition research on commenting practices does not immediately provide actionable insight into commenting under pandemic conditions. The reviews of comment concern, type, and mode, along with what the field can fund regarding best practices and its understanding of students as a target audience, and the complex rhetorical/sociolinguistic interactions that ever-complicate the enacting of commentary, and, finally, some preliminary ideas from front line sources offer metrics by which to measure if there was a change in commenting practices in response to the upheaval. Given the difficulties of making judgments and the individuality that pervades commentary (and imbues or detracts from its effectiveness), the most effective measure would be comparing the instructors against themselves.

Chapter 1 – Section 3 – Methods

This study has gone through the IRB review process at the location that the study took

place. It went through multiple rounds of revision, followed by a reconceptualization of the

project, and further revisions. I initially envisioned this project as a potential to check student

reception of comments and offer instructors the opportunity for reflection on their practice,

however, the coronavirus not only altered that vision, but also became an opportunity to study

something far more unique. It provided the guiding research question for the project: "What

actionable insights can be gathered by studying instructor commenting practices under

challenging conditions?" The adaptability that created this project will, I hope, be evident in the

methods employed, and offer local insights. Given the size of the study, it will not be

generalizable.

Context and Positionality

The study took place in a first-year writing program at a public R1 university in Texas.

The data was gathered after the fact but originated from the spring semester of 2020. The data

itself was gathered in the summer and fall of 2020. It is worth noting that the delivery of courses

during that time saw a shift in delivery from in-person to online; this shift was in accordance

with the Texas state government's stay at home order. From a replicability standpoint, it might

be difficult to get an entirely similar data set, however, as the pandemic continues additional stay

at home orders may appear, and blended delivery may present similar study conditions. The

COVID-19 pandemic itself might be a historical threat to validity; the data being gathered after

the fact, rather than being an ongoing process may ameliorate that issue, as the participants were

not aware that the data would be studied until they gave consent to participate in the study.

Additionally, it is entirely possible that the data presents negative cases—it could be that the

pandemic did not meaningfully impact commenting practices. That being said, the data can still provide insights on a programmatic level.

As a rule, I believe most people would read me as a straight, white, American male. The first two are not entirely accurate: I'm a gay third-generation Asian American of mixed ancestry. Ultimately, I highlight presentation for interview purposes, as it could potentially influence participant responses. Having taught in elementary and junior high schools outside of America, I might have unknown biases about what tone and form teacher comments should take or preconceived notions outside the norm for university instructors generally. That teaching experience was also in ESL, rather than first year writing, which could cause me to underestimate instructor focus on surface concerns, should that present in the data.

Recruitment and Participants

As with any IRB approve study, the participants signed informed consent forms and are free to discontinue participation at any time. All instructors at the site that taught first year composition courses during the spring 2020 semester were invited to participate. To make participation as easy as possible, participation in the study is modular, with participants selecting the level of participation that they would prefer. Basic participation requires the submission of written artifacts: comments for all students within a section from the spring 2020 semester. Instructors could opt to participate in any of the following additionally: answering a clarification email related to their comments, participating in a recorded, semi-structured interview lasting no longer than one hour (with the option to review the transcript generated to ensure their confidentiality has been maintained and they have been fairly represented), reviewing portions of this document that they appear in, and receiving feedback on their commenting practices. Participants will not be compensated for their participation in this study.

Optimally, the study would have between five to ten participants, and five were willing to participate. All have agreed to answer a clarification email, three of the five have agreed to the interview, four of five want feedback on their commenting practices, and two have opted to review the sections of this document where they appear. Of the three potential interviewees, two participated, and one could not due to scheduling issues. Despite the relatively small sample size, the demographics are varied. To protect their confidentiality, I will not give a specific breakdown by participant, but I will note that the composition of the participants includes varied gender presentation, race, age, education, and teaching experience.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

Three types of data are included in the study: collected comments, clarification emails, and recorded interviews. For the health and safety of the participants and myself, all were collected digitally to prevent the possible spread of COVID-19.

Instructors were provided with formatted collection sheets[4] with instructions to submit their comments. The instructions explained the layout of the document and requested that they remove any identifiable information from the comments—notably students' names. To ensure that the data was not altered during collection (beyond the redaction of identifiable information), I offered instructors the opportunity to add meta-commentary in brackets should they feel the need. Comment data is the primary focus of the study and is its baseline requirement for participation. The two other types of data to follow are included as a form of triangulation.

Clarification emails, while relatively self-explanatory, were included as a participation option to be as communicative as possible during the recruitment process about the types of interaction participants could expect. They also were intended to be a sort of follow up more easily secured, as interviews can be difficult to schedule and could be an imposition for some

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4   See page 68 for a sample collection sheet.

participants. Ultimately, owing to personal issues and the length of time elapsed, these were not utilized.

The semi-structured interviews were formulated to elicit conversation, reflection, and as an opportunity to get the broadest possible picture of instructor intent in commenting. The interview naturally varied from participant to participant, but the structured portion had these six basic components:

- [Question] Would you briefly tell me a bit about yourself as an instructor?
- [Question] How would you describe your commenting process?
- [Review prepared questions about specific comments]
- [Provide feedback on comments if desired]
- [Question] Based on my questions and feedback, do you have any preliminary thoughts – for example, "I'm doing a great job!" or "I could stand to be more clear."
- [Question] This is the last question. If you are willing to discuss it – and I totally understand if you are not – how did you feel about teaching through the coronavirus pandemic and the abrupt shift from in-person to online instruction?

The entire interview was designed to be flexible. The first question is meant to establish rapport. Parts two through five are meant to generate data via real-time reflection on the part of the instructor. While this study is focused on finding actionable insight for commenting practices in difficult circumstances, I felt the necessity to offer the opportunity to opt out of the last question. As an example, if a participant had a family member pass during the pandemic, it would be unreasonable to expect them to respond to this question.

Approach to Data Analysis

In accordance with the adaptability mentioned previously, the approach to data analysis will be Grounded Theory. The particular influences for this choice include Joyce Magnotto Neff's "Grounded Theory: A Critical Research Methodology" and Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss's *Basics of Qualitative Research*.

Neff grants the overarching structure to data analysis here: review the data, open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and review the data with a new outlook (129-130). Each stage is accompanied by memo-writing, which is important during recursive loops with the data. It is worthwhile to define the coding scheme outlined here. Open coding is the process of going through the data and looking for patterns. Axial coding looks at the interaction between concepts. Finally, selective coding looks for additional corroboration and counterexamples.

While Neff provides an excellent framework, Corbin and Strauss offer a way to approach open coding, from which the rest of the coding process occurs. Initial options that they outline include making comparisons within the data, examining connotative and implicit word meanings, application of personal experience, looking at linguistic choices (absolute, metaphoric, temporal, or unintentional), and investigating apparent emotional responses (69-84).

After reviewing the data several times, I decided on a modified (and simplified) version of the coding scheme used by Straub and Lunsford in *Twelve Readers Reading.* As the only researcher, I felt it was necessary to condense several of the categories for simplicity's sake, as well as attempting to circumvent the possibility of presenting greater disparities than there actually are. As an example, Straub and Lunsford break "Global" issues into three categories: ideas, development, and global structure (182-183). If I, as the only rater, misinterpreted a comment suggesting a reordering of certain things ("global structure") as a problem of development, that could skew the data. However, I imagine pointing out a misused comma is not likely to be mistaken as a global issue. The organizational structure for the coding involved assigning the values (see table below) to each comment within their collection sheet, followed by entering them into the coding data entry sheet (this also offered the opportunity to check their validity and formatting). In this way, each comment can be referred to with the following format:

I#-S#-A#-C# or Instructor Number, Student Number, Assignment Number, and Comment Number, respectively. It is worth noting that none of these are mutually exclusive; a long comment can have seemingly antipodal elements. In addition to the table below, this study includes a variety of word count metrics. As this was an independent project, and no other people had authorization from the IRB, there is no interrater reliability measurement. I hope that the chart below shows, however, that the criteria are well defined and that there is a reasonable probability that the data was uniformly coded.

Coding Breakdown		
Focus		
Code	Abbreviation	Description
Global	G	Global comments address issues of organization, ideas, rhetorical/audience issues, and other higher order issues.
Surface	S	Surface comments address issues such as grammar, syntax, spelling, and lexical issues.
Other	OF	Other Focuses can include, but are not limited to, simple praise/criticism, administrative notes (i.e. "In the next assignment, you will use this information,"), personal notes, or identifications (i.e. "I see that your warrants are X, Y, and Z.")
Mode		
Code	Abbreviation	Description
Dialectic	D	Dialectic comments are aimed at preserving the student's intentions – they are often, but not always question - and leave the ultimate direction of the writing up to the student.
Prescriptive	P	Prescriptive comments attempt to redirect the student towards what the teacher views as good writing or to tell students what to do.
Other	OM	Like Other Focuses, Other Modes address related information or are simple praise/criticism.
Praise and Criticism		
Code	Abbreviation	Examples
Qualified Praise	PQ	"Your thesis is very clear; you consistently bring attention back to it throughout the paper. Well done." (The student knows what elements they did well on

		so that they can repeat that success.)
Unqualified Praise	PU	"This paper is very well-written." (The student cannot determine from this comment what elements the instructor would like them to repeat in future work.)
Qualified Criticism	CQ	"As it stands, your introduction doesn't work. Your thesis is unclear." (The student knows that their thesis needs work.)
Unqualified Criticism	CU	"This paper has significant issues." (The student is not clear on what those issues are.)
Student Difficulties		
Code	Abbreviation	Description
Vague	V	Vague comments do not give students a clear indication of what the professor is seeing as an issue. They do not offer enough information to be actionable.
Jargon	J	Comments that include jargon that is given a succinct explanation are not counted in this category. Jargon in this study includes: grammar jargon, rhetorical/field specific jargon, or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary.

Chapter 2 – Section 1 – Results

Five instructors, with 104 students between them, submitted 1437 rough draft comments and seventy-one final draft comments. None of the 1302 instructors submitted comments on the annotated bibliography. Instructors 1 and 2 participated in recorded interviews. Instructors 3 and 4 were the only instructors to submit final draft comments. The department had a total of forty instructors teaching 1301 and 1302 in the Spring of 2020, with thirty-five initially starting face-to-face, with twelve teaching 1301 and twenty-eight teaching 1302, thus this study looked at approximately 14% of the commenting practices employed by the department during the semester in question. After presenting the study totals, each instructor will receive their own section, which will include a description of their changes over time, and instructor specific sections for either interviews or final comments.

The following charts give the study-wide totals. The percentages in each of the assignment columns represent the percentage within that assignment, while the Study Total column is the total percentage. It is important to note that no data was submitted for Instructor 5 for the first assignment, and a great deal of Instructor 3's data was either lost or corrupted for assignment two. Additionally, to grant insight into each instructor's commenting style in relation to the others in the study, I generated a chart showing their relative likeliness to utilize certain commenting practices relative to the study totals (thus, a positive percentage would denote a greater likelihood, while a negative percentage would demonstrate a lower chance comparatively). For the aforementioned comparison chart[5], along with all the other charts in the appendix, I have created a color-coded key to highlight greater percentages showing changes from one assignment to the next. In the comparison chart, it simply highlights greater percentages. The charts within this results section are intended to be a more user friendly

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5   See page 71.

snapshot. The expanded charts in the appendix will have their page number noted in their table title.

Table 1, Rough Draft Comments (Percentages of Coded Comments per Assignment) (Appendix: 69)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Total Drafts	81	76	83	240
Total Comments	533	407	497	1437
Global Comments	356 (66.7%)	279 (68.5%)	335 (67.4%)	970 (67.5%)
Surface Comments	50 (9.3%)	93 (22.8%)	112 (22.5%)	255 (17.7%)
Other Focuses	31 (5.8%)	37 (9%)	59 (11.8%)	127 (8.8%)
Dialectic Comments	68 (12.7%)	40 (9.8%)	51 (10.2%)	159 (11%)
Prescriptive Comments	341 (63.9%)	351 (86.2%)	379 (76.2%)	1071 (74.5%)
Other Modes	54 (10.1%)	46 (11.3%)	89 (17.9%)	189 (13.1%)
Qualified Praise	81 (15.1%)	30 (7.3%)	66 (13.2%)	177 (12.3%)
Unqualified Praise	30 (5.6)	34 (8.3%)	21 (4.2%)	85 (5.9%)
Qualified Criticism	64 (12%)	36 (8.8%)	60 (12%)	160 (11.1%)
Unqualified Criticism	1 (0.1%)	3 (0.7%)	9 (1.8%)	13 (0.9%)
Vague Comments	21 (3.9%)	23 (5.6%)	38 (7.6%)	82 (5.7%)
Jargon Used	9 (1.6%)	16 (3.9%)	22 (4.4%)	47 (3.2%)

Table 2, Final Draft Comments (Appendix: 72)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Total Drafts	37	13	18	68
Total Comments	37	16	19	72
Global Comments	21 (56.7%)	15 (93.7%)	15 (75%)	51 (71.8%)
Surface Comments	1 (2.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	2 (2.8%)
Other Focuses	15 (40.5%)	1 (6.2%)	2 (10%)	18 (25.3%)
Dialectic Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Prescriptive Comments	2 (5.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other Modes	35 (94.5%)	16 (100%)	20 (100%)	71 (98.1%)
Qualified Praise	21 (56.7%)	14 (87.5%)	16 (80%)	51 (71.8%)
Unqualified Praise	9 (24.3%)	1 (6.25%)	3 (15%)	13 (18.3%)
Qualified Criticism	22 (59.4%)	15 (93.7%)	11 (55%)	48 (67.6%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Vague Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Instructor 1

While the total number of comments increased sequentially, the average response total dropped to its nadir for assignment two, rebounding in assignment three, but not to pre-pandemic lengths. The ratio of global to surface comments moved sequentially from a ratio of approximately 3:1 in assignment one to a 1:1 split in assignments two and three. The number of observed dialectic comments dropped from assignment one into assignment two, once again rebounding (though only slightly) for assignment three. As one might expect, this occurred with a concurrent, inverse relationship with prescriptive comments, increasing to their height in assignment two, and dropping to slightly above pre-pandemic levels. There was a modest reduction in criticism for assignment two, with a rebound to nearly pre-pandemic levels. Praise, while not abundant to begin with, dropped steadily throughout the semester. Qualified praise and criticism dropped by a little over half their pre-pandemic percentage, while unqualified praise and criticism did triple going into assignment three (though they are relatively insignificant numbers, both as a percentage and as individual instances). Finally, there was a small, but steady, increase of vague comments in each assignment, along with an increase of the jargon used in commentary by the third assignment.

Table 3, Instructor 1 Rough Draft Comments (Appendix: 73)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Total Drafts	22	22	21	65
Total Comments	149	177	199	525
Global Comments	108 (72.4%)	88 (49.7%)	100 (50.2%)	296 (56.3%)
Surface Comments	41 (27.5%)	88 (49.7%)	100 (50.2%)	229 (43.6%)
Other Focuses	2 (1.3%)	3 (1.6%)	3 (1.5%)	8 (1.5%)
Dialectic Comments	28 (18.7%)	7 (3.9%)	13 (6.5%)	48 (9.1%)
Prescriptive Comments	123 (82.5%)	167 (94.3%)	174 (87.4%)	464 (88.3%)
Other Modes	4 (2.6%)	7 (3.9%)	8 (4%)	19 (3.6%)
Qualified Praise	7 (4.6%)	5 (2.8%)	1 (0.5%)	13 (2.4%)
Unqualified Praise	1 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.01%)
Qualified Criticism	14 (9.3%)	4 (2.2%)	11 (5.5%)	29 (5.5%)
Unqualified Criticism	1 (0.6%)	2 (1.1%)	6 (3%)	9 (1.7%)

| Vague Comments | 15 (10%) | 22 (12.4%) | 29 (14%) | 66 (12.5%) |
| Jargon Used | 8 (5.3%) | 8 (4.5%) | 20 (10%) | 36 (6.8%) |

Instructor 1 Interview

Instructor 1 disclosed in their interview that they were formerly a writing center tutor, and as of the time of recording, had only taught writing in the classroom. Instructor 1 believes in one-on-one engagement and a top-down approach to commenting (dealing first with global issues and stopping there, if present, or moving onto surface level issues and minutia if not; higher order concerns always come first, if there aren't any, Instructor 1 moves on to surface level issues). This is all done on a strict ten-minute timer. Regardless, Instructor 1 always strives to give students something to work on and believes that students who address all comments adequately in their writing should receive an 'A' on their papers.

Instructor 1 stated that all composition terminology used in comments was covered in class, however, they do not cover frequently used grammar terms in their surface level commentary. They did do occasional grammar instruction in person but suggested that the shift online diminished their ability to do so. That said, Instructor 1 did express concerns about what level of past knowledge could be assumed in students. When the idea of framing comments as questions came up, Instructor 1 expressed a concern that question-based commentary might read as sarcastic to students, and the instructor's comments might read as more prescriptive by Straub's model. Class-wide issues of assignment adherence are addressed in class, according to Instructor 1.

The transition from in-person to online instruction was perceived as smooth, as, in Instructor 1's words, the class had "already gotten off the ground" in person. Despite a great deal of stress from the pandemic itself, Instructor 1 did not lower their expectations. They were

perplexed by a pattern of students only addressing commentary on the first page, after the shift online. The shift to online instruction did leave Instructor 1 feeling more emotionally disconnected from students than usual, but simultaneously points out that emotional appeals from students do not always meaningfully connect to their production in class work, further increasing the worry that they might want to be given more slack during the pandemic.

"Barbarian-style," as Instructor 1 described their commenting practices, or the feeling that they need to force their way through commenting, did leave the instructor interested in improvement. Instructor 1 managed to beautifully juxtapose the difficulties all teachers face in the course of instruction: "What's the next professor going to think if they show up writing in their next class, just having been passed along from first year writing, just because of the pandemic or whatever, I feel like I have a responsibility to stick to it, even if it hurts," highlighting their dedication to their material and the importance of education, even at great personal difficulty, while they simultaneously want to say to students, "I love you and I want you to be successful. I can't just forgive everything, and you do have to still follow the guidelines that have been set out that you tacitly agreed to by not dropping," demonstrating a deep concern for students, yet still holding them accountable.

Instructor 2

The total number of comments and their volume both steadily fell as the semester progressed in a linear way, by nearly 50% in comment totals, and nearly 75% in word count. This could be due to factoring in drafts that did not receive comments due to meeting the assignment criteria, or, as Instructor 2 entered on the comment collection sheets "draft was good, no comments given," though that likely does not account for the totality of the decrease. Meanwhile, the focus ratio saw a decline in global commentary by 14% over the semester,

though commentary on surface issues remained largely static. Other focuses came to account for some of the shift. The number of dialectic comments reached its zenith in assignment three, after its lowest point in response to assignment two. Prescriptive commentary dropped steadily throughout the semester, while use of other modes of commentary steadily increased. The praise to criticism ratio showed an interesting trend: total praise remained reasonably high throughout, peaking in assignment three. Criticism and praise were handed out in equal measure in assignment one, yet criticism fell to its lowest level during assignment two and did not regain much ground in assignment three. While qualified praise and criticism appeared in over 50% of returns in assignment one (with only 10.5% of comments containing unqualified praise, and no unqualified criticism), assignment three saw a drop in total criticism by more than half, and a vast increase in unqualified praise.

Table 4, Instructor 2 Rough Draft Comments (Appendix: 74)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Total Drafts	22	18	18	58
Total Comments	76	46	40	162
Global Comments	66 (86.8%)	39 (84.7%)	29 (72.5%)	134 (82.7%)
Surface Comments	3 (3.9%)	1 (2.1%)	1 (2.5%)	5 (3%)
Other Focuses	8 (10.5%)	6 (13%)	7 (17.5%)	21 (12.9%)
Dialectic Comments	10 (13.1%)	4 (8.7%)	7 (17.5%)	21 (12.9%)
Prescriptive Comments	67 (88.1%)	38 (82.6%)	29 (72.5%)	134 (82.7%)
Other Modes	10 (13.1%)	7 (15.2%)	7 (17.5%)	24 (14.8%)
Qualified Praise	16 (21%)	3 (6.5%)	5 (12.5%)	24 (14.8%)
Unqualified Praise	8 (10.5%)	10 (21.7%)	10 (25%)	28 (17.2%)
Qualified Criticism	24 (31.5%)	4 (8.7%)	5 (12.5%)	33 (20.3%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	1 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.6%)
Vague Comments	2 (2.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	3 (1.8%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Instructor 2 Interview

Like Instructor 1, Instructor 2 was formerly a writing center tutor, and, at the time of recording, had taught 1301 and 1302. Written response was not the only type of feedback Instructor 1's students received – they also received feedback on in-class writing and one-on-one conferences. Instructor 2 attempted to continue doing conferences with students electronically after the shift online. Their students were told that 1302, in contrast to Instructor 2's perception of 1301, would be less concerned with the students' surface errors, but that those errors would be addressed in comments in a broad way. One-on-one help with grammar has been offered by Instructor 2 and has almost always been declined by students. Instructor 2 noted that they graded by rubric, and students would receive comments with that rubric in mind. They had never taught any portion of a course online before the pandemic, and they were teaching five courses at the time. As such, it's not particularly surprising that Instructor 2 did not comment on papers that met all the assignment criteria as a workload solution but agreed that pointing out something students did particularly well going forward appealed to them.

Instructor 2 offered interesting insights into the student body. They noted that there were very few English majors, and that most students wanted to "just kinda wanna pass and move on." Instructor 2's students frequently asked questions about the comments they received in their conferences, and that the notion of a naysayer is not something students seem to have dealt with in their high school writing. It was also posited that some students appear to become so passionate about their topics that they sometimes forget they're writing under assignment criteria. This instructor made several observations about students' response to the pandemic. They struggled more with citation issues (the shift to online occurred before that was to be covered in class), and there was a significant drop in all measures of participation – students

"emotionally checked out." Instructor 2 had students suffer a variety of losses from jobs, to hospitalizations, to Internet access from being forced to share resources at home, rather than on campus.

There was a clear emotional toll to the pandemic. "It was triage mode at that point, you know?" Instructor 2's simple question gets to the root of the situation. While Instructor 2 confided that they did not feel they performed well when they said, "I felt like a total failure as a teacher by the end of it, right? And I know I wasn't, and I know that I did the best I could, considering the circumstances, but it was very difficult to do," they clearly allowed their care for their students to carry the day: "it got to a point where it was, these students are trying, I just got to get them through this course, they're trying, they're working hard, I know which ones were already working hard beforehand and I know which ones weren't."

Instructor 3

Instructor 3 saw a significant increase in word count across assignments in a linear way throughout the semester, though this can only be deduced via average word count by assignment, as there were significant file issues with assignment two. Global commentary decreased as the semester progressed, and other focuses increased. There was a modest increase in dialectic commentary, while prescriptive commentary remained largely static. Other modes of commentary saw a low point by percentage in assignment two, however, this could be partially attributed to the limited number of comments from assignment two, though the percentage was significantly higher between assignment 1 and assignment 3. There was a minor drop in qualified praise, and a more significant drop in unqualified praise across assignments. Both modes of criticism remained largely static. Unqualified commentary on the whole did decrease as the

semester progressed. Vague comments remained largely static, and Instructor 3 did not utilize

unexplained jargon in any assignment.

Table 5, Instructor 3 Rough Draft Comments (Appendix: 75)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Total Drafts	20	2	12	34
Total Comments	129	16	145	290
Global Comments	104 (80.6%)	9 (56.2%)	98 (67.5%)	211 (72.7%)
Surface Comments	3 (2.3%)	1 (6.3%)	10 (6.8%)	14 (4.8%)
Other Focuses	21 (16.2%)	5 (31.2%)	42 (28.9%)	68 (23.4%)
Dialectic Comments	16 (12.4%)	1 (6.3%)	19 (13.1%)	36 (12.4%)
Prescriptive Comments	86 (66.6%)	10 (62.5%)	74 (51%)	170 (58.6%)
Other Modes	33 (25.5%)	1 (6.3%)	61 (42%)	93 (32%)
Qualified Praise	37 (28.6%)	1 (6.3%)	34 (23.4%)	72 (24.8%)
Unqualified Praise	21 (16.2%)	1 (6.3%)	11 (7.5%)	33 (11.3%)
Qualified Criticism	14 (10.8%)	0 (0%)	18 (12.4%)	32 (11%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.3%)	2 (0.6%)
Vague Comments	4 (3.1%)	0 (0%)	5 (3.4%)	9 (3.1%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Instructor 3 provided final comments for nearly all students in assignment one, none for

assignment two, and very few for assignment three, and, as such I have not tried to highlight

significant shifts because there are too many missing data points. One pattern is relatively clear –

Instructor 3 typically included some praise and some criticism of the students' work in final draft

comments.

Table 6, Instructor 3 Final Draft Comments (Appendix: 76)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Total Drafts	19		4	22
Total Comments	19		4	22
Global Comments	6 (31.5%)		1 (25%)	8 (36.3%)
Surface Comments	1 (5.2%)		1 (25%)	2 (9%)
Other Focuses	12 (63.1%)		0 (0%)	12 (54.5%)
Dialectic Comments	0 (0%)		0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Prescriptive Comments	2 (10.5%)		0 (0%)	2 (9%)
Other Modes	17 (89.4%)		4 (100%)	21 (95.4%)
Qualified Praise	7 (36.8%)		2 (50%)	9 (40.9%)
Unqualified Praise	7 (36.8%)		2 (50%)	9 (40.9%)
Qualified Criticism	7 (36.8%)		2 (50%)	9 (40.9%)

Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)		0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Vague Comments	0 (0%)		0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)		0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Instructor 4

    Instructor 4's word count per comment, and averages, peaked in assignment two, and were still higher in assignment three than in assignment one. Global commentary increased steadily throughout the semester, while the limited instances of surface commentary ceased in assignment three. Other focuses reached their peak in assignment two, though remained slightly elevated over their absence in assignment one. Dialectic commentary reached a peak in assignment two, though also remained elevated in assignment three, as did prescriptive commentary; other modes also followed this peak and minor elevation pattern. Qualified praise dropped during assignment two, but rebounded to its highest in assignment three, meanwhile unqualified praise increased significantly in assignment two, and was the only instance of its use. The total praise percentage hit its highest in assignment two but was still higher in assignment three than in assignment one. Qualified criticism dropped significantly from assignment one to assignment two, though it hit its peak in assignment three. Unqualified criticism was absent across all assignments. Qualified commentary hit its lowest point in assignment two, and returned to its highest point in assignment three, and, predictably, assignment two had the highest (and only) percentage of unqualified commentary.

Table 7, Instructor 4 Rough Draft Comments (Appendix: 77)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Total Drafts	17	14	14	45
Total Comments	179	109	60	348
Global Comments	78 (43.5%)	84 (77%)	57 (95%)	219 (62.9%)
Surface Comments	3 (1.6%)	3 (2.7%)	0 (0%)	6 (1.7%)
Other Focuses	0 (0%)	23 (21.1%)	4 (6.6%)	27 (7.7%)
Dialectic Comments	14 (7.8%)	26 (23.8%)	11 (18.3%)	51 (14.6%)

Prescriptive Comments	65 (36.3%)	79 (72.4%)	52 (86.6%)	196 (56.3%)
Other Modes	7 (3.9%)	28 (25.6%)	9 (15%)	44 (12.6%)
Qualified Praise	21 (11.7%)	5 (4.5%)	12 (20%)	38 (10.9%)
Unqualified Praise	0 (0%)	23 (21.1%)	0 (0%)	23 (6.6%)
Qualified Criticism	12 (6.7%)	2 (1.8%)	8 (13.3%)	22 (6.3%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Vague Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.3%)	2 (0.5%)
Jargon Used	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.5%)

As for Instructor 4's final draft comments, global commentary remained high throughout. Comments on surface concerns, along with commentary that was either dialectic or prescriptive, were entirely absent from Instructor 4's final draft comments. Therefore, other modes accounted for 100% of commentary, with high levels of qualified praise and criticism, and limited use of unqualified praise. This praise and criticism was almost always qualified, rather than unqualified.

Table 8, Instructor 4 Final Draft Comments (Appendix: 78)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Total Drafts	17	14	14	45
Total Comments	18	16	15	49
Global Comments	15 (18.3%)	15 (93.7%)	13 (86.6%)	43 (87.7%)
Surface Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other Focuses	3 (16.6%)	1 (6.2%)	2 (13.3%)	6 (12.2%)
Dialectic Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Prescriptive Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other Modes	18 (100%)	16 (100%)	15 (100%)	49 (100%)
Qualified Praise	14 (77.7%)	14 (87.5%)	14 (93.3%)	42 (85.7%)
Unqualified Praise	2 (11.1%)	1 (6.2%)	1 (6.6%)	4 (8.1%)
Qualified Criticism	15 (83.3%)	15 (93.7%)	9 (60%)	39 (79.5%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Vague Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Instructor 5

Instructor 5 did not have entries for assignment one, thus it is difficult to deduce a pre-pandemic baseline, however, other instructors had more notable differences between assignment two and assignment three. Instructor 5 was the most static of the study participants in

commenting style, perhaps signaling that they were the least impacted. The total word count between assignment two and three did decrease, though the average number of words per comment and the total average word count by assignment did remain static (this is likely accounted for by two missing drafts from students). Nearly all of Instructor 5's comments were on global issues, with only one surface concern noted between the two assignments. The commentary provided is almost universally prescriptive in nature. Qualified praise accounted for approximately ¼ of commentary, and, while qualified criticism was higher in both assignments, it did drop significantly moving from assignment two to assignment three. Nearly all the praise and criticism were qualified, with only one instance of unqualified criticism across the two assignments. Instructor 5 did reduce their use of jargon from assignment two to assignment three.

Table 9, Instructor 5 Rough Draft Comments (Appendix: 79)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Total Drafts		20	18	38
Total Comments		59	53	112
Global Comments		59 (100%)	51 (96.2%)	110 (98.2%)
Surface Comments		0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)	1 (0.8%)
Other Focuses		0 (0%)	3 (5.6%)	3 (2.6%)
Dialectic Comments		2 (3.3%)	1 (1.8%)	3 (2.6%)
Prescriptive Comments		57 (96.6%)	50 (94.3%)	107 (95.5%)
Other Modes		3 (5%)	4 (7.5%)	7 (6.2%)
Qualified Praise		16 (27.1%)	14 (26.4%)	30 (26.7%)
Unqualified Praise		0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Qualified Criticism		26 (44%)	18 (33.9%)	44 (39.2%)
Unqualified Criticism		0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)	1 (0.8%)
Vague Comments		1 (1.6%)	1 (1.8%)	2 (1.7%)
Jargon Used		7 (11.8%)	2 (3.7%)	9 (8%)

Chapter 2 – Section 2 – Discussions and Implications

This study was much too small to provide any sort of generalizable knowledge, and, even within the small data set, there were no universal patterns in instructor responses to the pandemic. Of course, points of interest for future research will be presented, after making a comparison to its closest analog, *12 Readers Reading*, I will delve into each measurement in groups. This investigation will be focused on dramatic shifts in commenting modality in an attempt to determine if there are any patterns of note that could be attributed to the abrupt shift from in-person to online instruction and the increased stress of social distancing and pandemic anxiety.

As *12 Readers Reading* was the biggest contributor to the coding scheme utilized here, though admittedly simplified, it is the closest piece of research for comparison. Certainly, there is room for debate about these numbers, but the chart below shows the relative breakdown of percentages that can meaningfully be compared:

Table 1, Comparison of this study and *12 Readers Reading*				
This study:		Difference	12 Readers Reading	Straub and Lunsford's Categories*
Global Comments	67.5%	-11.5%	79.0%	Global Ideas (29%), Development (14%), Global Structure (12%), Extra-Textual (24%)
Surface Comments	17.7%	-3.3%	21.0%	Local Structure (4%), Wording 11.1%, Correctness (6%)
Dialectic Comments	11.0%	-43.0%	54.0%	Indirect (2%), Problem-Posing Questions (11%), Heuristic Questions (12%) Interpretive (8%), Explanatory (13%), Reader Response (8%)
Prescriptive Comments	74.5%	46.5%	28.0%	Corrections (4%), Evaluations (7%), Qualified Negative Evaluations (7%), Imperatives (5%), Advice (9%)
Total Praise	18.2%	6.2%	12.0%	Praise (12%)
*Straub and Lunsford 182-183				

The proportion of global and surface comments are strikingly similar, with this study's participants being slightly less likely to comment on global structures, and a little less likely to

comment on surface features of the students' texts. The participants were, overall, somewhat more likely to praise student work as well. The major difference between the two came in the form of the ratio between dialectic and prescriptive comments, which yielded differences nearing 50%. While one might conclude that this was reflective of pandemic conditions and increased stress (a sort of "Fix this, this, and this," approach under duress), I suspect this is largely due to the differences in assignment prompt. An assignment prompt from Straub and Lunsford's study reads: "You have lived for 18, 20, 25 years—or more. There is a list of subjects you know a great deal about. Choose one of these subjects and write an essay in which you discuss this topic in a way that will help your readers see why it is important to you" (14). Meanwhile, the department issued curriculum utilized by all instructors in this study is considerably longer, often nearing five pages in length. These prompts include everything from the invention stages to notes on assessment, and it is therefore not surprising that with more prescriptive assignments the comments to follow would be more prescriptive – teachers would need to work harder to keep students within assignment guidelines. Though the studies have twenty-five years separating them and considering the situation the instructors in this study found themselves in, the findings are strikingly similar. Room for debate exists about the ability to compare the two, and what measures they found and what categories they would apply to here, and future scholarship on commenting practices and pandemic pedagogy are encouraged to have them.

<u>Word Count</u>

The simplest measure, volume of response, saw mixed results. Instructors 1 and 2 both reduced their response volumes in response to the pandemic, while Instructors 3, 4, and 5 each saw a measurable increase. One might have expected these numbers to drop universally, given the increased workload of shifting courses online, yet three out of five participants actually

increased theirs over the course of the semester. In their interviews, Instructors 1 and 2 both noted a decreased motivation and production on students' parts, which might well have prompted them to respond less, though I suspect that other factors had more to do with it. Instructor 1's total volume decreased as they shifted more towards surface level comments later in the semester, many of which were single word responses. As was mentioned in the Results section, during the interview, Instructor 1 revealed that global issues took precedence, and should they not be present, then surface issues would be addressed, which could indicate students thriving, rather than struggling. Instructor 2 returned several drafts without comments because they were good drafts, which could account for some of the decline in volume of response, along with a full teaching load. Instructor 2 also attempted to continue conferencing online, which cannot be factored in here. Though I can only speculate, I imagine that the other instructors viewed the reduction in contact time as something that required an increase in their written response, but it could just as easily be the increase in length and complexity of papers students worked on throughout the semester. See the chart below for a detailed breakdown of word count trends.

Table 2 Word Count				
Word Count (Study Totals)				
	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Total
Word Count	19743	14118	19437	53298
Average per Comment	41	42	44	42
Average per Assignment	247	237	281	255
High and Low	534/53	569/0	1034/0	1034/0
Instructor 1				
Word Count	4634	3052	3664	11350
Average per Comment	31	17	18	22
Average per Assignment	210	138	174	174
High and Low	354/53	297/58	291/58	354/53
Instructor 2				
Word Count	5167	1547	1225	7939

Average per Comment	67	33	30	43
Average per Assignment	234	85	72	130
High and Low	446/10	259/0	165/0	446/0
Instructor 3				
Word Count	6370	866	7457	14693
Average per Comment	49	54	51	51
Average per Assignment	355	433	677	480
High and Low	534/193	569/297	1034/261	1034/193
Instructor 4				
Word Count	3572	4650	3293	11515
Average per Comment	19	42	54	35
Average per Assignment	210	332	274	271
High and Low	377/133	439/174	390/171	439/71
Instructor 5				
Word Count		4003	3798	7801
Average per Comment		67	71	69
Average per Assignment		200	211	205
High and Low		263/133	312/165	312/133

The literature of response amount is far from decided. Students might not like short feedback (Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 271), long feedback (Crisp 573), or it might not matter at all (Straub and Lunsford 6). Hewett et al pointed out that online instruction requires a greater emphasis on reading and writing volume for students and teachers alike (55), which would suggest that the increases in Instructor 3, 4, and 5's volume was correct for the shift to online, but that is not a direct parallel. Increased email correspondence, for example, could account for some of that increase, and would not necessarily indicate that an increase in commenting volume would be appropriate. Future research would need to determine what optimal length of response is (if that's even possible, given that students will individually respond to different lengths) before determining whether there was a need to increase or decrease response volume under pandemic conditions.

Focuses

Instructors 1, 2, and 3 saw a drop in their percentages of global commentary across assignments, while Instructor 4 saw increases in a linear fashion throughout the semester, and Instructor 5 was largely static between the two assignments. Instructor 1's change in ratio between surface and global commentary has been discussed above, and in the Results section. Instructors 2 and 3 saw an increase in other focuses during that time, which, for the purposes of this study, were largely praise or criticism of certain elements that didn't allude to a particular revision task in either a prescriptive or dialectic fashion (or were administrative comments or personal comments). Instructor 4's increase is surprising: given the relative difficulty of global commentary, relative to surface level commentary or praising or criticizing elements, one might imagine that teachers would either reduce their global commentary, or, as Instructor 5 did, stick largely to their usual paradigm. Nearly all of the comments coded as surface level comments in the study are from Instructor 1, the others almost never broke the low single digits in either total comments or percentage of comments, except for a very mild increase in surface level commentary by Instructor 3 in assignment 3 (which still only accounted for 6.8% of commentary).

As noted in Table 1 above, while the global comments seen in this study were slightly lower, so too was the focus on surface level issues. While the relative effectiveness of surface level correction is debated between composition research and L2 research, for the purposes of composition research, this study suggests that the impact on focuses is not especially noteworthy. The instructors observed here, either in their actual commenting practices or, as indicated in Instructor 1's interview, corroborate Straub and Lunsford's findings, and seem to be operating under the same assumptions Anson and Anson point out – that 94% of instructors believe global feedback to be the most important (15). There could be an argument following Instructor 4's lead

(that is, increasing global feedback) under similar circumstances in the future, as the decrease in contact hours do leave comments in the position of showing what instructors value most in writing (Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 241, Searle and Dillon 57), and, for first year writing programs, this might be the correct direction.

<u>Modes</u>

At the study-wide level, prescriptive comments increased in assignments two and three, with their zenith being assignment two. Dialectic comments remained largely static, hovering at about 10% of commentary. This was, in my view, to be expected for two reasons: 1. As I mentioned previously, the assignments themselves have extremely detailed requirements and guiding students within those requirements make up the bulk of the comments and 2. Making revision a discussion, rather than a dictation, is difficult even under ideal circumstances. Instructor 1 largely followed the study averages, being most prescriptive in assignment two, and still higher in assignment three than assignment one. Instructors 2 and 3 became less prescriptive as the semester progressed, while Instructor 4 steadily increased, and Instructor 5, again, remained largely static. Instructors 2 and 3 are interesting here, as their lowest points of discursiveness were in assignment two (approximately when the pandemic landed) but reached their highest points in assignment three, both exceeding the study averages there. This fact might suggest course correction towards less appropriative commenting styles as part of their pandemic response.

While the field is clear – commenting and revision should be a discussion, not an appropriation of student work – the actual logistics of working towards that are considerably less clear. Prescriptive modes are generally more directive in nature, but none of the comments that I read felt excessively authoritarian. It might be worthwhile for this particular institution to loosen

the assignment criteria to give instructors a greater ability to foster conversation with students about revision, however, I believe the assignments are well constructed, and the trade off of giving clear criteria and the other writing skills they cultivate would be a discussion far beyond the scope of this work. Commenting on student work is intrinsically prescriptive, in some sense, as it highlights things needing attention (Straub "Control" 148), and it's difficult to make a value judgment, as good commentary shouldn't eschew any particular mode (Straub "Control" 147). In an ideal circumstance, feedback would be a discursive loop between instructor and student (Onore 237, Murphy 81), but a global pandemic is hardly 'ideal,' and future researchers might find that being a bit more directive, a bit more prescriptive, even appropriative, might actually be the *proper* response under such conditions. Both Instructor 1 and 2 in their interviews seem to suggest that students were looking for more of this kind of 'handholding' during the early days of the pandemic.

Praise and Criticism

My predictions for praise and criticism largely held true. Praise and qualified comments of all kinds hit their lowest points in assignment two, the outset of the pandemic, rebounding in assignment three. Unqualified commentary, too, reached its height in assignment two. Surprisingly, however, criticism also hit its nadir at that same time. Certainly, positivity of any sort would be difficult under dramatically increased stress, and qualified commentary requires more effort than unqualified commentary. Instructor 1 modeled this with a steady drop in praise, and the odd drop in criticism in assignment two. Instructor 2 had a drop in qualified praise, but a compensatory increase in unqualified praise in assignment two, and, once again, the lowest levels of criticism in assignment two. Instructor 3's assignment two data is hardly complete, however, from assignment one to assignment three, praise was lower, and both qualified and

unqualified commentary dropped. Instructor 4 was similar to, if more dramatic than, Instructor 2 in the shift to unqualified praise in assignment two, and the study oddity with the highest amount of praise in assignment two, though still elevated in assignment three relative to assignment one. Instructor 4 also had the drop in criticism and qualified commentary many others saw in assignment two but came into assignment three at their highest levels of both qualified commentary and criticism. While the most likely to utilize criticism in the study, the unusually static Instructor 5 showed a significant decrease in criticism from assignment two to assignment three (and the qualified commentary that was pegged to it as well). These might be the most conclusive and significant findings of the study: praise did temporarily decrease, or take a less qualified form, but instructors might also feel less inclined to criticize knowing that the student body at large is suffering through a generational event.

As has been highlighted in this section, and the literature review, the field is not entirely settled on praise and criticism. Unqualified praise (and there aren't really any notably good uses for unqualified criticism) is less than ideal, as praise should highlight moves instructors want students to repeat (LaBrant 205, Dusel 217) and praise might be motivational in the long run for students' writing (Daiker 156). While well-intentioned, the inclination to utilize unqualified praise will likely not prove productive, though purely from a morale standpoint, it is certainly understandable. How students respond to praise and criticism is not fully understood (and likely very individual), though they may like praise, but might find it unproductive (Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 234, Straub "Students' Reactions" 95). Others found that criticism and a lack of feedback reduces the average word count of student production (Gee 42, Sommers, N. *Responding* 5), which necessitates striking a balance between qualified praise and qualified criticism (Anson and Anson 13). While the most dramatic results were found here, it is worth

noting that praise in this study was higher than previous estimates ranging from 6% (Daiker 154) to 12% (Straub and Lunsford 182-183) at 18.2%. Students in this study received 50-150% more praise than by previous measurements, which under the circumstances could be the correct course of action.

Vague Comments and Comments with Jargon

One might expect that vague and jargon-ridden comments might abound during stressful situations, either as attention waned or as shorthand, respectively, however, they both remained relatively low throughout. The majority of the vague comments, along with a reasonable amount of the jargon used, can be accounted for by Instructor 1's comments on surface level concerns, and Instructor 5's use of jargon – which may or may not have been covered in instruction or assigned reading. This fortunate finding is accompanied by, predictably, unanimous support from the literature: vague comments should be avoided (Sommers, N. "Responding" 153, Higgins et al "Conscientious" 56, Hyland 181, Straub "Students' Reactions" 94) as should unexplained jargon (Higgins et al "Conscientious" 56, Straub "Students' Reactions 93, Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 237, Ferris 93). A negative finding, in this case, is quite a blessing, as I cannot think of an argument for the use of either.

Notes on Final Draft Comments

As Instructor 4 was the only one to submit a representative amount of final draft comments, and Instructor 3 only sporadically, there is not a great deal this study can say about them. Extremely preliminary findings suggest that both commented on them as a product (as opposed to simply another draft of a potentially endless, iterative process), in relatively codified ways. Both regularly found elements to praise and criticize. They were often in line with Straub's suggestion to only address two to three issues at a time ("Students' Reactions" 92-93)

and Diederich's argument for highlighting positive moves and a move needing improvement (223). Compared to rough draft comments, more bound up in stimulating revision, final draft comments did not appear to be impacted by the pandemic/shift online nearly as much.

Preliminary Notes for WPAs

Two logistical recommendations immediately leap to mind. Basic online instruction techniques and resources should be given to all instructors as part of their ongoing training, even if those teachers do not normally teach online courses. This training should highlight the nuanced differences between in-person and online instruction (Hewett et al 66). While (hopefully) the COVID-19 pandemic is winding down in the United States, another pandemic or another sort of disaster could require the same immediate shift to online-only instruction. Additionally, as technology improves, there's a solid chance that online instruction will become more mainstream. The second recommendation would be streamlining, and reducing the volume of, departmental communications in a reactive fashion. As Yoo (194) and Workman et al (143) pointed out, the shift dramatically increased the administrative load of email that instructors had to deal with. Instructors corresponding more rigorously with over 100 students would certainly appreciate it.

This study very limitedly demonstrated that instructor commenting practices might be impacted by national emergencies. Instructors' state of mind and subconscious reactions already can impact their commenting in ways that are unpredictable (Elbow "Teacherless" 265, Anson "Reflective Reading" 361). Instilling reflective practice during training could offset the kind of shifts seen, particularly if instructors are more aware of their commenting practices generally. As is considered best practices under any circumstances, instructors should be considering how their feedback comes to be and how students perceive it (Higgins et al "Getting the Message" 272).

The most notable shifts this case study found included their praise and criticism styles and ratios, and WPAs would do well to remind instructors that unqualified praise is less than ideal, to be cognizant of the potential for their qualified praise to diminish, and that instructors might utilize less criticism (or, to be more pragmatic, be more hesitant to point out flaws in writing than they usually would be, to the detriment of students' long-term growth as writers). It might be worth reinforcing the importance of global commentary, particularly in an online setting, to highlight what the department/field registers as the most important in revision tasks, given the reduction in contact hours (Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest 241, Searle and Dillon 57).

Finally, even under non-pandemic conditions, and even outside of the online context, it might be worthwhile to do as Nancy Sommers suggested: have students write a response to the feedback they receive (*Responding* 11). Sudden separation generated interesting student responses, according to my interviews with instructors, including only addressing comments made on the first page. As engagement is paramount for online instruction – students are more likely to drop or fail without it (Hewett et al 66) – this could keep students further engaged with the revision process and the course itself.

Suggestions for Future Research

As I have noted several times, this study is much too small to be generalizable, but I think replicating its findings would also prove elusive. As this project was entirely carried out by one person, it is strictly based on my own perceptions within the confines I created. To address that, I largely attempted to keep my focus on the data quantitative, rather than qualitative, and haven't included any critique of individual comments, but I still had to make judgment calls in coding. It is also partially responsible for the large scope of the literature review – to establish some ethos for making the claims I have made here. Replicability would also be difficult, simply because

striking the exact moment a pandemic struck would require IRB approval before the researchers would know to be creating a study. Culturally, other than the youngest living, it'll likely be another 100 or more years before society can be blindsided by a pandemic again, as this cultural moment will leave scars and adaptations. By then, technology may have improved to the point that contact can be truly achieved in a virtual setting. There is also the problem of securing comments themselves. This study obtained instructor comments after the fact, and there is no way to be certain they weren't edited. The alternative, of course, is to get instructors involved in the study before the comments are generated, and this might change the way they comment – knowing they're being studied could affect the outcome. Another component lacking in the study is student perceptions of the comments versus what they wanted to receive under pandemic conditions. This study, prior to the pandemic, was designed to include student interviews and to gather their perceptions of instructor feedback, however, I was disinclined to believe securing student participation would be possible under pandemic conditions. I regret that decision, as getting even a small sense of what students wanted from feedback in response to the pandemic would have been invaluable information. Enough responsible self-flagellation. This study, and the results in it, are all born of the struggle and surprise that instructors and researchers alike faced going into the pandemic in its early days in March 2020.

What then would I suggest future research teams do? First, I'd like to highlight 'teams,' as having interrater reliability and others to help carry the work of coding and tabulating would have been invaluable. They ought to craft a longitudinal study that can be more readily compared to past research sooner than later. They should run it several times, preferably with the same instructors over time, to gather what constitutes normal operating conditions. Then, during the next pandemic, or similar crisis, run the study again – once again, optimally, with the same

instructors – to get a better sense of the impact of pandemic stress and shifts to an online modality. With greater technology now in place, and the fresh scars and memories of this pandemic and the adaptations those bring, my sincere hope for future studies would be to have mostly negative findings.

Chapter 2 – Section 3 – Conclusions

The field of composition research might be as settled as it can be on best practices for responding to student work. Global concerns should supersede surface concerns – though ESL literature suggests that surface concerns can be productively addressed. Commentary shouldn't be appropriative, it should a discursive loop, making dialectic commentary superior to prescriptive feedback. The irony of best practices as commentary on praxis is they're prescriptive by definition. Juggling all of them ought to be aspirational and circumstantial, not a means by which to judge instructors. The rhetorical context of writing feedback cannot be escaped: the power differential of graded work and the assumptions that instructors understand student intentions, along with students understanding instructor feedback and the intentions and goals behind it, are as imprecise as all language, if not more so. With those concerns noted, the findings of this case study are to follow. At the risk of redundancy, this was a very small-scale case study carried out by one graduate student, but I believe its findings can be of use to future research and WPAs alike.

1437 comments came from five instructors across three assignments commenting on 104 students' writings. Of the three assignments, the first would be considered pre-pandemic conditions, while assignment two occurred during the sudden shift to online instruction as stay-at-home orders came into effect, and assignment three might be looked at as a sort of stabilizing or adapting to those conditions. It must also be noted that there was missing data from Instructor 5 for assignment one and from Instructor 3 for assignment two. A limited number (seventy-one in total from two participants) of final draft comments were also collected and coded. Coding elements were not mutually exclusive (a comment could, for instance, address global and surface

concerns), so the following percentages are simply their presentation within the sum total of comments.

Rough Draft Comment Percentages

- Focuses: global comments 67.5%, surface comments 17.7%, other focuses 8.8%

- Modes: dialectic comments 11%, prescriptive comments 74.5%, other modes 13.1%

- Praise and Criticism: qualified praise 12.3%, unqualified praise 5.9%, qualified criticism 11.1%, unqualified criticism 0.9%

- Vague comments 5.7%, unexplained jargon 3.2%

Final Draft Comment Percentages

- Focuses: global comments 71.8%, surface comments 2.8%, other focuses 25.3%

- Modes: dialectic comments 0%, prescriptive comments 2.8%, other modes 98.1%

- Praise and Criticism: qualified praise 71.8%, unqualified praise 18.3%, qualified criticism 67.6%, unqualified criticism 0%

- Vague comments 0%, unexplained jargon 0%

Individual instructors' commenting styles varied quite widely, as did their responses to the pandemic. Word count increased for three of the five, while it decreased for two of the five. The preponderance of surface level commentary came from Instructor 1, and they only do so should they not find any glaring global issues, as noted in their interview. Instructor 2 and 3 revealed an interesting pattern of becoming more discursive in the commenting styles for the third assignment. The two instructor interviews suggest that students might actually crave more prescriptive commentary as a result of the pandemic – an issue for future research. The ratios and kinds of praise and criticism were more predictable, with qualified praise hitting its lowest point in assignment two, and unqualified commentary of all kinds increased during assignment two.

Criticism also hit its nadir in assignment two. The most significant finding of the study is here: praise may decrease in response to pandemic conditions, or shift to an unqualified form, and instructors may feel less inclined to point out issues in student writing, too. Vague comments and jargon riddled comments did not present in significant numbers, despite the possibility that they could be time-saving or a sort of shorthand.

As well as they can be compared, this study's findings were similar to Straub and Lunsford's *12 Readers Reading*, with the exception of the modes of commentary – dialectic (43% less likely) and prescriptive (46.5% more likely). The disparity can be accounted for by the differences of prompts and the expectations that they generate for instructor response. Instructors in this study were 11.5% less likely to comment on global structures, and 3.3% less likely to comment on surface features, but 6.2% more likely to praise elements of students' writing. Future research may find that pandemic conditions do generate a greater propensity for prescriptive commentary, but I am disinclined to conclude that they do given the circumstances I outlined. While there did appear to be localized effects of the pandemic, this study's findings are largely in line with previous research, taken as a whole.

Based on my findings, I have generated some preliminary recommendations for WPAs to consider. First, I would recommend all instructors be given basic training on techniques and resources available to them for online instruction, even if they typically only teach in-person classes. The pandemic showed us all that modality must be adaptive to public health concerns. Second, departmental communication should be streamlined and have reduced volume during such crises. Instructors will have a dramatically increased email communications load with students during these times. Third, instructors should be encouraged to utilize reflection in their commenting practices (and pedagogy generally, of course). This will allow them to be more

attuned to the impact a crisis has on their commenting practices and mitigate any detrimental changes. Finally, students might benefit from being required to write a response (perhaps with revision plan) to their instructors' feedback, particularly in an online setting, or crisis setting (though it could be beneficial in any setting). This should help keep students engaged and aid in working towards best practices – making commenting, and, therefore, revision, a discussion.

Those looking to do similar research would do well to have a team and study ready to submit for approval just as the next crisis strikes. It would behoove them to have run a similar longitudinal study to establish a baseline for comparison. I don't suspect this exact study (or cultural moment) could be replicated in the next hundred years or so, considering the fresh wounds that are slowly scarring on our collective cultural consciousness. If another pandemic were to strike five to ten years from now, many would have memories of the abrupt shift online and it would not provide the same shock value.

Final Thoughts

There needs to be more research like this, pandemic or no. Research like this allows for its own solution finding – it should generate a greater amount of reflective practice, for readers and participants alike, for which I doubt one could find an argument against. Because students are individuals, because best practices are aspirational, at best, even research chasing a seemingly futile, unifying answer will take us ever closer to the perfection we all wish we had. As for commenting itself, I think we could all operate with a little less certainty. Writing has conventions to comment on, sure, but some to be skillfully ignored, too. Absolute objectivity is laughably impossible but writing instruction (and the comments that come with it) should be bringing students closer to the academy's epistemological values and allow them to grow ever more comfortable engaging with academic discourse. The only real advice I can give to anyone

that ever has or ever will comment on a student's work is this: do you best, even if it is

"barbarian-style." Straub argued there must be better or worse ways to respond, but even the

worst ways continue the conversation.

To the songs I sing of glory and the brave
Are we dreaming there are better days to come
When will the banners and the victory parades
Celebrate the day a better world was won

On the day
The storm has just begun
I will still hope
There are better days to come
VNV Nation, "Sentinel"

Appendix

Sample Comment Collection Sheet:

Instructions:

Please sequentially copy and paste your comments into the boxes provided below. Each comment should be its own bullet point. If you feel the need to make a note (due to personal abbreviations, agreed upon conventions, etc) please use brackets: [example note]. If a student failed to turn in a first or final draft, dropped the course, or failed to turn in the assignment in question, please note that with a bullet point. Additionally, if you return comments on final drafts, please denote the shift in the draft with its own bullet point.

Example:

- I thought this was a wonderfully written paper.
- [Next draft]
- Your revisions were excellent.

Finally, please do make certain to remove any identifying information from your comments. Please alter it using brackets: "I really liked your paper, [student name]."

Student 1
Assignment 1

Comments:	•
	•
	•

Assignment 2

Comments:	•
	•
	•

Assignment 3

Comments	•
	•

Expanded Tables:

Color Coded Key for Percentage Changes:

Key				
-10% or more	-9.9% <-> -5%	-4.9% <-> 4.9%	5% <-> 9.9%	10% or more

Study Totals for Rough Draft Comments:

	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Totals
Total Students	104	104	104	104
Total Comments	533	407	497	1437
Missing Drafts	23	28	21	X
Global Comments	356 (66.7%)	279 (68.5%)	335 (67.4%)	970 (67.5%)
Surface Comments	50 (9.3%)	93 (22.8%)	112 (22.5%)	255 (17.7%)
Other Focuses	31 (5.8%)	37 (9%)	59 (11.8%)	127 (8.8%)
Dialectic Comments	68 (12.7%)	40 (9.8%)	51 (10.2%)	159 (11%)
Prescriptive Comments	341 (63.9%)	351 (86.2%)	379 (76.2%)	1071 (74.5%)
Other Modes	54 (10.1%)	46 (11.3%)	89 (17.9%)	189 (13.1%)
Qualified Praise	81 (15.1%)	30 (7.3%)	66 (13.2%)	177 (12.3%)
Unqualified Praise	30 (5.6%)	34 (8.3%)	21 (4.2%)	85 (5.9%)
Qualified Criticism	64 (12%)	36 (8.8%)	60 (12%)	160 (11.1%)
Unqualified Criticism	1 (0.1%)	3 (0.7%)	9 (1.8%)	13 (0.9%)
Total Praise	111 (20.8%)	64 (15.7%)	87 (17.5%)	262 (18.2%)
Total Criticism	65 (12.1%)	39 (9.5%)	69 (13.8%)	173 (12%)
Total Qualified Commentary	145 (27.2%)	66 (16.2%)	126 (25.3%)	337 (23.4%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	31 (5.8%)	37 (9%)	30 (6%)	98 (6.8%)
Vague Comments	21 (3.9%)	23 (5.6%)	38 (7.6%)	82 (5.7%)
Jargon Used	9 (1.6%)	16 (3.9%)	22 (4.4%)	47 (3.2%)
Word Count	19743	14118	19437	53298
Average Word Count Per Comment	41	42	44	42
Avergage Word Count by Assignment	247	237	281	255
Word Count High/Low	534/53	569/0	1034/0	1034 /0

Study Totals for Rough Draft Comments (Assignment 1 compared to Assignment 3):

	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Totals
Total Students	104	104	104	104
Total Comments	533	407	497	1437
Missing Drafts	23	28	21	X
Global Comments	356 (66.7%)	279 (68.5%)	335 (67.4%)	970 (67.5%)
Surface Comments	50 (9.3%)	93 (22.8%)	112 (22.5%)	255 (17.7%)
Other Focuses	31 (5.8%)	37 (9%)	59 (11.8%)	127 (8.8%)
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Total Praise	111 (20.8%)	64 (15.7%)	87 (17.5%)	262 (18.2%)
Total Criticism	65 (12.1%)	39 (9.5%)	69 (13.8%)	173 (12%)
Total Qualified Commentary	145 (27.2%)	66 (16.2%)	126 (25.3%)	337 (23.4%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	31 (5.8%)	37 (9%)	30 (6%)	98 (6.8%)
Vague Comments	21 (3.9%)	23 (5.6%)	38 (7.6%)	82 (5.7%)
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Average Word Count Per Comment	41	42	44	42
Avergage Word Count by Assignment	247	237	281	255
Word Count High/Low	534/53	569/0	1034/0	1034 /0

Instructor Commenting Style Comparison Chart:

	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5
Global Comments	-11.2%	15.2%	5.2%	-4.6%	30.7%
Surface Comments	25.9%	14.7%	-10.9%	-16%	-16.9%
Other Focuses	-7.3%	4.1%	20.1%	-1.1%	-6.2%
Dialectic Comments	-1.9%	1.9%	1.4%	3.6%	-8.4%
Prescriptive Comments	13.8%	8.2%	-15.9%	-18.2%	21.0%
Other Modes	-9.5%	1.7%	19.1%	-0.5%	-6.9%
Qualified Praise	-9.9%	2.5%	12.5%	-1.4%	14.4%
Unqualified Praise	-5.8%	11.3%	5.4%	0.7%	-5.9%
Qualified Criticism	-5.6%	9.2%	-0.1%	-4.8%	28.1%
Unqualified Criticism	0.8%	-0.3%	-0.3%	-0.9%	-0.1%
Total Praise	-15.6%	13.8%	18.0%	-0.8%	8.5%
Total Criticism	-4.8%	8.9%	-30.0%	-5.7%	28.1%
Total Qualified Commentary	-16.2%	11.7%	12.1%	-6.3%	42.6%
Total Unqualified Commentary	-4.9%	11.2%	5.0%	-0.1%	-5.9%
Vague Comments	6.8%	-3.9%	-2.6%	-5.2%	4.0%
Jargon Used	3.6%	-3.2%	-3.2%	-2.7%	4.8%

Study Totals for Final Draft Comments:

	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3	Study Totals
Total Students	104	104	104	104
Total Final Comments	37	16	20	71
Missing Drafts	23	28	21	X
Global Comments	21 (56.7%)	15 (93.7%)	15 (75%)	51 (71.8%)
Surface Comments	1 (2.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	2 (2.8%)
Other Focuses	15 (40.5%)	1 (6.2%)	2 (10%)	18 (25.3%)
Dialectic Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Prescriptive Comments	2 (5.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.8%)
Other Modes	35 (94.5%)	16 (100%)	20 (100%)	71 (98.1%)
Qualified Praise	21 (56.7%)	14 (87.5%)	16 (80%)	51 (71.8%)
Unqualified Praise	9 (24.3%)	1 (6.25%)	3 (15%)	13 (18.3%)
Qualified Criticism	22 (59.4%)	15 (93.7%)	11 (55%)	48 (67.6%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total Praise	30 (81%)	15 (93.7%)	19 (95%)	64 (90.1%)
Total Criticism	22 (59.4%)	15 (93.7%)	11 (55%)	48 (67.6%)
Total Qualified Commentary	43 (86.8%)	29 (100%)	27 (100%)	99 (95.6%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	9 (24.3%)	1 (6.2%)	3 (15%)	13 (18.3%)
Vague Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Word Count	2036	987	725	3748
Average Word Count Per Comment	54	61	44	53

Instructor 1:

	I1-A1Total/%	I1-A2 Total/%	I1-A3 Total/%	I1 Cumulative
Total Students Per Instructor	24	24	24	24
Total Comments	149	177	199	525
Total Final Comments	0	0	0	0
Missing Drafts	2	2	3	X
Global Comments	108 (72.4%)	88 (49.7%)	100 (50.2%)	296 (56.3%)
Surface Comments	41 (27.5%)	88 (49.7%)	100 (50.2%)	229 (43.6%)
Other Focuses	2 (1.3%)	3 (1.6%)	3 (1.5%)	8 (1.5%)
Dialectic Comments	28 (18.7%)	7 (3.9%)	13 (6.5%)	48 (9.1%)
Prescriptive Comments	123 (82.5%)	167 (94.3%)	174 (87.4%)	464 (88.3%)
Other Modes	4 (2.6%)	7 (3.9%)	8 (4%)	19 (3.6%)
Qualified Praise	7 (4.6%)	5 (2.8%)	1 (0.5%)	13 (2.4%)
Unqualified Praise	1 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.01%)
Qualified Criticism	14 (9.3%)	4 (2.2%)	11 (5.5%)	29 (5.5%)
Unqualified Criticism	1 (0.6%)	2 (1.1%)	6 (3%)	9 (1.7%)
Total Praise	8 (5.3%)	5 (2.8%)	1 (0.5%)	14 (2.6%)
Total Criticism	15 (10%)	6 (3.3%)	17 (8.5%)	38 (7.2%)
Total Qualified Commentary	21 (14%)	9 (5%)	12 (6%)	42 (8%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	2 (1.3%)	2 (1.1%)	6 (3%)	10 (1.9%)
Vague Comments	15 (10%)	22 (12.4%)	29 (14.%)	66 (12.5%)
Jargon Used	8 (5.3%)	8 (4.5%)	20 (10%)	36 (6.8%)
Word Count	4634	3052	3664	11350
Average Word Count Per Comment	31	17	18	22
Avergage Word Count by Assignment	210	138	174	174
Word Count High/Low	354/53	297/58	291/58	354/53

Instructor 2:

	I2-A1 Total/%	I2-A2 Total/%	I2-A3 Total/%	I2 Cumulative
Total Students Per Instructor	23	23	23	23
Total Comments	76	46	40	162
Total Final Comments	0	0	0	0
Missing Drafts	1	5	5	X
Global Comments	66 (86.8%)	39 (84.7%)	29 (72.5%)	134 (82.7%)
Surface Comments	3 (3.9%)	1 (2.1%)	1 (2.5%)	5 (3%)
Other Focuses	8 (10.5%)	6 (13%)	7 (17.5%)	21 (12.9%)
Dialectic Comments	10 (13.1%)	4 (8.7%)	7 (17.5%)	21 (12.9%)
Prescriptive Comments	67 (88.1%)	38 (82.6%)	29 (72.5%)	134 (82.7%)
Other Modes	10 (13.1%)	7 (15.2%)	7 (17.5%)	24 (14.8%)
Qualified Praise	16 (21%)	3 (6.5%)	5 (12.5%)	24 (14.8%)
Unqualified Praise	8 (10.5%)	10 (21.7%)	10 (25%)	28 (17.2%)
Qualified Criticism	24 (31.5%)	4 (8.7%)	5 (12.5%)	33 (20.3%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	1 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.6%)
Total Praise	24 (31.5%)	13 (28.2%)	15 (37.5%)	52 (32%)
Total Criticism	24 (31.5%)	5 (10.8%)	5 (12.5%)	34 (20.9%)
Total Qualified Commentary	40 (52.6%)	7 (15.2%)	10 (25%)	57 (35.1%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	8 (10.5%)	11 (23.9%)	10 (25%)	29 (17.9%)
Vague Comments	2 (2.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	3 (1.8%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Word Count	5167	1547	1225	7939
Average Word Count Per Comment	67	33	30	43
Avergage Word Count by Assignment	234	85	72	130
Word Count High/Low	446/10	259/0	165/0	446/0

Instructor 3 Rough Draft Comments:

	I3-A1 Total/%	I3-A2* Total/%	I3-A3 Total/%	I3 Cumulative
Total Students Per Instructor	20	20	20	20
Total Comments	129	16	145	290
Missing Drafts	0	18	8	X
Global Comments	104 (80.6%)	9 (56.2%)	98 (67.5%)	211 (72.7%)
Surface Comments	3 (2.3%)	1 (6.3%)	10 (6.8%)	14 (4.8%)
Other Focuses	21 (16.2%)	5 (31.2%)	42 (28.9%)	68 (23.4%)
Dialectic Comments	16 (12.4%)	1 (6.3%)	19 (13.1%)	36 (12.4%)
Prescriptive Comments	86 (66.6%)	10 (62.5%)	74 (51%)	170 (58.6%)
Other Modes	33 (25.5%)	1 (6.3%)	61 (42%)	93 (32.%)
Qualified Praise	37 (28.6%)	1 (6.3%)	34 (23.4%)	72 (24.8%)
Unqualified Praise	21 (16.2%)	1 (6.3%)	11 (7.5%)	33 (11.3%)
Qualified Criticism	14 (10.8%)	0 (0%)	18 (12.4%)	32 (11%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.3%)	2 (0.6%)
Total Praise	58 (44.9%)	2 (12.5%)	45 (31%)	105 (36.2%)
Total Criticism	14 (10.8%)	0 (0%)	20 (13.7%)	34 (11.7%)
Total Qualified Commentary	51 (39.5%)	1 (6.3%)	52 (35.8%)	103 (35.5%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	21 (16.2%)	1 (6.3%)	13 (8.9%)	34 (11.7%)
Vague Comments	4 (3.1%)	0 (0%)	5 (3.4%)	9 (3.1%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Word Count	6370	866	7457	14693
Average Word Count Per Comment	49	54	51	51
Avergage Word Count by Assignment	335	433	677	480
Word Count High/Low	534/193	569/297	1034/261	1034/193

Instructor 3 Final Draft Comments:

	I3-A1 Total/%	I3-A3 Total/%	I3 Cumulative
Total Students Per Instructor	20	20	20
Total Final Comments	19	4	22
Missing Drafts	0	8	X
Global Comments	6 (31.5%)	2 (50%)	8 (36.3%)
Surface Comments	1 (5.2%)	1 (25%)	2 (9%)
Other Focuses	12 (63.1%)	0 (0%)	12 (54.5%)
Dialectic Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Prescriptive Comments	2 (10.5%)	0 (0%)	2 (9%)
Other Modes	17 (89.4%)	4 (100%)	21 (95.4%)
Qualified Praise	7 (36.8%)	2 (50%)	9 (40.9%)
Unqualified Praise	7 (36.8%)	2 (50%)	9 (40.9%)
Qualified Criticism	7 (36.8%)	2 (50%)	9 (40.9%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total Praise	14 (73.6%)	4 (100%)	18 (81.8%)
Total Criticism	7 (36.8%)	2 (50%)	9 (40.9%)
Total Qualified Commentary	14 (73.6%)	4 (100%)	18 (81.8%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	7 (36.8%)	2 (50%)	9 (40.9%)
Vague Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Word Count	1062	220	1282
Average Word Count Per Comment	55	55	55

Instructor 4 Rough Draft Comments:

	I4-A1 Total/%	I4-A2 Total/%	I4-A3 Total/%	I4 Cumulative
Total Students Per Instructor	17	17	17	17
Total Comments	179	109	60	348
Missing Drafts	0	3	3	X
Global Comments	78 (43.5%)	84 (77%)	57 (95%)	219 (62.9%)
Surface Comments	3 (1.6%)	3 (2.7%)	0 (0%)	6 (1.7%)
Other Focuses	0 (0%)	23 (21.1%)	4 (6.6%)	27 (7.7%)
Dialectic Comments	14 (7.8%)	26 (23.8%)	11 (18.3%)	51 (14.6%)
Prescriptive Comments	65 (36.3%)	79 (72.4%)	52 (86.6%)	196 (56.3%)
Other Modes	7 (3.9%)	28 (25.6%)	9 (15%)	44 (12.6%)
Qualified Praise	21 (11.7%)	5 (4.5%)	12 (20%)	38 (10.9%)
Unqualified Praise	0 (0%)	23 (21.1%)	0 (0%)	23 (6.6%)
Qualified Criticism	12 (6.7%)	2 (1.8%)	8 (13.3%)	22 (6.3%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total Praise	21 (11.7%)	28 (25.6%)	12 (20%)	61 (17.4%)
Total Criticism	12 (6.7%)	2 (1.8%)	8 (13.3%)	22 (6.3%)
Total Qualified Commentary	33 (18.4%)	7 (6.4%)	20 (33.3%)	60 (17.1%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	0 (0%)	23 (21.1%)	0 (0%)	23 (6.6%)
Vague Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.3%)	2 (0.5%)
Jargon Used	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.5%)
Word Count	3572	4650	3293	11515
Average Word Count Per Comment	19	42	54	35
Avergage Word Count by Assignment	210	332	274	271
Word Count High/Low	377/133	439/174	390/71	439/71

Instructor 4 Final Draft Comments:

	I4-A1 Total/%	I4-A2 Total/%	I4-A3 Total/%	I4 Cumulative
Total Students Per Instructor	17	17	17	17
Total Final Comments	18	16	15	49
Missing Drafts	0	3	3	X
Global Comments	15 (83.3%)	15 (93.7%)	13 (86.6%)	43 (87.7%)
Surface Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other Focuses	3 (16.6%)	1 (6.2%)	2 (13.3%)	6 (12.2%)
Dialectic Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Prescriptive Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other Modes	18 (100%)	16 (100%)	16 (100%)	49 (100%)
Qualified Praise	14 (77.7%)	14 (87.5%)	14 (93.3%)	42 (85.7%)
Unqualified Praise	2 (11.1%)	1 (6.2%)	1 (6.6%)	4 (8.1%)
Qualified Criticism	15 (83.3%)	15 (93.7%)	9 (60%)	39 (79.5%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total Praise	16 (88.8%)	15 (93.7%)	15 (100%)	46 (93.8%)
Total Criticism	15 (83.3%)	15 (93.7%)	9 (60%)	39 (79.5%)
Total Qualified Commentary	29 (100%)	29 (100%)	23 (100%)	81 (100%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	2 (11.1%)	1 (6.2%)	1 (6.6%)	4 (8.1%)
Vague Comments	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Jargon Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Word Count	974	987	505	2466
Average Word Count Per Comment	54	61	33	49
Avergage Word Count by Assignment	54	61	36	50

Instructor 5:

	I5-A2 Total/%	I5-A3 Total/%	I5 Cumulative
Total Students Per Instructor	20	20	20
Total Comments	59	53	112
Total Final Comments	0	0	0
Missing Drafts	0	2	X
Global Comments	59 (100%)	51 (96.2%)	110 (98.2%)
Surface Comments	0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)	1 (0.8%)
Other Focuses	0 (0%)	3 (5.6%)	3 (2.6%)
Dialectic Comments	2 (3.3%)	1 (1.8%)	3 (2.6%)
Prescriptive Comments	57 (96.6%)	50 (94.3%)	107 (95.5%)
Other Modes	3 (5%)	4 (7.5%)	7 (6.2%)
Qualified Praise	16 (27.1%)	14 (26.4%)	30 (26.7%)
Unqualified Praise	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Qualified Criticism	26 (44%)	18 (33.9%)	44 (39.2%)
Unqualified Criticism	0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)	1 (0.8%)
Total Praise	16 (27.1%)	14 (26.4%)	30 (26.7%)
Total Criticism	26 (44%)	19 (35.8%)	45 (40.1%)
Total Qualified Commentary	42 (71.1%)	32 (60.3%)	74 (66%)
Total Unqualified Commentary	0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)	1 (0.8%)
Vague Comments	1 (1.6%)	1 (1.8%)	2 (1.7%)
Jargon Used	7 (11.8%)	2 (3.7%)	9 (8%)
Word Count	4003	3798	7801
Average Word Count Per Comment	67	71	69
Avergage Word Count by Assignment	200	211	205
Word Count High/Low	263/133	312/165	312/133

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