Responding to student writing: Teachers’ philosophies and practices

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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1. Introduction

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

1.1. “Best practices” recommendations from composition research

1.1.1. Overview

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

1.2. Teacher views of response to student writing

As already noted, previous research on response to student writing has yielded many helpful insights and indeed produced the “best practices” suggestions for response shown in Fig. 1. However, a sizable gap in the research base has been consultations with teachers themselves about what they do with regard to feedback and why they do it that way (Ferris, 2006; Goldstein, 2001, 2005). There are a few exceptions to this generalization. Straub and Lunsford’s (1995) book-length study, Twelve readers reading, elicited not only written commentary on student texts from twelve renowned experts in composition studies but also reflection from these scholars about why they responded as they did. While this research yielded both a useful analytic framework for commentary and interesting insights about these instructors’ approaches to response, it is important to observe that these were hand-picked teacher respondents, chosen because they were highly respected writing experts. It cannot be assumed that they represent the views and practices of a broader cross-section of instructors from a range of backgrounds teaching writing in a variety of contexts.

There have been a few other studies over the years in which classroom instructors have been asked about their responding practices. Researchers in one small early study (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990), conducted with three teachers and nine Brazilian students of English as a Foreign Language, triangulated data collection and analysis by interviewing teachers and students as well as examining student texts with teacher commentary, finding that teacher and student assessments of teacher response were consistent with observed responding behaviors. In a study of writing conferences, Newkirk (1995) reviewed recordings of teacher–student conferences with the instructor, finding that at some points the instructor and students had different goals for the interactions. In several recent
1. Teacher feedback (whether written or oral) should focus on a range of issues, including content, organization, language, mechanics, and style, and the focus of response should depend upon individual students’ needs at that point in time.

2. Feedback should be provided on multiple drafts of student papers, not only final graded drafts.

3. Students should receive feedback from multiple sources (e.g., instructor and peers) so that they can benefit from reactions from different readers.

4. One-to-one writing conferences may be more effective than written teacher commentary.

5. Teachers should give clear and text-specific feedback that includes both encouragement and constructive criticism and that avoids appropriation (taking over) the student’s text. Where possible, questions are preferable to imperatives, as they are less directive and promote student autonomy.

6. Teachers should focus primarily on issues of content and organization early in the writing process, saving grammar and mechanics issues for the end of the writing process.

5. Selective error feedback on several patterns of error is more beneficial than comprehensive error correction, as the latter is exhausting and overwhelming to teachers and students.

6. If feedback on errors is provided, indirect error feedback (in which the error is indicated but not corrected) is more beneficial to long-term student development than direct correction (in which the teacher or peer provides the correct form to the writer).

7. For peer response activities to be successful, the teacher should (a) model the process for students before beginning (i.e., provide training); (b) structure peer response tasks carefully; (c) form peer review groups thoughtfully; and (d) include accountability/reflection mechanisms so that students take the process seriously.

8. To alleviate problems that some students might have with teacher-student writing conferences, teachers should (a) discuss goals and format of conferences with students ahead of time; (b) suggest that the student take notes or record the conference for later review; (c) consider holding conferences with students in pairs or small groups to minimize discomfort any students might feel with one-to-one meetings with the instructor and to maximize instructor time (particularly with small groups of students struggling with similar writing issues).


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Fig. 1. “Best practices” suggestions from response literature.

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studies, researchers have also attempted in various ways to fill the teacher-as-informant gap. In a 2007 study, Montgomery and Baker surveyed teachers and students in an intensive English program at a U.S. university about the focus of teacher written commentary and compared the survey responses to teachers’ actual written commentary. They also followed up the data analyses by discussing the findings with the teachers themselves to get their reactions. They found that teachers gave far more feedback on grammar and mechanics on student papers than they reported in their surveys, even on preliminary drafts. The results were especially surprising because, according to the authors:

> Although there is no official policy, at teacher training meetings teachers are taught to provide feedback on both local and global issues throughout the writing process, but to concentrate on global issues on the first draft and local issues on subsequent drafts. *(Montgomery & Baker, 2007, p. 85)*

In addition, the authors reported that teachers met weekly for training and to review current research on teaching issues, and that these response values were reinforced at those meanings. In short, the teachers were not simply ignoring or forgetting response prescriptions that they vaguely remembered from graduate school but rather disregarding advice given to them by current supervisors in regular in-service training sessions.
In a different context, Lee (2008, 2009a, 2009b) conducted several studies among secondary English instructors in Hong Kong in which she asked teachers about their feedback practices (Lee, 2008); assessed the teachers’ willingness to consider changing their practices (Lee, 2009a); and examined “mismatches” between teachers’ expressed philosophies toward feedback and their actual responding behaviors (Lee, 2009b). Lee found that teachers’ practices were not always consistent with either best practices or even their own beliefs and that they were relatively open to changing their response behaviors but felt constrained by a range of external factors—class size, heavy teaching loads, parental expectations, and a lack of training in how to effectively implement changes. Interestingly, these teacher practices persist despite the fact that “published advice about feedback has made a direct impact on the Hong Kong secondary English curriculum” (Lee, 2008, pp. 71–72), as demonstrated by official Hong Kong curriculum documents. In other words, teachers in that setting did not resist “enlightened” feedback practices because they felt constrained by official policy from doing things differently. On the contrary, they maintained their practices despite scholarly research and official documents that urged otherwise. The findings of these recent studies therefore raise interesting questions about why teachers’ response behaviors deviate not only from “expert” and supervisor recommendations but also from their own self-reported beliefs.

As the above discussion has shown, there is no shortage of practical and specific advice for instructors of L2 writers on how best to provide or facilitate feedback in their classes. The question considered in the present study is to what extent composition instructors say they follow this advice—what they actually do about response in their classes and why. The current study also builds on recent efforts to incorporate the teachers’ voices into conversations on response to student writing. What is unique about this study compared with the other recent papers is that it investigates a broader range of instructor practices (not just written commentary), and it delves more deeply into writing teachers’ thoughts and feelings about their response practices. The research questions guiding the design of this study were as follows:

1. What are the response practices (including providing written and oral feedback and facilitating peer response) of college writing instructors, and how do they compare with “best practices” recommendations by L2 experts?
2. How do college writing instructors describe their own philosophies toward response, and how/where did they acquire those views?
3. Are college writing instructors’ statements about their practices and philosophies consistent with their observed written response behaviors?

To address these research questions, this study utilized a mixed-methods design. Phase 1 was primarily quantitative, involving surveys of a cross-section of college writing instructors in one region (N = 129). Phase 2 was qualitative and took a multiple-case study approach (N = 23). This approach to research design allowed for a broader look at what real-world composition instructors say they actually do while allowing for a closer examination of why they approach response as they do and how they feel about their efforts.

2. Method

2.1. Context and participants

This study took place at eight postsecondary sites—two four-year universities and six two-year colleges—in Northern California. These sites were selected because they were all within reasonable traveling distance for the research team\(^1\) to conduct on-site interviews with the participants. The participant pool was limited to writing instructors (recruited from English departments and stand-alone

\(^1\) The research team included the author (the lead researcher) and five graduate student researchers (Jeffrey Brown, Daina Olseen Collins, Brigitte Rabie, Danielle Geist Schmidli, and Maria Eugenia Arnaudo Stine). This team worked collaboratively to design the research instruments, conduct interviews, and analyze the data. Hsiang (Sean) Liu also participated in the data analysis phase.
writing programs, depending upon each site’s configuration) who usually teach or have frequently taught either first-year writing courses or the developmental/basic writing course that immediately preceded the first-year course (i.e., a two-quarter or two-semester sequence). The instructional levels were specifically limited in this way so that the student writers would be advanced enough for the teachers to attempt the types of response practices under investigation. To recruit volunteer participants, we made primary contact with an individual in each department, asking him or her to send a link to our online survey (described further below) to his/her colleagues who fit our target population of instructors. We received 129 survey responses from writing teachers at the eight sites through an online collector over a two-month period. Our best guess is that between 40 and 45% of the possible teacher respondents at the sites actually completed the survey.

2.1.1. Participant backgrounds

The first section of the survey (Questions 1–7) asked the instructors about their own backgrounds. The responses are summarized in Table 1. These responses suggest that most of our participants were veteran teachers who came from a range of academic/professional preparation backgrounds. The vast majority (over 80%) reported having taken graduate-level coursework (a seminar or a practicum) in teaching composition, and nearly all respondents said that they had received some formal training, whether in a graduate teacher preparation program or through in-service workshops, in responding to student writing.

| Survey item | Summary of responses 
|---|---|
| Q1: Type of Institution | Two-year college: 76 (58%)  
Four-year university: 53 (42%) |
| Q2: Types of courses taught | First-year writing course: 47 (37%)  
Basic writing course: 29 (23%)  
ESL equivalent of basic or FY course: 9 (7%)  
Two or more of above: 40 (31.3%) |
| Q3: Primary teaching assignment | Only mainstream (non-ESL) composition courses: 104 (82%)  
Only ESL courses: 10 (8%)  
Both mainstream and ESL: 14 (10%) |
| Q4: Years of teaching experience | 0–2 years: 18 (14%)  
2–5 years: 23 (18%)  
6–10 years: 35 (27%)  
11–20 years: 37 (29%)  
20+ years: 15 (12%) |
| Q5: Highest relevant degree | Ph.D.: 18 (14%)  
M.A. in English: 73 (57%)  
M.A. in TESOL: 18 (14%)  
M.A. in composition: 8 (6%)  
M.A. in education: 5 (4%)  
TESOL certificate w/M.A.: 2 (2%)  
Composition certificate w/M.A.: 20 (16%)  
Other: 17 (13%) |
| Q6: Specific training for teaching college composition | Graduate course on composition theory/pedagogy: 103 (81%)  
Graduate course on teaching second language writing: 28 (22%)  
Undergraduate courses on teaching writing/ESL: 27 (21%)  
Practicum/internship course on writing/ESL: 107 (83%)  
In-service workshops: 90 (70%)  
Presentations/workshops at conferences: 78 (61%)  
None: 8 (6.3%)  
Other: 34 (27%) |
| Q7: Specific training on responding to student writing | Part of a course: 96 (76%)  
In-service workshops: 48 (38%)  
Professional conference: 34 (27%)  
None: 17 (14%) |

a Not all participants responded to all questions, so some responses do not total 129.

b Participants were allowed to select all responses that applied, so totals are over 100%.
2.2. Data collected

2.2.1. Online surveys
As already noted, our first stage in data collection involved an online teacher survey. This survey was designed to examine the “best practices” suggestions already discussed (Fig. 1). In addition, there was a question about the respondents’ practices when responding to second language (L2) writers (see Ferris, Brown, et al., 2011). There were also two survey questions focused on capturing instructors’ attitudes toward response (see Ferris, Liu, et al., 2011). All questions were multiple-choice response items, and most also allowed space for written comments if the respondents chose to add them. As already noted, we collected 129 completed surveys.

2.2.2. Teacher interviews
The second phase of data collection consisted of interviews with volunteer participants who provided contact information at the end of the survey. Fifty-three survey respondents volunteered for interviews, and we completed interviews with 23 of them over a two-month period immediately following the survey collection. We chose the interview participants from among the volunteers to represent a range of the college/university sites. The interviews were arranged at the volunteers’ convenience and were mostly held at the teaching sites, lasting on average 30–45 min. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by six members of the research team (3–4 interviews each) according to a standard protocol (see Fig. 2). The interview questions were designed to investigate in more depth not only the participants’ initial survey responses but also issues that would be hard to discuss in an electronic survey format.

All interviews were recorded on digital audio recorders to supplement the interviewers’ notes and make the interviews accessible to other members of the research team. All interview participants were given a subject identification number, which was used in data analyses and discussions of the findings. All interview participants signed consent forms before beginning the interviews.

2.2.3. Student texts with written teacher commentary
The third piece of data collected was sample student texts with teacher commentary from each interview participant. The teachers were asked to provide copies of 3–5 student papers, with their written feedback in whatever form it took. The teachers obtained consent forms from the student writers and brought them to the interviews. One of the items on the interview protocol (Fig. 2, Item 8) involved the interviewer discussing the written teacher commentary with the interviewee to gain further insight into the choices the teacher had made and the purposes for the comments.

2.3. Data analysis

2.3.1. Surveys
For the survey data, we examined frequencies and percentages of responses to all questions and did cross-tabulations of specific questions and their responses. Additional verbal comments from respondents were collated, categorized, and tabulated. This task was divided among members of the research

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2 As noted here, I have already published two co-authored articles based upon these data. This paper differs from the previous ones in two substantial ways. First, it reports on the entire set of data collected (the entirety of the teacher survey findings, the interviews, and the analysis of teacher-marked student texts) rather than focusing narrowly on two survey questions about teacher attitudes toward response (Ferris, Liu, et al., 2011) or one survey question and one interview question (Ferris, Brown, et al., 2011). Second, whereas the Ferris, Brown et al. paper focused specifically on response to L2 writers, this paper looks more broadly at teachers’ reported practices with all of their students (not just L2 writers). Readers familiar with the earlier articles may notice similarities in the methods sections (since the data collection and analysis procedures were the same) and in the implications for teaching sections. However, the conclusion of this paper focuses more on suggestions for research than implications for teaching, and the other sections of this article are completely distinct from the previous two.

3 Due to space limitations, the complete survey is not reproduced here. However, readers can consult Ferris, Liu et al., 2011 or contact the author for a PDF version of the survey instrument.

4 Both the survey and interview questions were piloted with a small group of volunteers and necessary adjustments made before formal data collection began.
1. Please briefly describe your background & experience as a writing teacher. Do you have any specific experience or training in working with ESL student writers?

2. Describe your philosophy or approach to responding to student writing. How does your approach to response fit into your overall philosophy of how to teach writing?

3. How would you say your philosophy or approach has been formed? Has it changed over time?

4. What have been your most successful or effective response strategies? (Note: clarify that responses to this question do not have to be limited to written teacher feedback—they can also cover conferences, peer feedback, etc.)

5. What is most frustrating or challenging to you about response to student writing (same note as for question 4)?

6. Do you have (m)any ESL/multilingual students in your classes? Do you think that their needs as writers differ from those of the monolingual (native English speakers) students? If so, how? Do you adapt your response strategies in any way with those students, and if so, how?

7. Follow-up on any questions or comments from the participant’s survey responses.

8. Look at the marked student papers together. If the interviewer has any questions or needs clarification about the purpose, meaning, or intent of a comment, discuss it. Ask the interview participant to discuss how s/he approached these various student papers, and why (e.g., did s/he respond differently because of perceived differences in student abilities? Were the comments tailored to the particular task and assignment? Etc.)

9. Also discuss how specific contextual factors such as the length of the term, online teaching, the stage of the writing process, etc., might have impacted the instructor’s responses to these students and response practices in general.

**Fig. 2.** Interview protocol (Ferris, Brown, et al., 2011, pp. 232–333).

team, and there was a second reader for each question who double-checked the categorizations made by the first reader; any questions or discrepancies were brought to the lead researcher (the author) for resolution.

2.3.2. Interviews

Each interviewer took handwritten notes as well as audio-recording the interactions. The researcher then created a table summarizing subjects’ responses to the major interview questions along with illustrative quotations for each category. All interviewers’ tables, along with interview recordings, were uploaded to the project web site so that team members could compare responses to questions across the sample of interview participants.

2.3.3. Student texts

Though we were not primarily interested in a quantitative analysis of the teachers’ commentary but rather a sample of their actual feedback to compare with the teachers’ self-reported
philosophies and practices during interviews, we nonetheless thought it helpful to adopt a consistent scheme to examine the teachers’ written comments. Thus, we utilized an adapted version of a framework by Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti (1997; see Appendix A) to look at formal characteristics of teacher comments (length, syntactic form, use of hedges, specificity) on the sample student texts obtained from the interview subjects. The team reviewed and practiced the procedures for using the analysis forms, and then the individual interviewers completed the analyses.

2.3.4. Case study narratives

In addition to looking at the entire sample of surveys, interview responses, and student texts as already described, we also wanted to provide a comprehensive description of each of our 23 interview participants. Thus, once the interviews were completed and the sample texts were analyzed, the six interviewers composed 2–3 page narratives about each participant, following a standard format that was modeled by the lead researcher (see the sample in Appendix B). These case study narratives included information from all data sources obtained from that participant. Each case study also had a second reader who listened to the interview recording and reviewed the other materials to ensure that the important details and themes had been emphasized and accurately captured. Changes were then suggested to the first readers, who finalized the narratives accordingly. Once the 23 case narratives were completed, the team members examined them as a secondary data source and discussed all of them to discern themes, commonalities, and divergences across the sample. The results and discussion that follow are based upon all of the above data sources and analyses.

3. Results and discussion

Findings from the study are presented and discussed as responses to the research questions outlined earlier.

3.1. Research Question 1: teachers’ response practices

3.1.1. Results

Questions 9–22 on the survey asked a series of questions about how the teachers in the study used various response mechanisms in their writing courses. Question 9 was a general question about teachers’ overall approach to feedback: Did they utilize a multiple-draft syllabus in which students had one or more opportunities to receive feedback before a paper was graded or placed into a portfolio? The answer was overwhelmingly “yes,” which 81% of respondents saying they always did so and another 15% responding “sometimes.” Thus, most college writing instructors in the study claimed to utilize a process-oriented model for the writing/response/revision cycle rather than simply having students write without feedback.

However, a closer examination of teachers’ verbal comments in response to Questions 9–12 suggests that instructors did not themselves intervene with feedback at intermediate stages of the writing process. Some teachers noted that most of the feedback their students received on preliminary drafts came from in-class peer workshops (in which students read and gave suggestions about classmates’ drafts), sometimes in concert with office visits to the teacher by the more motivated students. Though 99% of the respondents said they provided written feedback on most or all of their students’ major writing projects (Question 14, discussed further below), in many cases this written feedback was only given on final, graded essays. Some of them elaborated on their responses: “Unfortunately collecting and commenting on drafts and then working on revision has yielded little revision on the part of students; I’ve moved away from it but still use it from time to time.” Another commented, “I only provide feedback on drafts when students meet with me, but my students receive feedback on their drafts from peers during workshop.” In short, although a large number of teachers claimed to employ a
multiple-draft process syllabus, it is important to qualify this generalization by noting that intermediate-draft feedback did not always (or even often) come for the instructor.

3.1.2. Peer response practices

Considering the importance that many instructors placed on peer feedback workshops, it is useful to look more carefully at how they said they implemented them. Survey Questions 10–12 focused on if/how teachers used peer response in their classes. Table 2 summarizes the responses to these questions. A large majority of the instructors claimed to provide either formal training or an informal introduction to peer review before asking students to undertake it; to give students some kind of structure as they completed the peer response task; and to hold students accountable for doing thorough and thoughtful work during peer review.

However, teachers' verbal comments accompanying these peer review questions painted a more complex picture. Among the 32% who said they provided formal training in peer response, several respondents provided details of how they did so: “I model peer response using an essay on the overhead, and we often do shorter responses to informal writing...before I ask students to respond to full essays.” The majority of respondents claimed to provide an informal introduction to peer feedback that they would not call “training.” Respondents in this category also expanded on their answers. One said, “I don’t believe training for this should be formalized.” Some respondents claimed not to use peer feedback in their classes. One respondent elaborated: “peer feedback sessions use up too much class time for my style of teaching.” Another explained, “most of my students are truly struggling in their grammar, punctuation and writing, and it would not be helpful to the other students to have them correct or read their papers without the latter skills.” These findings suggest that these writing instructors hold a range of opinions about how to introduce peer feedback and even if it is an appropriate activity for their classes.

As for structuring the peer review task for students, experts suggest that teachers should structure the peer response carefully so that students know what to look for and how to give useful advice (see Ferris, 2003; Liu & Hansen, 2002); this suggestion seems consistent with many of these teachers' reported practices. According to the survey, 56.5% claimed to provide a detailed feedback form, rubric, or set of instructions (Question 11) while 24.2% claimed to employ a combination of general instructions and detailed feedback forms, rubrics, or sets of instructions. A respondent within the latter category explained, “I start very structured with a rubric and verbal instructions, etc., but depending on how well students do, I often loosen up this approach as long as I feel they can provide significant feedback.” In addition, 13.7% claimed to provide general instructions rather than specific ones. For example, one respondent elaborated, “aside from an initial discussion (and skit) early in the semester about what makes a good/bad workshop partner and our goals for the workshop time, I don’t script the actual workshop in any fashion.” In short, most (nearly 80%) of our respondents described structuring...
the peer response task carefully, at least initially, but others did not or did so less as students became more familiar with the process.

It has been suggested by composition scholars that reflection and accountability mechanisms are the key to ensuring that students take feedback (whether from peers or the teacher) seriously. According to the online survey, 83.5% of respondents (Question 12) said that they did use accountability tools (such as collecting peer review worksheets or asking students to write responses to their peer reviews) to improve the effectiveness of peer feedback activities. However, they did not always review peer feedback forms to ensure that the students had done a good job of giving or receiving peer response, nor did they typically require students to reflect on and describe how peer had helped them to develop a specific piece of writing. Not surprisingly, given this lack of follow-up, these teachers expressed frustrations with peer response. For instance, one interviewee expressed that there are always three groups: one that is off task, one that has one person who thinks she or he knows it all, and one that is quiet. Another interviewee said that “some students take it more seriously than others.” These results suggest that the instructors in this study may have been undermining their own peer response activities by not providing adequate reflection or analysis mechanisms to follow such workshops.

3.1.3. Teacher–student writing conferences

Question 13 on the survey asked about how (and if) teachers utilized one-to-one writing conferences with their students. Table 3 summarizes the responses.

Both the survey respondents and interview participants expressed great enthusiasm for writing conferences: only five survey respondents claimed to never or rarely utilize them. In the interviews, when asked about their most successful response practices, a number of teachers said that they found one-to-one writing conferences the most effective and satisfying way to provide feedback to their students. The vast majority (78%) of the survey respondents said that such conferences were either required or strongly encouraged. In verbal comments, some elaborated on their responses and even their procedures:

I find this the absolute best way to see improvement/changes in the next draft. I have students prepare for this conference by writing down 2 questions they have before they come. I also require them to take notes during the conference so they leave with helpful tips. If I don’t do both of these things, they will not ask questions or take away suggestions. Since changing my approach, more students’ papers improve in the next draft.

Other teachers, however, said that they were unable to find the time to hold such conferences: “In the quarter [system], conferences take too much time away from instruction. I instead attempt to work in the class one-to-one, though it’s not very practical either.”

3.1.4. Written teacher feedback

While many teachers stated that they preferred or valued one-to-one writing conferences, most also provided written feedback on students’ papers, whether on preliminary or final drafts. Because written feedback tends to be the most common and time-consuming form of teacher response, we constructed a number of survey questions to ask in more detail about how instructors approached such commentary. These questions and the instructors’ responses are summarized in Table 4.
Table 4
Survey responses regarding written teacher feedback.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>survey item</th>
<th>Summary of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q14: How frequently did teachers comment on student writing?</td>
<td>On all/most of students' writing: 46 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15: Do teachers use a rubric or checklist in giving written feedback?</td>
<td>On all major writing assignments but not on less formal tasks: 8 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16: What is teachers' typical delivery mode for written feedback?</td>
<td>Do not provide written feedback: 1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17: Do teachers primarily use comments in the margins or end/summary comments?</td>
<td>Yes, and that comprises most/all of the feedback: 5 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q18: What is the main focus of written teacher commentary on preliminary (not final) student drafts?</td>
<td>Yes, and I add substantive comments of my own: 73 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q19: How do teachers approach feedback on early vs. late student drafts?</td>
<td>No, I just make my own comments: 47 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20: What is teachers' approach to commenting on language issues?</td>
<td>A combination of methods: 15 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21: What form does written teacher commentary take?</td>
<td>Mostly marginal comments, maybe with a brief end note: 28 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q22: Do teachers implement reflection/analysis activities to ensure that students understand and apply their written feedback?</td>
<td>Mainly a cover/end note with few/no comments in the text: 8 (6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A fairly equal proportion of marginal notes and end comments: 87 (70%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rubric/separate feedback form: 2 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggestions about content: 33 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggestions about organization: 1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggestions about language: 2 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A fairly equal combination of all of the above: 74 (61%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not applicable because I do not give written feedback on drafts: 11 (9%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Only content-focused feedback on early drafts: 21 (17%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A combination of content- and language-focused feedback on all drafts: 37 (30%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No consistent “approach”-depends on the text/student: 30 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I do not provide feedback on more than one draft: 36 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct correction or rewriting of student errors: 13 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indirect correction (underlining or circling) of errors: 19 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A system of error codes: 8 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A summary note about language issues: 3 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A combination of above approaches: 80 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I rarely/never address language issues in written feedback: 1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statements or imperatives: 19 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questions: 11 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single words: 2 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Codes or symbols 1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A combination of above approaches: 92 (74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, regularly: 39 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, sometimes: 46 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not sure: 10 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No: 27 (22%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of teachers said they gave written feedback on major student assignments, while some said they also provided it on less formal writing, such as journal entries or free writes. Many used some kind of a rubric or feedback form to structure their written responses, but most combined such tools with their own personalized comments. Most instructors said that their written feedback is handwritten rather than produced on a computer, and no teacher said they used alternative delivery modes such as audio-recorded comments. There was no clear preference for marginal or end comments; 70% of survey respondents said they used a fairly equal combination of both. As to the focus and purpose of feedback, instructors’ responses on Questions 18–19 suggested that there was no prescribed approach such as “content first, form later,” but rather that they focused on different text characteristics in combination and as the needs of the text/student dictated. Respondents were asked in Question 20 about their specific approach to addressing language errors in the text, and
again, the majority said they used a combination of methods—direct correction/rewriting of errors, circling or underlining errors, a system of codes, and a verbal endnote about patterns of error. In Question 21, instructors were asked about the formal characteristics of their feedback, and most claimed to use a combination of statements, imperatives, questions, and codes or symbols. Finally, as with peer response, teachers were asked if they implemented any follow-up activities to ensure that students understood and considered/applied teacher feedback, but only 32% said they did so “regularly.”

To summarize, about the only generalizations that could be made about teachers’ self-reported written feedback strategies were that many used rubrics and most wrote comments by hand rather than on a computer. A key word that could be used about teachers’ descriptions of their written commentary is flexibility. Instructors seemed more interested in providing feedback that made sense for a particular text or student than in adhering to prescriptions such as “Ask questions rather than making statements”; “Only address ideas on early drafts”; or “Use text-specific marginal comments rather than generic end comments.”

3.1.5. Discussion: teacher practices and “best practices”

Broadly speaking, these 21st century college writing instructors appeared to have embraced composition experts’ suggestions about providing and facilitating feedback on student writing. They claimed to utilize multiple-draft syllabuses through which students have several opportunities to receive feedback from different sources; they reported using peer feedback and one-to-one writing conferences extensively rather than relying on written teacher feedback alone; and they described written feedback strategies that are flexible and utilize various combinations of commentary and correction methods. Many had adopted a fairly structured approach to various feedback methods, such as providing clear guidance to students about how to complete peer review tasks, asking students to come prepared to required teacher–student conferences and to take notes, and using rubrics or checklists as part of their own written feedback. From our interviews, we gathered that these structures served several purposes for the teachers: they saved time (or helped teachers and students to utilize time wisely), and they matched teachers’ perceptions of how feedback would best work for their student populations. In the region in which this study was completed, there are many multilingual (L2) writers and many who are the first in their families to attempt college. Teachers appeared to believe that a clearly structured approach to feedback would help to scaffold the writing/response/revision process most effectively for their students.

In other ways, teachers’ self-descriptions of their response practices were surprising and arguably even counterproductive. It was striking how few of the teachers said they used computer-based tools to construct written feedback for their students. Survey respondents and interview participants had explanations for their choices—they found it hard to adjust to reading student papers on a computer, and they believed that word-processed commentary was less convenient and/or more time-consuming. However, given their other choices in the name of clarity and scaffolding, it is surprising that they would shun modern tools that, if nothing else, facilitate the legibility and thus the clarity of written feedback. Even more notably, less than a third of the instructors said they regularly asked students to analyze, reflect upon, or respond to feedback they had gotten from their instructors. Recent scholarship about teacher feedback has stressed that response is a two-way process, and for response to have optimal effect, students should be asked (or required) to engage in some way with feedback they have received. (Ferris, 2003; Ferris, Liu et al., 2011; Sommers, 2006). In sum, as to the “big picture” of response to student writing, the teachers in our study appeared to be in line with so-called best practices. However, as to the details, they may have been subverting their own efforts in some important ways, adding to an often-expressed sense of frustration with the process of providing feedback to students (see Ferris, Liu, et al., 2011).

3.2. Research Question 2: teachers’ response philosophies

3.2.1. Findings

Our interviews with 23 volunteer participants who had completed the online survey afforded us the opportunity to ask them in-depth questions about the philosophies and attitudes toward response
to student writing. We were interested in several related questions: (1) Were the instructors able to articulate a philosophy toward response when asked to do so? (2) What are instructors’ philosophies? and (3) How and where were teachers’ philosophies formed?

Some (about one-third) of the interview participants struggled with the abstract nature of the “philosophy” question, and, rather than explaining why they approach response as they do, instead described what they did (e.g., use rubrics, focus on marginal comments or end notes, focus on higher-order concerns). However, the other instructors were able to articulate a range of values guiding their response behaviors:

• a desire to encourage students and build their confidence,
• the goal of helping students take more responsibility for their own writing progress,
• a belief in individualizing instruction for students through text-specific feedback,
• wanting feedback to be a “dialogue” or a “conversation” with students rather than a series of teacher directives,
• their own belief in the central nature of response in the teaching of writing,
• the need to be clear in their own responses and to model clarity for student writers,
• the struggle to prioritize what is most important when responding to a student text,
• the need to be “expeditious” and wise in time management—being fair to oneself while still providing useful feedback to students.

As to sources of their response philosophies, many instructors pointed to graduate courses on teaching writing and/or internships on teaching or tutoring writing completed during graduate programs. Others mentioned getting ideas from colleagues and feedback from students. One mentioned that her dissertation director had modeled good feedback processes, and that she tried to emulate them with her own students. A number of teachers said that they had developed their approaches to response through experience—through seeing what did and did not work for their students. Finally, most of our interviewees said that their approaches had changed over time, but in different ways. One teacher said that experience had “softened” her responses, making her more encouraging and less negative. Another said that watching her students pay little attention to commentary she had labored over caused her to streamline her feedback approach and spend less time on it. Because most of the participants were experienced teachers from a variety of academic backgrounds (see Table 1), it is not surprising that their feedback strategies were informed by different sources and that they had evolved over time.

3.2.2. Discussion
In addition to responses to specific interview questions, examining the set of case study narratives yielded some more general insights about writing teachers and their responding behaviors. There seemed to be four general response types into which our 23 case study participants fit.

3.3. Type 1: the idealist (6 interviewees)
In our sample, this was almost always a new teacher with under three years of experience in teaching writing; in several cases they were teaching associates (TAs) still completing a graduate program. These teachers said they value being nondirective in their responses, prioritize one-to-one writing conferences over written feedback, and tend to believe that all students benefit equally from the same response strategies (e.g., they do not want to make any adjustments to their practices for ESL/multilingual writers). Here is a sample quote from an “Idealist” when asked to articulate his philosophy of response:

I’m not really necessarily looking at the product. I don’t care too much about the product. . . I really care that they can move from one draft to the next. That’s kind of central to my teaching philosophy.
3.4. Type 2: the pragmatist (6 interviewees)

This type tended to be a veteran instructor who had taught writing for ten years or more. This person had tried and discarded a variety of response strategies and mainly was concerned with “getting the job done” as efficiently as possible. For instance, as one subject put it:

I don’t write long verbal responses to them; I write a lot of short remarks. At the top, I usually get a quick summary, maybe twenty words at the most. That’s one of the ways I deviate from the…methodology that was taught to me. . .you were supposed to write like a paragraph… and with a hundred students, I can’t do that.

3.5. Type 3: the outsider (3 interviewees)

Though there were only a couple of examples of this type in our interview sample, their differences from the others were striking enough that they are worth noting. These teachers also tended to be more experienced (10 or more years of teaching) but came to teaching writing from backgrounds outside of composition or even English. They had received little or no formal training or exposure to composition theory and in fact expressed disdain for it. Rather, they had their own strongly held views about what was right or wrong and were not especially interested in “best practices,” research, or the ideas of other teachers. They were the least likely to use process approach techniques such as multiple-drafting or peer response, and they tended to express cynicism about students in general and response in particular:

End notes, yeah right. I don’t think they ever even read them for the most part…You could have just saved your breath… .I’m very jaded and disillusioned at this point in time. I’ll be the first one to admit.

3.6. Type 4: the dedicated veteran (8 interviewees)

Teachers in this category had taught for many years—usually between 10 and 20. They enjoyed and valued teaching writing and were constantly working at evaluating and improving all aspects of their teaching, including their response practices. Instructors of this type were able to articulate a thoughtful and principled approach to response yet readily admitted that they still struggled with aspects of it. As one subject noted:

I would like to change my philosophy to not put too much of a burden on myself as a teacher...to realize that it’s their responsibility, really, to put the effort into the paper and to make the improvement...that it shouldn’t depend on me.

In short, though there were generalizations that could be made about the approaches to response by the instructors in our sample, there were also dramatic differences in philosophy that defy broad classifications, as illustrated by our discussion of the four “responder types.” It was apparent that student experiences in a writing class could be quite different depending upon the approach to response taken by their instructors.

3.7. Research Question 3: instructors’ response behaviors

3.7.1. Findings

As already noted, interview participants provided 3–5 samples of their students’ texts with their own written commentary. These samples were part of the interview discussions, and we did a separate descriptive analysis of the teacher commentary. These analyses demonstrated both convergences and mismatches between what teachers said about their practices and philosophies and what was observed in their written responses.

In both surveys and interviews, instructors said that higher-order concerns (students’ content or ideas) were important to them in response. This assertion was supported by the observations that
teachers’ comments about content tended to be longer than those about grammar or mechanics. One interview participant, for example, wrote in complete sentences while addressing points for essay development but only used single words or short phrases when noting sentence-level errors. This quantity distinction suggests teachers were putting more thought and effort into such comments, supporting the claim that feedback on content was a priority for them. However, nearly all of the texts provided by interview participants included feedback on grammar/errors—and in some cases, the majority of the feedback was on such lower-order concerns. This was not considered a mismatch between philosophy and practice, however, because the survey responses indicated that the teachers in the study provided a mixture of content- and language-focused feedback, and the student texts analyzed supported the teachers’ descriptions of their practices.

Another observed convergence was with the teachers’ use of endnotes. Many interview participants stated that their endnotes included general suggestions for revision and that such feedback worked better in endnotes than in the margins. Our analysis of their marked texts confirmed that most of the teachers wrote more/longer sentences in endnotes and that such notes focused on suggestions for revision. While several teachers stated a preference for marginal comments as being more immediate and said they struggled with what to say in endnotes, more teachers affirmed the value of a summary endnote, and their observed responding behavior confirmed that preference.

Though many of our teachers appeared to practice what they preached (or at least what they said they believed), for some others, there was discontinuity between their stated philosophies and actual responding practices as observed in the sample texts they provided. Many teachers stated that they primarily use questioning techniques in their feedback, but when we examined their actual commentary, we found more statements and imperatives than the teachers had led us to expect. A different type of discontinuity pertained to the instructors’ ability to execute their “philosophies” skillfully. For example, one of our interview participants stated that she has become increasingly aware that “being clear” is what she requires her students to do, so she needs to model clarity in her feedback to them. However, when we examined her feedback on students’ papers, it was apparent that she still had some way to go to “model clarity”; in fact, her interviewer had to ask her several times to explain very short, cryptic comments whose meanings and purposes were not transparent even within the context of the students’ papers.

Another teacher explained in his interview that he marked patterns of errors in a student text and then gave a verbal description of the pattern in his endnote, and indeed, he did so. However, his idea of marking a “pattern” was simply to type the word “comma” where one was missing and then to write in the endnote “You have a lot of comma errors.” This practice may be accurate and consistent with his stated philosophy, but given the range and complexity of comma errors, it may not have been descriptive enough to help his students very much.

Finally, to conclude our observations on teacher marking practices, we also noted differences in the ways teachers responded to papers they considered to be of higher quality or written by stronger students. In general, students whose papers were stronger received much less feedback except on very surface-level mechanical issues. It appeared that many of our subjects did not have a clear picture of how to push stronger writers to the next level—or perhaps they chose to conserve their responding energies for those students they perceived to be at more risk of failure.

3.7.2. Discussion

In many ways, the teachers’ observed commenting practices matched what they had said on the surveys and in their interviews: they mixed feedback on content and language; they used both marginal and end notes; and they provided suggestions for revision rather than simply telling students what was wrong with their papers. However, in other instances, teacher responding behaviors did not match up with what they said they believed, just as in the studies by Lee (2009b) and Montgomery and Baker (2007). More notably, when philosophy statements such as “model clarity” and “mark patterns of error” were held up to closer scrutiny, these worthy goals, in some cases, were not accomplished skillfully enough to be truly useful to student writers. However, because “quality” and “effects” of teacher commentary were not part of this study’s design, this latter observation should be considered anecdotal rather than conclusive.
4. Conclusion

4.1. Summary of findings

Previous studies on response to student writing have yielded suggestions about what instructors should do (or not do). This study examined whether these suggestions have borne fruit in teacher preparation and in classroom practice. To a large extent, it seems that they have: the college writing instructors in our study claimed to use modern responding practices that included multiple opportunities for students to receive feedback and revise their papers and different sources and delivery modes for feedback (peer response, teacher–student writing conferences, written teacher feedback). While there was clearly variation across the sample of survey respondents and interview participants, teachers also seemed to have embraced a range of techniques for providing feedback: using rubrics or checklists, strategically combining marginal and end comments, mixing feedback on content and language depending upon the needs of individual students, and varying the formal characteristics of their written comments (questions, statements, imperatives, comment length). There seemed to be an overall preference among teachers in our sample for utilizing flexible response strategies that fit the student and the task rather than following rigid prescriptions.

While earlier studies have similarly provided information about the focus and form of teacher written commentary (e.g., Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris et al., 1997; Straub & Lunsford, 1995), this study examined a broader range of response practices, including peer review and teacher–student conferences. Teachers in this study utilized both peer response and writing conferences extensively. As to peer response workshops, the majority of teachers followed a structured approach that including modeling/training and providing clear guidance for students as to what to look for in peers’ texts and how to respond. The instructors in this study valued writing conferences highly and either required or strongly encouraged them in their classes. In short, as to general response practices, the instructors tended to follow expert advice to provide students with different sources of feedback as they move through the writing process or the course.

A unique characteristic of this study was its focus on asking teachers themselves why they approached response as they did, rather than simply inducing their purposes from examining their written commentary. We found that teachers’ approaches ranged from the noble (empower students as individual writers) to the compassionate (build students’ confidence in themselves) to the pragmatic (manage the time demands) to the cynical (just give students models to follow because they don’t care much and won’t exert much effort). Generally speaking, the instructors seemed to care about their teaching of writing in general and their response practices in particular, with some expressing enthusiasm about the value of feedback and others voicing frustration and doubt about its efficacy and value.

4.2. Implications for practice

Overall, the findings from this study were encouraging as to the state of college writing instruction in this region, especially with regard to response to student writing. However, we also noted ways in which the teachers might be able to improve outcomes and reduce frustration by considering the following issues:

(1) Teachers should pay more attention to what students do after receiving feedback. There are useful ways in which teachers can ask students to reflect upon and analyze feedback they have received from instructors or peers and how it might apply to their future writing. Having put so much effort into constructing oral or written commentary, teachers should take the final step of ensuring that students can and do utilize it effectively (see also Hamp-Lyons, 2006).

(2) Teachers should explore how computer-based feedback can benefit themselves and their students. Electronic feedback is superior to handwritten feedback in three different ways: it is legible, it is clearer and less cryptic, and it is permanent and can be saved for future reference or analysis. While there may still be legitimate concerns about student access and teacher comfort
or convenience, such practical issues are rapidly becoming less relevant in most postsecondary settings.

(3) *Teachers should evaluate their own response strategies and make adjustments as necessary.* Participants in this study had, for the most part, developed thoughtful philosophies and approaches to response and could articulate them well. However, as previously noted, there were sometimes problems with execution, specifically clarity and usefulness of some written commentary. Instructors may find it beneficial to obtain feedback from their students and advice from peers (informally or during an in-service workshop) to sharpen and improve the ways in which they make written comments, conduct conferences, or facilitate peer review. A principle or philosophy is only truly valuable if it is actually applied effectively.

### 4.3. Future research

This study was obviously limited by size (129 college writing instructors surveyed and 23 interviewed) and location (in a specific region accessible for in-person interviews). However, the design is easily exportable, and it could be useful to discover whether the response practices and philosophies described by the teachers in this study are generalizable to a broader sample and/or in different regions. It is easy to imagine, for example, that in contexts where class sizes and teaching loads are much larger than our participants experienced, instructors’ strategies for coping with feedback and the workload might be quite distinct from the findings of this study. It could also be useful to expand the design of this study by adding student surveys and/or interviews (as in Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Montgomery & Baker, 2007) to assess similarities and differences between teacher perceptions of and student reactions to response practices in their classes.

A different type of follow-up study might pursue an ethnography of response practices in one or more writing classrooms, looking over time at how classroom talk, peer workshops, and teacher feedback interact. In the current study, teachers responded to questions about such activities and even provided samples of their written commentary, but such data is quantitatively and qualitatively different than observing the interactions of different response practices in a particular setting over a period of time.

Finally, this study suggests that a closer examination of teacher preparation practices might be appropriate. Nearly all of our participants reported having received some prior professional training in responding to student writing, and our case study participants often (but not always) cited such training as a source of their current beliefs about response. Nonetheless, it was clear from the surveys and the interviews that the teachers in our sample had a wide range of approaches to and beliefs about response, suggesting that either the nature of the training they received was dissimilar or that the ways in which they applied their training (or did not) varied. It could be valuable to study courses and programs that prepare writing instructors to find out to what extent such preparation includes formal training in response to student writing and what the content and form of such training might be. For example, does “training” in response consist of reading and discussing an article or two on the topic in a composition pedagogy seminar, or does it include hands-on practice in writing comments or conducting conferences, with feedback from peers or a trainer about the effectiveness of the response? Examination of teacher preparation contexts could also include collecting follow-up data from graduates of such programs to see if/how training in response has influenced their classroom practices.

### 4.4. Closing thoughts

Response to student writing occupies an odd space in composition research and classroom practice. It is ubiquitous—everyone does it—and it is time-consuming and often exhausting. At the same time, few researchers in recent years have looked closely at how response practices are implemented, how well they work or do not, and how teachers and students feel about them. Meanwhile, respected experts express strong doubts about whether feedback helps student writers at all (see, e.g., Elbow, 1999). In the face of such ambivalence and a relative lack of information, writing teachers carry on. This study provides some current information about what writing instructors do about response, why
they do it, and how they feel about it. Surely, given the amount of time given to feedback and the confidence that teachers place in its potential, response requires and deserves renewed efforts and energy from writing researchers.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2013.09.004.

References


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