Does commenting on students' writing in a purely online environment impact the way we offer written feedback?

The Centre for Academic Communication for Let's Talk About Teaching 2020

Agenda:
- Offering written feedback: Approaches
- One study: Effective strategies for online written feedback
- Small group discussions and large group share
- CAC approaches with written feedback
- Summary

Best practices: (Adapted from *Grading Student Writing: A Guide for Instructors*, 2018)
- Planned (Aligned with learning outcomes)
- Consolidated (A few salient points vs every weakness)
- Comprehensible (Complete sentences vs cryptic abbreviations: "awk")
- Accessible (Conversational vs cold in tone)
- Timely (Feedback offered in time to impact performance on next assignment)

CAC Team Tips:
1) Refer to what "the reader" is experiencing when commenting (e.g., "the reader expects a transition between these sentences"), so the student gets the concept of writing to communicate to an audience. This term also helps keep things neutral and objective
2) Refer students to useful external sources using hyperlinks and screenshots/copy and pasted text with source acknowledgement (e.g., collocation dictionary, academic phrasebank, list of transitional words, comma rules)
3) Write like you talk: use all tools at your disposal (humour, emoticons, etc.) to make comments as much like "you" as possible ("awk" isn't like you at all!)
4) Focus on where the student is NOW in their writing, and provide feedback that focuses on whatever the steps are to get them ONE step above that place, one step at a time
5) If there is a pattern of weak paragraph structure, provide a sample paragraph with explicit annotations explaining its structure
6) Use 3 highlight strategy: one colour for strengths, one for confusion, one for errors; followed up by a birds-eye comment on the whole. Be specific about identifying strengths along with the specifics on identifying errors.
7) Differentiate feedback provided on rough drafts and feedback provided on final submission (Offer suggestions on drafts; point out strengths/future opportunities on final versions)
8) Provide focused feedback on grammar (note trends rather than pointing out every error)
9) At the start of the course, explain and provide clarification on types of feedback/comments you will give
10) Create glossary/guide to define and clarify meaning of key language used in written feedback
11) Be encouraging!

One study: Gausch et al. (2013): "Effects of feedback on collaborative writing in an online learning environment"

Research questions: 1) What type of online written feedback improves the writing quality? And 2) What type of online written feedback enhances student learning?

Key finding: Instructor feedback that is both epistemic (feedback refers to requests for explanations and/or clarifications in a critical way) and suggestive (includes advice on how to proceed or progress and invites exploration, expansion, or improvement of an idea) has the greatest impact on both the quality of student writing and student learning.

Small group discussions:

1. What are you currently doing that is working well?
2. What is one aspect you would like to improve?

Small group discussion summary:

1. To improve:
    A. being concise! One participant noted that it was "hard to shut up on screen"; there are no margins giving you limits on how much you can say! One solution might be to limit written comments to little things, and to make an audio or video recording for the "bigger" things or lengthier explanations.
        -CourseSpaces had an easy tool for audio recording feedback, and Brightspace has one for audio and video
    B. Barriers to being online all the time; hard copies are portable and give us a rest from screen time. A solution might be to print assignments, grade by hand, and scan (if there aren't too many and resources allow) or to use a tablet/stylus device to comment by hand on a pdf
    C. Seeing the bigger picture beyond the smaller grammatical and citation issues
    D. Focusing on next steps, rather than using "awk" or "needs revision"

2. Going well:
    A. Use of other tools and strategies in addition to written feedback: audio/video feedback
    B. Having students use our rubrics to mark their own work or other students' work, so that all the burden of feedback/audience response isn't on the instructor; consolidate peer reviewers' and your own feedback into a few sentences, or compare a student's grade of various aspects of their own work to yours to identify where they're doing better/worse than they think.
    C. Having students identify potential areas of weakness and strength in their own work as part of their formative feedback (in "comments" for instructor to respond to; this can help speed up feedback and keep it focused)

Resources for further reading

Online feedback

Dean, M., & Guasch, T (Eds.). (2015). *Learning and teaching writing online: Strategies for success*. Brill. https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/lib/uvic/detail.action?docID=2028204

Guasch, T., Espasa, A., Alvarez, I. M., & Kirschner, P. A. (2013). Effects of feedback on collaborative writing in an online learning environment. *Distance Education, 34*(3), 324–338. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2013.835772

Moffitt, R. L., Padgett, C., & Grieve, R. (2020). Accessibility and emotionality of online assessment feedback: Using emoticons to enhance student perceptions of marker competence and warmth. Computers and Education, 143, 1–11.

Written corrective feedback

Bichener, J., & Ferris, D., (2012). *Written corrective feedback in second language acquisition and writing*. New York, NY: Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203832400

Lee, I. (2019). Teacher written corrective feedback: Less is more. *Language Teaching, 52*(4), 524–536. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000247

Mao, S. S., & Crosthwaite, P. (2019). Investigating written corrective feedback: (Mis)alignment of teachers' beliefs and practice. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 45*, 46 – 60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2019.05.004

Writing Centres Online

Neaderhiser, S. and Wolfe, J. (2009) Between technological endorsement and resistance: The state of online writing centres. *The Writing Centre Journal, 29* (1), 49–77.

Inman, J. A., & Sewell, D. (Eds.). (2000). *Taking flight with OWLs: Examining electronic writing centre work.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Additional Websites

https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/16/02/responding-student-writing-and-writers

https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/writing-assignments-feedback/commenting-on-student-writing/

https://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/pages/responding-student-writing

https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/16/02/responding-student-writing-and-writers