RECONSIDERING TEACHER COMMENTARY AS INTERACTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE DIALOGUE: IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT WRITING AND REVISING

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This dissertation focuses on teacher commentary as formative assessment and as collaborative dialogue that actively engages both teacher and student writers in conversations about the writing. Student voices are emphasized throughout this teacher research study of two classes at a Midwestern community college, a study that explores what the FYC student writers want and value in teacher commentary as they write and revise. With a particular research project acting as the contextual “center” of the dialogue, multiple data collection instruments were employed, including: student-generated texts and self-assessments, pre-and post-project questionnaires, personal interviews, and personal observations and reflections from teacher and students. Analysis of this data draws upon feminist theory, grounded theory and an ethnographic perspective to discover, describe, and assess the multiple and varied contexts surrounding student writing and revising as well as student values within these complex contexts. I argue that students do value the collaborative dialogue, interactions and formative assessment found in commentary that gives the students a voice in their own writing and revising, and I further argue that this intentional and rhetorical response to student writing sends a powerful message to those student writers about what we in the field of Rhetoric and Composition truly value in writing.
With love & appreciation, this text is dedicated to—

*Dad and Mom*, who have always encouraged my love of reading, writing & learning;

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CHAPTER 1: A LOOK BEYOND BASICS IN THE COMMENTING RELATIONSHIP

We compose texts (whether in word, audio or visual form) to communicate our thoughts and ideas to others, and receiving feedback or commentary about what we have composed allows us to determine how successfully (or not) we have accomplished our goals for that particular text. Experienced writers attempt to imagine their readers as they are composing a text; they consider how these readers will understand, respond to, or even question the text as they are composing it, but even experienced writers can miss the mark at times. While experienced writers understand the value of commentary and will seek out the opinions of a trusted reader as they work, most student writers struggle to imagine their reader’s response and do not yet understand the value of receiving thoughtful commentary about their texts. For this reason, Nancy Sommers (1982) suggests that teacher commenting on student writing serves a valuable pedagogical purpose (p.148). In her well-known article, “Responding to Student Writing,” Sommers explains that “we comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because, ultimately, we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their own writing” (1982, p. 148). In ways, these ideas about teaching students to think critically and reflectively about their own writing also align nicely with Donald Murray’s ideas in “Teaching the Other Self” (1982). Pedagogically-speaking, then, teacher commentary introduces student writers to the rhetorical concepts of audience and context, and begins to teach students how to think like readers as they write, self-assess, and revise within the various stages of their own writing processes. Sommers cautions, however, that “[w]ritten comments need to be viewed not as an end in themselves—a way for teachers to satisfy themselves that they have done their jobs—but rather as a means for helping students to become more effective
writers”(1982, p. 155). In other words, teachers are expected to read and comment on their student writings with more than a compulsory or disinterested glance. After all, teacher commentary that can help students grow and develop as critical thinkers and as writers is both thoughtful and intentional commenting, but it is also commenting that requires a significant investment of time and attention by teachers.

No single activity in the teaching of composition requires more of a teacher’s time, attention and energy than commenting on student texts. Producing commentary is time-consuming, and teachers of writing often log many more hours with their students’ papers than they spend in the classroom teaching. In fact, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) estimates that a minimum of 20 minutes is needed to respond to a single student paper (2002). While the NCTE does not specify a page length, let’s assume an average paper length of four pages in a college composition course. For a class of 25 students, then, the teacher will spend at least 500 minutes [20 minutes per paper x 25 students], or eight and a third hours, responding to a particular set of papers.\(^1\) When considering multiple drafts, longer or more complex papers, and teaching multiple classes, though, the time that teachers spend reading and commenting on student papers grows exponentially. So, during a given semester, teachers may actually spend more time with their students’ written texts than with the students themselves. Perhaps this is why Richard Haswell’s “minimal marking” system became so popular in 1983 and beyond. His two-step method provides a seemingly simple labor-saving shortcut to commenting on student drafts. In Haswell’s first step, the teacher places an X in the margin next to the line that contains a mistake, and the student then finds and corrects the mistake on her own. In the second step, the teacher checks the student’s correction for accuracy and then instructs the student as necessary. Of course, Haswell has since lamented that many teachers
have chosen to skip the second step completely, thus only partially following his method, and, in
effect, making it “labor-saving” for teachers but not necessarily “learning-effective” for students
(2009, p. 1281). Haswell understands the desire to be more efficient in commenting but cautions
that effective shortcuts can only come “through an exploration of the true complexity of teacher
response to student writing” (p. 1263). In fact, Haswell further suggests that “. . . the ecology of
response—its full human, social, and institutional context—is more complex than the customary
practice of response seems to warrant” (p. 1264). Unfortunately, proposed shortcuts in
commenting practices often ignore these multiple contexts and the inherent complexities
involved within the act of writing itself. These proposed shortcuts may fail to recognize that
individual writing processes are different and the needs of student writers may vary, that
different types of composing by students may require different types of responses from teachers,
that the level &/or type of comments needed by students may vary based on the genre or drafting
stage for a particular project, and that different composing contexts may require teachers to use
different means of commenting. The list of potential short-comings of many proposed short-cuts
could go on, but the implication here is that commenting on student writing is both complex and
contextual.

And yet, the search for time-saving shortcuts continues to demand attention in writing
instruction. In recent decades, rubrics, with their clear-cut categories and specific criteria, have
been seen by some as time-savers in the long, arduous task of commenting on and grading
student papers. Rubrics have even been hailed by some (mainly administrators and testing firms)
as the great equalizer in writing assessment because they create standards that can be replicated
in multiple settings by multiple teachers. Unfortunately, as Maja Wilson (2006) points out, when
these standardized, time-saving rubrics are used, we lose our ability to truly be responsive in the
ways that our student writers need us to be. Rubrics often fail to recognize our values as readers and can also fail to recognize the strengths of student writers. With their focus on the product, and an emphasis on how students “measure-up” in certain categories, rubrics tend to emphasize negatives (i.e. what is missing or done incorrectly) in student texts rather than recognizing positives (i.e. growth and development). In a related article, Wilson suggests that “[r]ubrics, and their ‘menu’ of generic comments are clumsy in practice and in theory; they tear at the foundations of the rhetorical heart of writing, reducing student essays and our responses to an exercise in purposelessness” (2007, 63). These may seem like strong words, but rubrics, with their “prepackaged and processed” feedback (Wilson, 2007, 63), cannot meet the individual needs of all student writers and their individual writing processes since rubrics are not capable of engaging the rhetorical complexities of writing and language. Assessment scholar Bob Broad (2003) explains that “[t]he strength of the hundreds of rubrics like White’s (“Sample Holistic Scoring Guide”) lies in what they include; their greatest weakness is what they leave out” (2). In order to be useful as a means of evaluation, rubrics are designed to be brief, clear, and normative, but “[i]n doing so, they (rubrics) surrender their descriptive and informative potential: responsiveness, detail and complexity in accounting for how writing is actually evaluated” (Broad, 2003, 2). In other words, what is necessary for standardized or normative evaluations is the absence of any real detail about the rhetorical nature of the writing or about the human response of the reader. Rubrics “work” largely because they look at a piece of writing with blinders on; rubrics only “see” what they are designed to see. For these reasons, Broad further cautions that “traditional rubrics and scoring guides prevent us from telling the truth about what we believe, what we teach, and what we value in composition courses and programs” (2003, 2). For many composition scholar-teachers who know the value of teacher commentary, then, their
frustrating yet all too true reality involves a continual struggle between their desire to instruct and inspire their student writers and the time constraints that seem to make this goal impossible to reach.

Composition scholars have driven multiple, ongoing conversations about commenting theory and pedagogy in recent decades, and yet teacher commentary remains a bit of a mystery. How is this possible? CompPile, an on-line resource that provides an extensive index of post-secondary research and scholarship into writing, lists “around 420 data-gathering studies involving teacher response” for the period between 1939 and 1999 (Haswell, 2009, p. 1284). What have we learned through all of these studies, you might wonder? Well, much of the research has delved into practical matters, like the teacher’s methodology in commenting (i.e. positive or critical, vague or specific, brief or lengthy, etc.), placement of comments (i.e. notes throughout, only an end-note, or both), and mode of commenting (i.e. hand-written, typed, audio, or multi-modal). And in most cases, the focus of this research has dealt more with textual analysis of the commentary itself rather than with rhetorical analysis of the commentary and the commenting context (Connors & Lunsford, Ede & Lunsford, Auten, Batt, and others). In fact, in their Introduction to Richard Straub’s Key Works on Teacher Response: an Anthology (2006), C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon suggest that research into teacher response has been largely inconclusive:

How odd to think that a practice as intuitively sensible as commenting on students’ texts in order to facilitate more and better writing should have occasioned such a labor of scholarly justification. And how disconcerting to find, after all the theorizing, the case studies, the controlled experiments, not to mention all the dutiful and well-intentioned
scribbling of millions of teachers in the margins of billions of student essays over the same half century, that the matter remains unresolved. (2006, p. 1)

In other words, after decades of theoretical and empirical research on teacher response commentary and its influence on student writing development, it seems there is still much that we do not yet know.

Interestingly, the questions that remain unanswered after decades of research are often related to the student writers themselves. For example, how might technology (and the student’s technology literacy level) affect students and their interactions with teacher comments? What effect might technology have on the commenting dialogue? What are the effects of commentary on particular student populations? Are students more apt to respond to certain types of comments than others? Why do student writers make the rhetorical choices that they do in their writing and revising? What role do individual student needs play in the commenting relationship, especially in how students value and use (or don’t use) their teacher’s comments? Questions also remain regarding composition teachers and their classrooms. For example, how might factors like faculty workload, classroom experience, and teacher training affect the quality of commentary that is given to student writers? How might composition class size affect the teacher and students who are involved in the commenting relationship? How might the availability of technology (and the teacher’s technology literacy level) affect students and their interactions with teacher comments? These are just a few of the questions that I hope will spur future conversations in the Rhetoric and Composition field and beyond.

Few would argue that teacher commentary and writing instruction are simple tasks; these are instead understood to be complex and highly contextualized enterprises. But recent theorizing about teacher commentary suggests that its effectiveness may be tied more directly to
classroom contexts and to student readings of comments than was previously thought. In fact, Richard Straub (2006) argues that “[w]hen teachers treat their response as a conversation—not just feedback—they model for students how readers and writers muster and manage language, metacommunicative cues, and context in order to create meaning” (352). This type of response as conversation could also be viewed as a type of mentoring in rhetoric and communication skills, it seems. Teacher commentary also has been described as “individualized teaching” (Knoblauch & Brannon, 2006) and “direct teaching” (Mathison Fife & O’Neill, 2001) because of its potential impact in guiding individual students throughout their processes of writing and revising. And yet, those who could teach us the most about this important means of teaching—the students themselves—are, as Peggy O’Neill and Jane Mathison Fife suggest, “an important—but often overlooked—source of information in analyzing and understanding response” (Rpt. 2006, 190). Student voices are not included in most response research, not even in studies that are focused on student understandings and usage of teacher comments. In an important pedagogical practice which supposedly promotes conversation or dialogue about the writing, as Straub suggests, it certainly seems odd that one half of that conversational relationship has been largely ignored or viewed as a silent “partner” in the exchange. After all, when one half of the conversational relationship is not allowed to speak, isn’t the result more of a monologue than a dialogue?

Recent scholarship by Mathison Fife & O’Neill, Brian Huot, Nancy Sommers, Chris Anson, and others, is beginning to recognize that student voices are needed in research about teacher commentary if we are to truly begin to understand its role within the full context of the composition classroom and its activities. Research by Nancy Sommers and Chris Anson (as discussed by the scholars during session K.06, “Teachers’ Comments through Students’ Eyes” at
Sommers shares the question that propels her study: “Do students read and understand teachers’ written comments?” From her interviews with students at a community college, Sommers seeks to answer this question and provide insight into student perceptions of commentary. Sommers finds that students generally do read comments, but often need some context in order to better understand what their teacher means. Sommers further suggests from her research that teachers need to balance their comments by giving encouraging words along with ways to improve the writing. Anson acknowledges that much is written about teacher comments but very little is written about students’ responses to these comments. Anson studies student responses to oral and written (using insert-comment technology) commentary within his research and finds that teachers tend to use more words per response when they are responding orally than when they are writing their responses. He also studies student affect when screen capture technology (which combines the oral and written) is used in commentary. Interestingly, in Anson’s study, when students could hear the teacher’s voice and see their text on the screen (via screen capture technology), their sense of positive feelings from the instructor were stronger but their sense of the instructor’s negative feelings were weaker. The combination of visual and auditory response seems to be positively received by students within his study, but Anson’s research work continues. As both of these scholars emphasize, much more student-focused research is needed, and as Brian Huot (2002) stresses, “we must include our students’ interests, opinions, and attitudes in any kinds of response that we may assume to be effectively communicated” (135). After all, how can teacher commentary be effective for student writers if their wants and needs are either unknown or ignored?
This dissertation delves into the complexities of teacher commentary as formative assessment, as a means of interactive and collaborative dialogue or “direct teaching,” and investigates local classroom contexts in an attempt to better understand what composition students value in teacher commentary, along with how students make use of formative teacher response commentary. By conducting teacher-research with two sections of beginning or first-year composition (FYC) and by gathering data from student questionnaires, various classroom artifacts, and a number of personal interviews, I create a thick description of my commentary or response practices and the student writers/recipient of that commentary.

In this opening chapter, I begin by briefly introducing scholarly conversations on teacher commentary and noting the absence of student voices within these existing conversations. From here, I delve deeper into recent scholarship that deals with teacher commentary as formative assessment and with current understandings of the multi-faceted and highly contextual nature of this commentary conversation. This review of recent scholarship reveals the complex nature of commentary as conversation, the need for student voices to be heard, and the current absence of a theory of response. Key voices and important ideas within existing conversations are featured and these serve to ground this study within these existing conversations in the field. Next, I briefly describe my own background as a teacher-scholar and my interest in this area of scholarly inquiry as a move toward establishing my research stance for this study. From here, I use recent scholarship and classroom examples to define key terms as they are understood by this researcher and used within this study. The discussion of the purpose for this study and the research questions that follow, then, reveal the focus of the inquiry that is inspired and shaped by my own background and by this earlier scholarship. A brief discussion of my sense of the
implications of this research study for the field of Rhetoric & Composition follows a brief overview of the remaining chapters in this dissertation and closes out this first chapter.

Literature Review: Teacher Commentary and Missing Voices

Peter Elbow has said that “[t]he right or best comment is the one that helps this student on this topic on this draft and at this point in the semester—given her character and experience” (1999, p. 198). His words imply a contextual basis for comments, a certain kairos as goal. Who decides what is the right or best comment, though? In much of the research into teacher commentary, this decision has been made by the researcher or the teacher. And as Cynthia Onore (1989) reminds us, “[c]omments, even those which take advantage of the best information about composing and revising that is available, are limited in their potential to produce predictable results since their interpretation cannot be fully controlled; neither can the ways in which writers respond and react to them” (p. 237). Mathison Fife & O’Neill (2001) further caution that “[b]esides neglecting the pedagogical context of the comments, research that relies solely on the researcher’s or teacher’s interpretation of a response violates what we know about reading and making meaning” (306). In other words, there is no perfect or one-size-fits-all comment that will guarantee successful student writing and revising, and the perceptions of both teacher and student matter. Janet Gebhardt Auten recognizes the teacher’s responsibility in the commenting relationship when she suggests that “... the challenge for teachers in writing comments is not just to be clear or ‘audience aware’ but to reconcile their context for writing comments with students’ awareness and ability to read comments” (1991, 14). Rather than relying on textual analysis of commentary, then, what Auten suggests is the need for a more rhetorical emphasis that considers contexts surrounding teacher (writer) and student (intended audience). This idea of
context within commentary is important if we want to understand the full impact of what we say and how we say it, along with what our students hear and how they choose to use our words.

An emphasis on context is a thread that is woven through the works of a number of scholars as they discuss teacher commentary or response. In their article, “Listening to Students: Contextualizing Response to Student Writing” (1999), O’Neill & Mathison Fife caution that comments cannot be viewed as “isolated artifacts” but should instead be viewed as contextual and interconnected aspects of the writing classroom (Rpt. 2006, p. 191). This is an especially important reminder since much of the previous research in teacher commentary has indeed treated the teacher’s words on the student’s text as being isolated and self-contained rather than viewing that commentary as an interconnected piece of a larger pedagogical whole. Mathison Fife & O’Neill (2001) further suggest that “[i]n order to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers’ written responses, more research studies need to begin to examine these complex pedagogical practices, taking into account the full context in which composing/response/revision/evaluation occurs” (304). This idea of the writing classroom as a contextual space also aligns nicely with Nancy Sommers’ words on commenting from 1982: “[t]he key to successful commenting is to have what is said in the comments and what is done in the classroom mutually reinforce each other” (p. 155). Context is definitely important within the writing classroom, and teacher commentary is an important piece within that overall context. And ideally, as Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch see it, that response should be a sort of negotiation, a dialogue between student and teacher about the text (1982, p. 163). This kind of negotiation or dialogical relationship between teacher and student goes well beyond comments written on a draft, though. In fact, as Mathison Fife & O’Neill explain, “[c]ommunication that enhances student textual control and revision skills cannot begin with teachers’ comments written on student drafts. Instead, these
comments must be contextualized by efforts to position students to speak authoritatively not only through their writing, but also about their writing” (2001, 303). The real work of commenting on drafts, then, is intentional and begins in the classroom even before the initial writing is completed, and this work continues throughout the writing process as teacher and student interact and become what Amy Lee (2000) refers to as “coinquirers”(10) in the writing and revising process. The implication here is a partnership between student and teacher, an ongoing and interactive process in which a given text is not an end but rather a site of continued inquiry and discovery. Being a “coinquirer” requires active engagement throughout the entire process and allows for attention in commenting to be focused on specific needs for individual students as well.

Any study of teacher commentary necessarily includes the work and ideas of Richard Straub, in part because of his own scholarly attention to matters of teacher commentary, and in part because his work is often referenced as a starting point in the work of other scholars. Straub’s own work led him to advocate for teacher commentary that is both conversational and interactive. He suggests that comments can ask questions or suggest revision possibilities, thereby “enabl[ing] students to engage in ‘richer pursuits of meaning’ than they would on their own” (as cited in Mathison Fife & O’Neill, 2001, 310). Straub further claims that “[o]nly by elaborating one’s comments in a way that opens up the matters under discussion for a mutual investigation by writer and reader can a teacher make his comments conversational . . .”(1996, 389). A spirit of inquiry and interaction is definitely encouraged within his words, and in this way I find Straub’s view of the roles of teachers and students within the commenting process to be similar to Lee’s “coinquirers” idea. In fact, Straub even uses similar wording in his 1996 article, “Teacher Response as Conversation: More Than Casual Talk, an Exploration,” when he
speaks of teachers and students as “fellow inquirers” (Rpt. 2006, p. 352). Straub suggests that “[i]f teachers respond as interested and expectant readers, looking to promote richer inquiry and not just writing that is better formed, students will exert more effort at constructing something worthwhile to say and finding ways to share this understanding more fully with others” (p. 352). This emphasis on inquiry and interaction beyond the bounds of the page is an important, and sometimes overlooked, aspect of formative teacher commentary.

I appreciate how Straub places high value on this type of teacher commentary, in part, because this commentary has the potential to affect how the students view or consider themselves as writers. In fact, he states: “[b]y talking about the text as an act of writing and reading, they (responders) create the student as someone who is both capable of, and interested in, working through these issues of writing and improving himself as a writer” (1996, 390). In other words, when students gain a sense of their identities as writers and realize that they are a valuable part of the commenting dialogue, they are more apt to engage in the work of writing and revising. Like Straub, Mathison Fife & O’Neill (2001) suggest that commentary should be conversational, and they attempt to recognize conversational patterns or dialogues that strive to create a “mutual negotiation of meaning between participants” (312). And to this end, these scholars have formulated a number of questions for compositionists to consider (See Figure 1.1 below):

**Figure 1.1: Considerations for Conversational Commenting**

- What rules, explicitly stated or implied, structure the kinds of contributions students and teachers make in the writing and response interchange?
- What rules exist about turn-taking?
- Who gets to set the topic?
Who is authorized to speak *about* the student’s writing and to suggest plans and rations for revision?

What pedagogical practices invite the student to respond to the teacher’s comments?

(Source: Mathison Fife & O’Neill, 2001, 312-3)

These questions underscore the idea that students should not only be *allowed* to initiate the conversation, but should actually be *encouraged* to do so. Mathison Fife and O’Neill (2001) also reference the work of John Gumperez, a conversational researcher, who stresses the social nature of this type of conversational commentary or “dynamic process” (1982, 131) and who recognizes that attention must be given to contexts and to participant perceptions of what occurs.

Mathison Fife and O’Neill (2001) also value participant perceptions, and suggest that “stating their observations, goals, and concerns” is an important part of the “process of inquiry” for students (313). They further explain that

> by encouraging our students to participate in dialogue, and by including their voices in our interpretations of the situation, we are changing the terms that usually define response as well as the reality of it. Getting students to talk and write about their writing *like* writers can construct a reality where they *are* writers [emphasis added]. (316)

So, when we begin to value our students’ learning experiences, their development as writers, and their ability to evaluate and to revise their own texts, we also encourage a sense of self-awareness and confidence in our students. And valuing these experiences and abilities in our students, along with their new-found self-awareness and confidence, can then encourage student engagement and the further development of their identities as emerging writers and scholars.

Asao Inoue puts these ideas into practice in his “Community-based assessment pedagogy”
Within his upper-level undergraduate course, Inoue’s students are involved in the creation of assessment criteria and rubrics, and they even help to create the writing assignments. In fact, the students are responsible for most of what occurs throughout the semester. The goal, according to Inoue, is for students to learn first-hand about their own writing and assessment practices through theorizing, practice and reflection (210). While this particular type of pedagogy might not work well in all academic settings or with all student populations, the underlying concepts of the need for student involvement in assessment and for students to understand their own writing processes and the effects of assessment (on them and on their writings) are applicable in multiple contexts, especially within teacher commenting.

A special issue of the *Harvard Writing Project Bulletin* (2000) focuses on the topic of responding to student writing and discusses the findings of an ongoing Harvard study about the role of feedback in the academic and scholarly development of undergraduate students. The study’s findings suggest that “most undergraduates regard thoughtful feedback in its many forms—written comments on drafts and papers, e-mail messages responding to proposals or introductions, and personal conversations in office hours or after class—as central to their learning experience” (Walk, 1). Nancy Sommers, a researcher in the study, suggests that teacher commentary or feedback seems to be especially beneficial for freshman students who are unaccustomed to the norms and academic expectations of college and who sometimes struggle to adjust to these new demands; a teacher’s specific comments to the students’ writings can introduce these novice scholars to new and deeper ways of thinking and writing, thus helping them to develop a more academic mindset (Walk, 2000, 1-2). Most student writers appreciate response that shows their teacher cared enough to read what they have written (Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008). But while most students desire some sort of response to their writing,
perspective about what type of response they themselves need often differs from that of their teachers. And unfortunately, much of the research in our field has ignored matters of context, of negotiation between teacher and student, and of student perceptions, and instead has focused on analysis of the actual texts of teacher comments. The effectiveness of these teacher comments has been studied at numerous junctures as well. In their well-known and oft-cited 1993 study, Robert J. Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford provide a unique large-scale study of student writing and teacher commenting practices. The authors discuss their actual study, what their findings might mean for the field, and lament that “[f]or reasons of overwork, or incomplete training, or curricular demands, many of the teachers whose comments we looked at are still not going beyond giving students standards by which to judge finished writing” (1993, 219). In other words, they found teacher commentary to be more summative than formative in nature, resulting in an emphasis on the product of the writing rather than on the student’s writing process itself. And unfortunately, the possible reasons given in 1993 for teachers’ reliance on summative commentary—“overwork, or incomplete training, or curricular demands” (Connors & Lunsford, 219)—are still issues today as evidenced by NCTE Position Statements and research by George Hillocks, Jr. (2002) and Melanie Lee (2009), among others. So, in a field that supposedly values the process involved in composing, research seems to indicate that teacher comments (for whatever reason) often consider only the end product instead. In other words, rather than giving hopeful words aimed at helping students to understand their writing processes and how they can improve their writing on future projects, much teacher commentary offers only a final verdict that is narrowly focused on a singular task and seems only vaguely aware of the student writers themselves.
It is somewhat troubling that by the 1980s, numerous scholars had published research works about teacher commentary (Sommers, 1982; Knoblacuch & Brannon, 1981; Searle & Dillon, 1980; Gee, 1972; Hillocks, Jr., 1982; Ziv, 1984; Auten, 1985, and others), yet many of their insights were seemingly brushed aside or ignored. For example, in her 1982 article “Responding to Student Writing,” Sommers presents insights into teacher commenting practices and student response to these teacher comments in a work that also recognizes the complex and contextual nature of commentary. Many later references to this work, however, seem to focus only on the textual analysis aspect of the article. For many in the field, it seems, teacher commentary was still seen as being about finding mistakes and justifying grades rather than being a matter of intentional interactions between teacher and student about writing. In the 1990s, then, some of the research into teacher commentary began to emphasize the student’s role in the commenting relationship and the effect of teacher comments on students (Straub, 1996; Mathison Fife & O’Neill, 1999; Anson, 1999; and others). While these scholars focus on the students and on commenting as dialogue, many other scholars still seem more concerned with what students choose to do with the responses that they receive (as evidenced by their texts, i.e. product) rather than working to discover how and why the students make the rhetorical choices that they do (i.e. process). And so it seems that a phrase Sommers suggested in 1982 as a means to understand the commenting problem—“a confusion of process and product” (154)—could actually fit in a current discussion of commentary: teachers and researchers still seem more concerned with the end product that their students produce rather than with the writing and revising processes the students employ in order to get to that end product. This dichotomy between the values that our field espouses (an emphasis on processes and contexts) and the everyday realities within our classrooms (an emphasis on products or outcomes) is reason for
concern. And of further concern, as Louise Phelps laments, is the reality that “today’s study of response remains a minor subspecialization pursued by a relatively small group of scholars, rather than the central theoretical concern for the discipline” (as cited in Huot, 2002, 111-12). This dichotomy between stated values and everyday practices ought to be of concern to the entire Rhetoric and Composition field, and not just a handful of interested scholars.

A temporary gap between theory and praxis is nothing new and is, in fact, very predictable. A new theory or a new understanding of an existing theory must be carefully vetted by scholars in the field before it is widely accepted, and only after its widespread acceptance does theory nudge practitioners in the field to change their pedagogies accordingly. In some cases, however, pedagogy can nudge scholars to re-think theory, and in this way, then, theory follows practice. In the case of teacher commentary, however, the theory and the practice have stayed apart and neither has seemed to budge. Scholars like Phelps, Mathison Fife & O’Neill, Huot, and Broad are working to change the ways in which we theorize, practice, and assess teacher commentary, though. Mathison Fife & O’Neill (2001) suggest that “[b]y broadening our notion of response—and acknowledging the many and varied ways that teachers respond to student writing as well as the many and varied ways that students influence and interpret those responses—we will be able to narrow the gap between our teaching practices and our research questions” (300). Viewing teacher commentary as formative assessment draws attention to the full context of writing and allows for critical inquiry into the students’ processes. When teacher commentary is part of an interactive and ongoing conversation, then, students are supported as they employ critical inquiry and reflection into their own writing throughout their entire process of thinking, drafting and revising (Straub, Huot).
While an emphasis on pedagogy or theory-in-practice is somewhat expected in a field that recognizes much of its “heavy lifting” as occurring in the classroom, this does not negate the need for underlying theory. In his 2002 text, *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*, Brian Huot argues that “...we currently lack a sufficient theory for responding to student writing” (109). Part of the issue for Huot is that response literature tends to focus on practice rather than theory. For Huot, the necessary theory for response must also consider the underlying theory of reading. After all, before responding to a draft, the teacher must first read the text, and “reading like a teacher means reading to teach” (113), or at least it should. As readers of our students’ texts, we make choices about how we read their texts and what we read within their words and ideas. Huot suggests that these choices are based upon multiple factors within the context of the classroom as well as the teacher’s experiences (122). He explains that, “[a]n individual reading of student writing is based in and constrained by the structure of the class and the philosophy, training and experience of the teacher” (122). As teachers of writing, then, it is important for us to recognize not only that we make these choices but also we must begin to consider why we make the rhetorical choices that we do as readers of our students’ texts. We need to begin to recognize what we value as readers, and this must then be considered within our response theory. Huot suggests that “[a] dialectic between theory and practice shifts the focus from *how* we respond to *why* we respond, making us reflect upon and articulate our beliefs and assumptions about literacy and its teaching” (112). So, as we move beyond analysis of the actual text of comments (or *what* and *how* we say what we say), we can begin to focus on the rhetorical contexts (or the *why*) surrounding our commenting.

Understanding response differently, as Huot suggests, should result in new and exciting changes within our field, but change may not come easily. In fact, Phelps (1989) suggests that
response theory suffers as the result of the field’s tendency to “short-circuit theory development because of the pressure to solve urgent educational problems” (39). Unfortunately, when a need is urgent or pressing (and aren’t most needs presented as such?), there is a tendency to look amongst the familiar options for a “quick fix” rather than digging deeper or practicing what Phelps terms “fundamental inquiry,” which she explains as “a process of reconstituting the question itself” (39). Phelps further explains that “[t]his fundamental inquiry changes the way we perceive and value information, the way we frame questions, the connections we make among phenomena and concepts” (39). According to Phelps, this fundamental inquiry can change the way we view the original situation so completely that it may elicit major changes in our teaching goals and practices. This discussion of fundamental inquiry seems to align nicely with Huot’s position regarding response theory as he explains that “[i]t is time for the profession to reconceptualize its approach to evaluating and responding to student writing. Instead of just developing alternative methods for couching our commentary, we need to come to an understanding of where our comments come from” (2002, 112). In other words, we need to begin to consider the rhetorical contexts and the choices involved in the act of commenting and within the commenting relationship. Huot further advises that “[r]ather than categorizing teachers’ methods of response, or developing certain principles, it is time we began to study the dynamics of reading student writing, to know what it means to read and respond like a teacher” (113). This statement once again seems to emphasize the why behind our comments. After all, formative comments are not isolated words or ideas that are scribbled randomly in the margins of a student’s paper; instead, formative comments are highly contextualized pieces of a dynamic teaching and learning relationship between teacher and student, a relationship that includes reading and writing by both teacher and student throughout the on-going process.
It is important to note here that Huot does not claim to have all of the answers in his text, but he does present some thought-provoking ideas about what a theory of response might include. He and his graduate students studied response and assessment literature and then worked to create a theory of response. Their model, titled “Moving toward a Theory of Response,” includes an inner circle that is titled “context” that is then surrounded by a larger circle that includes attributes of response like “Transformative,” “Instructive,” “Dialogic,” and “Reflective” (132). Notes of explanation and clarification accompany each of these attributes and a general note found near the top reads: “Theory of response changes as we communicate with students” (132). In his discussion of the model and their process in completing it, Huot clarifies that the students’ interests, opinions, and attitudes are important to any kind of response. Huot further states: “[i]ntegrating my treatment of response with this model could create a dialogic rhetoric of response that strives to enhance communication between teachers and students” (135). And, if we choose to take Huot’s view of a theory of response as “chang(ing) as we communicate with students” (132), then response and its underlying theory becomes a dynamic process of communication in which both teacher and student voices are an integral and vital part of that process.

The research study that follows attempts to complement Huot’s ideas about a dialogic rhetoric of response, response that is dynamic and interactive communication, response that also attends to Broad’s emphasis on values at play when we read student writing and draft comments and when students read our comments. This study, then, seeks to complicate current understandings of teacher response as a fixed, predictable or isolated entity, moving beyond the typical focus on textual analysis or mode of delivery of the comments themselves to focus instead on commentary as a dynamic and on-going relationship between teacher and student. In
an effort to discover what writing students value within this commenting relationship, attention is given to student voices throughout the study. My goal within this study is not to create a new theory of response—that would be an endeavor much beyond the scope of this small, localized study—rather, my purpose here is to begin to understand, from the students’ perspectives, the multi-faceted, highly contextual, and dynamic act of teacher response as a pedagogical happening in the composition classroom.

Researcher Background

My scholarly interest in teacher commentary stems in part from my own experiences as a student, teacher, and writing researcher. As a strong reader and writer, I did well in my undergrad coursework and I frequently received little to no feedback on my writing assignments, save for the grade and a brief note of affirmation. Years later, and one semester into my master’s studies, I also began to teach beginning composition as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA). After a brief “Introduction to Teaching Writing” course with a handful of other first-time instructors, I was turned loose with 48 young writers under my care. Commenting on student papers was one of many topics covered briefly in the initial seminar course, but I actually learned more about teacher commentary through my own studies as a graduate student and my exigent desire to learn best practices in the teaching of writing. I diligently studied up on theory and pedagogy, but I was also determined to be a student of my students as well. I found that it also helped to be a student myself as I worked to teach my own students; in this way, I was never far removed from my own experiences within the teacher-student relationship, and I understood what it meant to be on both sides of the desk.

I became very interested in teacher commentary when I saw firsthand what an impact my words could have on my students as they worked to write and to revise. I began to recognize that
my comments could act as a personal teaching moment for my student writers. Interestingly, most of my peers found commenting to be a chore, a “necessary evil,” rather than a chance to interact with the students and make a positive difference in their writing experiences. My GTA teaching experiences further helped me to view theory in new and exciting ways, though, as I began to recognize pedagogy as theory-in-practice. For example, I understood that reading and writing were connected skills as ancient scholars like Quintilian taught, but I understood that connection more completely when I began to intentionally or deliberately use reading to teach writing in my own classroom. Looking back now, I realize that I was interested in formative assessment (assessment that helps and instructs students throughout their process as they write and revise) and in being intentional (taking deliberate action after careful thought and reflection) in my teaching long before I even knew the terminology that is now so commonplace in our field.

When I decided to pursue a PhD in Rhetoric & Writing, I chose Bowling Green State University in part because of their long history of working with teachers. I immersed myself in the readings, discussions, and subsequent writings about the history, theory, and pedagogy in the field. And since I continued to teach writing as I pursued my own studies, I applied what I was learning to my own classroom. One class, however, really rocked my quiet little world: Writing Assessment. As an assigned reading in Dr. Lee Nickoson’s course, I was introduced to Bob Broad’s 2003 text, *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*. It was just one of many texts read for the course, but the ideas within that text have stayed with me long since. I began to wonder: How can teachers of writing make their comments count for their students? How can we move beyond well-intentioned monologues to interactive dialogue that is both efficient (from a teaching standpoint) and effective (from a learning standpoint)?
Within his text, Broad emphasizes the need within the Rhetoric and Composition field to recognize what we truly value versus what we say or think that we value. In fact, near the end of his text, Broad suggests an end-of-semester activity in which the teacher asks the students to attempt to determine the teacher’s values as they study the course artifacts that they have collected, from discussion notes to assignments to teacher comments on those assignments to grading rubrics. What does the evidence within these artifacts show about what is truly valued in that writing classroom and by that instructor? From first read of Broad’s text, this teacher-researcher was deeply impacted by this idea of determining what is truly valued versus what is said to be or thought to be valued. Suddenly, the self-reflection and self-assessment that I commonly practiced took on a new sense of intrigue and urgency. I was no longer simply curious; I had to know if I was being consistent, if I was practicing what I preached. I had to know if what and how I taught reflected what I knew and valued as student and scholar.

I always considered myself to be a student-focused instructor and a student of my students. After all, didn’t I make every effort to understand my students as I helped them to understand writing, to encourage them to communicate with me as I modeled good communication with them? But is a student-centered teaching ethos enough? I told my students that I valued them and their writing. I told my students that I valued communication with them. I tried to make my values transparent. But, what did my syllabus, my assignments, my lectures and discussions in class, my email correspondence with them, and my comments in class and on their writings say about what I actually valued? I began to re-assess everything about the ways in which I taught; not content to teach in a merely satisfactory fashion, I began to look for ways to infuse my true values into every aspect of my teaching. One question remained close at heart, though—what do my students themselves value and need within their composition class
experience? After all, if I truly value my students, shouldn’t I at least attempt to understand what they value, too?

As teacher, doctoral student, and scholar, I began to study theory and pedagogy in earnest, especially as they are related to formative assessment and student engagement. Connections between formative assessment and student engagement emerged quickly within the literature, and the important role of teacher commentary as formative assessment soon became apparent to me as well. Further research into teacher commentary, formative assessment, and student engagement yielded new questions on the potential of teacher commentary: when treated as interactive and collaborative dialogue, could teacher commentary give students an active voice in their own writing? What might be the implications for student writing and revising?

Terms and Definitions

Before moving into the details of my study, I think it might be helpful to discuss the key terms and ideas that I will be engaging with throughout this dissertation. In the pages that follow, I provide specific and detailed definitions and explanations of these key terms and ideas. In addition, I explain any distinctions between general understandings of these terms and the ways in which I understand and use them within my text. In several cases I include references to specific scholarly works that have influenced or impacted my understanding of the particular term. Additionally, where applicable, I include examples from my own classroom as a means to further clarify a term or idea.

Teacher Commentary

As I begin this project, I consider teacher commentary (also referred to as feedback or response within the literature) as a formative assessment strategy that includes the teacher’s comments to student writing (whether hand-written, typed, audio, or multi-modal in nature),
along with verbal and electronic discussions with the student about the writing (whether within or outside of class). In many ways, this commentary begins before the student even begins to write as we discuss the assignment goals and requirements, possible topics or ideas, and strategies for gathering information or organizing ideas. These conversations may take place before class, during class, after class, in the hallway, or via emails, but they are foundational within the student’s writing process. And when I check back with a student about an earlier conversation, I am essentially continuing and building onto that initial conversation. In other words, I understand teacher commentary/response to be a type of formative assessment that works beyond the margins, an on-going conversation between the teacher and student about his or her writing, with an emphasis on contexts and on choices made.

*Formative Assessment*

In its most basic form, formative assessment is assessment that occurs while a work is still in progress and that allows for changes or improvements to be made in the work based on that assessment (Huot, 2002, 18). Formative assessment, as I understand and use the term, is assessment that takes place throughout the process of writing and revising, while summative assessment is concerned only with the final product of one’s efforts. So, for example, teacher commentary that gives help and guidance to the student as he is writing and revising would be considered formative, but comments that merely justify the student’s grade or give terminal judgment on the writing would be considered summative. Formative assessment here goes beyond a single measure (like a test) and includes multiple strategies that require on-going reflection, critical thinking, and action. This is also a type of assessment that involves both teacher and student. These assessments might be in the form of a “Reflection Memo” (Bardine & Fulton, 2008) or other self-assessment in which student writers explore their own writing process.
within a particular project. This would require the writers to look deeply into their own writing process and consider not only what has been written, but also to consider how it was written and why, and to determine where to go from there. When reading through a student’s self-assessment, then, the teacher can better understand what the student is thinking and the reasons for choices made in writing and revising the draft. In this way, the teacher’s comments back to the student can be more focused and effective as more of a dialogue about the writing is created. This type of formative teaching and assessing is intentional in nature. Formative teacher commentary is commentary that is carefully interwoven into all aspects of or contexts within the writing classroom. While it may be most often noticed within the comments written on student papers, it exists in all that happens in and around the writing classroom.

*Instructive Evaluation*

Brian Huot (2002) advocates beyond basic notions of formative assessment for what he terms “instructive assessment” or “instructive evaluation.” To Huot, “[m]uch of our evaluation or assessment as teachers, writers or editors is open, fluid, tentative and expectant—formative—as we work with a writer toward a potential text, recognizing the individual, textual purpose(s) of the writer” (65). Huot also points out that “grading [which is generally considered to be summative] has little relationship to the type of evaluation writers constantly make in the drafting of a particular piece of writing” (65). Instructive evaluation, however, involves the student in the process of evaluation, making her aware of what it is she is trying to create and how well her current draft matches the linguistic and rhetorical targets she has set for herself, targets that have come from her understanding of the context, audience, purpose, and other rhetorical features of a specific piece of writing. (69)
This type of evaluation must “involve the student in all phases of her work” (69), and Huot further explains that “[i]nstructive evaluation demands that students and teacher connect the ability to assess with the necessity to revise, creating motivation for revision that is often so difficult for students to obtain” (70). This implies an on-going and interactive dialogue between student writer and teacher throughout the context of the writing and revising work. My personal understanding and use of formative assessment (as expressed earlier) is actually very similar to Huot’s “instructive evaluation” idea.

**Dialogical and Interactive Commentary**

A dialogue requires input from both parties, and communication theory teaches that dialogue includes a balance of give and take from the involved parties. In order for commentary to be interactive and dialogical, both parties must actively interact and take part in the give and take of the conversation. Unfortunately, teacher commentary—even when comments are personally responsive or ask questions—is often merely a monologue with a conversational tone; it is written by the teacher to the student, but no means of response from the student to the teacher is given. In an effort to create more of a dialogue, students can be asked for suggestions or concerns that they would like for the teacher to attend to in her comments about the drafts. The teacher can read their drafts, then, with particular attention given to the aspects of the project that the students asked about. And in writing comments on the drafts or discussing the drafts with the students in a conference setting, the teacher can respond directly to the students’ questions or concerns. And from there, more conversation about the project can continue throughout the process of writing and revising. I find that this strategy works best when students are asked to formally write out their suggestions or concerns as a part of the project or assignment. In ways, this move gives the students permission to be actively involved and
encourages their participation in the conversation. I find that this is often necessary since students’ past experiences have led them to believe that their thoughts and opinions about their writings do not count. So, for example, my students complete a “Status Report” for several of their major projects. Along with specific questions or concerns about the project, students are also asked about their successes, their struggles, and their specific plans for revision at that particular stage in the project. In this way I can get a sense of how the students feel about their texts and the progress they are making as I read through the texts themselves. Ideally, then, teacher commentary helps to create an interactive dialogue between teacher and student, an ongoing dialogue in which both the teacher and the student are active participants and have an active voice throughout the composing process.

Student Engagement

Student writers, especially first-year writers, may often lack confidence as writers and that may translate into a lack of engagement in their own learning and a lack of authority in their writing. Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz discuss this issue in their 2004 article, “the Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year,” and Laurie Groban also discusses this idea within her 2010 article, “The Student Scholar: (Re)negotiating Authorship and Authority.” Both of these articles present the need for students to begin to recognize the existing “conversation” in the field. The authors further stress that students need to begin to see themselves as becoming involved, or engaged, within that conversation in order to grow and develop as writers. And according to the Harvard Writing Project study (discussed earlier in this chapter), instructor feedback on student writings can help students connect with their instructors and gain a sense of belonging within the academy as well (Walk, 2000, 2). Engagement requires active involvement from students and teachers, then; it is not a passive practice. Within my own classes, my students and I discuss this
idea of an existing “conversation.” We talk about the scholars who have already spoken; we read, discuss and question some scholarly works; and we question and consider what it means to enter into this “conversation.” For many of my students, this questioning and discussing allows them to see a larger purpose for the thinking, researching, and writing that they do in class. And since I allow my students to choose their own research topics for our required research project, this also helps to encourage their interest and engagement within the project. In other words, when they can choose which existing conversation to enter into, the students are more likely to become actively involved in all phases of the research and writing work for their projects. And in this process, the students can begin to see themselves as emerging scholars and as writers who actually have something of value to share in the existing conversations.

Purpose of Research Study

This study focuses attention on the contexts surrounding teacher commentary as formative assessment, as a means of “direct teaching” that can play a powerful role in successful student writing and revising. By focusing on teacher commentary as interactive dialogue, this study draws attention to the oft-silent recipients/partners in the conversation: students. As a classroom-based study, this primary research study focuses on FYC students’ values as displayed/discovered through the interactive dialogue that I see as being foundational within teacher commentary and the many related, complex contexts of the composition classroom. With the text of a particular research project acting as the contextual “center” of our dialogue, this study attends to FYC student understandings of teacher commentary and related interactive classroom activities in an attempt to better understand how students value, are influenced by, and how they make use of, formative teacher commentary.
For this particular study, feminist theory provides an important foundational framework. After all, feminism has a special relationship with pedagogy, and much of the work involving feminist theory in composition has been forged in classroom spaces and practices and has been grounded in the lived experiences of students as well as teachers. Feminist theory is both critical and practical when studying matters of composition pedagogy since it considers multiple voices and possibilities, requires critical and thoughtful reflection, and looks for connections and contradictions within the complex contexts surrounding both teaching and learning. It is this emphasis on multiplicity, reflexivity and intertextuality within feminist theory that provides a foundational framework for every aspect of this particular composition study, especially with regards to the methods and methodologies employed for data collection and analysis.

Because a pedagogical activity (teacher commentary) within a particular classroom context (a writing classroom) is at the heart of this scholarly inquiry, a teacher research study seemed a natural option. Interestingly, while scholars may sometimes disagree about certain aspects of teacher research, Lee Nickoson (2012) explains that teacher research scholars like Stenhouse, Berthoff, Fishman & McCarthey, and Lankshear & Knobel do share “common ground” on at least these two points: 1) they understand teacher inquiry/research to be “an intellectual and professional endeavor that grows out of that teacher’s questions, concerns, and/or curiosities”; and 2) they “conceive of and practice teacher research as a form of action research, the goal of which is improved teaching effectiveness that, in turn, leads to the development of the teacher-researcher as pedagogue and investigator” (p. 104). Aside from these expected scholarly and pedagogical purposes and benefits for teacher-researchers, Nickoson further suggests that engaging in teacher research within composition may allow us to “put ourselves in a position to effectively learn not only about our students but also—and crucially—
from them” (p, 111). In other words, this type of research can allow the teacher-researchers to gain understanding about their student writers and how they learn (often from the students themselves). Nickoson goes on to explain that “[b]uilding our disciplinary knowledge, teacher research can aid us in simultaneously developing a deeper understanding of our students as writers, building our abilities to reach them and make a positive difference in their literate lives” (p, 111). This is a perspective that aligns nicely with my own regarding potential benefits of teacher research within composition, especially research involving student writers. Additionally, because teacher research involves both teacher and students within the natural teaching and learning contexts of the class, it has the potential to move students from being mere research subjects to becoming “co-researchers, sources of knowledge whose insights help focus and provide new directions for the study” (Ray, as cited in Nickoson, 2012, p. 107). I also appreciate Ruth Ray’s ideas about teacher research as a means of “bringing about change—in the teacher, the student, the school system, the teaching profession, the field of study, and the practice of research—from within the classroom” (as cited in Kirsch & Sullivan, 1992, p. 183). The rich and complex contexts of the writing classroom are valued and carefully considered within teacher research, and this contextual emphasis was vital to this particular research study. Teacher research, with its grounding in the everyday classroom experience, allowed this teacher-researcher to explore the multiple contexts surrounding my formative teacher commentary along with the ways in which individual students perceived of and used this commentary in their writing and revising work.

The setting for this study was my own ENGL 111: Beginning Composition classes at a regional campus of a fast-growing, state-sponsored community college in the Midwest. Since ENGL 111 is a “core” or required course for most programs at the college, student demographics
varied widely. The student population was diverse in age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, past experiences, and current educational goals. The subjects consisted of one teacher-researcher and approximately 25-30 students from within two sections of the class during the spring 2012 semester. Participation in this study was completely voluntary and was conducted within IRB/HSRB standards.4

Because I conducted this study in my own classes, most of the data collected from students came in the form of paper drafts, teacher comments made in response to those drafts, journal entries, self-assessments, evaluations, and reflections that were already a part of the semester curriculum, so students were not asked to complete additional work, with the exception of the two questionnaires and, in the case of three participant volunteers, a personal interview. Multiple methods of data collection were employed for this study. Pre-and post-project questionnaires were completed by students (during our regular class time) as they worked on one of their two assigned research projects for the semester.5 Questionnaires included specific questions about past and present experiences with teacher comments/responses. Questions about the students’ perceptions about the value of these comments, as well as the type of comments that they perceived that they needed were also included. In addition to the various classroom artifacts that were collected throughout the semester (student papers, teacher comments, journal entries, student self-assessments, evaluations, and reflective essays), teacher observations and reflections (including those about both informal and formal commentary) were included in the data as well. A more detailed and extensive discussion of methods and methodologies is included within the next chapter, Chapter 2, of this text.

Data collection occurred throughout the semester, with the exception of the personal interviews which occurred in the month following the semester end. During the semester, I kept
a running record of my own observations and reflections as I attempted to systematically chronicle the semester and its activities. And since most of the student-generated, written artifacts were part of the normal “paper exchange” within the course, I simply made copies of the applicable student papers before returning them to the students. Emails, discussion board posts, and other electronic artifacts were printed off for analysis with the rest of the hard-copy data. By narrowing the research to dealing with one specific project versus all projects assigned that semester, I attempted to create a manageable data load while still including sufficient data to represent the multiple contexts surrounding that particular project and allowing for the later triangulation of that data in analysis.

I chose to approach the data analysis for this study from an ethnographic perspective (Green & Bloome, 1997) while using grounded theory (as described by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, 1998; Kathy Charmaz, 2006). Within grounded theory, coding is described as a “dynamic and fluid process” (Strauss & Corbin, 101), and this coding process, when combined with the detail, depth and localized attention of an ethnographic perspective, allowed for a richer and more complex description of the data and allowed for a focus on understanding rather than merely explaining. The open coding process, “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (Strauss & Corbin, 101), allowed for the analysis of data to occur throughout and then beyond the initial data collection process itself. This continuing analysis often included detailed observations, personal reflections, self-assessments, and questions from this teacher-researcher and the student research participants. Throughout the study I attempted to allow the analysis to occur “from the data up,” thus allowing for the desired interplay between these qualitative aspects of analysis and their quantitative counterparts as well. Employing this type of grounded analysis, while also
considering this analysis from an ethnographic perspective, gave me the ability to explore and
assess multiple contexts surrounding writing and revising and how students value these contexts
and activities. This study also answers a call from within the field for more research into student
writers’ wants, needs, and values.

Research Questions

This study considers what students value in teacher commentary, and the research is
guided by four research questions:

1. What factors make commentary dialogical and interactive?
2. In what ways do students understand and value this dialogical and interactive
   commentary?
3. How do students interact with and use teacher comments?
4. What might an understanding of student values (with regards to dialogical and
   interactive teacher commentary) mean for FYC pedagogy?

Chapter Overviews: A Roadmap to All That Follows

After the initial introduction to the project, background about the existing conversation in
the field, and the basis for this particular study that is found in this first chapter, the second
chapter begins to set the stage for the primary research study itself. The second chapter, THE
PLACE, THE PARTICIPANTS, AND THE PROJECT, begins with a brief introduction to the
methods and methodologies employed in the study; followed by thick descriptions of the
research setting, the research participants, and data collection instruments employed within the
study; and then moves to detailed descriptions of the methods and methodologies that were used
for the collection and analysis of data within this study. In-depth discussion and explanation
about the how, what, when and why the different data and written artifacts were collected within
the classroom setting is included. This chapter also includes a detailed discussion surrounding
the analysis of the collected data.

The third chapter of this dissertation, STUDENT VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES, presents case studies of three student writers and their individual journeys through the ENGL 111 course. The case studies are presented from an ethnographic perspective which allows for “a detailed, in-depth look at local practices from multiple angles” (Sheridan, 2012, pp. 74-75). This ability to gain rich detail and depth from multiple perspectives within my own classroom, along with being able to gain “understanding [of] the rich visible and seemingly invisible networks influencing the participants in the study” through ethnography (Sheridan, 2012, p73) was important for this particular study of the commentary relationship. In fact, through these case studies I attempt to respond to Kirsch & Ritchie’s call for feminist scholars to “include multiple voices and diverse interpretations in our research narratives” (2003, p. 155). Unlike a full ethnographic study that would focus on a particular culture for an extended period of time, however, my study is limited to my two ENGL 111 classes and encompasses a rather short length of time: a single semester. So, as Sheridan explains the ideas of Green and Bloome, “adopting an ethnographic perspective means ‘that it is possible to take a more focused approach (i.e. do less than comprehensive ethnography) to study particular aspects of everyday life and cultural practices of a social group’”(2012, p.80). And this ethnographic perspective may include the use of ethnographic tools used in fieldwork, like interviews and document analysis, for example (in Sheridan, p. 80). For these reasons, adopting an ethnographic perspective seemed like a logical move within this study, and especially within this particular chapter. This portion of the primary research study includes data from personal interviews, classroom artifacts and my observations as teacher-researcher. This data from interviews, document analysis, and teacher
observations is presented within three ethnographically-inspired case studies. Findings from the initial analysis of that data are further explored using Charmaz’s “constant comparative method” of analysis, then, in order to discover points of connection and intersection in the writing lives of these three students and their peers.

Chapter four of this dissertation, A TEACHER’S AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF COMPOSING RESPONSE, includes a personal, detailed account of my own processes of reading student texts and of composing responses to those texts that is followed by selected accounts of specific interactions between me and four of my students. These selected accounts are then followed by a discussion of what these accounts allowed me to explore/discover about the commenting relationship and the contexts surrounding this complex, dialogical relationship. As A.S. Canagarajah (2012) cautions, however, I attempt to maintain a “balance between self, culture, and narrative writing” (p. 114) within this autoethnographic account. Within this chapter I have no desire to practice what Kirsch & Ritchie (2003) refer to as “self-indulgent privileging” of my own story (p. 15), but rather would like to honor their suggestion to place my teacher-researcher story and the stories of my student-participants “in dialogue with each other to gain new insights into (my) own and others’ lives” (p. 15). By attempting to allow the individual student “stories” to speak to, or to inform, my own story (and vice versa), it is possible to recognize potential points of connection and disruption between our respective personal experiences. This autoethnographic account of my own reading and composing processes actually began in response to a suggestion by Brian Huot that teachers need to reflect on their own processes of response as ethnographers (2002, 134), but this account became a valuable portion of my overall research study in its own right since this research method encouraged deep
reflexivity and intentional contextualization of data within the research, both of which were important to my particular study.

The fifth and final chapter of this dissertation, then, MAKING CONNECTIONS, RECOGNIZING CONTRADICTIONS, AND SUGGESTING CHANGES, builds on the earlier analyses and discussions of findings in the previous two chapters as it moves to a discussion of these findings in relation to the research questions that were initially posed here in Chapter 1. This discussion connects the study findings, the initial research questions, and the current conversations within the field as a means to present possible implications of this particular research study. Implications for this teacher-researcher, along with implications for other teachers of writing, for writing students, and for the field of Rhetoric and Composition are discussed in this chapter. Possible implications for future research into teacher commentary and its effects on student writers, along with implications for how we might begin to re-imagine composition pedagogy (specifically with regards to a theory of response and the training of teachers) close out this chapter.

Concluding Thoughts: An End to the Beginning of Our Journey

Engaging students in their own learning, especially within the composition classroom, is often accomplished through formative teacher commentary. And yet, while much of the theory and scholarship about the teaching of writing emphasizes the importance of a teaching pedagogy of intentional, formative instruction that engages student writers in the learning process, many teachers find themselves caught somewhere between good intentions and overwhelming classroom demands. In other words, for whatever reason—whether for lack of training, lack of experience, or for workload issues—what we already know about the teaching of writing, and specifically teacher commentary, is not always being put into practice within our classrooms. I
find it to be troubling, for example, that teacher commentary is often summative and product-focused rather than being formative and focused on the process of writing. This seems to indicate that teachers may not be responding to or assessing student writing rhetorically (Huot, 2002, 69). So, I wonder, how can we hope to teach students to think critically and reflectively as they write and as they assess on their own if we are unwilling or unable to teach the rhetorical complexities of writing to our students? This necessary rhetorical instruction is not passive and does not simply happen, though; instead, it is teaching that requires careful planning, intentional implementation, and critical reflection in order to be effective. And since students and their needs differ, our ways of responding to them and to their writing must vary as well. There is no one-size-fits-all comment that will work for every student in every setting and on every writing task. There is no way of getting around the fact that commenting on student writing requires much time and attention from teachers, but since it is a means of “direct teaching” (Mathison Fife & O’Neill, 2001) and “individualized teaching” (Knoblauch & Brannon, 2006), it is also a valuable teaching strategy. Unfortunately, even though clear guidelines for class sizes and teacher workloads have been established, adherence to these guidelines is rare, so students and teachers are often placed at a disadvantage (or even set up to fail) within over-crowded writing classrooms and because of unreasonable demands on teachers. These are issues that affect both teachers and students who are involved in the commenting relationship, and these issues deserve continued attention in our field.

In conclusion, after decades of initial research in the field, it seems that for all we know about teacher commentary and its effects on student writers, there is still much that we do not yet know. We know that while most students desire some sort of response to their writing, their perspective of what type of response they themselves need often differs from that of their
teachers. But, in truth, we currently don’t know much about student attitudes, opinions, and values as related to teacher commentary because student voices have not been included in much of the response research. We don’t know much about how students are influenced by, and how they make use of, teacher commentary that is collaborative and dialogical, teacher commentary that involves the students as active participants in the conversation. As suggested in the scholarly works discussed here in this chapter, more research is needed, especially more research that includes the voices of our students. I hope that this primary research study and dissertation will add to the existing conversation in the field of Rhetoric and Composition by considering what the student writers within one localized context want and value in teacher response.

Notes to Chapter 1
1. NCTE has position statements on many issues of concern within the field which can be accessed easily through the NCTE website at: www.ncte.org/positions/statements. It is important to note here that NCTE’s *More than a Number: Why Class Size Matters* statement on class size and teacher workload clearly and, especially in the case of college writing courses, strongly endorses limiting class sizes to 20 students at most, with 15 students being the preferred class size at the college level, and with remedial or developmental sections to be limited always to a maximum of 15 students. The sad reality, however, is that many colleges continue to run their writing courses—whether developmental or beginning composition—with more than the recommended number of students in the classes. For this reason, I’ve chosen to use the more reality-based class size within my example to figure the time spent commenting on student papers.
2. CompPile is described on its home page as “an inventory of publications in writing studies, including post-secondary composition, rhetoric, technical writing, ESL, and discourse analysis.” The site was actually created by Richard Haswell and Glenn Blalock as a useful (and easily usable) resource for the field. In fact, as of May 2012, the site boasts 103,322 records of sources. Haswell maintains the bibliography entries from 1939-1999, while Blalock maintains bibliography records from 2000-current works and maintains the site as well. The site can be accessed at: www.comppile.org.

3. As I’ve used the term *kairos* here, it is similar in meaning to the explanation that Bizzell and Herzberg give within *The Rhetorical Tradition, 2nd ed.* (2001, 24) as they explain the Sophistic doctrine of kairos. According to Sophists, kairos is attained when the immediate circumstances are considered and the action that is taken is deemed to be expedient at that moment in time. In other words, kairos is based on circumstances and contexts at a particular time; it is the ideal action at the optimum time for the particular circumstances at hand.

4. HSRB approval was obtained from both the study setting and the degree-granting university setting prior to the start of the study.

5. Copies of both questionnaires can be found in the Appendices at the end of this text.
CHAPTER 2: THE PLACE, THE PARTICIPANTS, AND THE PROJECT

As I discussed in the previous chapter, a teacher research study seemed to be the natural
option for my study of formative teacher commentary from the students’ perspectives and of the
contexts surrounding this pedagogical activity in the classroom setting. Teacher research, action
research that is grounded in the everyday teaching and learning that occurs within the classroom,
allowed this teacher-researcher to study the students and their learning experiences in the natural
setting or culture of my own classroom. I found this grounding in everyday teaching and learning
experiences to be especially important within the culture of the writing classroom where myriad
contextual factors had the potential to affect my student writers and their levels of success with
writing. And inspired by Lee Nickoson’s reminder that “[t]eaching remains at the heart of what,
as compositionists, we are about” (2012, p. 110), I knew that teacher research, research that
would allow me to better understand my students and the effects of my pedagogy on their
writing, was worthy of my critical inquiry and scholarly pursuit. So, in the spring of 2012 on a
local community college campus, I set out to study teacher response in two sections of a
beginning composition course in order to begin to understand the impact and the effectiveness of
teacher response from the students’ perspectives. By focusing on formative teacher commentary
or response as a complex and highly-contextual dialogue, an on-going and interactive
conversation between teacher and student, this study involves FYC (First-Year Composition)
student understandings and perceptions of teacher commentary, the students’ perceived role in
the on-going dialogue about their writing, what these students value within the dialogue, and
how these students make use of formative teacher commentary as they write and revise. From a
teaching or pedagogical perspective, teacher commentary can be a valuable means of formative
assessment and “direct teaching” (Mathison Fife & O’Neill, 2003) within the multiple, complex
contexts of the composition classroom, but I wanted to know: how valuable do the FYC students themselves perceive this commentary dialogue to be?

From its very inception, this study was designed to critically and reflexively consider that which is typically considered to be a teacher practice (commenting) from the perspective/voice that is often missing from conversations about the practice (the student’s) while considering the myriad contexts and conditions of the writing classroom and its related activities. In addition, this study reconsidered commenting as a collaborative dialogue between teacher and student. It should be noted here that feminism, with its emphasis on pedagogy as thoughtful and critical practice, the inclusion of multiple voices and diverse perspectives, and the value of contexts and conditions, provided an important and foundational framework for this entire study. This feminist framework informed my initial approach to the study, the questions that guided this study and even the other methods and methodologies that I chose to employ throughout the study. For example, I determined early on that grounded theory would be the best research methodology for discovering and exploring these student perceptions and valuations within the formative commentary dialogue in this teacher research study. After all, grounded theory research is research that comes out of, or is grounded in, the data itself. Using an ethnographic perspective along with grounded theory allowed for the detailed, in-depth, or “thick,” descriptions of setting, subjects, data collection instruments, and varied classroom contexts that helped to focus attention on the students and their writing experiences. Additionally, grounded theory welcomes the usage of mixed methods, and both quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed within this study. Quantitative research methods are important for determining statistics and trends within research data, and quantitative methods definitely played a role in this research study, but qualitative research methods were necessary to
really get at the heart of this study. As Strauss and Corbin have explained, “(qualitative research) lends itself to getting out into the field and finding out what people are doing and thinking” (1998, 11). And since I wanted to know what students were doing and thinking within the contexts of the commenting relationship, using qualitative research methods and an ethnographic perspective seemed like a great way to explore this. Strauss and Corbin have further suggested that “qualitative methods can be used to obtain intricate details about the phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (1998, 11). These feelings, thoughts and emotions were important and necessary data as I attempted to understand the students’ perspective about the commentary relationship and their role within this complex relationship. To this end, multiple data collection instruments were used within this mixed methodological study, while a particular research project assignment acted as the “contextual center” for the study.

As mentioned earlier, in order to carefully consider the many and varied aspects of the composition classroom, including the individual student’s perceptions and their writing processes, it was necessary to employ multiple methods—both quantitative and qualitative methods—within the analysis of data. Mixed methods proved especially useful in cases where both quantitative and qualitative data could be gained from within the same data collection instrument. For example, pre-and post-project questionnaires included questions with pre-set answer options to gather quantitative data about the respondents themselves and what they valued, along with short answer questions on the form to gather qualitative data about respondent thoughts and perceptions about teacher commentary. For the initial questions on the questionnaires that included pre-set answer options, Attribute Coding, coding that helps to document demographic information or characteristics of participants, was used to code this
quantitative data. For the short answer questions on the questionnaires, then, Descriptive Coding, In Vivo Coding and Process Coding were all used within the coding of this qualitative data. Descriptive Coding helps to summarize basic ideas or topics within data, so this coding helped to determine initial categories for data within the short answer responses. In Vivo Coding, which attempts to honor the participant and give her or him a voice in the study, made it possible to include the students’ own words within initial qualitative coding of data from the short answer responses on the questionnaires and then throughout the coding of the rest of the data as well. Later in the coding process, Process Coding was employed to uncover actions and interactions within the data from various data collection instruments, while Values Coding allowed students’ attitudes, beliefs, and values to be discovered within data as well. Within student-generated texts (like Reading Responses and the major writing projects), Descriptive Coding and Process Coding were used to categorize data and then to gain an understanding of that data. Other texts that were more subjective in nature (like self-assessments, reflections, emails and interviews) allowed for the collection of more data through Values Coding, Emotion Coding and In Vivo coding in addition to the Descriptive and Process Coding.

Additionally, selected ethnographic tools and methods were used throughout this study in order to provide an in-depth exploration into the complex contexts of the composition classroom and of the commenting relationship. For example, in Chapter 3 I have included three ethnographically-inspired case studies that pull heavily from personal interviews, student self-assessments, and document analysis of student-generated texts, while Chapter 4 includes an autoethnographic account of this teacher’s processes of reading and of composing response along with detailed accounts of interactions with several student writers about their texts. It should be noted here that ethnography, a qualitative research method that has its roots in the field of
anthropology, usually involves long-term study of a particular culture and its practices, but aspects of this research method—like the ability to provide rich, in-depth detail about subjects within their natural environment or setting (Lauer & Asher, 1988, 39) or cultural setting (de Vasconcelos, 2011, np)—are of particular interest to researchers in other disciplines (like composition) as well (Sheridan, 2012, p. 74). Sheridan further explains that “[b]eing an ethnographer is about developing habits of seeing and ways of being that make sense of the cultural practices from within the culture being studied” (p. 76). By examining subjects and the environment that surrounds them (often as a participant observer), the researcher can view the subjects and the context(s) within which they live, work, act, or in the case of this particular study, compose. Some scholars value ethnography as a means to “provide a window on culture” (de Vasconcelos, 2011, np), and in this particular case, the culture being considered was that of the writing classroom of one particular teacher. Additionally, ethnography can provide insight into the multi-faceted contexts or networks (Sheridan, p. 73) that influence or affect the behavior(s) and attitudes of those being studied within a particular culture. Ethnographic studies are not new to the composition field and are desirable in studies like this one because they provide “detailed accounts of writing behavior in its rich context” (Lauer & Asher, 39). These detailed, in-depth accountings of writing practices can include the multiple perspectives (or contexts) involved in the writing as well. And in the case of autoethnography, the lens is turned onto the researcher and the personal perspective is engaged in order to show how the particular culture “shapes and is shaped by the personal” in relation to the writing (Canagarajah, 2012, p. 113). This particular research study (as described in detail within this chapter) works within a feminist theory framework as it attempts to present a rich description of the classroom contexts and the interactive dialogue that was interwoven throughout those contexts as shown through the
analysis of various classroom artifacts, teacher reflections, and data from personal interviews with several students, as well as the use of a pre-and post-survey design (described in detail in the pages that follow). The pages that follow, then, are devoted to describing in detail the study setting, the study participants, the collected data, and the grounded theory methodology and ethnographic perspective used in the analysis of that data.

Study Setting

The community college, or two-year college as it is now preferably called by some, is recognized as a unique and wonderfully-complex place of learning since it provides a wide range of courses to a large, diverse student population for a number of different purposes. The setting for this particular study was the local campus of the largest, and fastest-growing, state-sponsored college system in a particular Midwestern state. During the time of this study, this community college system included thirty campuses state-wide, was the largest accredited college in the state, and served as academic “home” for more than 120,000 students. Located within a city, the particular campus that acted as the setting for this study was spread across several miles and occupied numerous buildings that were in various stages of remodeling at the time of this study due to ever-increasing enrollment numbers. This particular campus was deeply affected by the economic downturn that began in 2008 because of its location within a region that relied heavily on manufacturing. With few other options, many displaced workers enrolled in courses and programs at this community college, creating a surge in enrollment that few could have predicted or prepared for. While it was located in close proximity to another state college, this community college was fully a commuter campus, and its location allowed for city bus service and a shuttle between college campuses. With strong ties to the surrounding community, this particular community college offered classes at on-campus and off-campus locations and at times that were
convenient for working adults; worked with local businesses and with the state’s Workforce Development Office to offer specialized courses and certifications as well as re-training of displaced workers for new jobs and careers; offered dual-enrollment options for local high school students who wanted to get a jump-start on their college educations; provided courses that fulfilled general education requirements at relatively low costs to students who could then transfer to four-year institutions to complete their degrees; worked to prepare under-prepared students for the rigors of college-level studies; and offered a wide range of certifications and Associate’s degrees in numerous fields so that students could complete their studies within two years and begin their careers. The student population of this two-year college was understandably diverse since it included current high school students, new graduates of high school, GED recipients, foreign exchange students and ESL/ELL students, returning adult students, and returning military veterans and reserve members of the military. In addition to obvious differences in age, gender, and culture, this student population was also diverse with regards to socioeconomics, and all students came to this college with different educational experiences, levels of digital literacy, life experiences, and personal goals for their current educational pursuits. The mission of this two-year college was complex and two-fold: to provide a quality, cost-effective education to a diverse student population and to boost the state’s economy.

The complexities and the diverse needs that are inherent to this and other two-year colleges were at the heart of a recent National Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) statement (2012): “[w]hat distinguishes the two-year college English instructor is his or her dedication to open educational access, commitment to democratic participation and equity within higher education, and ability to help make these ideals a reality for highly diverse learners from
backgrounds that cross conventional divides of age, race, ethnicity, class, and academic preparation.” The two-year college English instructor, as TYCA so aptly recognizes within their statement, is at the heart of the students’ educational experience in ways that reach far beyond the mere instruction of composition. At the time of this study, the English Department on this particular campus included a Department Chair, six full-time faculty members, and 14-16 adjunct faculty members from various subject backgrounds and with a range of educational credentials. Full-time faculty members taught five course sections per semester and adjunct instructors were allowed to teach as many as five course sections as well. While several adjunct faculty members (including this researcher) taught only at this college, most adjuncts taught for more than one college during this semester.

On this particular campus, a total of 105 sections of English courses (whether ENGL 111: Beginning Composition or ENGL 112: Exposition & Persuasion) was taught during the spring semester of 2012 when this study was completed. A majority of these sections were ENGL 111: Beginning Composition. On this campus, ENGL 111 was offered in the traditional 16-week format as well as in an accelerated 8-week format, with options for face-to-face or on-line instruction as well. A maximum of 24 students was allowed per class section. Students were able to self-select and register for a course section in their chosen format (whether traditional or accelerated) and in their chosen type of instruction (whether face-to-face or on-line) once they had placed into ENGL 111. Student placement into ENGL 111 was determined by means of an electronic placement exam (COMPASS) which was comprised of multiple-choice questions and no actual writing sample or by successful completion (earning a “C” or better) of one or more remedial courses. In choosing a face-to-face course section, students also had the option of a class section that met for three hours on one day or a section that met for 75 minutes on two days
a week. At the time of this study some specific programs at this campus offered class sections that met on Saturdays; however, all face-to-face English classes were offered Monday through Friday.

The college’s state-wide description of record for ENGL 111 stated the following information about the course:

English Composition is designed to develop students’ abilities to think, organize, and express their ideas clearly and effectively in writing. This course incorporates reading, research, and critical thinking. Emphasis is placed on the various forms of expository writing such as process, description, narration, comparison, analysis, persuasion, and argumentation.

A listing of twelve specific, state-wide course objectives for ENGL 111 (See Figure 2.1 on the following page), an extended description of each objective, general grading criteria for papers, an explanation of students’ responsibilities and corresponding statement of instructors’ responsibilities, and assignment sheets for all of the writing assignments were included within a locally-published ENGLISH 111 Student Packet, a required text for every ENGL 111 student on this particular campus. This text was revised each year or as needed by faculty members within the department. The English curriculum for the ENGL 111: Beginning Composition course was determined largely by those at the state level of the college and was prescriptive with regards to the types of papers and the lengths of those major papers that were to be completed in attempts to comply with accreditation demands. Instructors on this campus could choose to use one of the two groupings of assignments that were supplied in the ENGLISH 111 Student Packet, or they could use a combination of assignments from within the two groupings. Each assignment was designed to fulfill certain course objectives so that in the completion of all of the assignments,
students would have worked to master all of the prescribed, state-wide learning objectives for the course.

**Figure 2.1: ENGL 111 Course Objectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. understand communication theory and the roles audiences play in the writing process</td>
<td>7. write well-organized essays with a firm thesis and a clear introduction, body, and conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. apply critical reading and thinking skills to the writing process</td>
<td>8. engage in pre-writing activities, including narrowing a topic, generating ideas, determining the audience and the relationship between audience and content, and setting an appropriate tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. demonstrate an awareness of language as a tool for learning and communication</td>
<td>9. demonstrate an understanding of the various rhetorical modes, including argumentation and analysis, and apply that understanding in various writing environments, including an essay test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. develop strategies for making independent, critical evaluations of student and published texts</td>
<td>10. support a thesis statement with valid reasons and evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. research and critically evaluate information to produce writing with APA or MLA formal documentations, which consist of in-text citations and final list of all sources cited</td>
<td>11. follow the conventions of standard written English, in sentence structure, punctuation, grammar and usage, and spelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. apply strategies for the composition process such as drafting, collaboration, revision, and peer evaluation to produce written documents</td>
<td>12. recognize and develop styles appropriate to varied writing situations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I assisted in the compilation of the *ENGLISH 111 Student Packet*, and Group #1 was comprised of my assignments. I used the assignments from Group #1—my assignments—with my own two classes during this semester. [These assignments are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.] During the spring semester of 2012, ENGL 111 students were required to complete four or five major papers with a combined total of 20 pages of polished text. Two of these papers were required to include formal research, along with the proper use and documenting of sources.

The two sections of the college’s ENGL 111 course at the center of this study were taught in the traditional 16-week, face-to-face format. I taught both of these sections of the course.
during the spring semester that began on January 9, 2012 and ended on May 5, 2012. Both sections met two days a week (Mondays and Wednesdays) for 75 minutes each class session. One section met in the morning (from 11:00 AM until 12:15 PM) and the other section met in the afternoon (from 2:00 PM until 3:15 PM). Additionally, it should be noted that the Monday class sessions (for both sections of the course) were held in a computer classroom on the main level of the building, while the Wednesday class sessions (for both sections) were held in a traditional lecture-style classroom in the basement of the same building. This two-classroom schedule is worthy of attention here because of the potential negative impact of the classroom space on FYC student learning. In this study, the two classroom learning environments that were experienced by the FYC students were vastly different spaces, with the computer classroom seeming much less conducive to student learning and interacting than the more traditional classroom.

The computer classroom was a long narrow room with six tight rows of computer tables/desks and chairs that faced a wall of windows. The upper windows were covered with an opaque film that was yellowed with age, but the lower row of windows offered a clear view of an outdoor courtyard area between two buildings. Once students were seated in a row, it was nearly impossible for anyone to move in or out of the row. Each of the table/desk rows had four computer monitors, towers, and keyboards on top which left little free desk space on which to work. The placement of the technology on the tables also made it difficult for me to see the students and to make eye contact, too. The teacher’s desk, computer, and the classroom printer were at the very front of the room, and the long length of the classroom made communication difficult from front to back of room and vice versa. Two white boards covered the wall on one side of the room, so students needed to turn to the side to see any notes/examples written on the boards. And because of the length of the classroom, it was difficult for students in every part of
the room to see every part of both boards. Additionally, the screen for the projector that was linked to the teacher’s computer covered most of one white board when in use. Lecturing and carrying on discussions in this classroom required me to move back and forth along the white board wall in order to include the students from every part of the room in the conversations.

The downstairs lecture-style classroom was larger than actually needed but a welcome change to the tight feel of the computer classroom. With a large white board behind the teacher’s desk at the front of the room, the rows of tables were divided by a wide central aisle and students had space to move between the rows as well. Each side of the room had five rows of tables, with two tables in each row on one side of the room and only one table per row on the other side of the room. Two students could sit at each individual table, and the students enjoyed being able to sit comfortably at tables that allowed them space to lay out their books and materials and work as needed. While this room had no printer and no student computers, the teacher computer was connected to a projection unit and a pull-down screen filled one front corner of the room. This setting was much more conducive to both lecture and discussion than the computer classroom.

Nonetheless, both sections of ENGL 111 spent Mondays in the computer classroom and Wednesdays in the smaller lecture-style classroom. And in addition to meeting in the same location, I followed the same syllabus and schedule in both sections of the class. While these particular contextual factors were exactly the same for both class sections, it should be noted that other contextual factors, like differences in students and in the time of day, for example, made each class section uniquely its own as well. It should also be noted that these two sections of ENGL 111 were the only courses that I taught during this semester.

English 111 is a challenging course for writers of every skill level, but since it is a required or “core” course, it is often one of the first college courses that students take and the
experience is much akin to culture-shock for many students. In an attempt to help my students to successfully navigate this unfamiliar territory, I worked to introduce new ideas, skills, or ways of thinking through in-class activities and discussions before each major project was even assigned. I also worked to scaffold assignments so that each assignment was built on the ideas and skills used in the assignment before it. The first major project, a three-to-four-page Personal Literacy Narrative, allowed the students to begin their ENGL 111 journey on a personal note. Students described a reading or writing experience in their pasts and analyzed how this experience had impacted them and their subsequent reading or writing. This ability to describe and analyze was important for the second project, a four-to-six-page Occupation Profile project. For this project, students had to research a specific occupation (using both primary research and scholarly sources) and then present an interesting and detailed profile of the chosen occupation. The research skills that they used in the Occupation Profile project helped the students as they began to work on the next two important projects, the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research project. The four-to-five-page Amplified Annotated Bibliography project was designed as a precursor for the upcoming Argumentative Research project, and required the students to begin to research their topics, explore their intended arguments and organize their support for their upcoming arguments. By having to work with their potential sources in the Annotated Bibliography project, students gained an understanding of the existing arguments in the field and began to consider how they would make their own arguments and which sources would best support those arguments. (The final draft of this Annotated Bibliography project was turned in with the final draft of the Argumentative Research project and acted as the Works Cited or References page for that project.) By the time the students got to the actual Argumentative Research project, then, much of the hardest research and organizational
work for this six-to-eight-page project was already in progress. Their familiarity with their sources and the information within these sources allowed the students to give more attention in drafting and revising to refining their arguments and to other aspects of the project, like including an effective visual. The final project of the semester, a three-to-four-page Looking Back: Reflective Essay, allowed the students to return to the personal as they reflected back over the entire semester and considered their growth as writers through each of the major projects.

Since I believe that drafting, reflecting and revising are valuable aspects of every writing project and necessary for learning to understand one’s own writing process, I carefully constructed the course schedule to allow students to work through their writing process as they completed multiple drafts of each major project. For many students, this idea of working through multiple drafts in a writing project was a new one; the students were generally used to writing a paper and turning it in rather than working through their own writing processes as they worked through drafting and revising within a project. My students were supposed to complete three drafts of each major project, and because I understand the importance of critical reflection (a metacognitive process), a one-page reflection was to accompany the final draft for the first four projects. (Since the final major project was itself reflective, an additional reflection page was not required.) Structured peer review workshops of the first and second drafts allowed students to gain some important feedback about their projects from their peers. I gave formative commentary on second drafts of each major project, but individual students could also have feedback from me at any time or at any stage of their work if they requested it. I was also available to students to answer questions or offer help via email, and before or after class or during office hours for informal conferences. From first introduction of a project to the due date for the final draft, most projects spanned three to four weeks, though the research unit that
contained the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research project spanned seven weeks. In terms of logistics, then, this three draft process meant that sometimes we would be in the final stages of completing one project as we were beginning to discuss ideas and concepts related to the next project. In fact, since it usually took a week for me to comment on every student’s second draft, we would often begin to dabble in new ideas and concepts on the days when I had the students’ second drafts. Because I had worked to intentionally scaffold concepts and skills between projects, this “in-between” time served an important function as we began to transition from one project to the next and as students began to recognize how their work within the projects was connected.

The Argumentative Research project was chosen as the contextual “center” of this research study for several reasons. The Argumentative Research project encompassed all twelve of the state-wide learning objectives for ENGL 111, and all of the earlier projects and activities helped to build skills needed for this one large research project, too. This research unit (consisting of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project, the Argumentative Research project, and related activities) consumed the most time and attention of any of the major projects within the 16-week semester, too, consuming this time and attention both in class and outside of class. Much time and attention was given to this research project in part because it was longer in required length and worth more points than any other project, but also because students seemed to struggle with finding/using sources and with matters of documentation. These student struggles with research and documentation lead to more interactions between students and teacher on this one unit than on all other projects combined. Students asked more questions during class, made better use of workshop time in class, and sent more emails to me outside of class regarding the Argumentative Research project unit than for any other project all semester.
For the purposes of studying this interactive dialogue within the commenting relationship, then, the many linked activities in this research unit provided a strong context or “center” around which to work.

Student Participants

Even though both sections of the ENGL 111 course that are a part of this study were taught on the same days of the week, in the same classroom spaces, by the same instructor and following the same syllabus schedule, the differences and similarities between the student learners themselves added much to the overall classroom context. So while pooling data from both classes made sense overall from a statistical perspective because of so few study participants, exploring the individual classroom contexts proved to be valuable as well. In the next few pages, then, we’ll take a look at some statistical data from within each of the two classes.

While the official rosters for both class sections showed the maximum enrollment of 24 students on the first day of the spring semester, actual attendance was never a full 24 in either class as is not unusual on this campus. In the morning section of ENGL 111, two registered students never attended, so the number of students officially on the roster for the course became 22—five male students and seventeen female students. In the afternoon section, two registered students never attended. In this afternoon section, however, one student was added in during the third week of the semester due to special circumstances, so the number of students officially on the roster became 23—eight male students and fifteen female students.

During week 10 of the semester (or what the college notes as the “60% mark” in the semester), teachers were required to report an attendance status for every student within their classes. A “yes” was to be given if the student was attending and actively participating in the
class at this point in the semester, but a “no” was to be given if the student was not attending or actively participating in the class. In the morning section, five students on the roster fit into the “no” category, but only two of these students had actually withdrawn from the course. In the afternoon section, three students fit into the “no” category and none of these students had withdrawn.

When the semester ended, any student who had stopped attending and participating in class was to receive an “FW” (i.e. failure to withdraw) as a grade. While the official roster still showed 22 students registered in the morning section at the end of the semester, three of those 22 students had formally withdrawn from the course, so only 19 students required grades to be given. Unfortunately, another four of these 19 students received “FW” as their grade because they had stopped attending but had not formally withdrawn from the course. Thirteen students in the morning section earned passing grades in the course—five students earned “A”s, three students earned “B”s, and 5 students earned “C”s. Two students in the morning section received “F”s as final course grades, in part because they failed to complete all of the required major projects. Of the fifteen students who completed the course in the morning section, only two of these students were male and the remaining thirteen students were female. The official roster for the afternoon section of the course showed 23 students at the end of the semester, but only 21 of these students required grades to be given since the other two students had formally withdrawn from the course. Of these 21 students, two students received “FW” as their grade because they had stopped attending but had failed to formally withdraw from the course. Thirteen students in the afternoon section of the course earned passing grades in the course—two students earned “A”s, seven students earned “B”s, four students earned “C”s, and one student earned a “D”. Five students in the afternoon section earned “F”s as final course grades, with four of these students
failing to complete multiple required projects. Of the nineteen students who completed the
course in the afternoon section, seven of these students were male and twelve were female.

Table 2.1: Course Attendance and Participation in Study Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ENGL 111-05 (morning)</th>
<th>ENGL 111-23 (afternoon)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total registered students who attended at semester start</td>
<td>100 22</td>
<td>100 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total students actively attending at 60% point in semester</td>
<td>77 17</td>
<td>87 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total students who completed course</td>
<td>68 15</td>
<td>83 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total students who completed course &amp; gave consent for study</td>
<td>55 12</td>
<td>57 13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When comparing course completion rates for these two sections with overall graduation rates of this college’s student population, the gender breakdown in the morning section shows significant disparity (13% male and 87% female completion versus 38% male and 62% female graduation) while the breakdown in the afternoon section once again is fairly close to the state-wide rates (37% male and 63% female completion versus 38% male and 62% female graduation).

Averaging completion rates for the two sections within this study shows this disparity differently (26% male and 74% female completion versus 38% male and 62% female graduation). When considering average completion rates within six previous semesters of my own sections of
ENGL 111, however, disparities were noted within both male and female completion rates (40.4% male and 59.6% female completion versus 38% male and 62% female graduation). These enrollment, attendance, and completion statistics for the individual class sections and the college itself are included because they are necessary in attempting to understand the diverse needs of the students of this college and what these students value within their learning experiences.\textsuperscript{10}

It should be noted here that not everyone who completed the semester also consented to participate in this research study.\textsuperscript{11} Participation in the research study was completely optional for the students, and while more than half of those students who completed the semester had also consented to participate in the study, other students opted out of the study for unknown reasons. (See Table 2.1 on the previous page.) Additionally, not every student who originally consented to participate in the study actually completed the semester. Well-intentioned students sometimes end up having to drop out of a course or out of school (at this and other institutions) for personal or family-related reasons, and this was the case for several original study participants. In the morning section, three original study participants dropped out of the course while only one original study participant was lost from the afternoon section. Out of the fifteen students who completed the semester in the morning section of the course, twelve of these students gave consent to participate in the research study, while thirteen out of the nineteen students in the afternoon section who completed the course gave their consent to participate in the study. In taking a closer look at the study participants (those students who signed the consent form for the study and who completed the semester), demographic data shows some similarities and some differences between participants with regards to age, gender, and final grade earned within the ENGL 111 course. For example, of the twelve study participants in the morning section of the course, five were traditional-aged freshman students and seven were returning adult students. In
the afternoon section of the course, four of the consenting research participants were traditional-aged freshmen while nine were returning adult students. [See Table 2.2 below for more of this demographic data.]

Table 2.2: Demographic Data for Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ENGL 111-05 (morning)</th>
<th>ENGL 111-23 (afternoon)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Freshman (age 18-21)</td>
<td>42 5</td>
<td>31 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning Adult (age 22 &amp; older)</td>
<td>58 7</td>
<td>69 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17 2</td>
<td>46 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>83 10</td>
<td>54 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final Grade Earned in Course</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>42 5</td>
<td>15 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>25 3</td>
<td>38 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>17 2</td>
<td>23 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>17 2</td>
<td>23 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of participants</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NOTE: This data includes only those students who signed a consent form and completed the course; percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

It is important to note at this point that a study involving only two sections of a course is considered to be a rather small study, and analysis of data (especially quantitative data) can be limited when a sample size is small. Because so many aspects of these two class sections were exactly the same (or very similar)—with course, day of week, classroom setting, syllabus
schedule, assignments, instructor and pedagogical approach being identical for both—it made sense to combine the two sections in order to increase the overall sample size for quantitative analysis. With a rather small sample size (small even with both sections combined), however, all statistical findings of this study will be merely suggestive and will not be generalizable to all FYC students or even to all ENGL 111 students at this institution.

Researcher Participant

As the researcher conducting this study, I was considered to be a participant, and as the teacher who was teaching the ENGL 111 class sections being studied within this research, I was a participant in this study on yet another level. Being teacher-researcher and thus participant in this study was a complex and multi-faceted role for one person, a role with varying, and sometimes competing, responsibilities. For this reason, I have attempted to maintain a high level of transparency throughout this text as researcher-teacher-participant.

I entered into this particular research study with limited formal research experience but a strong foundational background in FYC theory and pedagogy that was anchored in my research work throughout my graduate and doctoral studies and in my FYC teaching experiences over nearly ten years. Much of my research work up to this point had focused on FYC, with particular attention given to teacher commentary, formative assessment and student engagement. Of the nearly ten years of experience that I had in teaching beginning composition at the time of this study, seven of those years were spent teaching ENGL 111 at this particular community college setting as an adjunct instructor. Those seven years provided me with invaluable teaching experiences that allowed me to understand and appreciate the needs of FYC students and the needs of the diverse student population at this particular institution as well.
Within this institution’s composition program, as is true in many college composition programs, more female adjunct instructors than male adjunct instructors were teaching at the time of this study. In this case, as a female adjunct instructor I was part of a nearly two-to-one majority within the composition program. I was in the minority, however, in that I chose to teach solely in this college setting while many of my adjunct colleagues taught at multiple schools. For this spring semester, I also chose to teach only the two sections of ENGL 111 that would be the focus of my research study. I was unlike many of my colleagues as well in that I was teaching while going to school myself, but this particular characteristic was one that I shared with many of my students who were working while going to school. I was also much like many of my students in that I was a parent and a returning adult student, so I understood firsthand the difficulties that many of my students faced in finding a life/work/school balance that would allow them to be successful in all areas of their lives.

Data Collection Instruments

Over the course of the sixteen-week spring semester, I used a wide range of data collection instruments. A majority of these instruments were student-generated texts that were already a part of the course curriculum and thus represented no interruption to the natural flow of the class. The students completed their assignments and turned them in as usual; the only difference to the natural order of things occurred outside of class when I made copies of these texts before returning them to the students. These student-generated classroom artifacts included: Reading Response #3 & #4, Mid-Term Self-Assessment, Proposal for Argument, Status Report on the 2nd draft of the Argumentative Research Project, multiple drafts of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research Project, In-class Essay 1, In-class Essay 2, Reflection pages for Annotated Bibliography and Argumentative Research projects, and
Looking Back: Reflective Essay (final draft). I deemed other instruments to be important potential sources of data and worth the additional time and attention required for completion and/or collection (whether in class or out of class), and these included: my observations and reflections as teacher-researcher, the texts of numerous student/teacher email exchanges and personal interviews, along with Pre-and Post-project questionnaires. The additional time and attention required was mostly required of me as teacher-researcher and represented minimal interruption to the natural flow of the class for the students.

Along with multiple data collection instruments, this teacher research study also required multiple methods of analysis in order to explore the many and varied contexts of the composition classroom setting as shown within the data. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis were employed, with mixed methods being used where both quantitative and qualitative data could be found within the same data collection instrument. For this particular study, then, methods of coding and analysis were carefully considered based on the type of data available within the data collection instruments and the potential usefulness of that data within the overall contexts of the study. Project-specific data from the Proposal and from within the multiple drafts of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research projects was considered using Descriptive Coding to determine categories and Process Coding to discover actions and interactions of the study participants. Student writings that were more subjective in nature (like emails, self-assessments, Status Reports, project reflection pages and the Final Reflection essay) were considered using Descriptive and Process Coding as well, but these data collection instruments also provided student voices with In Vivo Coding. Values Coding also brought student values, attitudes and beliefs to the forefront within these subjective writings. And, in some cases, Emotions Coding was used to label emotions that participants expressed (or
implied) within that data. The pre-and post-project questionnaires required mixed methods to be used since initial questions on each questionnaire had pre-set answer options (quantifiable data) and later questions included short answers that were written out by respondents and included their perceptions and opinions (qualitative data). Attribute Coding of the early questions on each questionnaire revealed demographic information and characteristics of student respondents, while Descriptive Coding helped to determine initial categories within the data. The answers to the short answer questions on both questionnaires helped to establish some initial or baseline data for the study with regards to general perceptions about the purpose of teacher commentary, multiple drafts and revising, along with the students’ perceptions about their usage of peer and teacher feedback. In Vivo Coding of this data showed student voices within categories that were determined through Descriptive Coding, and Values Coding of this data further explored the perceptions and values of these student respondents as shown within this particular data collection instrument. Detailed descriptions of each of these data collection instruments are included within the pages that follow.

**Reading Responses**

Students were required to complete four Reading Responses over specific textbook readings that were assigned throughout the semester. Since the ability to summarize material is recognized as a means of demonstrating reading comprehension, these one-to-two page Reading Responses were to include a brief summary paragraph of the assigned text as well as an explanation of personal application for the ideas within the text. Each of the assigned readings for the Reading Responses was directly related to a particular writing project. For example, Reading Response #3 was over the textbook Chapter 32: *Arguing* and it was assigned as students were entering into the research unit. Reading Response #4 was over the textbook Chapter 18:
Reflecting and it was assigned as the students were preparing to begin their final major project, the Looking Back: Reflective Essay. The purpose of the Reading Response assignments was to ensure that students understood the content of the reading text and that they had considered how they might apply that information within their own writings, especially within the specific project at hand. The emphasis was on content rather than grammatical correctness within the grading of these responses as well.

**Mid-Term Self-Assessment**

The Mid-Term Self-Assessment provided an opportunity for the students to reflect back over the first half of the semester and assess what they had achieved already and what they needed to work on yet. The Mid-Term Self-Assessment included just three rate-and-explain questions. For each question, students were asked to rate their current level of learning, participation, and/or effort in the course on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being high and 1 being low) and then were given space to write two or three sentences of explanation of that rating. The questions were as follows:

1) Read through the course objectives on page 2 of the course syllabus. How well do you think that you are mastering these objectives at this point in the semester? (Rate & explain);

2) How well are you doing with keeping up with reading and writing assignments for this class? (Rate & explain);

3) “I am putting forth my best effort in this class.” (Rate the accuracy of this statement & explain).

This Mid-Term Self-Assessment could only be completed during class on that specific day. Since it was listed in bold font on the course schedule, the students knew about it from the first
day of class. We also discussed it in class the week before, and students were reminded that this activity could not be made up later. The students were given approximately twenty minutes during the week 8 class session to complete the self-assessment. Because I believe that the real value is in the self-assessing itself and that it is unfair to give a grade based on one’s opinion, grades for this Mid-term were based on completion and following directions. And because of this type of grading, I think that the students had motivation to be truly honest with themselves and with me in their Self-Assessment responses. Administering this Self-Assessment at the mid-point of the semester was intentional on my part: completing this self-assessment at this time allows students the chance to take action or make necessary changes while there is still time to affect their final outcomes in the course.

Proposal

Throughout the semester, I emphasized to students the importance of pre-thinking and planning for every writing project, but nowhere was this preliminary thinking deemed more important than within their argumentative research projects. After a week of reading and discussing argumentative writing, but before they formally began their own projects, the students were required to complete a Proposal for their intended argument. Intended as a means to work through their beginning ideas and narrow their arguments to manageable size, the Proposal assignment asked students to put down on paper several important aspects of the focus of their argument and their research plans. Student proposals had to include the following:

1. a brief discussion of their interest in the general topic and their rationale for choosing the topic;
2. one or two research questions, along with potential key search terms;
3. a working thesis/statement of argument;
4. their intended audience, both primary and possible secondary audience; and
5. a discussion of their research strategy and possible sources.

Students could choose to simply list out the numbers and their responses to each request for information or they could write their plans out in essay form. The critical thinking aspect of the assignment was more important to me than the way in which they chose to write out the required information. I have found that this critical thinking about the proposed argument needs to happen at the very beginning of the research process, and if it is not somewhat forced, a large number of students will simply muddle through weeks of indecision and then throw together an ill-conceived argument at the last possible moment. By forcing the students to at least attempt to think through their potential argument and make some of these initial decisions early on, and by requiring that they put these ideas down on paper, the students are better prepared to discuss these potential arguments with me, to ask questions and request help, and to actually begin researching. Writing down their initial ideas is important, but discussing these ideas also serves an important purpose: the students begin to understand their research writing as entering into a conversation. I scheduled an in-class workshop and conference day in order to facilitate this atmosphere of critical thinking and inquiry about the impending research. In this way, students could chat with their peers and with me about their possible projects, do a bit of cursory researching within our computer classroom, and then check back with me as needed throughout the class session.

Status Report

After the students had completed their peer review session over the projects and they were turning in the second drafts of both the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research projects for my formative commentary, I had the students complete a
Status Report on the projects in the Discussion Board section of our class’s Blackboard site. The purpose of this Status Report was two-fold: 1) it allowed me to hear directly from the students about how they felt about their progress within the projects; and 2) it allowed the students to speak directly to me about what they wanted me to address as I read their projects and offered my feedback. The Discussion Board prompt that greeted the students was this:

This is the place for you to report on your progress thus far on the Argumentative Research project. Even if you are not finished with the 2nd draft, I want you to discuss your progress thus far! Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions:

1. What aspects of the project are going well at this point in the process?
2. What aspects of the project are you struggling with at this point?
3. Now that you’ve received some peer feedback about the project, what are your specific plans for writing & revising?
4. As I look over your draft this week, what specific questions do you have for me? Are there aspects of the project that you want me to specifically address in my comments back to you?

An additional benefit of this type of Q & A format is that the students can “peek” at their peers’ response to the prompt and their specific questions back to me. In this way, students who were not brave enough to ask a particular question might receive an answer vicariously through my responses to their peers. While requiring the students to ask questions and to take an active role in the commenting dialogue may seem heavy-handed to some, many students have not been allowed to participate in the dialogue before and I have found it necessary to intentionally offer the students a turn in the dialogue—whether they think that they want/need it or not.

**Multiple Drafts**

As mentioned earlier, the students completed multiple drafts of each of the major projects. Second drafts of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and Argumentative Research projects (with my written comments to the student writers) and final drafts of these student
projects were collected from all study participants, and additional drafting, notes, and comments were copied and collected when possible. Time and technology issues made it impossible to collect absolutely every aspect of every student’s projects, however. These multiple drafts of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and Argumentative Research project were included as data collection instruments because they include the students’ texts at various stages, my written comments to the students on their drafts, and, in some cases, the students’ explicit use of those comments as they revised. Looking directly at the early student drafts, their requests for feedback (as discussed earlier), my comments to the students, the students’ revisions within the final draft, and the students’ reflection pages (as discussed later) would seem to provide some indication of what the students want and value within the commenting dialogue.

In-Class Essays

Two in-class essays were required in ENGL 111 in order to provide students with practice in timed writing situations. With the current emphasis on high-stakes testing, essay writing has largely been reduced to formulas, like the five-paragraph essay, for example. But writing a good essay, long deemed a useful or transferable “skill” by many stakeholders in education, requires more than mere formulaic practice; writing a good essay requires a strong thesis and attention to rhetorical aspects of writing—like audience, context, and purpose—as well as that practice. Students were reminded beforehand that these required aspects of good writing were the same things that they had been working to master within their major writing projects as well. With an In-Class Essay, however, they were limited in their time and their space in which to work their writing “magic.” Some writers tended to stress themselves out in timed-writing situations, so this de-mystifying was beneficial as students realized that they already knew what to do and how to do it.
For In-Class Essay 1, my students wrote a problem/solution essay about an issue on campus or in their home neighborhood, an issue that affected them personally. The timing of this first essay aligned nicely with the students’ recently-completed work on their Argumentative Research projects. In-Class Essay 2 required the students to give pertinent advice to in-coming ENGL 111 students based on their own experiences throughout the semester. Because this prompt required the students to think back over their semester in ENGL 111 and determine what was important information that should be shared, this essay aligned nicely with the students’ work on their final Reflective Essay for the course. In-Class Essay 1 was completed during week 13 and In-Class Essay 2 was completed during week 14 of the 16-week semester. Each of the essays was to be one page in length. Both essays were scheduled ahead of time and were listed in bold font on the course schedule. Both essays were completed during twenty-five minutes of a designated Monday class session when we were in the computer classroom. While I scheduled these in-class essays on days when we would be in the computer classroom so that the students would have the convenience of typing their responses within Word, I also allowed students to write out their essay responses long-hand.

Project Reflections

Much of the learning in writing occurs through critical reflection at various stages within the writer’s process, yet many students will not exercise this reflexivity on their own. In some cases, students do not care to be so deeply engaged, but in many cases, students have simply never been taught how to exercise a metacognitive process like critical reflection. Because I understand the value of this meta-awareness and reflexivity, I required my students to complete one-page reflections to turn in with the final drafts of each major project. These reflection pages required the students to reflect back on their writing experiences and processes throughout their
work on each project. The goal of these reflection pages was to help the students to become aware and to begin to understand what they do within their own writing processes, how they think/write/revise within their writing processes, and why this self-knowledge/understanding matters. While the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project and the Argumentative Research project were connected projects that were turned in together, each project required its own reflection page. The students had the freedom to choose their focus for their reflection page for most projects, but for these two projects, I gave specific directions in a prompt for the reflection pages. [See below.] After all, I wanted the students to be especially mindful of their own writing processes and of the role that feedback and comments had played in their writing and revising.

**Prompt for Reflection Page for Argumentative Research Project:**

Look back through your drafts for this project and the comments that you received from your peers and from me. Now, discuss 2 or 3 of these comments in your reflection as you “respond” to the author(s) of the comments. Tell how each of the comments affected your writing and/or revising of the project (i.e. what did you do with what was suggested? Will this comment help you in the future, or change the way you do things in future writing assignments?). Give specific details wherever possible!

**Prompt for Reflection Page for Amplified Annotated Bibliography:** Look back through your drafts for this project and then describe your writing/revising process for the project. How was your process different on this project from other things you’ve written? How was your process on this project similar to your process on other projects? What specific things did you learn about yourself as a writer through this project?

*Final Reflective Essay*

The final major project of the semester was a reflective essay that required the students to consider all of their work and subsequent growth as writers through each of the previous major
projects. And since the students had already practiced this type of reflective writing when they completed the individual reflection pages for each of the major writing projects, the students were already quite familiar with this genre of writing. This particular project was to be included at the beginning of their final portfolio for the course. By requiring the students to handle all of their earlier projects as they placed them in the portfolio, my hope was that the students would actually look back through all of their projects and give some specific critical reflection to their writing processes rather than just general or disconnected musings. This project was designed to be personal and reflective in nature, an enjoyable final writing project for most students. As a data collection instrument, this Looking Back: Reflective Essay provided the students’ perspectives about their own growth and progress as writers throughout the semester and through each specific project. As far as the major writing projects are concerned, this one had the potential to provide the strongest sense of student identity and voice.

Teacher Observations and Reflections

Throughout the semester, as both teacher and researcher, I attempted to systematically document my observations and reflections. I attempted to note features of the classroom setting, daily classroom atmosphere, student questions & responses within certain course activities, and pedagogical adjustments that I made & my rationale for making them. I also made note of interesting intersections between in-class and out-of-class activities. This systematic documentation was often easier said than done, however. While I do have nearly eight weeks’ worth of consistent and fairly detailed notes, personal illness and schedule demands made consistency impossible in the latter weeks of the semester. During these later weeks of the semester, I worked to document my observations and reflections at key moments and as I could wrestle the time. So, while some of the mundane aspects of the semester and its experiences may
not be fully documented, the majority of the important moments of the semester are covered within my notes.

**Email Communications**

From the very first moments of the semester I stressed the importance of communication with my students. Communication is a key skill, no matter what major or career area a student is pursuing, so I attempted to model good communication skills for my students and I encouraged them to work at strengthening their communication skills in my course and beyond. In my past experiences, email has seemed to be the favorite means of communication with the instructor for most students. Knowing this, I am a very intentional email communicator who responds to every student email, even if just to acknowledge that I have received whatever assignment or note they have sent to me. And since I promise to respond to every student email within 24 hours—even on weekends, barring any scheduled interruptions or technology issues-- my students tend to email me frequently. And as a teacher, I value this dialogue. In ways, I see email as a way that the happenings and conversations of the classroom spill over into the everyday. And since I am an adjunct instructor who is only on campus on the days that I teach, email allows me to be more connected to campus and to my students. This email communication helps to clear up confusion surrounding an assignment or a question about a possible topic. And at times, this email communication becomes a means of mentoring and encouraging students beyond the boundaries of ENGL 111. For the purposes of this research, it should be noted that not every student took advantage of this email communication throughout the semester; however, I received more emails and emails from more students during the timeframe when the students were working through the research unit that is the focus (or contextual “center”) of this research study. This email communication provided opportunities for us to discuss topic ideas, potential arguments or
approaches to arguments, possible research questions or key search terms, where/how to find potential sources, and matters of documentation. While not as up-to-the-minute as asking questions during class, this email communication allowed students to get answers to their questions or ideas for their progress while they were working and/or before the next class session.

*Personal Interviews*

Originally I intended to put together several focus groups of five or six students from both sections of the class. Because I wanted to have final grades figured and posted beforehand, and because the semester itself was so fast-paced and challenging, I intended to schedule these focus group interview sessions several weeks after the end of the spring semester. When I sent out the query email at the end of the semester, however, I received back only four total responses between both class sections. Disappointed, but not to be daunted, I decided to settle on one focus group, and I set out to find a time to schedule a meeting with these four students. It soon became clear that a single time would not work—one student was on the road throughout the week for his job, one student didn’t respond back about scheduling—but two students seemed to have schedules that would align, so I set up an afternoon interview with those two students. Due to a communication issue, however, only one student came to the interview session. At that point, I decided that I would conduct three or four individual student interviews rather than attempt any size of focus group, and that is what I have done.

I conducted two face-to-face interviews with two different students in the month after the semester ended. In both cases, I chose a familiar location on campus in which to meet. In the same building where we had met for class during the semester, we met in a small sitting area within a student commons area for each of the interviews. This area provided a fairly quiet,
relaxed atmosphere for the interviews. The same interview questions were used in both interview sessions. In addition to audio-taping the face-to-face interview sessions, I also scribbled a few brief notes on my notepad during the interviews. I attempted to keep the “formal” interview itself to an hour or less, but in both cases, the student participants stayed to chat with me for a while afterward.

I also conducted one personal interview via email because of scheduling issues for that student participant. The same questions were used within the email interview as were used within the face-to-face interviews. In each interview, the student participant was asked to answer eight specific questions but was also allowed to include any additional information or ideas that she or he wanted to include. In this way, the students were allowed to voice what they deemed important or significant in this conversation as well. The face-to-face interviews were painstakingly transcribed, but in the case of the email interview, the written text and related emails were deemed complete enough to stand alone. These three interviews became the bases for the three ethnographic case studies that are found within Chapter 3 of this text, and more discussion about these interviews, related data, and implications are included in Chapter 3 of this text. While they are not intended to be representative of all ENGL 111 students, these three interviews do offer valuable insights into the commenting dialogue and FYC student learning from the student perspective.

*Pre- and Post-Project Questionnaires*

The Pre- and Post-Project Questionnaires were completed by student participants during class time and these were not a part of normal course schedule. The two questionnaires were designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from the student participants. The initial three questions on both questionnaires dealt with matters of student demographics (age range,
gender, means of entry into ENGL 111), while the next three questions on both questionnaires
asked about how the students valued certain aspects of the course, how they felt about revision as
a part of their writing process and how they felt about writing multiple drafts. Five of these six
initial questions on both questionnaires were close-ended with pre-set response options. The
fourth question on both questionnaires asked students to rank twelve different aspects of writing
from one to twelve, with “1” meaning “most important to me” and “12” meaning “least
important to me” in an attempt to learn what students valued in writing instruction. Including the
same six initial questions on both questionnaires allowed for some comparisons of students’
perceptions and valuations at different times in the semester as well. The final three questions on
Questionnaire 1 (the Pre-Project Questionnaire) were open-ended questions that asked students
about their opinions surrounding the purpose of teacher comments, their past experiences with
teacher comments, and their opinions about the kind of teacher comments that they thought
would help them in their writing & revising process. After the same six initial questions,
Questionnaire 2 (the Post-Project Questionnaire) included four more close-ended questions with
pre-set response options. Two of these questions asked students’ about their perceived value of
writing in their majors and in their future careers, while the next two questions asked about their
perceived value of teacher classroom explanations and teacher comments on their 2nd drafts of
their Argumentative Research project. The final two questions on Questionnaire 2 were open-
ended and dealt specifically with the Argumentative Research project. Question 10 asked for
specific ways that they felt the teacher’s comments on their 2nd drafts had affected their revision
work for the final draft. Question 11 asked the students to explain what they perceived to be the
most important feedback that they received on the research project, whether from peer or teacher.
The open-ended nature of the final questions on both questionnaires allowed students the
freedom to voice in their own words what they value and why it is important to them as students and as writers.

Ideally, Questionnaire 1 would have been administered near the beginning of the semester and before the students had experienced any commentary from me; however, due to an IRB approval issue, Questionnaire 1 was administered well after the course was underway but still before the students’ central research project was formally begun. In the morning section, eleven students completed this pre-project questionnaire, while thirteen students in the afternoon section completed the pre-project questionnaire. Questionnaire 2 was given in the week following the students’ completion of the Argumentative Research project. This post-project questionnaire was completed by seven students in the morning section and eleven students in the afternoon section of the course. [See Table 2.3 on the following page.] Incidentally, the questionnaires were intended to be anonymous—no space was given for names & the anonymous nature of the questionnaires was discussed in class beforehand—but, one student still signed a questionnaire. Additionally, students who initially gave consent and completed the pre-project questionnaire did not complete the course (as discussed earlier in this chapter). These students either dropped the course or simply stopped attending before the post-project questionnaire was completed. Because of the anonymous nature of the questionnaires, it was impossible to determine which questionnaires those original study participants had completed in order to remove them. Of the twelve students in the morning section of the course who signed the consent form and completed the course, eleven students completed the pre-project questionnaire and seven students completed the post-project questionnaire. Of the thirteen students in the afternoon section of the course who signed the consent form and completed the course, thirteen students completed the pre-project questionnaire and eleven students completed
the post-project questionnaire. Unfortunately, some attrition is common with a pre-test/post-test research design, yet (as shown in Table 2.3) response rates remained relatively high in both sections of the course.

Table 2.3: Questionnaire Response Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ENGL 111-05 (morning)</th>
<th>ENGL 111-23 (afternoon)</th>
<th>Combined Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of consenting students at time of pre-project questionnaire</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-project questionnaire response rate</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of consenting students at time of post-project questionnaire</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-project questionnaire response rate</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With only two class sections in the study, and because of the small number of study participants in each class section who completed the ENGL 111 course, the two sections were combined for the purposes of quantitative analysis, yielding a larger overall sample size for the data. When the two sections of the course were combined, a total of 25 students signed the consent form and completed the semester. This combined sample, then, included 24 completed Pre-Project Questionnaires and 18 completed Post Project Questionnaires. By pooling the data in this way, the total number of study participants who signed the consent form and completed the
course became 25. Combining the number of completed Pre-Project Questionnaires from the morning section (11) with the number of completed Pre-Project Questionnaires from the afternoon section (13) yielded a total of 24 completed questionnaires and a pooled response rate of 96% for the Pre-Project Questionnaire. Likewise, combining the number of completed Post-Project Questionnaires from the morning section (7) with the number of completed Post-Project Questionnaires from the afternoon section (11) yielded a total of 18 completed questionnaires and a pooled response rate of 72% for the Post-Project Questionnaire. Once again, combining (or pooling) the data from the two sections yielded a larger overall sample size for the quantitative analysis of this data. Even so, only suggestive findings that could not be generalized to all ENGL 111 students were possible from the start because of the small number of questionnaires completed.

Data Collection and Coding

In his recent book, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers (2nd ed)*, Johnny Saldaña advocates for what he terms “pragmatic eclecticism,” a strategy by which the researcher chooses to delay decisions about coding methods and thus remains open-minded about which coding method(s) would be “most appropriate and most likely to yield substantive analysis” (2013, 60) during initial data collection and pre-coding activities. In this way, the data itself can be used help to make decisions about how it will be analyzed. I found this to be a very appealing idea as I approached my own research. Saldaña’s text provides detailed descriptions, clear explanations, and samples of a wide range of coding methods and strategies. As a novice researcher facing a large volume of data to code and numerous coding decisions ahead of me, I found Saldaña’s text to be user-friendly and extremely helpful. Grounded theory had seemed like
the best fit for me since the beginning, but I found additional possible coding methods within this text that would seem to complement basic grounded theory strategies.

Regarding grounded theory, Kathy Charmaz has said that “[w]e learn through studying our data. Qualitative coding guides our learning. Through it, we begin to make sense of our data” (2006, 46). Within these words, Charmaz emphasizes the importance of qualitative coding, adding that “[c]areful attention to coding furthers our attempts to understand acts and accounts, scenes and sentiments, stories and silences from our research participants’ view” (46). Since I definitely wanted to gain understanding about the commenting relationship from the students’ perspective, I felt intense pressure to carefully code the data I collected. I was encouraged that Saldaña recognized the “overwhelming fear” that I, like many other novice researchers, have felt at the prospect of coding, and his advice to “[s]imply take data analysis one datum at a time” (2013, 66), offered a much-needed nudge toward the task when that time came.

Strauss & Corbin (1998, 13) have suggested that “[a]nalysis is the interplay between researchers and data. It is both science and art.” I found this idea of analysis being both science and art fascinating. After all, research is often presented as being only scientific, factual, and rigorous--in other words, disconnected and uninspired. Strauss & Corbin (1998), however, go on to explain how “(analysis) is science in the sense of maintaining a certain degree of rigor and by grounding analysis in data” (13). This grounding of analysis in data helps to ensure that the analysis stays connected to the data and its original context. The art of analysis, then, is found in the creativity of the researcher(s) doing the analyzing. According to Strauss & Corbin (1998), “[c]reativity manifests itself in the ability of researchers to aptly name categories, ask stimulating questions, make comparisons, and extract an innovative, integrated, realistic scheme from
masses of unorganized raw data”(13). Like Strauss & Corbin (1998, 13), then, I have attempted to balance science and creativity within my own research.

Charmaz further explains that “we create our codes by defining what we see in the data. Codes emerge as you scrutinize your data and define meanings within it” (2006, 46). Charmaz considers this process to be “active coding” and explains that as “you interact with your data again and again and ask many different questions of them, [. . .] coding may take you into unforeseen areas and new research questions” (46). I really appreciate this idea of “active coding,” of interacting with the data at different times and in different ways, and I found myself to be especially drawn to Charmaz’s “constant comparative method” as I considered the analysis of my own data. Charmaz explains that

[t]he constant comparative method of grounded theory means (a) comparing different people (such as their views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences), (b) comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time, (c) comparing incident with incident, (d) comparing data with category, and (e) comparing a category with other categories. (as cited in Broad, 2003, 30)

For my particular study, with multiple students, various classroom artifacts, and different student perspectives, all stretched out over the course of a semester, the ability to compare different aspects of the data on multiple levels, in various ways, and at different times was definitely appealing.

As I collected data throughout the spring semester, I did so with the sort of “pragmatic eclecticism” that Saldaña suggests in his book (2013, 60). I tried to remain as objective and open-minded as possible while I worked to collect data and to keep that data organized within my files. Since I recognize that “organization is analysis” (Saldaña, 36) in the strictest sense of
the word, I attempted to simply file the data logically and chronologically. For future ease in
coding, I thought it seemed logical to create separate hanging files for each data collection
instrument. I organized the data files in the chronological order in which the data was completed
or collected. I made notes about any observations and/or questions after my initial read-through
of each data grouping as an additional pre-cursor to coding. These notes were placed in the front
of each data file, and would later provide important preliminary ideas to be included within
analytic memos.

During the early coding period, I began to consider (in a very general way) what I might
look for within the data and which type of data would be most apt to contain that type of
information. I knew that the initial sequences of closed-ended questions with pre-set response
options within the two questionnaires would provide more quantiative results than some of the
other data collection instruments could provide. Those initial questions contained demographic
information which could be coded using Attribute Coding and would provide some valuable
“cover” information about the student participants. Several of those early questions contained
information about general student perceptions about multiple drafts and revising, along with a
question about valuing different aspects of the writing class. I hoped that those questions would
provide a sort of baseline as I began to analyze the rest of the data. I was interested in the
students’ perspective about the commenting dialogue, what students want and need from
commentary, and how the students actually use that feedback, so I considered the different data
collection instruments and worked to determine which of these could give me the most or best
information in the students’ own words. Understanding the students’ perspective requires
listening to the students’ voices, so that need to listen became my main focus as I considered the
different data collection instruments. A number of types of data seemed capable of providing the
students’ own words about what they want from commentary: the short answer questions on Questionnaire 1 & 2, the Reflection pages for the major writing projects, the final Reflective Essay, the Status Report posts on Discussion Board, and the personal interviews. Likewise, the students’ own words about what they need from commentary could be found within several different types of data: the short answer questions on Questionnaire 1 & 2, the Status Report posts on Discussion Board, texts of emails, my observations about their in-class questions and conferencing, and the personal interviews. In thinking about how students use that feedback, though, I realized that I could access their own words for how they used feedback within their reflection pages for the major projects and within the final Reflective Essay for the course, and I could use my own observations about the students’ writing process work, making note of both obvious moves and merely suggestive moves.

I also began to realize that while some of the other data collection instruments might not contain direct references to what these students want, need and value within the commenting relationship, these instruments could end up playing an important supporting role. I realized that this role could be as a means to add in contextual details about this complex commenting relationship or about the students’ overall learning. I also realized that the data in these instruments eventually could become a means to triangulate data later in analysis. My initial goal in data collection was to collect as much data related to my initial research questions as possible—whether directly related or only somewhat related—especially data that included the students’ own voices, so I viewed all data as potentially useful. By centering my research focus on this one particular classroom project and all that it included, I attempted to be both as exclusive and as inclusive as possible while also creating a manageable data load with which to work.
Even with these attempts to make the data load manageable for myself, however, I found the initial or open coding process to be somewhat overwhelming as I read and re-read all of the students’ writings and my initial notes and questions regarding those works. When I completed the initial quantitative analyses of the two questionnaires (using an IBM SPSS Statistics program), though, I gained some useful insights into changes in student perspectives (from before completing the Argumentative Research Project to after its completion) and differences in what was valued by the students based on age and gender of the student participants. These early statistical analyses also showed me that it was both possible and logical to combine the data from both classes for quantitative analysis because of the small sample size (i.e. number of student participants); thus, the data from each class section was combined in most stages of my analyses—except for some later comparisons I made between the class sections.

When I was ready to begin the initial or open coding of the data, I was relieved by Charmaz’s suggestion that “[i]nitial codes are provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data” (2006, 48). She further explained that “[t]hey (initial codes) are provisional because you aim to remain open to other analytic possibilities and create codes that best fit the data you have” (48). When codes are shown to “fit the data,” you then work to “gather data to explore and fill out these codes,” according to Charmaz (48). This perspective seemed to remove some of the pressure to be “perfect” in coding on the first attempt. In fact, this “active coding” process seemed much like the writing process; your initial attempt is the best that you can do at that point, but then you review what you’ve done and revise as necessary, repeating that whole process as necessary. Charmaz explained the value of “staying close to the data and, when possible, starting from the words and actions of your respondents” as a means of “preserv[ing] the fluidity of their experience and giv[ing] you new ways of looking at it” (49). I was interested
in my students’ perspective of commentary and how they use that commentary within their own writing, so coding with In Vivo codes and with action words seemed logical.

As I considered where to begin the actual coding process for the multiple data collection instruments employed within the study, then, I chose to begin with the short answer questions on the Pre-project questionnaire. This seemed like a good starting point since the responses to the questions were short, fairly focused, and in the students’ own voices. For example, in question 7 on the Pre-project questionnaire the student respondents were asked for their opinions about the purpose of teacher comments. Initial coding of the responses yielded three main purposes for teacher comments: “Help me” to, “Provide (me with),” & “Give Me.” Each of these main purpose codes led to specific descriptions of the purposeful action as well, with many of these sub-codes being In Vivo codes and shown within quotation marks. So, the main purpose code “Help me,” yielded multiple sub-codes that included descriptions of that action and the more detailed codes became—

“Help Me” to:

- identify and fix mistakes
- understand
- “think outside the box”
- “become (a) better writer”
- “improve (my) writing skills”
- “write the best (I) possibly can”
- “make a better final draft”
- “get a better grade”
I handled each of the initial main purpose codes in this way, and multiple, more descriptive sub-codes pertaining to the purposeful actions were created as well. Question 8 on the Pre-project questionnaire asked the student respondents to describe their past experiences with teacher comments and to tell whether the comments had been helpful or not helpful to them as writers. Most respondents gave general descriptions of past comments within their responses, but a few students gave actual examples of comments that were “helpful” or “not helpful” [See the sample response in Figure 2.2 below].

Figure 2.2: Sample Student Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs more detail</th>
<th>Not helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your writing here is a good start but you need . . . Writing what I need is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I created the following general codes from the students’ responses about past comments: focused on grammar or spelling errors, “critical,” “both good and bad,” focused on structure or organization problems, vague or broad, lacking in detail and explanation, filled with incorrect information, (student) learned what was needed, and (student) learned what was wrong. After looking at what the student respondents found to be “helpful” or “not helpful,” I coded their many and varied responses of “helpful” and “not helpful” comments and numerous sub-codes emerged. So, for example, Helpful: explaining “what doesn’t work” and Helpful: explaining “what is done well” emerged as sub-codes within the main “Helpful” comments code. Additionally, Not helpful: commenting without detail or explanation, and Not helpful: giving incorrect or confusing information, emerged as sub-codes within the main “Not helpful” comments code. Question 9 on the Pre-project questionnaire asked student respondents to tell what type of teacher comments they thought would be most helpful to their personal writing and revising process. A number of words or phrases emerged in the initial coding of the responses to
this question. Using In Vivo coding, I considered the students’ responses about what type of
teacher comments they thought would be most helpful to them in their writing and the following
words or phrases emerged:

- “truth”
- “criticism”
- “compliments”
- “ask questions”
- “honesty”
- “correction”
- “encouragement”
- “another viewpoint”

Likewise, the responses to the short answer questions on Post-project questionnaire were
in the student respondents’ own voices, and In Vivo Coding was used whenever possible. These
questions were more specifically focused than the more general questions on the Pre-project
questionnaire, though, and related to how teacher comments had affected their revision work
between drafts of the Argumentative Research project (Question 10) and to what they deemed to
be the most important feedback on the project from teacher and peers (Question 11). Initial
coding of Question 10 on the Post-project questionnaire yielded codes like: “helped me,” “gave
me,” “showed me,” “made,” and a grouping of less specific descriptions of teacher’s comments,
too. Numerous sub-codes emerged for each of these codes as well. For example, “helped me”
was further shown by sub-codes like: “to revise my project,” “with revisions,” “to know if I was
doing it right,” “with organizing the papers,” “focus on details,” and “stay focused on the main
argument,” among others. For Question 11 on the Post-project questionnaire, students were
asked to look back over the entire Argumentative Research project process and determine what they deemed as the most important feedback that they received from peers or teacher. My initial coding of Question 11 showed that some respondent ideas specifically related to the teacher’s feedback and some specifically related to feedback from peers, but some respondent ideas about the most important feedback were about feedback in general and not attributed to a specific source. I created a listing of the descriptions and explanations within each of these categories—teacher’s feedback, peer(s)’s feedback, and feedback from unspecified source—within this initial coding stage, with many of the descriptions and explanations listed in the students’ own words.

**Figure 2.3: Sample of Multiple Codes for a Single Response**

*(Question 7 on Pre-project questionnaire asks: In your opinion, what is the purpose of a teacher’s comments on a student’s draft?)*

Student Response: “To help the student, not just mark what’s wrong but to explain”

Codes: *Help me: Understand (by explaining, by being detailed)*

[Descriptive coding of Purpose]

*Give me: More than just what’s wrong*

*Values: Help  Values: explanation*  

[Affective or Values Coding of Purpose]

*Belief: Comments should be helpful for student*
*Belief: Comments should go beyond just marking what is wrong*

After this initial descriptive coding of each of the short answer questions on the two questionnaires, I went back through the student responses to apply additional codes to that same data with Values Coding. Applying Values Coding “assesses a participant’s integrated value, attitude, and belief systems at work” (Saldaña, 2013, 105). This Affective Method of coding seemed beneficial in my attempts to understand what the student respondents valued within commentary and how their beliefs about the commentary then affected their actual use of the
commentary within their own writing. By considering the student’s value, attitude, and belief system within each response, this Values Coding allowed for later comparisons and triangulation of qualitative data from within different data collection instruments. In this way, then, multiple codes could be applied to a single data source, as shown in Figure 2.3 on the previous page.

In my earlier pre-coding work with the different data collection instruments, I had begun to consider abstract concepts from which more specific concepts eventually evolved. These initial concepts included student perspectives/perceptions, student knowledge, and student actions. Concepts like “what students want from commentary,” “what students need from commentary” and “how students use commentary” were then considered according to the students’ perceptions about each. As I continued to work through these ideas in coding, I created visual layouts of the basic details related to these initial concepts as I discovered them. For example, Table 2.4 on the following page includes details about these initial concepts that are related to student perceptions, while Table 2.5 (shown later) includes more detail about the student knowledge and student action concepts. During this open-coding stage I considered another concept, “student understandings about the commenting relationship,” which emerged from the initial idea of student knowledge. Another concept, “student participation in the commenting relationship,” emerged from the initial student action idea, but I later found that it actually related to both student perceptions and student actions. For each of these concepts considered during the coding process, a number of categories and sub-categories emerged. As I considered the data within each of the different data collection instruments, I began to note the related properties and the dimensions of these properties within each of the concepts. I found that these initial concepts dealt with the students’ perceptions about what they want and need from commentary, and I knew that I wanted to include student voices wherever possible in coding.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Categories within Concepts</th>
<th>Properties within Concepts</th>
<th>Dimensions of Properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1: Student Perceptions about what they WANT from commentary | as stated in their own words | Basis for perceptions | *understanding of commentary  
*past experiences  
*current situation  
*future goals |
|  | as implied by their own words | Recognition of responsibility | *personal  
*family  
*teacher  
*institution  
*unknown |
|  | as understood or perceived by teacher/researcher | Type of perception | *idealistic vs. realistic  
*vague/generalized vs. specific/focused  
*carefree musings vs. critical reflection  
*detached/other-focused vs. personal/self-focused |
| 2: Student Perceptions about what they NEED from commentary | actual use of commentary | Basis for Perception | *understanding of commentary  
*understanding of revision & writing  
*past experiences  
*current situation or project  
*future goals |
|  | *as shown in drafts | Recognition of Responsibility | *personal  
*family  
*teacher  
*institution  
*unknown |
|  | *as stated in their own words | Level of Usefulness of Commentary | *current vs. future  
*all vs. some  
*personal/specific & focused vs. anyone & general usefulness |
|  | intended use of commentary | Motivation to Use Commentary | *improvement to current work  
*improvement to overall writing  
*improvement of grade/ better grade  
*please teacher/ do what teacher wants/requires |
| 3: Student Perceptions about HOW they USE commentary | *as shown or evidenced in drafts | Type of Move | *obvious vs. suggestive  
*local vs. global |
|  | *as stated or implied by their own words | Type of Perception | *idealistic vs. realistic  
*vague/generalized vs. specific/focused  
*carefree musings vs. critical reflection  
*detached/other-focused vs. personal/ self-focused |
For this reason, it seemed important to categorize data for these concepts as that which was stated In Vivo, or in their own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories), and that which was implied by their own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories). So, for example, the In Vivo coding for what students want and need from teacher commentary (as the students stated in their responses to question 9 on the first questionnaire) included the following words or phrases: “truth,” “criticism,” “compliments,” “ask questions,” ”honesty,” ”correction,” ”encouragement,” and “another viewpoint.” In further consideration of these words or phrases, however, I found that several of these were very close in meaning, and could be considered as nearly synonymous, as shown in my modified listing below:

- “truth”/ “honesty”
- “criticism” / “correction”
- “compliments” / “encouragement”
- “ask questions”
- “another viewpoint”

While the primary emphasis within these initial concepts was on the students’ perceptions, I also established a category for data regarding these concepts as understood or perceived by the teacher/researcher in order to create a more complete overall context surrounding the concepts. The related properties that I considered for this category included: Bases for Perceptions, Recognition of Responsibility, and the Type of Perception. A number of dimensions emerged among the Bases for Perceptions of these concepts: understanding of commentary, past experiences, current situation, and future goals. In considering the property of Recognition of Responsibility, I considered dimensions like individual/personal, family, teacher, institution, and unknown. And finally, I considered the Type of Perception along four different dimensions:
idealistic vs. realistic, vague/generalized vs. specific/focused, carefree musings vs. critical reflection, and detached/other-focused vs. personal/self-focused.

As I considered the concept of How Students Use Commentary, I found that three different categories emerged: their actual use of commentary (as shown in their written texts or as stated in their own words, as sub-categories), their intended use of commentary (as shown/evidenced in their written texts and as stated or implied by their own words), and once again, as understood/perceived by the teacher/researcher. I considered six different properties, along with their varied dimensions, as well. While several of these properties were consistent with those found within the earlier two concepts, a number of these properties were related to the “how” as well as the “why” involved in the students’ usage of commentary. The properties that I considered included: Basis for Perceptions, Recognition of Responsibility, Level of Usefulness of Commentary, Motivation to Use Commentary, Types of Moves/Uses of Commentary, and Types of Perceptions. I also considered the dimensions for the Basis of Perceptions which included: understanding of commentary, understanding of revision & writing process, past experiences, current situation/project, and future goals. The dimensions I considered for the Recognition of Responsibility property included: individual/personal, family, teacher, institution, or unknown. For the Level of Usefulness of Commentary property, I had to consider timing and context within the dimensions: current vs. future, all vs. some, and personal/specific-focused vs. anyone/general usefulness. Within the Motivation to Use Commentary property, I considered dimensions that included: improvement to current work, improvement to overall writing, improvement of grade/better grade, and to please teacher/do what teacher wants/requires. When I considered the Types of Moves/Uses property, I pondered this property along two different
dimensions: obvious vs. suggestive moves, and local vs. global moves. I considered the Type of Perception property along the same four dimensions as previously described.

As I read the students’ own words within their texts and their responses on the questionnaires, it became obvious to me that Student Knowledge and Understanding about the Commenting Relationship needed to be considered as a concept. [Please see Table 2.5 below.]

Table 2.5: Preliminary Concepts, Categories, Properties & Dimensions (Student Knowledge & Student Action)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Categories within Concepts</th>
<th>Properties within Concepts</th>
<th>Dimensions of Properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4: Student understandings about the commenting relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as stated in their own words</td>
<td>Level of understanding</td>
<td>*clear/complete understanding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*written</td>
<td>*some confusion or misunderstanding/incomplete understanding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*verbal</td>
<td>*lack of interest or concern</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as implied by their own words</td>
<td>Bases or influences of understanding</td>
<td>*past experiences (education, workplace or culture)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*written</td>
<td>*current situation or project</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*verbal</td>
<td>*future goals (school &amp; beyond)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as understood or perceived by teacher/researcher</td>
<td>Motivation for maintaining or changing commentary dialogue</td>
<td>*level of confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as evidenced by student’s participation/words</td>
<td>*perceived value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as implied by student’s participation/words</td>
<td>Roles &amp; responsibilities in relationship</td>
<td>*personal desire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*encouragement from others (peers, family, teacher, other)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*pressure/being forced (teacher, mentor, other)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*personal (as understood)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*impersonal expectations (as established or stated)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Student participation in the commenting relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as stated in their own words</td>
<td>Level of participation</td>
<td>*active/engaged participant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*written</td>
<td>*passive/disengaged participant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*verbal</td>
<td>*mixed or uneven level of participation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as implied in their own words</td>
<td>Motivation for participation</td>
<td>*clearly recognizable value</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*written</td>
<td>*implied/understood value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*verbal</td>
<td>*unclear/unknown value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as evidenced/suggested by their actions and participation</td>
<td>Basis for perceptions about participation</td>
<td>*past experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*understanding of commentary (fixed, disconnected vs. relationship)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*sense of value for learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three categories emerged as I further considered this concept: student understanding as stated in their own words (whether written or verbal, as a sub-category), as implied by their own words (whether written or verbal), and as understood/perceived by the teacher/researcher (as evidenced by their words/participation or as implied by their words/participation, as a sub-category). Four
different properties also emerged as I considered this concept: the student level of understanding, the bases (or influences) for that understanding, motivation for maintaining or changing commenting dialogue, and roles & responsibilities in the relationship. I considered the student Level of Understanding along three different dimensions: clear/complete understanding, some confusion/misunderstanding or incomplete understanding, and lack of interest or concern. The Considering the Bases or Influences for Understanding property required that I consider: past experiences (education, workplace, or culture), current situation or project, future goals (school and beyond), level of confidence, and perceived value. I discovered inside and outside motivators when I considered the Motivation for Maintaining or Changing the Commenting Dialogue property, and these motivators included: personal desire, encouragement from others (peers, family, teacher, others), and pressure/being forced (teacher, mentor, other). I further considered the Roles and Responsibilities within the Commenting Relationship property as being personal (as understood) and as impersonal expectations (as established or stated).

After I read the students’ own words within their texts and considered them along with my own observations throughout the semester, another concept emerged: Student Participation in the Commenting Relationship. The three categories that became apparent to me within this concept were similar to the categories considered for several earlier concepts: as stated in their own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories), as implied by their own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories), and as understood/perceived by the teacher/researcher (whether evidenced by the students’ actions/participation or merely suggested by their actions/participation, as sub-categories). I considered three different properties within these categories, though: the level of participation, motivation for participation, and the basis for the student perceptions. When I considered the Level of Participation property, three dimensions
emerged: active/engaged participation, passive/disengaged participation, and mixed/uneven level of participation. Likewise, I found the Motivation for Participation property to include three dimensions: clearly recognizable value, implied/understood value, and unclear/unknown value. Three dimensions also emerged when I considered the Basis for Student Perceptions property: past experiences, understanding of commentary (fixed, disconnected vs. relationship), and sense of value for writing &/or learning. 

When I considered all of the student data within the full context of the study, I deemed it necessary to include additional concepts: the perceptions of the teacher/researcher, the knowledge & intentions of the teacher/researcher, and the actions/participation of the teacher/researcher regarding commentary and the commenting relationship with students. After all, feminist theory in composition encourages the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives within research as a means to more fully explore situations, contexts, and relationships. When I viewed my composition classroom critically through a feminist theory lens, I was reminded of the importance of every voice, every participant, and every action in the complex and varied contexts of the classroom setting. I further recognized that these contexts were interconnected and therefore necessary in my efforts to create an accurate picture of the overall context of the classroom as well. So, while this study is focused on students and attempts to give these students an active voice in an often teacher-focused area of writing instruction research, it would have been inaccurate and irresponsible of me to simply ignore or deliberately silence my own teacher voice entirely in this study of commentary as dialogue; it would, in fact, have been much like the one-sided conversations that have emerged from previous studies where student voices were ignored or silenced. Rather than hiding the teacher or silencing her voice, then, I have attempted instead to intentionally create a sense of transparency (and perhaps, validity) throughout this text
that I feel is important to the integrity of the overall context of the study. As an attempt to create this desired transparency within this study, I have included an autoethnography of my own processes of reading student texts and of composing responses to those texts. This autoethnography (found in Chapter 4 of this text) helped to build contextual detail and became an integral part of the overall study. The addition of the three teacher concepts that I considered allowed for later comparison and triangulation of this teacher data with related student data. A visual breakdown of these teacher-related concepts, including their respective categories, properties & dimensions, is shown in Table 2.6 on the following page.

As with the similar student concepts, I found that three categories emerged within each teacher concept: as stated by the teacher in her own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories), as implied by the teacher’s own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories), and as understood/perceived by the students (whether shown by written evidence or verbal evidence, as sub-categories). Wherever possible, I attempted to use similar properties (to the student counterparts) within each of the teacher concepts in an effort to make later comparisons and triangulations easier to complete. So, for example, the Teacher Perceptions about the Commenting Relationship concept contains the same properties as the Student Perceptions about What They WANT and the Student Perceptions about What They NEED concepts: Basis for Perceptions, Recognition of Responsibility, and Type of Perception. The dimensions I considered for the properties were related to their student counterparts but also differed some. So, for example, the dimensions of the Bases for Perceptions property for the teacher included: understanding of the value of commentary; past experiences with students in commenting relationship; current situation; and personal research and reflections.
Table 2.6: Preliminary Concepts, Categories, Properties & Dimensions (Teacher)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Categories within Concepts</th>
<th>Properties within Concepts</th>
<th>Dimensions of Properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6: Teacher perceptions about the commenting relationship with students</td>
<td>as stated in the teacher’s own words *written *verbal</td>
<td>Bases for perceptions</td>
<td>*understanding of value of commenting relationship *past experiences with students in commenting relationship *current situation or project *personal research &amp; reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as implied by the teacher’s own words *written *verbal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as understood or perceived by the student(s) *written words *verbal words implied by their actions/participation</td>
<td>Recognition of responsibility</td>
<td>*personal (related to teaching philosophy/pedagogy) *student role/responsibility *institutional responsibility *other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Type of perception</td>
<td>*idealistic vs. realistic *vague/generalized vs. specific/focused *carefree musings vs. critical reflection *detached/other-focused vs. personal/self-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: Teacher knowledge &amp; intentions about commenting and the commenting relationship with students</td>
<td>as stated in the teacher’s own words *written *verbal</td>
<td>Bases for understanding of commentary &amp; relationship</td>
<td>*past experiences *current student, situation, project *future goals/intentions *confidence in value of commentary and future outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as implied by the teacher’s own words *written *verbal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as understood or perceived by the student(s) *written words *verbal word implied by their actions or participation</td>
<td>Motivation for pursuing &amp; maintaining commenting dialogue</td>
<td>*personal desire &amp; teaching pedagogy *understanding of student needs *to provide personal and purposeful guidance to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Roles &amp; responsibilities in commenting relationship</td>
<td>*teacher—dialogue vs. monologue; encourage vs. merely allow dialogue *student—to take active role in dialogue *shared—to create sense of “community”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: Teacher participation/action in the commenting relationship with students</td>
<td>as stated in the teacher’s own words *written *verbal</td>
<td>Level of participation</td>
<td>*active.engaged/intentional participant *passive/disengaged participant *mixed or uneven level of participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as implied by the teacher’s own words *written *verbal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as evidenced/suggested by the teacher’s actions and participation</td>
<td>Motivation for participation</td>
<td>*clearly recognizable value *implied/understood value *required aspect of teaching writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Type of action taken</td>
<td>*intentional participation in the back &amp; forth of the dialogue *individualized-specific for student &amp; current needs *obvious intentions vs. suggestive intentions within comments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Within the Recognition of Responsibility property, the dimensions I considered included: personal (related to teaching philosophy/pedagogy); student responsibility; institutional responsibility; and other. The dimensions I considered within the Type of Perception property were the same as within the student counterpart, then.

When I considered the Teacher Knowledge & Intentions about Commenting and about the Commenting Relationship with Students concept, three similar categories emerged: as stated in the teacher’s own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories), as implied by the teacher’s own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories), and as understood/perceived by the students (whether in their written words, their verbal words, or implied by their actions/participation). I considered a number of properties within this concept as well: Bases for Understanding of Commentary & Relationship; Motivation for Pursuing & Maintaining Commenting Dialogue; and Roles & Responsibilities in Commenting Relationship. While the emerging properties themselves were similar to those within the related student concepts, I noted some necessary differences within the dimensions for the categories in the teacher concepts. I considered the Bases for Understanding Commentary and Relationship property along the following dimensions: past experiences; current student, situation, project; future goals/intentions; and confidence in value of commentary and future outcomes. I found that the dimensions for the Motivation for Pursuing & Maintaining Commenting Dialogue property differed substantially from the related student property and included: personal desire & teaching pedagogy; understanding of student needs; and to provide personal and purposeful guidance to students. Likewise, I found the Roles & Responsibilities in Commenting Relationship property to have very different dimensions from the related student property, and these dimensions included:
teacher—dialogue vs. monologue, encourage vs. merely allow dialogue; student—to take active role in the dialogue; and shared—to create sense of “community.”

I found that similar categories emerged within the Teacher Participation/Action in the Commenting Relationship with Students concept as within the Student Participation in the Commenting Relationship concept: as stated in the teacher’s own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories); as implied by the teacher’s own words (whether written or verbal, as sub-categories); and as evidenced/suggested by the teacher’s actions and participation. Properties I considered within this Teacher Participation/Action concept included: Level of Participation; Motivation for Participation; and Type of Action Taken. The first two properties I considered were similar to those within the corresponding student concept, though I noted that the third was unique to this teacher concept. The dimensions I considered within the Level of Participation property were mostly similar to the student version and included: active/engaged/intentional participant; passive/disengaged participant; and mixed or uneven level of participation. Dimensions I noted for the Motivation for Participation property included: clearly recognizable value; implied/understood value; and required aspect of teaching writing. Within the Type of Action Taken property, then, the dimensions I considered for the teacher-focused property included: intentional participation in the back & forth of the dialogue; individualized/specific for student & current needs; and obvious intentions vs. suggestive intentions within comments.

Once I began to work with all of the emerging concepts, along with their categories and subsequent properties and dimensions, I began to consider the underlying processes at work within the data as well. Considering these underlying processes (like, how students interact with and use teacher comments) required that I analyze student-generated texts (like the multiple drafts of the major projects & the student self-assessments completed within the process), and
consider teacher/student interactions (whether verbal or email conversations, or interactions on the project pages) about the students’ writing throughout their process of completing the projects. I obtained this project-specific data through Descriptive, Process, and Values Coding methods and this coding work provided a basis for later comparisons with data that was more general in focus, like that within the Mid-term Self-Assessment or the Final Reflective essay. Process Coding of the Final Reflective essay projects, for example, revealed to me a number of processes that took place over the course of the entire semester from the students’ perspectives: progressing/growing as a writer & in understanding of writing as process; reflecting back on successes of semester & on disappointments/failures of semester; recognizing personal responsibility for semester outcomes (both positive & negative) and value in different aspects of class; beginning with fear/insecurity/unfamiliarity about ENGL 111 & about writing itself; needing motivation, confidence, help & encouragement; and appreciating teacher feedback, teacher attitude/passion, helpfulness, & encouragement. While not specifically-focused on the Argumentative Research project that acted as the “contextual center” of this study, the students’ own words in this subjective and reflective student writing (the final Reflective essay) provided insights into student understandings and valuations of many aspects of the commenting relationship within the larger context of their experiences within the course. The initial Descriptive and Values Coding I completed with data collection instruments like the Pre- and Post-Project questionnaires provided valuable baseline data regarding the students’ general perceptions about multiple drafts, revising, valuable aspects of the class and the purpose of teacher commentary. My later analyses of student-generated texts, emails, and interviews, however, provided me with more specific, in-depth data that was clearly student-focused and often contained student voices as well. When I compared this more specific, student-focused data
back to the more general baseline data I had found earlier, I noted that this triangulation made it possible for me to recognize potential patterns and conditional contexts within some of the data from the various data collection instruments. For example, I began to recognize several variables that could affect what students wanted or needed in commentary: the type of writing project; the student’s stage within her writing process on a project; the amount of time available to work on the project; and the student’s preference for type of feedback (oral, written, or electronic). Additionally, as discussed earlier, I worked throughout the coding process to include student voices by assigning student words/phrasing (In Vivo Coding) within the properties and dimensions areas wherever possible. I found that this type of coding was especially helpful when I considered the students’ processing within their individual writing and revising processes. Using the students’ voices allowed me to further consider and identify the conditions, actions, interactions, changes and consequences associated with the various phenomena/concepts in a different light, then. Using the students’ voices within coding also helped me to keep the students at the center of the project, which was integral to this study.

My analysis of data from within the various data collection instruments corresponded back to my initial research questions posed within Chapter 1 of this dissertation as well. While I had given some initial ideas about “what factors make commentary dialogical and interactive?” (Research question 1) within the pages of Chapter 1 and in my introduction to this chapter, my students added to these ideas within their responses to the short answer questions on the two questionnaires, within their Status Reports, within their project Reflection pages, within their Final Reflective essay, within their emails, and within their interview responses. Not surprisingly, I found that the interactive and conversational aspects of commentary were especially obvious within emails and interviews, but I found that students often shared their
views about what they wanted from the student-teacher conversation about their writing within these other subjective writings as well. When I considered the ways students understand and value this dialogical and interactive commentary (from Research question 2), the students’ responses on the two questionnaires proved helpful as well. Additionally, the data from subjective student writings like the Status Report and project Reflection pages provided me with active student voices from within the process of writing the Argumentative Research project. The Final Reflective essay also proved helpful when I considered student understanding and values (as stated or implied by their own words), and considering teacher observations and reflections added contextual detail as well. To consider “how do students interact with and use teacher comments?” (Research question 3), I considered what the students said about their interactions with/uses of teacher comments within their writing processes on the central research project, and then analyzed what the students actually did within the different stages of their research projects. Since these student-generated texts included multiple teacher interactions (most notably in written comments on the page) throughout the process, I discovered that the majority of the data related to this question came from the analysis of project-specific data collection instruments, like the Proposal, multiple drafts of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography & Argumentative Research projects, Status Reports, project Reflection pages, selected student emails, and some related information from three interviews (interviews that led to the ethnographically-inspired case studies in Chapter 3). The short answer responses to the questions on Questionnaire 2 also provided me with some project-specific data in student voices, though this data was not attributable to specific study participants because of the anonymous nature of the questionnaires. My teacher observations and reflections, the autoethnographic
account of my teacher reading and response processes, along with analytic memos, provided me with additional insights and allowed for triangulation of data in some cases as well.

This study focused on teacher commentary as a complex and highly-contextual dialogue, an on-going and interactive conversation between teacher and student. But unlike much earlier research into teacher commentary and its effectiveness, this study focused on FYC student understandings and perceptions of that commentary, the students’ perceptions of their role in the dialogue about their writing, what the students valued within this dialogue, and how the students then chose to use this formative teacher commentary as they wrote and revised. By emphasizing the natural teaching and learning contexts found within the everyday classroom experience, the feminist framework at the heart of this teacher research study allowed for contextualizing that was especially valuable within this particular study as I attempted (from within my own composition classroom) to consider the multiple and sometimes varied contexts surrounding teacher commentary and how the student writers actually perceived of and used that commentary. In addition, the autoethnography of my own processes of reading and of composing response to student texts added another dimension and layer of rich detail to the study of the many contexts within my composition classroom. The complexity and interconnectedness of these multiple contexts within the composition classroom made my use of an ethnographic perspective and grounded theory analysis valuable as well. My use of grounded theory methods of analysis allowed for the data itself to determine largely what was discovered within. My employment of an ethnographic perspective also allowed for rich, complex descriptions of concepts and processes to emerge throughout my analysis of the different data collection instruments. I considered the data from each data collection instrument in light of, or in comparison with, data from within other data collection instruments, and this made it possible for
me to compare and further triangulate data, too. In fact, using Charmaz’s “constant comparative method” made it possible for me to compare similar data from within different data collection instruments, to compare data from within the same data collection instrument but from different study participants, to compare data from different data collection instruments but from the same study participant, and to compare data from a particular participant at different times within the semester or at different times within a writing project. These comparisons allowed for the eventual creation of thicker, more complete descriptions of classroom contexts and of the actions and interactions of both teacher and students.

While I found that some data collection instruments in this study played a larger role in presenting the student perspective within the commentary dialogue than others did, each data collection instrument was important as I attempted to create a picture of the complex contexts of the composition classroom and the interactive dialogue that was interwoven throughout those contexts. From these data collection instruments, an interactive dialogue could begin to be traced and analyzed, an interactive dialogue that was inherent to the complex and multi-faceted relationship between student, teacher, and writing. The student’s perspective of this interactive dialogue and the student-teacher-writing relationship that was at work within this dialogue will be further explored in the chapters that follow. A thicker description of student writers and of their perceived value of the commentary dialogue can be found within three ethnographic case studies that are presented in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, then, an autoethnographic account of my own processes of reading and of composing responses to my students’ texts is presented. My teacher-researcher experiences within my own processes of reading and composing response are explored in rich detail and then carefully considered in relation to the selective interactions with four students about their writing that are described there. In Chapter 5, the final chapter of this
dissertation, then, a detailed discussion of study findings can be found, along with a discussion of how these findings relate back to those initial research questions. Possible future implications for my own classroom as well as for FYC pedagogy can also be found within the final chapter of this dissertation.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. For more about autoethnography as a research method, please see the Appendices at the end of this text.

2. According to the college’s own records, spring enrollment in 2008 was more than 7,000 students, a jump of nearly 1,000 students from the previous spring. The enrollment numbers continued to surge for the next two years but have seemed to stabilize some now. At the time of this study, enrollment on this campus was around 12,300 students.

3. At the time of this study, remedial/developmental courses (for both English and math) were handled within their own distinct department, so the English Department included only credit-level courses.

4. Interestingly, in state-wide enrollment statistics for fall 2010, ENGL 111 was shown as the #1 course with 18,257 students enrolled. The #2 course on this listing was a First Year Seminar course with a state-wide enrollment of 11,476 students. ENGL 112 was 22nd on this enrollment listing with 2,979 students enrolled state-wide.

5. In data provided by the school itself in 2006, 68% of all students in this community college system take at least one remedial course while attending college. In other words, more than half of this college’s student population state-wide fails to meet initial placement criteria for beginning composition or math.
6. The spring 2012 semester was the first semester in which this type of room-shift was attempted for the composition classes on this campus. This room-shift scheduling was deemed necessary due to a lack of available computer classroom space.

7. The assignment sheets for both of these major projects can be found in the Appendices at the end of the text. More discussion about the other individual activities can be found later in this chapter within the discussion of data collection instruments.

8. Interestingly, the gender disparity shown in the morning section is greater than the college’s recent state-wide numbers for both enrollment and graduation rates, but the gender breakdown in the afternoon section aligns more closely to the state-wide numbers. According to data for fall 2010, 58% of enrolled students were female, and nearly two-thirds (62%) of the college’s graduates were female.

9. This 60% attendance/participation reporting is required in compliance with federal financial aid recordkeeping.

10. More discussion of these statistics and their implications within this study is included within Chapter 5.

11. A sample copy of the consent form can be found in the Appendices at the end of this text.

12. A copy of the interview questions can be found in the Appendices at the end of the text.

13. As mentioned earlier, copies of the Pre-Project Questionnaire (Questionnaire 1) and the Post-Project Questionnaire (Questionnaire 2) can be found in the Appendices at the end of this text.

14. A full listing of these (and other) initial codes can be found in the Appendices at the end of this text.
CHAPTER 3: STUDENT VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

Within the pages of the previous chapter, I gave detailed descriptions of the setting, the participants, and the study itself. Detailed descriptions of the collected data and the grounded theory methodology used in the analysis of that data were also included. This chapter, then, builds on those initial descriptions and begins to explore the classroom contexts and the interactive dialogue that was interwoven throughout them. The three case studies presented in this chapter will introduce three returning adult students, Susan, Liz, and Jacob (pseudonyms used in place of their actual names); will present their perspectives about writing, revising, and teacher comments in their own voices (from their responses to the questions from our interviews as well as from earlier email exchanges and discussions); and will include some related excerpts from their class writings and our exchanges about the works as well. Later, being inspired by Charmaz’s explanations of the “constant comparative method” of grounded theory in practice, I will discuss possible connections between the three students, especially with regard to these students’ backgrounds, their perspectives, and/or their experiences in the course.

From the beginning of this study I determined to present as much data as possible in the students’ own voices, and student focus groups seemed like a great way to allow the students to voice their perspectives about writing and about the commenting relationship. Knowing that I was dealing with my own students who might be predisposed to give me positive feedback (especially if they thought that their grades in the course might be affected by their participation), I decided that the focus groups should be scheduled after the semester had ended and final grades for the course had been posted. And since the semester itself was unusually hectic, I planned for the focus groups to meet a week or two after the spring semester ended. I envisioned multiple small groups of four or five students meeting for a wonderfully-rich time of dialogue and the
free-exchange of perspectives and ideas about the commentary that they had experienced as they had written and about the course-as-a-whole. When I mentioned this voluntary activity in class during the last two weeks of the semester, the students seemed genuinely excited. I stressed that participation in these post-semester focus groups would be completely voluntary. I explained that I would be sending out an invitation to participate via campus email, and that I would understand a lack of response to that email invitation as a lack of interest on their part and I would not contact them about it again. Weeks later I excitedly sent the email invitation and then waited expectantly for all of the positive responses that I was sure would fill my inbox. In the end, however, my original intention—to conduct multiple focus groups—was replaced by my very obvious reality: individual interviews would have to replace the focus groups due to a lack of student response in both classes.

The exact reason for the lack of student response to my email invitation is unclear. I wonder if the students were too busy to respond to the invitation or to participate in the focus groups at the start of their summer break or if they were simply not checking their school email since the semester had ended. Or perhaps the students were not really interested in participating but had only pretended to be interested when I asked about it because they thought that they should be or because they just wanted to please me. In truth, I will likely never know the exact reason(s) for the lack of student responses to the invitation, but I was thankful nonetheless for the responses that I did receive. From both sections of the class, only four students responded to the emailed invitation, and interestingly, all four of these respondents were returning adult students. All four students were over the age of thirty, and two of these respondents were female, while the other two respondents were male. As mentioned in Chapter 2, after that initial response rate to the invitation, it became clear that a single focus group was more likely, and I began trying to
coordinate schedules to find a time when all four students could meet. Only three of the four students responded back to my queries about times to meet, and it quickly became apparent that these adult students’ schedules did not align at all. In the end, I conducted two individual, face-to-face interviews on the college campus, one with each of the female students, and I conducted the interview with the remaining male student via email because of his work and family schedules along with his distance from the school.

The two individual face-to-face interviews were conducted within the month following the end of the spring semester, with my interview with Liz occurring on May 22, 2012 and my interview with Susan occurring on June 7, 2012. Both of these interviews took place on campus in a small sitting area that was located in the same building in which our classes had met all semester. This small sitting area was situated in a corner of a student commons area on the first floor of the building. While the rest of the commons area had tiled floors and had an institutional feel to it, this little corner area was carpeted and had a small sofa, two chairs and a small table arranged there to create an inviting space for students where they could study or relax between classes. I chose to conduct the interviews in this space because it was a comfortable and semi-private student space. And because this was where I would often meet with students during the semester to discuss their writing projects, the students were already familiar with this space as well. Additionally, because it was after spring semester and fewer classes were being held for the summer session, I knew that the hallways would be fairly quiet and this space would likely be empty. Both face-to-face interviews were audio-taped (with the student participants’ knowledge, of course) and later transcribed, and I jotted down a few additional notes for myself during the actual interviews as well. It was nice to see these students again and we fell into easy conversation right away, but I worked hard to keep the conversation concerning the actual
interview questions confined to an hour as I had promised within my initial invitation. In both cases, however, the students stayed to chat for thirty to forty-five minutes after the official interview had ended. For Jacob, meeting face-to-face was impossible due to his busy family life and the travel required for his summer job, but he was enthusiastic about participating in this part of my study and we determined that conducting the interview via email was probably the best option. I emailed the interview questions to Jacob and he sent his responses back to me via email on July 7, 2012. Since Jacob typed his responses within the interview question list itself, I decided that this document could stand on its own. The same interview questions were used for all three personal interviews.¹

The Value of Case Studies within This Study

Qualitative research methods like interviews, informal observations and case studies often study writing in context by using ethnography as a means to create thick, detail-rich descriptions. Lauer & Asher (1988) have suggested that, “[i]n composition classrooms, instructors engage in informal observation all the time, noticing their students’ behaviors, the results of instruction, the difficulties that occur, the methods that seem to work, and so forth” (23). This critical reflexivity is an important aspect of composition pedagogy and research. In fact, in a recent article, J. A. Maxwell (2012) emphasized that “[w]e need qualitative methods and approaches in order to understand ‘what works’ and why” within education (659). Instructors, then, seem perfectly positioned to conduct this much-needed qualitative research in education. Of course, the rhetoric and composition field has a strong history in qualitative research methods, especially related to our understandings of student writing processes (Emig, 1971; Graves, 1975; Flower & Hayes, 1981; among others). These are some of the reasons that I deemed qualitative research methods to be both valuable and necessary for my study. In
particular, an interview can be an especially valuable data-collection instrument because it allows the gathering of “facts, opinions, goals, plans, and insights that may not be available from any other source” (MacNealy, 1999, 203). The personal and interactive nature of this type of data-collection instrument allows for the collection of qualitative data that is uniquely centered within the interviewee’s personal experiences, perspectives, attitudes and concerns, and this was an important aspect of data collection within this study.

Of course, the highly-personal nature of interview research also can make this data-collection instrument susceptible to bias, especially when interviewing one’s own students. For example, “social desirability bias” occurs when interviewees (students) respond as they think that the interviewer (their teacher or instructor) wants them to respond or they say what they think that the interviewer wants to hear. Admittedly, the students that I interviewed were likely somewhat predisposed to give me positive feedback since I had been their instructor, they knew the focus of my research work, and I was asking them to evaluate the nature of the feedback that I had given to them. While some bias of this nature was probably inevitable in a study like mine, I attempted to temper this inevitability by intentionally conducting the interviews after final course grades were posted and by encouraging the interviewees to respond openly and honestly to the questions asked. An additional concern in an interview situation like mine is “selection bias.” In this study, “selection bias” may have occurred since the students who agreed to be interviewed were self-selected and may have been stronger, more confident students or students who were simply more comfortable interacting with their professor (me) outside of the classroom setting. In order to mitigate these effects, however, I attempted to look for broad areas of agreement or dissent amongst interviewees and I placed the response data from each interviewee into dialogue with the data from the other interviewees and their peers. Once again,
some bias was probably inevitable in a study like this, but with deliberate actions taken to lessen the effects of these biases, the interviews remained valuable data collection instruments.

While qualitative research methods like interviews may suffer from susceptibility to bias, MacNealy has suggested that an interview affords additional advantages as a data collection instrument because it also allows for the clarification of questions or the additional development of responses through follow-up questions, if needed or desired by the researcher, and in the case of face-to-face interviews, tone of voice and body language of the interview subject can be noted as well (204). Data from interviews can be combined with data from other instruments for a number of purposes, too, like to create case studies, for example. Additionally, interview data often proves useful in triangulation with data collected from other instruments. For these reasons, interviews have proven to be valuable within many studies, especially recent studies within the rhetoric and composition field (Broad, 2003; Tinberg & Nadeau, 2010; N. Sommers, 2011; Anson, 2011, and others). In this particular study, the interviews that were conducted with Liz, Susan and Jacob provided rich, detailed descriptions of these students’ writing experiences and the impact of teacher commentary from these students’ perspectives, and, perhaps even more importantly, these descriptions were given in the students’ own voices. While the interview data provided the basic framework for the case studies that follow, our email exchanges and discussions, along with the students’ own writing projects and written reflections, provided additional details and descriptions that helped to illuminate contextual factors that were at play as well.

**Liz: Overcoming the Past and Working toward Change**

At the time of this study, Liz was unemployed and the single mother of two teenage daughters, one of whom was a college freshman at a four-year state college. Liz had found
herself suddenly out of a job after working in the same field for twenty years. And after many unsuccessful attempts to find another job, Liz was frustrated, in her words, by “not being marketable, not being as educated as a high school graduates” (interview). She went on to explain, “I don’t really feel like I had a choice [about coming back to school] . . . to be competitive”. And she explained how “the economy, the job market . . . all of it” had figured into her decision to return to school, a decision which had made her, in her own words, “scared to death!”(interview).

For Liz, much of her fear came from her past experiences in education. Liz shared that she “was never a very successful student,” and she confided that she had been “very fragile” and full of doubts and insecurities when she began the spring semester in my class (interview). She had attempted to return to school the previous semester, but an illness and personal issues had made her largely unsuccessful and facing an academic probation hearing. This semester, then, began with Liz feeling that she had something to prove not only to herself, but also to her family and to the school. Liz now felt intense pressure to do well, to push beyond her poor experiences from the past, and she recognized the importance of education within that process. She explained her situation in this way: “coming back to school, and to take out loans to come back to school, really put a lot of pressure on me. And coming back to school with kids at home [she chuckled at this point] . . . it was a lot! It was intimidating; it was scary […] All of it was a lot of pressure, but I’m glad I did it. It was the best thing I could have done, and I know it” (interview). That intense pressure sometimes led to reoccurring doubts about her ability to survive and thrive in school, yet Liz’s perspective about her return to school, and the value that she placed on her education, was clear within her words: “if you’re not working, then this (school) is your job, and
your grade is your paycheck. And you’re paying to go to school, you know. I felt like I really needed to do my very best . . . it’s an investment” (interview).

Like many returning adult students, Liz struggled to decide on a major area of study as she began her academic journey. She settled on a major in General Studies as a way to experience learning in a number of different subject areas and to perhaps give herself a foundation on which to make a more specific decision later in her studies. At the time of this study in the spring of 2012, Liz was taking a full-time course load of four courses (twelve credit hours) for the semester. And being new to higher education, Liz was incredibly interested in my doctoral work. She wondered how many courses I had to complete to earn my doctoral degree, and she was curious about the exam process that I completed before beginning to work on my dissertation. Liz admitted that she could not really see herself going that far in her own schooling, but she was very curious about how that level of education “worked,” and we exchanged a number of emails early in the semester about the different academic degree levels, why they are pursued, and what must be done (besides regular coursework) in order to earn each of those degrees. Liz had many questions, but I attempted to answer each and every one of them. In ways, I think these questions represented Liz’s way of getting to know her new discourse community, of beginning to understand how the academic demands—the regular coursework, required exams and research projects—related to the end goal, the certification or degree that would be earned. And this new knowledge and understanding allowed Liz to “settle in” as a student as she embarked on this new adventure within academia. This idea of helping the student to “settle in” seems to align well with Sommers’ explanation of feedback as having a social function --to provide students with a sense of belonging and a feeling of connection with faculty ( in K. Walk, ed., 2000, 2).
Liz worked hard through the first two projects of the semester, the Personal Literacy Narrative and the Occupation Profile Research project, and she seemed excited about her progress. It wasn’t easy, by any means, but she was fighting through every struggle and gaining confidence along the way. Learning to cite sources within that second project was especially intimidating for Liz since she had never had to do so before. In fact, in her final Reflection for the course, Liz reflected back on how intimidated she had felt by this new demand, “[c]iting sources within an essay sounded like Russian roulette via Microsoft word to me.” That sense of uncertainty, and her awareness of the penalties for plagiarism, caused much stress for Liz as she completed that second project and then again as she worked on the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research projects. As we later discussed her argumentative project within our interview, Liz shared her continued apprehension with documentation: “For me, the biggest fear is plagiarism--not citing, accidentally or not realizing; I mean, I would never intentionally steal someone else’s work, never, ever intentionally-- I have much more work ethic than that— but it’s very scary from that standpoint” (interview). For Liz, the ability to complete multiple drafts and receive feedback at different stages of a project helped to give her the needed chances to make sure that she had cited everything correctly by the time she turned in a final draft. She explained this within her final Reflection when she said, “Through drafting and revising, I improved my citations and the strength of my research paper. I also grasped the basics of in-text citations.”

When we began the Argumentative Research project, Liz had strong interest in her topic and had some good initial ideas. Liz was very interested in the teacher/student relationship, especially with regards to “at risk” school children. As we talked, however, it became clear that a narrower focus was needed. In an informal conference, we discussed possible research questions
and search terms that would be helpful as Liz pursued her more focused study. By the time the second draft of the paper was due, Liz was beginning to see her argument as a “call to action” to do something about the growing numbers of “at risk” children in American schools. In her reflection page with the final draft of the project, though, Liz lamented that she had struggled with this project. She explained that she had been intimidated by the project at the beginning, but “then a fire grew to pursue my topic. The fire was so big that I had a lot of trouble managing it.” Very accurately, Liz recognized the struggle when the writer has too much emotion about a topic and when the topic is not narrow enough to handle well. Sadly, Liz was disappointed with her final paper then (right after completing it) and was still unhappy with it when we sat down for our interview more than a month later. As we discussed this project, Liz stated, “it was just so big for me, and I’m still not satisfied with that at all, not at all! It just does not sit well with me”(interview). Within her reflection page about the project, Liz questioned her own experience as a writer as part of the problem, noting that it takes more than passion to write a strong argument. Liz stated: “I feel as though I just reported on a topic, instead of arguing it. I believe maybe the topic I chose, while I am very passionate about it, was too big for a writer with little experience.” Her main frustration, however, was that she didn’t feel like she had found her “argumentative voice” within the project, and since the topic was personal for her, it didn’t make sense to Liz that she couldn’t hear her own voice within the piece. When we discussed the project later, Liz sadly said, “I just don’t think that it reflects the progress that I’ve made and what I’m capable of doing” (interview). When I mentioned that she might pick up this topic again at a later date for a different class, Liz seemed exasperated and said, “Ugghh! That argumentative paper was so hard! I really want to feel confident in my writing and I’m still not there . . . in writing, you know . . . and I have a million and one things in my head to say, and I
hope to, you know, to feel comfortable with writing someday” (interview). When reminded of all
of the progress made throughout the semester, Liz smiled, but clearly the doubts and insecurities
were not completely gone yet.

As a returning adult student, Liz appreciated the interpersonal interactions within the
ENGL 111 class and the dialogical commentary about the writing projects. As mentioned earlier,
Liz regularly emailed me with questions about the project at hand or about anything else that was
on her mind. In our interview, Liz explained that “[a]s an older student, I think that . . . I think
maybe because we’re both adults, we both have kids, and we both have lives, I don’t feel like a
child, you know, like you were pointing a finger at me or talking down at me. You never came
off that way. I think that I felt that we could more have a conversation about the direction of
things, how to approach our work on our writing . . .” (interview). Liz shared that she “felt very
comfortable coming . . . with questions, even in class—I always felt very comfortable, very
open, and I felt like what you’d come back with was always constructive—I could work with it—
and I didn’t walk away with huge question marks” (interview). About her role in the
conversation or dialogue about her writing, Liz explained, “I always felt like I was part of the
conversation. And actually, like through our emails, I felt like I was the center of the
conversation, you know, because it was about me and about my learning and you were coaching
me to be better” (interview). When she was asked, “what kinds of teacher feedback were most
likely to engage you in your writing & revising process?” Liz quickly responded, “All of it! All
of it was helpful! The discussion and peers’ questions, the written comments, you know, on the
hard copy that you can take home with you . . . all of it was helpful” (interview). Liz
acknowledged the value of classroom discussion, too, and told how sometimes she suddenly
understood something (having what I term a “light bulb moment”) when I explained something
in class or even when another student asked a question about something. But, according to Liz, even “if you don’t quite remember what you heard in class, then the written comments are a ‘take away’ that can guide you when your instructor isn’t there. And that was helpful . . .” (interview).

As we discussed written comments, Liz suddenly became aware of the amount of time that it must take a teacher like me to write all of those comments for each student throughout a given semester. She expressed a bit of amazement as she recalled how much I had commented on her drafts throughout the semester. When asked about the specific types of revising that my feedback encouraged, Liz thought for a moment and then said, “to dig deeper. It made me consider sentence structure, even . . . how sometimes things that sounded okay in my [sic] head sometimes sound better another way,” she said with a chuckle. She also remembered “the nudge to be more specific,” and being encouraged to be “more specific in my writing” (interview). For Liz, the comments gave “the encouragement to push through, to write a little bit more, to do a little better with every draft, to do a little better with each revision” (interview). It was my turn to be amazed, though, when Liz emphatically quoted one of my common classroom sayings within her next response: “I swear to you, your little comment of ‘just get some words down on the page!’ (something I’m known to say for a 1st draft or getting started on a project), that you have to have something down on the page to be able to work with, [that] was ridiculously helpful going into the class! That release of pressure allowed me to get started,” she explained, and then chuckled as she went on to say, “I went home and repeated that little verse to myself--‘just get something down on the page!’” (interview). It is a rather simple idea, really: a first draft doesn’t have to be perfect when a writer begins to write, and if the writer can just relax and get some initial ideas down on the page, then she will have something to work with. But for some reason,
many students—especially beginning writers, like Liz—come into a writing class with the assumption that everything they write, at every stage of a project, can (and should) be perfect; yet that is very far from what we in composition studies know about writing process! In fact, Murray (1972) described the first draft as “rough, searching, unfinished” and said, “[w]hen you complete a draft you know how much, and how little, you know” (4). For me as a writing teacher, though, it was nice to hear Liz say, “I love how relaxed you were about the first draft because that allowed me to relax and get started” (interview).

When we shifted our attention to the Argumentative Research project and the types of revisions she made within that project, Liz grew more serious as she stated, “oh, that was so hard for me! I changed and re-changed and re-changed the whole paper so many times. I don’t even know how many times! . . . I would start it and start to go off in a direction and I’d see myself going way off track . . . so I think that I majorly revised it quite a few times and it was very difficult for me” (interview). And looking back at the project drafts themselves clearly shows this on-going struggle within the project.

At the proposal stage of the Argumentative Research project, Liz had strong interest in the topic itself but she was less sure about exactly what she wanted to argue within that larger topic. The initial, basic ideas were there within the proposal, but Liz wasn’t quite sure how to narrow her focus. She lacked specific research questions and potential search terms (required information within the proposal assignment) in part because she was truly interested in many aspects of the topic and struggled to choose only one of these aspects on which to focus her argument. In an informal conference with Liz after a class session, I learned that her intense interest in “at risk” children stemmed from her own personal experiences as an “at risk” child who then became a single mom years later. So, Liz was approaching this project from a position
of knowing, of personally experiencing much of what she was reading within her research for the project, and this personal connection made the project that much more important for Liz. In our conference, I suggested a couple of options within the main topic that would be manageable within a six-to-eight-page research project, and Liz seemed to relax some as she pondered these options.

By the 2nd drafts of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and Argumentative Research projects, though, Liz’s on-going struggle became more obvious. The Amplified Annotated Bibliography draft included a strong introduction that seemed to introduce the main emphasis of an argument, even though it lacked a thesis statement:

*The children and the livelihood of our country are in danger as [sic] the number of “at risk” children grows. Collectively as parents and a nation, we [sic] are consistently failing these children by not meeting their emotional and educational needs. [...] It is said that “It takes a village to raise a child,” and no truer words have ever been spoken. These are children; they are the hope of a brighter future for all of us. How will they feel about us or our country after they have grown into adulthood? When it is their time to take the reins of this country (how will they feel about how) their needs and education took a backseat to earning a living or being fair to the next student in the overcrowded classroom? What will become of our children? What will become of our country?*

After this introduction, Liz included bibliographic citations and summary/evaluation paragraphs for each of her sources. She had some strong sources and seemed to have a good idea of how each source could be used within her argument. There were a few minor grammatical and formatting issues and she was missing a conclusion for the project, but Liz seemed to be well on
her way toward a strong project. All seemed to be going well. Until I looked at her Argumentative draft, that is.

While the Amplified Annotated Bibliography draft seemed to be strong and focused for this stage of the project, the draft of the Argumentative Research project itself was more like beginning notes for a 1st draft. The entire draft was just over two pages in length, and seemed to contain mostly information from just one of her sources. I could tell what Liz was trying to do within the draft, but she was definitely struggling to put it all together. From her Status Report post, I knew that Liz was beginning to see this project as a “call to action” for her readers, and this call was evident within her annotated bibliography draft, but Liz was just beginning to describe the issue at this point in her argumentative project and her argument was not yet clear within her text, perhaps because she was still working to formulate the ideas in her own mind. Whatever the reason, Liz definitely had some work to do yet on the project! My comments within her draft, then, offered encouragement about her good start to the project and offered suggestions about how to include more detail and how to connect ideas throughout her text. Liz had begun the draft with a thinking/considering exercise as a way to introduce some of the characteristics of “at risk” children, a strategy that seemed to work well, so I encouraged her to build on this initial information some and then to include some statistics regarding “at risk” children and their educational and emotional needs as she moved deeper into her argument itself. I also asked questions throughout the draft and within my end note to her, questions intended to help Liz to think through the different aspects of her intended argument and the information that she would be including within her project. Since she was intending this to be a call to action, it was important for Liz to clearly show what actions could/should be taken by the parents, by the school, &/or by the community to meet these children’s needs and to make a difference in the
lives of these “at risk” children. And in addition to my hand-written notes within her draft, Liz and I also chatted about the project after class on the day that I returned 2nd drafts to the students. Liz had already read through my notes to her at this point, but she wanted to make sure that she understood everything correctly as she looked ahead to her revision work between drafts.

Even though she knew what she wanted and needed to do as she revised, Liz still struggled some throughout the revision process and, as mentioned earlier, she was not completely satisfied with her final draft of the Argumentative Research project. Both the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project and the Argumentative Research project were much stronger in their final draft form than in their 2nd draft form, though, and it was clear that Liz had attempted to revise according to my comments and notes within her earlier drafts. Additionally, Liz had made good use of information from all of her sources in this final Argumentative Research draft, and she had attempted to connect ideas throughout the text as well. In places, additional detail, explanation, or synthesis would have created more overall cohesiveness within the text, but Liz had simply run out of time and ability to focus on the project. In fact, within her final Reflection for the project, Liz lamented, “I found writing came very hard for me with this assignment.” For Liz, I think that one more round of revising might have made this project seem more like what she intended it to be, and might have allowed her to be able to hear her own academic “voice” within the text. Then, instead of merely being proud to have “completed this assignment” (as she stated within her reflection page for the project), Liz could have been proud of what she had written and how she had written it, too. For many beginning writers, though, and especially for those like Liz who are new to academia, time and practice are needed to “try on” their new discourse and to become comfortable in it. I think that this idea of “trying on” their new discourse relates back to Bartholomae’s ideas within “Inventing the University”(1985):
“The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (623). Bartholomae later describes this appropriation of language and ways of knowing as “a narrative of courage and conquest” (639). This is a fitting description, I think. After all, academic writing is neither natural nor easy for most beginning students!

Susan: A Different Direction and New-found Desire

For Susan, my ENGL 111 class was not the beginning of her academic journey. Instead, it represented a shift in direction for her journey. Like Liz, Susan’s decision to return to school was largely an economic one, based in part on the job market. Susan explained her decision in this way: “knowing that retail was very limited, and having to find other ways to have income, I knew that I would have to learn a new trade, so that’s why I came back to school” (interview). Her original intent was to study criminal justice, but she learned part-way through that school’s program that they did not offer a necessary lab component for her degree. Even though most of her credits from the first school did not transfer as she had been promised (by that school, of course), Susan worked hard at her new college home to begin again and to complete the necessary coursework for her degree. Math, however, would become her nemesis. Multiple attempts at a particular math course ended in failure. In talking about those math experiences, Susan sighed and said, “. . . I just couldn’t do it. It completely blew my mind, and I just couldn’t do it. I failed it . . . and I couldn’t pass it to save my soul!” (interview). After yet another failed attempt at the math course, a tearful Susan was offered some life-changing advice from her sister: “why don’t you just go into something that you already know, something that you would enjoy?” When Susan couldn’t think what that “something” might be, her sister excitedly suggested, “Hospitality! Cooking, baking . . . . You love it all!”(interview). And that was the
beginning of a new direction for schooling and for life. Susan transferred the credits that she had from her second school and entered into the Hospitality program at our college, with the intent to major in Pastry Arts within the Culinary School. Of course, like most degree programs, the Hospitality program also required the completion of general education courses, like ENGL 111 and Math 118. After another bad experience in a math class her first semester here, Susan was understandably anxious about taking the course again, but was hopeful that the right instructor, one who would actually explain concepts and offer help when needed, would be available for her next attempt. In the meantime, Susan was focused on completing the rest of her core classes, like ENGL 111, and beginning some of the basic cooking classes, like Nutrition and Food Safety (interview). During the spring semester, the timeframe of this study, Susan was enrolled in three courses (nine credit hours).

Susan enjoyed writing, but a few outside stressors zapped her joy during the semester. In her final Reflective Essay for the course, Susan wrote, “I have dealt with car troubles, depression, the flu and court. Writing under such stressful conditions, I feel my writing for these assignments has lowered its [sic] standards simply to ‘just get it done,’ regardless of the grade I receive.” As a conscientious student, this bothered Susan a great deal. She had prepared herself for the writing challenges of the semester, but the outside struggles had caught her off-guard, and Susan struggled throughout the semester to settle in and put forth what she deemed to be her best effort.

While Susan worked hard on the first two projects, the Personal Literacy Narrative and the Occupation Profile Research project, and seemed to enjoy working on these writing projects at the time, her end-of-semester self-assessment of those projects was largely negative. Within her final Reflective Essay, Susan actually suggested that she would have given herself a “much
lower grade than [sic] what was given” on the first project. In her discussion of the second project, Susan noted her struggles with documentation, especially with learning how to format long quotes and how to transition in and out of quoted material. She also lamented repeatedly that she “struggled with grammar” as she discussed both projects within her final Reflection. As evidenced by her words within this final Reflection, confidence was slow in coming for Susan; for much of the semester, she did not feel confident in herself or in her abilities as a writer.

Admittedly, the Argumentative Research project is the most challenging project of the semester in ENGL 111. Students tend to be apprehensive and are intimidated by a number of factors: the fact that it is argumentative, that it is a research project and requires documentation, that it is the longest paper of the semester, and that it is worth the most points of all of the major projects. Susan exhibited this anxiety toward this project when she discussed it in her final Reflective Essay. She began: “the last assignment I think is the most difficult in all the writing assignments combined. It was an argumentative research project with an amplified annotated bibliography as a Works Cited paper on steroids. I dislike argumentative papers very much; I feel they are my weakest point in writing.” She went to explain her feelings when the project was assigned, saying, “When the teacher assigned this project . . . I could feel my stomach do a flip-flop. It was not a pleasant feeling, knowing this was worth a third of my grade.” And yet, at the Proposal stage, when we actually began the Argumentative project, Susan had chosen a topic that she felt strongly about and she had many good questions and ideas about her intended research. Her Proposal showed that Susan had already given much thought to the topic, better censorship in media, and her intended argument, that censorship for language and for sexual content should be more equally balanced (and enforced) within media, especially for media aimed at children and teens as audience. When we conferenced about the project in class, Susan and I discussed
how she could narrow her focus some, and we discussed possible sources for the information that
she wanted and needed to make her argument. Susan seemed to be inspired and ready to
research.

In the following weeks, however, Susan was ill for more than a week and missed several
class sessions. She was also unable to work much on her research project during that time. So,
when her peers were turning in their second drafts of the Argumentative Research project for my
feedback, and were posting their “Status Report” posts (within the Discussions section in
Blackboard) about their progress within the project, Susan was falling farther and farther behind.
Once she returned to class, Susan and I conferenced face-to-face about her progress within the
project. This was preferable to a Discussion board post about her progress since Susan needed
some assistance with “catching up” to where she needed to be within the project. Susan had
struggled with finding the information that she needed and then struggled to collect her thoughts
and get it all down on the page in “the right order” for the paper (final Reflective Essay). In fact,
when we discussed her writing and revising of the Argumentative Research project within our
interview, Susan exclaimed, “The big one!! I wound up having to rewrite the whole thing and
start over from scratch in the end because I wasn’t happy with the way that anything was setting
and, um, the revisions weren’t coming along the way I wanted them to” (interview). She was
already frustrated with how the project was going (or, not going), and with my comments added
into the mix, Susan explained, “And then when you added in your comments and your advice, I
could understand from your point of view, but I was totally lost in my own work and was asking
myself, like ‘where am I going with this?’ . . . and my thinking was like sporadic cloud bursts . . .
so I ended up having to rewrite the whole thing, from beginning to end” (interview). And then
she exclaimed, almost as an after-thought, “Sometimes you’re just not happy!” (interview). About
her earlier draft of the project, Susan said, “It was like, if I would have turned the paper in right now . . . at that point . . . it would’ve been an incomplete because there was nothing to it. So, it was basically like I was copying and pasting a lot of information, but I wasn’t really saying anything direct” (interview). This was an accurate assessment of her project at that point—many facts and quotes, but no real focus or support of her intended main argument. And while the final draft was indeed much better, Susan was still not entirely satisfied with it, even after multiple (and complete) re-writes of the paper.

In her reflection page for the Argumentative Research project, Susan acknowledged her on-going difficulties throughout the process of completing the project and questioned whether the topic might have been too much for a beginning writer like herself to tackle. Susan also brought this up in our interview, saying: “It was hard to find the information and a baseline to go from. ( . . . )I found it very difficult, and I kept thinking maybe I should’ve picked a different subject. You know, you warned us about some topics, but I didn’t realize that this one would be so hard”(interview). Instead of finding information that really delved into the how and the whys of censorship in practice, Susan lamented that she kept finding sources that included fact lists and timelines and that only defined and explained what censorship was (and wasn’t) rather than really discussing how and why censorship should be enforced (classroom conference & interview).

These struggles that Susan discussed within her reflection page for the project and within our interview were evident within the project drafts as well. The Amplified Annotated Bibliography was a new genre of writing for Susan, so along with struggling to find that information that she wanted and needed for her eventual argument, she also struggled with how to correctly format and present the necessary information in the project. The 2nd draft of this
project was an attempt at a draft, but it was not at all complete. Susan had included a section heading for the introduction, but there was no additional information included then. Citations for her sources were attempted, but most needed additional information in order to be complete and some were not formatted correctly. Susan had attempted to at least begin the required paragraphs for each source cited, so she had some points of summary but she had made no attempt at this point to discuss potential benefits or limitations of the sources for her argument, perhaps because she had not yet figured out what information she would use and where she would use it in her argument.

The 2nd draft of the Argumentative Research project, then, gave further evidence of Susan’s struggles to find a main focus (or what she termed a “baseline”) for her argument. In fact, much of the draft consisted simply of long quotes from various sources with little synthesis of ideas or connection back to a main argument. Susan had an argumentative thesis that she included within her introduction, but much of the rest of her text seemed more informative than argumentative, and there was no overall cohesiveness to her text. It seemed clear that Susan was drowning in an overwhelming sea of information and was struggling to determine what information was important to use for her argument and what information could be set aside, so my notes to her within the draft (and at the end of the draft) emphasized the need for a clear and consistent focus for her argument throughout the entire text. I suggested that she summarize some of the background information on the topic that was given in numerous long quotes in the draft, and I reminded her that synthesizing information from sources would allow her to connect ideas from different sources to each other and back to her main argument. I also asked questions aimed at helping her to consider ways to more clearly describe or explain ideas and to further emphasize her intended argument. So, for example, when she stated within her text that “It is an
ongoing battle of what we find appropriate for our children to watch,” I asked in a margin note, “Isn’t part of the battle about who gets to decide what is appropriate?” (in 2nd draft of Argumentative project). I already knew from our informal conferences about the project that Susan considered this to be an important aspect of her argument, but that aspect of the argument was not coming through at all within her text when she merely made a statement and assumed that her reader understood all that she intended behind those words. I also encouraged Susan to include specific examples or illustrations to help explain or describe certain ideas to her readers. When I returned the drafts to her in class, Susan carefully read through all of my notes and then we informally conferenced over the projects near the end of class. None of my comments seemed to surprise her, and her personal frustration with the project was clear, but Susan left class that day with a plan of attack for revisions. Because of missing class and subsequently being behind on the projects, Susan had not received much peer feedback on these projects, but as I later learned, she was fine with that.

When we discussed feedback received on her projects, Susan expressed her frustration and dissatisfaction with peer review: “The peer reviews . . . they felt like . . . I mean, other people are . . . they’re looking at your paper from their perspective and they’re not really (giving) enough feedback for me. ( . . . ) The peer review was just like ‘oh, well, that’s good’” (interview). Wanting more than a general and summative response like she often received from peers, Susan appreciated the teacher comments that were written on the draft, saying: “But from you, the revision (notes) that you did on my projects gave me enough to think on different levels, like where you were coming from or where another audience would be coming from, and to know how to project it (the argument) on different levels so that it would be understood by other readers on different levels, like from the teacher to the student to other groups, maybe”
Susan acknowledged the value of the teacher comments on the page, saying that it “made an impression” on her paper, especially when “trying to understand how to have a better paper” (interview). Susan also looked to the comments on her final draft of the project as a way to “justify that (she) did something right, that it was understood” (interview). In other words, Susan wanted to know that her hard work in writing and revising had been worth all of her effort, and she recognized that this affirmation could not be fully explained with a mere grade.

When asked about how interpersonal commenting related to student thinking and learning, Susan said, “Personally, I think that it makes all the difference in the world because, if you were to hand in the unrevised draft, mid-project, and get a grade for it, in most cases—almost all cases, I think—that grade would be much lower than the final project. Based on the feedback you get for the middle project, it’s much better for the last project because you are making it a better project” (interview). Susan went on to explain that the final project draft would be better because “you are taking the time to read all of the comments and the feedback and putting it all in to the paper and you are making it a better project, instead of just handing it in and saying, ‘here. I’m done’” (interview). This response from Susan definitely seems to speak to the value of the writing process and of formative assessment and instruction within the student’s process of writing a text. Susan was definitely an advocate for multiple drafts, and her words within her final Reflective Essay suggest that she perhaps deemed this to be one of her main successes in the course: “I felt this was my strong point of writing and improving through each draft presented. Each draft showed my trying efforts to make them better to stand by themselves as the final draft. [. . .] I am glad I did not turn in the first draft as the final work of art . . .” (interview). The process of completing a project can be frustrating, especially during revision work, as Susan suggested earlier. And yet, Susan explained, “I enjoy feedback. It can be
overwhelming at first when you read it, like ‘oh, my god! What am I going to do with this paper,’ but once you actually start working on it, and you take the advice, the questions, and suggestions back into the paper, it actually works better because it’s like you’re seeing it (the paper) from a different point of view” (interview). In fact, according to Susan, “You can actually see it (the writing project) from different levels; it’s like you can work on it and see it change . . .” (interview). Susan summed up her perspective on the benefits of multiple drafts and revising by saying, “I think that, you know, the revising and adding all the (changes suggested by the) comments, being able to participate with it (the draft) and ask all the questions, is definitely worth it in the middle of the project” (interview).

Susan’s final drafts of the Annotated Bibliography project and the Argumentative Research project provided evidence of these benefits of revising between multiple drafts of a project and of using teacher comments within the revising process. Both final drafts showed that extensive revision work had been completed between drafts, and this revision work resulted in stronger, more focused final drafts. The final draft of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography included a strong introduction paragraph that provided the necessary background information for the argument being made and discussed the types of sources that were found during research. Citations for each of these sources were complete and were correctly formatted, and the paragraphs for each source included: a summary of the main ideas within the source, benefits of the source for her argument, and (in most cases) any possible limitations for the source. Susan’s conclusion for the project gave a nice explanation of the effectiveness of the sources for her argument as well. Additionally, the final draft of the Argumentative Research project presented a more focused argument from beginning to end of the draft. Susan used fewer direct quotes, especially long quotes, and tried to put as much information as possible into her own words. She
attempted within her revisions to synthesize information from her sources and to connect ideas wherever possible which helped with overall cohesiveness. In some places, even more explanation and detail was needed for better understanding of her main argument, but the clarity of her argument was much improved between drafts. And while no visuals had been included within the earlier drafts of her project, Susan included multiple visuals within her final draft to help support her argument. The visuals illustrated particular points of her argument and presented specific data. Of particular interest was a pie chart that Susan created to show her primary research findings about people’s common beliefs about censorship. And while her earlier argumentative draft had seemed to just end abruptly, Susan ended her final draft with a carefully-constructed concluding paragraph that attempted to “wrap up” the argument that she had made within her draft. Susan’s final drafts of the projects were not perfect, but both were much improved from her earlier drafts, and it was clear that Susan had attempted to revise at least in part according to the feedback (both written and verbal) that I had given her between drafts.

When Susan was later asked (in the interview) about the kinds of teacher feedback that made her want to work on her projects, she replied, “the details, all the little notes and stuff. It’s a little overwhelming at first when you first look at it because of all of the notes, but if you actually look at the notes while you’re working on the paper and read the notes, then it’s helpful and it’s a little bit like you’re interacting with the notes and figuring out what you need to put into the papers” (interview). For Susan, this type of “dialogue” (in the form of the teacher’s written notes within the draft and Susan’s responses to these notes), is especially helpful when the student is working on the bigger papers and projects (like the Argumentative Research project) within the course. In fact, Susan said, “they’re just so much harder to get together, you
know, if you don’t have someone guiding you through it” (interview). Susan further explained that she “improved based on the proper feedback from the teacher as she wrote on drafts and by asking questions to further the chain of thought process into the final product” (final Reflective essay). Numerous times throughout the semester (and within our interview) Susan expressed that she was glad to be able to ask questions in class. She explained that “if the teacher says that you can ask questions, and they’re open about it, then I feel more comfortable, too, that I can ask questions.” She continued on saying, “I’m going to school for me, not for the person sitting beside me or for anyone else; I’m going to school for me. And if I don’t understand something, then I need to be able to ask questions so that I can understand and learn what I need to learn in the class. And if that can’t happen, then we’re both [meaning teacher and student] in the wrong place” (interview). How true this is! For beginning composition students like Susan, much of the student-initiated dialogue about their writing and revising occurs in the form of student questions and teacher answers to those questions. And as Susan emphasized above, this student-initiated dialogue is both desired by the students and necessary for their learning. In discussing student-initiated dialogue here, I am reminded of the questions formulated by Mathison Fife & O’Neill (2001, 312-3) and included in Chapter 1 (Figure 1.1: Considerations for Conversational Commenting) of this text. It is important to note here that encouraging student-initiated dialogue requires a pedagogy that is intentional and interactive.

*Jacob: Second Chances and New Adventures*

While working for a construction company, Jacob had injured his lower back and was unable to work until released by the doctor. Unfortunately, by the time the doctor released Jacob from his care and allowed him to return to work, his employer had decided to lay him off (interview). When Jacob met with his case worker for the government’s Vocational
Rehabilitation program, the case worker suggested that Jacob enroll in college courses and pursue a different career. Jacob recognized that the back injury he had suffered would make it impossible for him to ever return to the hard physical labor that was required within the construction industry, but he was surprised to learn that the government would actually help to pay for him to go back to school. Since he had a family to support and the government would pay for him to go to school, Jacob thought that it sounded like a great opportunity, as he explained it, to “get paid to use my brain instead of my back” (interview). In discussing how he felt about becoming a college student again, Jacob said, “in the back of my mind I was scared out of my mind. Being a 38 year old father of four and married to a wonderful wife and only having a brief encounter with the college lifestyle back in 1992, this was going to be a real eye opener” (interview).

In the spring of 2012, Jacob was majoring in Business Administration and taking a full course-load of four courses (twelve credit hours) for the semester. He actually admitted to me that “ENG 111 was one of the courses that I put off taking until the last semester of this year” because, as he told it, “I was sure to fail the class since it had been soooooo long since I’ve had to form a sentence properly for a grade that there was no way for me to pass” (interview). Of course, he did later say, “surprisingly, I did very well in the class after I got back into the swing of college life and kept my nose in the books” (interview), a difficult feat for a very busy father of four, to be sure. But Jacob was determined to make this work because, as he acknowledged, he had “five other people that are depending on me (Jacob) to make this work” (interview). Jacob was keenly aware of his responsibility as head of his household, and he knew that school would provide him with a second chance, an opportunity to start over in a new career path. For
this reason, Jacob was a serious student who considered his studies to be his current “job” (much like Liz did) as he worked toward a new adventure.

From the beginning of the semester, Jacob seemed excited about each new challenge. He was well-prepared for each class session and eagerly participated in class discussions and activities, too. Moments of confusion and frustration popped up from time to time, but Jacob seemed poised and ready to “attack and conquer” anything that threatened to get in the way of his success. So, when his early draft of the first project of the semester, the Personal Literacy Narrative, did not have the necessary main focus, Jacob asked questions and tried to figure out how to accomplish what he needed to accomplish within the project. In his final Reflective Essay for the course, Jacob explained how he “had a very difficult time trying to separate the thing that caused me to write the speech about (the topic) and the process of writing the speech. Once I figured out that this was a simple project and the facts about the writing were what mattered, not [sic] the incident I was referring to as what the project was about, I . . . started writing good material that went well through peer review and final draft” (interview). Jacob’s struggle to understand the difference between writing about the topic that had motivated him to write a speech and writing about his process of writing the actual speech itself was not at all unusual, but he was frustrated nonetheless. About the second project of the semester, the Occupation Profile Research project, Jacob wrote, “this paper particularly stretched me to the limits of what I thought I was capable of and I really did not [sic] think that my old and un-polished writing style could pull this off” (from final Reflective Essay). In truth, it seems that getting started on the project may have been his biggest problem, and he acknowledged some procrastination in the early stages of the project within his Reflective Essay. But he later explained how he grew as a writer within this project: “during this project, I was able to start to refine my writing process to
the fine-honed, double-edged sword that it is today. This project forced me to focus on the entire paper as a whole, not just focusing on the topic at hand, but keeping the thesis statement at heart all the way through the paper. I was also forced to be aware of how the flow from paragraph to paragraph went all the way until the end” (from final Reflective Essay). Even though he had put off taking ENGL 111, and he had questioned his ability to write, Jacob quickly gained confidence in himself, and he gained confidence in his ability to write.

Like many students, the research aspect of the Argumentative Research project caused Jacob some concern, especially the requirement for numerous sources. At the Proposal stage of the project, however, Jacob had a strong level of personal interest in his topic, gold dredging in rivers and streams, and he already had a clear and thorough research plan for his intended argument, that gold dredging actually benefits fish and their habitats rather than endangering the fish as some legislators suggest. After conferencing with me about his topic and his plans for research, Jacob was ready to dive into the research. Several weeks later, when he posted his “Status Report” to the Discussion Board in Blackboard, Jacob responded to each question in the prompt and gave a very detailed report about his progress within the project. At this second draft stage, he acknowledged that he was learning much about his topic through the research, but he was struggling some with how to arrange all of the information that he wanted to include, and he requested some help with the “flow” of his argument. Jacob also discussed his plans to strengthen his thesis statement, and he expressed some specific concerns about transitioning within the first part of his paper. While a teacher often may wonder if students are really interested in what she has to say to them about their papers, Jacob made clear in his post that he trusted in my ability to help him on the project, and he even said, “thanks for all of your help” at the end of the post. And, in fact, when asked in the interview about how interpersonal
commenting/response is related to student thinking and learning, especially with regards to writing and revising, Jacob stated, “I think that the interpersonal comments helped out greatly in the writing process.” But Jacob went on to explain that “some students cannot mingle with teachers and ask for the help they need or just do not know that they need help. It takes a good student to ask for help and an even better one to use the information provided to them by the teacher to make their writing as good as possible” (interview). And then he very astutely added, “The student who learns from their and others’ mistakes will write a better paper every time compared to the student who thinks they know how to write and do not take constructive criticism well” (interview).

When asked about the kinds of teacher feedback that were most likely to engage him in his writing and revising processes, Jacob responded, “the feedback that caused me to concentrate and stay focused on the task at hand had to be the rough draft revision feedback. After receiving this feedback from the teacher, you had a great idea of what was working and what was not. This type of feedback is in my mind almost priceless” (interview). Jacob went on to mention that students had to be willing to use the feedback they were given, though, in order to make their writing the best that it could be. In other words, Jacob recognized that students have to take responsibility for their own writing and must choose to engage with the feedback from the teacher. This is, I think, an important insight from the student’s perspective. When asked about the specific types of revisions that the teacher’s feedback encouraged, Jacob replied, “mostly flow revisions and some grammatical” (interview). He further stated: “I believe that she wanted each of us to try and write to the best of our ability and not to settle for underachieving. She would keep writing the same things after each revision if she thought that it really could be done better” (interview). And when asked about how his responses to the teacher’s comments affected
his teacher’s later responses to his work, Jacob explained, “I know that just by doing some of the suggestions that the teacher offered me while writing the paper helped in the later revisions of the project. If (I) would at least try and fix the problems with the paper, she would find other things to try and help me fine tune my paper on instead of focusing on prior problems that were not yet addressed” (interview). Jacob acknowledged here that revision work was required at multiple stages within a given project, and that revisions might focus on different aspects of the project at different times throughout the writing process.

Jacob’s drafts of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project and the Argumentative Research project show his writing and revising processes at work. Within his 2nd draft of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project, Jacob included some strong information but he also had some formatting issues with the citations for his sources, and he was missing information from several of his citations as well. A strong introduction presented the overall topic and Jacob’s main argument, and a conclusion provided some wrap-up for the project, but major issues existed in between! Jacob had made attempts at creating citations for most of his sources, but these entries were a strange mix of MLA and APA documentation styles. Strong summaries were given for a few sources, but the paragraphs that accompanied the citations for other sources included only random bits of information or quotes from the sources themselves. None of the entries discussed potential benefits or limitations of using the source within his particular argument either. Within the 2nd draft of the Argumentative Research project itself, then, Jacob presented a strong start to his argument and he had his basic ideas in place, but there were issues with clarity and flow throughout the draft. Several quotes and visual elements were included within the text, but without any context or synthesis given, these elements were not connected to each other or to the main argument within the text. Issues with in-text documentation were
obvious as well. So, the concerns about the project that Jacob had expressed in his Status Report were valid ones, and he had accurately recognized some of the issues that needed attention within his 2nd draft—even if he was not quite sure how to approach some of those revisions on his own. Within my in-text comments to him, then, I attempted to direct Jacob in how to make certain ideas clearer, how to transition between ideas and connect ideas for better overall textual flow, how to effectively include the visuals as support for his argument, and how to correctly give in-text documentation for information from his sources.

The final drafts of both the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research projects showed that Jacob had given much attention to his revision work between drafts. The final draft of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography was stronger and more focused than the earlier drafts of the project. The Introduction was clear and focused on the main argument. The citations were mostly correct for each of the sources (just a few minor issues remained), and each source citation was now followed by a strong paragraph that included a detailed summary, benefits of the source for the project at hand, and possible limitations for the source. The Conclusion paragraph for the project provided a strong wrap-up as well. Likewise, the final draft of the Argumentative Research project was stronger and better organized than the earlier drafts of the project. Jacob had attempted to better explain terms, concepts and ideas within the text, and he had worked to connect ideas throughout the text as well. Quotes and visuals were better handled within the final draft than in earlier drafts, though more context or stronger lead-in was still needed in a couple of places. Documentation in the final draft was now consistently in MLA style throughout the text, and in-text documentation was correctly given in most places within the text. Jacob’s revised conclusion also provided a nice wrap-up of his argument that included a summary of his main ideas and supports.
Jacob discussed his revision work within the reflection pages for each of the projects. In the reflection page for the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project, Jacob acknowledged that this was a new and different genre of writing for him, and he explained, “Looking back through these drafts for this project was kind of a neat thing to do because it showed me how far off I was in the beginning from a completed work.” While it took multiple drafts for him to put together a strong, complete project, Jacob also admitted, “The processes of pre-writing and trying to form a rough draft were pretty hard for me in the beginning. I really did not know how to tackle this project. . .” A new type or genre of writing often has this effect on beginning writers; inexperience or unfamiliarity can lead to fear, uncertainty, and avoidance (or procrastination, in some cases). Jacob further explained, “The process of researching and then summarizing the work that you need for the other paper is very different from anything I ever had to do before” (reflection page for Amplified Annotated Bibliography project). But even though it was a different type of project, Jacob worked hard to follow directions and asked questions when he didn’t quite understand something. And once he realized that the one project could greatly help him in completing the other project, Jacob found new determination to succeed and found that he could do anything that he set his mind to do. In the reflection page for the final draft of the Argumentative Research project, Jacob expressed that he found enjoyment in looking back through the drafts for this project. He also acknowledged that the feedback from both his peers and the teacher were helpful to him as he wrote and revised the drafts of his project. Jacob noted that his peers’ comments showed him that he was reaching his intended audience, and his teacher’s comments helped him to use his sources to support his argument instead of relying only on his own opinion. In discussing specifics of his revision process for the Argumentative Research project, Jacob discussed how he “did some major remodeling of (his) paper due to how
(he) was using the information” (interview). Jacob explained his revising in this way: “I was trying to argue the subject at first instead of letting my research argue the point for me. Once I had figured out this aspect of the paper and let the research fight the battles, the paper pretty much wrote itself; all I did was put it together to flow properly” (interview). Understanding how to use sources to add credibility and support to an argument is required within academic writing at all levels, but many beginning composition students, like Jacob, initially struggle with mastering this key skill, and I found much of the student/teacher commenting dialogue within the context of this particular research project was related to the use of sources and to matters of documentation.

When asked about how much interpersonal commenting/response is related to student thinking and learning, especially with regards to writing and revising, Jacob shared his strong views about the importance of this communication:

During the revising process the communication link between the teacher and the student must remain strong and as constant as possible in order for the student to get the greatest good out of the instructions from the teacher. If the link between student and teacher is not formed by the teacher who really wants the student to learn and the student who really wants to learn then failure will almost always occur. (interview)

Interestingly, Jacob’s response once again spoke to matters of personal responsibility and of choice, but this time he emphasized this responsibility and choice on the part of both teacher and student, and he suggested an on-going and interactive communication throughout the revising process. Jacob also emphasized here that the lack of participation on the part of either teacher or student would result in failure: failure to teach and failure to learn. Isn’t it interesting that engagement and motivation, topics frequently discussed with reference to students, are suggested
by this student as necessary for teachers as well? This idea of shared responsibility and required engagement in learning for both teacher and student also reminds me of Lee’s “coinquirers” idea (2000, 10) and Straub’s “fellow inquirers” idea (Rpt. 2006, p. 352) where learning is an ongoing, interactive partnership between teacher and student.

Comparing Voices and Perspectives of Student Participants

Using the “constant comparative method” to consider the data within the case studies seemed like a logical option because it afforded me the ability to compare data from individual participants at different times and in different settings or situations as well as the ability to compare data from different participants at similar times and in similar settings or situations with each other. While several recent texts seemed to attribute the “constant comparative method” to scholar and researcher Kathy Charmaz (perhaps because of her detailed explanations of the method and her advocacy for the method’s usage), I was interested to find that Charmaz herself clearly attributed this method back to sociologists Barney G. Glaser & Anselm L. Strauss (The Discovery of Grounded Theory, 1967) as an integral aspect of their “defining components of grounded theory practice” (Charmaz, 2006, 5). At its most simplistic level, the constant comparative method is a qualitative method used in grounded research in which comparisons are made during each stage of the analysis (Charmaz, 5). A more complete definition of the method can be found in the glossary of Charmaz’s 2006 text, however:

A method of analysis that generates successively more abstract concepts and theories through inductive processes of comparing data with data, data with category, category with category, and category with concept. Comparisons then constitute each stage of analytic development. (187)
Within grounded theory, then, comparative methods can help researchers to see their data differently and to consider their observations in “new, analytic ways” (Charmaz, 53). And, according to Charmaz, the constant comparative method does not have to end when the data analysis is complete; instead, comparisons and analyses can (and should) continue throughout the review of existing literature and in the consideration of theoretical framing for ideas (165). In fact, Charmaz suggests that “[t]hrough comparing other scholars’ evidence and ideas with your grounded theory, you may show where and how their ideas illuminate your theoretical categories and how your theory extends, transcends, or challenges dominant ideas in your field” (2006, 165). These potential means of going beyond the initial data analysis with constant comparative methods seemed both exciting and inviting, then, as I considered (or, perhaps more accurately, reconsidered) the data from the three ethnographic case studies included earlier within this chapter.

Some initial comparisons already have been made within the individual case studies themselves, especially with regards to each individual participant’s writing and revising experiences between drafts, but additional comparisons can yet be made between participants with regards to: their backgrounds or past experiences; their values and beliefs (from their perspectives) about school, about writing, and about teacher commentary; and their experiences within the course. And later, comparisons between these three case study participants and the other student participants in the classes could yield valuable insights as well, insights about FYC students, teacher commentary, and composition pedagogy.

**Background/Demographic Comparisons**

Earlier in this chapter, it was established that the three interview participants were all returning adult students and that all were over thirty years of age. It was also established that two
of the participants were female and one participant was male. Within the individual case studies, then, we learned that one of the female participants (Liz) was a single mother of two teenage daughters and the male participant (Jacob) was the married father of four children. While not explicitly stated within the case study, the other female participant (Susan) was married and had no children at the time of the study. All three participants were returning to school to pursue new or different career options. Both Liz and Susan chose to return to school mostly for economic reasons, with both sensing a lack of other options within the job market. For Jacob, a work-related injury and subsequent loss of employment forced him to consider an opportunity to return to school through a government vocational rehabilitation program. Of the three participants, Liz was the only one who did not yet have a specific career focus. Liz was pursuing a General Studies degree and was taking twelve credit hours. She was paying for her schooling herself, with the help of government student loans. Susan was pursuing a Culinary Arts degree in Pastry Arts, and she was taking nine credit hours that semester. Susan also was paying for her schooling herself with the help of government student loans. Jacob was pursuing a degree in Business Administration and was taking twelve credit hours. His schooling was largely paid for by government vocational rehabilitation program funds.

Liz attended the morning section of my ENGL 111 course, while both Susan and Jacob attended the afternoon section of the course. Although all three participants were far-removed from their early schooling at the time of this study, both Liz and Susan still seemed to be struggling with the effects of negative experiences in school from their pasts as the new semester began. Liz and Susan each were full of personal insecurities and doubts as the ENGL 111 course began, and both were hopeful that their new school ventures would be more positive ones than those experienced in the past. Jacob, on the other hand, was a bit anxious about having to write
again after so many years out of school, but he seemed to possess an underlying sense of personal confidence; he was open to the challenges ahead of him and was confident that he could conquer them.

Beliefs/Values Comparisons

All three participants clearly placed high value on education and learning, especially their own learning, and they expressed these values within their written reflections, their interview responses, and also within our in-class and email conversations throughout the semester. Liz, Susan and Jacob were committed to their own learning because they understood the impact that education could have on their futures in the workplace and beyond. For all three participants, the personal responsibility to do one’s best was ever present. And for Liz and Jacob, the responsibility went beyond their personal successes: the future well-being of their families was also tied to their learning.

All three participants recognized the importance of classroom discussions to their learning, with both Liz and Jacob mentioning that they sometimes gained insights from the questions and comments of their peers in these discussion sessions. Conversations with the teacher were mentioned repeatedly by all three participants as well. Liz and Susan both appreciated that they had the freedom to ask questions of the teacher during class and via email (what I would term “student-initiated dialogue”), and they knew that they would get helpful, thoughtful responses. And Susan specifically stated that this was not always the case in other classes that she took; in some of her previous classes, students were not allowed to ask questions or would not get helpful responses to questions that they asked. Interestingly, all three participants emphasized that asking questions and being able to dialogue with the teacher while working on a project was important and necessary to their learning. Implied by Liz and Susan,
and stated outright by Jacob, was the necessary involvement of the teacher within these dialogical interactions.

The three participants also specifically recognized the importance of the teacher’s written comments within their writing and revising processes as well. Of particular value, it seemed, was the ability to have the teachers’ words with them at home (or, out of class) as they worked on their projects. Liz spoke of the comments being a “take away” from the teacher that the students could think about later and better understand as they worked on their projects at home without the teacher physically there to help them. Additionally, Liz suggested that the continual interactions with the teacher throughout a project (i.e. formative assessment) allowed the teacher to coach her through the rough spots within the project. Susan acknowledged that teacher comments could sometimes be overwhelming initially, but then she specifically mentioned how helpful the comments could be if they were considered as talking with the teacher (i.e. conversational or dialogical) while writing and revising the project. And Jacob stressed the need for continued interactions between teacher and student (i.e. interactive dialogue) within the process of writing and revising. So, teacher comments might focus on a particular student question about the project or might make suggestions for an addition or change within the project, which the student might then acknowledge or he might ask another question about another aspect of the project via email, which the teacher could then respond to via email . . . and so on. The important thing to note here, I think, is that Jacob clearly saw the teacher’s comments as being more than isolated words on a page; for Jacob, the written comments were highly contextual and were only a part of the on-going conversation between teacher and student throughout the project. In these ways, then, the students seemed to view teacher commentary as a
means of formative (or what Huot terms “instructive”) assessment that was contextual, dialogical and interactive.

Writing and revising through multiple drafts (i.e. following a process approach to writing) was valued by all three participants, with all three stating outright that they believed that they wrote better final drafts because they were able to write, revise, and work through issues within their earlier drafts. While composition scholars have long understood the effectiveness of an emphasis on process when writing, many students are resistant to following a process approach because they see it merely as “extra” work. For this reason, it was interesting that all three case study participants so clearly expressed that they personally valued the process approach in their writing. For Liz, being able to work through multiple drafts relieved some of the pressure that was often associated with starting a writing project. Liz also appreciated being able to work through multiple drafts on projects with documentation requirements. Since she had never had to document sources before, the multiple drafts allowed her the time and practice to learn when and how to correctly document information that she used from her sources. And both Susan and Jacob emphasized how their projects improved with each draft so that they could turn in their best work as the final draft.

In the end, even though Liz and Susan struggled some with their Argumentative Research projects, and both were vocal about their displeasure with their final drafts, both students still clearly valued the hard work they had invested in completing a tough project in spite of their struggles. Liz and Susan found personal value in their perseverance through the project struggles and in their determination to complete the project, even when just completing the project had seemed nearly impossible at times throughout the process. And even though both Liz and Susan confided that the final draft of the Argumentative Research project was not what they would
consider their best work, Liz and Susan also emphasized that they did learn much and their overall writing abilities were much improved. Both students were keenly disappointed that their final projects did not show this growth and development, though. For Jacob, however, the Argumentative Research project allowed him to value a new-found confidence in his ability to write well. Jacob also had a few struggles along the way, but he was able to work through these struggles to complete a final draft of the project for which he was very proud of himself. And in discussing his personal journey through the process of completing the project, Jacob emphasized that his hard work had paid off in the end.

In comparing the values and beliefs of the three participants (as stated and emphasized within their own written reflections, their interview responses, and their conversations with me), then, it became clear that a number of beliefs were shared by Liz, Susan and Jacob. These shared beliefs by the case study participants included the following:

- Education and learning are valuable and are worth the hard work and sacrifices that are needed in order to achieve them
- Dialogue/conversations with the teacher (both verbal and written) are valuable to learning, especially within writing and revising, and teacher involvement in this dialogue is key
- Multiple drafts and revising between drafts are valuable because this process approach allows for improved writing and a stronger final draft
- Hard work and perseverance are required aspects of learning
- A final draft of a project may represent student learning, but it does not necessarily show all that has been learned
Once again, these shared beliefs were stated and emphasized by Liz, Susan and Jacob within their own written texts and in their conversations with me, so this listing comes from the students’ perspectives.

Comparing Individual Journeys through the Argumentative Research Project

In considering my students’ writing and revising processes within these projects, then, I am reminded that while it is tempting to think of each draft as a specific, well-defined, linear step or stage in the completion of the project (and often must be considered thusly in order to provide feedback or grades, for example), these processes are actually much more varied and complex than that on an individual basis. So, while we can generalize some aspects of the writing process, we must also acknowledge that writing is at heart a very personal and rhetorical act that may vary from person to person and from task to task. Writing is a self-reinforcing mode of learning (Emig, 1977) that usually begins with thinking or talking through ideas, followed by writing, then reading what we have written, followed by more thinking about it, followed by revising what we have written as we deem necessary, and so on. Most writers follow some form of this process, though the how and the when and the why of the different aspects of the process may vary based on personal writing process and contexts surrounding the writing. For some writers, the process is very smooth and fluid from start to finish, but for others the process is a series of starts and stops and detours and re-starts. Within my composition classes, I work to help students to begin to understand their personal writing and revising processes so that they will be able to apply what they learn about how they write and revise to other writing tasks and projects (i.e. transfer of knowledge and skills). While writing assignments and the contexts surrounding them may differ, an understanding of one’s personal writing process is transferable knowledge that can allow students to approach each new project with a certain level of confidence. It should also be
noted here that while I might seem to present the various steps/stages within the research project as being very specific and linear, I do so only for ease of explanation and comparison; the personal writing experiences of these three students (like most writers) and their level of progress within their writing processes are often far from neat, tidy or linear. In looking back at each participant’s journey through the Argumentative Research project, though, I found some similar struggles amidst the diverse, and often personal, challenges that were faced at the various stages of the project by each student as she or he worked to complete their project. And since I already have discussed each student’s individual journey through this research project within her or his case study, I will give brief explanations here that include only information necessary for comparing or contrasting purposes.

As we began the Argumentative Research project that semester, the students were required to complete an Argument Proposal assignment. At this stage in the project, all three participants had strong interest in their topics and all three had good initial ideas about the arguments that they wanted to pursue, but their level of preparation at this point (as shown in their level of completion of this assignment) varied greatly. Liz and Susan were somewhat prepared at this point, with both struggling to find a more narrow and manageable focus for their projects, but Jacob was well-prepared with a complete proposal and he already had a thorough research plan in place for his project. Liz was probably the least prepared of the three at this point since she was struggling to decide what exactly she wanted to argue within her larger chosen topic; so many possible arguments could be made within her topic that Liz was overwhelmed and felt incapable of deciding on just one to pursue. Unfortunately, that indecision about the focus for her argument left Liz without any specific research questions or search terms, and with only a vague plan for the project. Susan, on the other hand, had many good questions
about her intended argument, but she needed a narrower, more manageable focus for the project and needed some guidance about searching for sources related to her specific argument. Susan had more of a research plan than Liz had, but Susan’s plan wasn’t complete either and it needed to be revised some after she narrowed the focus of her argument. Only Jacob had a complete proposal and a thorough (and manageable) research plan at this stage in the project.

When the 1st draft of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography was due, none of the three participants had a complete (or correct) draft. Both Liz and Susan were falling behind schedule on the project. For Liz, the struggle to determine a focus for her argument had continued, and while she had managed to find a couple of sources, she still had much research work to do yet. Susan was struggling to find sources as well. While she had found much general information on the topic, Susan was struggling to find sources that contained specific information that she needed for her argument. And though Jacob had a draft at this stage, there were major formatting issues in the draft, and he had not really fulfilled the project requirements at all. All three students admitted that this particular project was a new genre of writing for them, and Jacob confessed that he had not even known where (or how) to begin the project. In spite of their rough beginnings in this new, unfamiliar genre, however, and with teacher feedback and guidance throughout the process, all three students later managed to complete strong annotated bibliographies that acted as the Works Cited or References page for their Argumentative Research projects.

The 1st draft of the Argumentative Research project found Liz and Susan falling even farther behind as they continued to search for sources, while Jacob was struggling to organize his ideas and the information from his sources into an argument. Liz still struggled to determine a manageable focus for her argument, and we emailed back and forth and conferenced after class
numerous times to attempt to work through the many possibilities. In fact, I distinctly remember telling Liz at one point, “Any one of the options that we’ve just discussed would work well as your argument, but we are getting down to the point where you just have to choose one and run with it. Otherwise, you won’t have enough time to complete the project!” My words were intended to encourage Liz in her decision, but they also provided a necessary “reality check” as well. In Susan’s case, the struggle to find the desired sources was affecting the whole project; Susan did not want to even begin writing until she had all of her sources, so the longer she struggled to find those sources, the farther behind she got. So, both Liz and Susan were paralyzed in their processes—Liz by indecision, and Susan by an inability to act outside of her desired order of actions—so, as time continued to march on, this ever-challenging project became even more frustrating and challenging for these two students. And while Jacob had a 1st draft at this point, he was really just in the beginning stages of putting his information in order and establishing his argument. In fact, much of what he had included within this initial draft was quoted material from his sources, and there was little or no synthesis of ideas yet. Clearly, all three students had much work to do yet on their projects at this stage in the process!

After turning in the 2nd drafts of both the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research projects to me, the students completed a Status Report post within Blackboard. The student responses to the questions within the prompt allowed them to tell me about their progress within the projects before I read or commented on their individual drafts. I have found that at this mid-way point, the students’ responses to the prompt (or the lack thereof) can be rather telling about their actual progress within the projects. In the case of the three case study participants, this premise seemed especially true. While Liz had completed a post, she didn’t specifically answer all of the questions within the prompt, and the plans that she gave for
revisions were vague at best. On a more positive note, though, Liz was beginning to see her argument as a “call to action” and she felt that she was learning much as she researched. For Susan, outside stressors had kept her from class for a week or more at this point, so she had fallen even farther behind, and she did not complete the formal post. Instead, we discussed her project face-to-face when she returned to class, and we worked to create a plan to get her caught up within the project. Of the three students, only Jacob had a complete post at this stage within the project. He gave specific responses to every question within the prompt and asked for help or guidance for several specific concerns within the project, like the overall flow of his argument, the arrangement of information, and transitioning between ideas.

In looking at the 2nd drafts of the Amplified Annotated Bibliographies, then, it seemed that all three were making some progress within the project. Surprisingly, Liz seemed to be back on track within this draft. She had a strong Introduction which emphasized her chosen argument, and she also had correct bibliographic citations for each source, along with a paragraph for each source that included a summary as well as possible benefits of the source for her argument. For Susan, however, it seemed that the struggles continued. She had attempted a draft, but it was not at all complete. There was no Introduction and no Conclusion, and while bibliographic citations had been attempted for several of her sources, most required additional information or formatting corrections. Susan had begun summary paragraphs for each of the listed sources, but they were very brief and had no discussion of benefits or limitations of the sources for her argument. It was a start, though, and since she had missed so many class sessions, I was aware that Susan would be behind at this point. When I looked at Jacob’s draft, it was clear that he had worked to complete the project, but it was also clear that he did not quite understand the formatting and general requirements for the project yet. Jacob had a strong Introduction and Conclusion, but his
bibliographic citations for his sources were a strange mixture of APA and MLA documentation styles. Some of the paragraphs for his sources had some summary information, but other sources had only bits of quoted information beneath the citations, and none of these paragraphs included any discussion of the possible benefits or limitations of the source for his particular argument. So, in ways, the one who had seemed the least prepared within her Status Report post (Liz), turned in a more complete (and correct) draft for this part of the project than the one who had seemed to have everything in order within his post but who actually ended up needing some major revisions on this part of the project (Jacob). An interesting turn of events, to say the least, but the 2nd drafts of the Argumentative Research project itself told a very different story!

When I read the 2nd drafts of the students’ Argumentative Research projects, I found that these drafts aligned much more accurately with the indications of Status Report posts than the students’ 2nd drafts of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project had. So, much like her post, Liz’s 2nd draft was incomplete and she was really just beginning to put her ideas onto the page. Liz’s argument was not yet clear within her text at this mid-way point in the project, and she had used information from only one or two of her sources in the two page draft. From her Amplified Annotated Bibliography draft I could tell that Liz was beginning to work out her ideas and her main argument, but that work had not yet made its way to her Argumentative Research draft. Meanwhile, Susan had more pages of text than Liz at this point, but her draft was more of a collection of quotes than an argument, and from the start of the draft, it was clear that Susan was struggling between an informative focus and an argumentative one. Susan attempted to introduce her topic and her argument, and she had a tentative thesis, but more explanation was needed to introduce that argument. Many long quotes from her sources filled space on the pages, but Susan had included no synthesis of ideas, so the text seemed to jump between ideas with no apparent
main focus. The draft gave evidence that Susan was clearly making progress, but she was still well behind where she needed to be within the project at this mid-way point. Unlike Liz’s and Susan’s drafts, Jacob’s draft was mostly complete at this stage within the project. Jacob had a strong start to the project and most of his basic ideas were already in place within this draft. As he had noted within his Status Report, though, the overall flow of his argument needed some work and there were still a few documentation issues to work out as well. For the most part, however, Jacob was where he needed to be at this stage within the project.

My written comments on the individual project drafts at this point in the process were largely an attempt to respond in a very specific and focused way to each student’s concerns (as mentioned within their Status Report posts and within our informal conferences or email conversations) within the actual texts of their projects. So, instead of giving vague, disconnected suggestions or directives, I worked to “ground” my comments within the context of their written texts and our on-going conversations regarding those texts. All three participants received written comments from me on their project drafts, and I conferenced informally about the projects with all three students, both in and out of class. The conversations surrounding the projects continued with all three students throughout their writing and revising work via email as well. While Liz and Susan were content to receive the hand-written feedback from me on the scheduled date for the return of the drafts, Jacob expressed some concerns about his schedule outside of school at that time. Because he talked with me about his scheduling issues ahead of time, I offered to send his project feedback a couple of days earlier than the scheduled return date so that he could begin revision work on his project. I work best from hard copy, so I still wrote out comments on his actual draft copies, but I then typed in-text comments (using Word) within an electronic copy of his draft and emailed that electronic draft (with my comments) to Jacob so
that he could begin revising. Jacob also received his hard copy draft with my hand-written comments on the day when I returned drafts to the rest of the class.

At the final draft stage, the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project acted as the Works Cited or References page for the Argumentative Research project, so it was imperative that the project be complete (with all sources included) and correct (especially with regards to the bibliographic citations themselves). While earlier drafts of both projects were found to be lacking, all three students turned in final drafts of both the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research projects that were stronger than at the 2nd draft stage. In all three cases, because of much attention to revision work, these final drafts of the projects became the students’ best drafts within this project, even though both Liz and Susan later expressed concerns that their final drafts were not necessarily their best work in the course. In Liz’s case, her final Argumentative Research project draft was a complete draft that included information from all of her sources and was now clearly an argument rather than being merely informative in nature. Liz had attempted to revise according to my written notes and our conversations about the project, but a few issues remained within the draft. In ways, Liz’s final draft was actually more like the 2nd draft that she had struggled to complete earlier; now that her main ideas were down on the page, Liz was still working to fully explain and connect ideas within the draft. It is likely that another round of revising would have made a positive difference in how Liz felt about her project in the end. Like Liz, Susan had attempted to revise according to my comments and our conversations about the project, but she still struggled to pull everything together at this final stage in the project. While Susan had initially struggled to find sources for her argument, she later struggled with information overload as she attempted to use her sources to support her argument within her text. In spite of these struggles, Susan’s final draft presented a more focused
argument than that found in her 2nd draft. Additionally, Susan attempted to synthesize the information from her selected sources, to transition in and out of quotes, and to connect ideas throughout her text. With more time to work on the project, and perhaps another round of revisions, Susan too might have been happier with her final draft of the project. Jacob, on the other hand, was on time and on track throughout most of the project; the final drafts that he turned in were solid projects, and he was pleased with what he had accomplished when he turned in the projects to be graded. Through his revision work, Jacob created a stronger and more organized argument within his final draft. With obvious attention to my written comments to him and our conversations about his project, Jacob attempted to add clarity to explanations and ideas within his text, and he worked to create stronger connections between ideas throughout his text as well. And, unlike the strange mixture of MLA and APA documentation styles that he used within his 2nd drafts, Jacob consistently used only MLA within his final draft of each project.

As shown here within these comparisons between case study participants and their journeys throughout the process of completing the Argumentative Research project, then, a correlative relationship does seem to exist between the level of student preparation at certain check-points within the process and their actual progress within the project. In particular, the careful completion of the pre-planning and decision-making required within the Proposal (at the very start of the project) seems to affect the actual researching and writing within the project. Additionally, a complete post to the Status Report prompt at the mid-point in the project, a post that includes specific responses to all of the questions asked, may indicate a more complete draft as well.

In comparing the personal experiences of these three students throughout the various requirements and stages of this project, then, a number of struggles were shared (at least to some
degree) by Liz, Susan and Jacob throughout the process of completing the Argumentative Research project and its related activities and assignments. These struggles included:

- Unfamiliarity or inexperience with a particular genre of writing
- Unpreparedness or indecisiveness at the start of a project/pre-planning or pre-writing struggles
- Inability to differentiate between writing to inform and writing to argue
- Fear &/or inexperience with documentation and the correct use of sources
- Inability to recognize revision needs within own writing &/or understand how to approach needed revisions (especially global concerns)

In further considering these shared struggles, then, some additional detail and explanation might be helpful. First off, as was true for the three case study participants (and most of their peers from my ENGL 111 classes), the annotated bibliography is a totally new genre for most beginning writers. When facing a different genre of writing, students may struggle to understand the purpose for the project, and, like Jacob, they also may initially struggle to understand formatting and general project requirements. Many beginning writers, like Liz, Susan and Jacob, lack experience with argumentative writing as well. And it should be no surprise that when faced with an unfamiliar genre or a writing task for which they have little experience, many beginning writers will struggle with knowing where to even begin, and, as Jacob acknowledged, procrastination can easily set in. And if these students already do not see themselves as strong writers (and many beginning writers struggle with self-confidence), then their approach to the writing task before them is likely to be tentative, and they may hesitate to commit to a particular topic and/or argument unless they feel reasonably sure that they can be successful.

Unfortunately, this indecisiveness, this tendency to hesitate to commit, can set students up for
failure within a project: the longer they wait to decide, the farther behind they get, and the farther behind they get, the more stressed and frustrated they get about making the necessary decisions, and on and on the cycle continues in a self-defeating, downward spiral. Both Liz and Susan found themselves within this self-defeating cycle yet managed to successfully get back on track, but for some of their peers (and beginning writers everywhere who are like them), the personal writing journey through a project often does not end with success. Strong preparation and planning at the earliest stages of a project, on the other hand, can get writers off to a strong start within a project and can lead to fewer frustrations along the way. This strong pre-planning includes decision-making about key aspects of a project, and this planning is especially important within a large and challenging project like the Argumentative Research project, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Argumentative writing has its own challenges, but adding research requirements creates even more challenges for inexperienced (and often, insecure) writers. Argumentative writing is difficult for many beginning writers because they find it difficult to recognize the difference between arguing and merely informing with their words. This difficulty, then, is compounded when the student writers are required to use information and ideas from others (i.e. outside sources) within their own writing projects. And in their efforts to find information and use information from their sources, some writers, like Susan, get overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information they find. And in trying to organize all of their information, some of these writers actually may forget that they are supposed to be arguing within their texts. Additionally, many beginning writers mistakenly believe that argumentative writing simply revolves around the writer’s own opinions and how well he or she can “make the case.” Like Jacob, these beginning writers do not realize that credible sources are required to support an effective argument, so they
attempt to rely on the strength of their own opinions within their projects. As Jacob found, though, using information from strong, credible sources as support for an argument can make the actual writing of the argument easier, and the result will be a stronger and more effective argument. Most beginning writers struggle at some point in the writing process, though, to clearly and effectively connect ideas within their texts for an overall cohesiveness, and this is especially true when these writers are required to use outside sources for their projects. Incidentally, all three case study participants struggled at some point within their projects to create or strengthen the overall cohesiveness within their arguments. For most beginning writers, though, the most intimidating aspect of any research project seems to be related to documentation. As many writers approach research projects, they do so full of fear and with a general lack of confidence, often due to their lack of experience with the use of sources and documentation demands. To many student writers, like Liz, Susan, and Jacob, the documentation requirements for research writing can be overwhelming and may seem much like a foreign language, full of strange words, ideas, and logic that are unlike anything else these beginning writers have encountered. With practice, however, these writers can begin to learn how this important aspect of academic writing “works” and why the documentation of sources is so important within their own writing.

Much of the revising that Liz, Susan, and Jacob did between drafts of the Argumentative Research project was related to their use of information from their sources and the correct documentation of this information and of these sources, and this seems to be true for many beginning writers. But while most student drafts will need to be revised, beginning writers often struggle to recognize what needs revised within their texts or how to approach the needed revisions. The difficulties that many of these writers face with regards to recognizing the need
for revisions within their own writing may stem from a number of factors, including their inexperience or their difficulties in writing in the first place. Additionally, beginning writers may not yet be able to take a (menta1) step back to separate themselves from their writing in order to enable them to read their own texts objectively and with an eye toward revisions (Sommers, 1980). Interestingly, student writers seem more comfortable in making revisions when they know exactly what they need to do. For example, many of the issues with information from sources, or the documenting of that information or source, are specific and local concerns that have a clear, straightforward “fix”; whether it is a matter of formatting or the need for in-text documentation or for the correction of a citation, the writer can easily make the necessary change or correction. Editing concerns like spelling, punctuation, and wrong word usage would all fall into this local concern category as well. It seems, however, that beginning writers struggle more with revising for global concerns that do not have a clear or singular option to “fix” the problem but instead require some abstract thinking and decision-making on their parts. For example, concerns with the overall focus or organization of a text often frustrate beginning writers, and some, like Susan, may simply opt to re-write the entire project when they can’t easily determine how to “fix” the problem(s) within their existing text. It is also important to note, however, that there is no one “set” formula for revision work since student writers each process information and ideas differently as they write and revise. Additionally, revision processes may vary based on that student’s level of writing experience, the demands of the particular genre or type of writing, as well as the writer’s stage of writing within the overall project. But as Liz, Susan, and Jacob all emphasized, an on-going dialogue with the teacher (both written and verbal) is desired and needed by beginning writers throughout both the writing and the revising of a project in order for them to learn to write and become stronger in their writing, too.
As this chapter draws to a close, then, I hope that the voices and perspectives of Liz, Susan and Jacob remain clear and recognizable throughout the remainder of this text as we continue to explore the varied and complex contexts that exist within the composition classroom. These three students’ experiences in and out of the classroom and their perspectives about school, about writing, and about teacher commentary are likely shared (at least in part) by many other beginning writing students in today’s composition classrooms as well. When the case studies were compared, data showed that Liz, Susan and Jacob all shared several key values and beliefs, but the three students were also found to share some common writing-related struggles as well. All three students clearly placed value on education and learning, and they also valued dialogue/conversations with the teacher within that learning. Each of these students gave explanations as to what she or he perceived that these student/teacher conversations and interactions could and should be like, too. Several of these explanations included discussions of responsibility and choice within the student/teacher relationship as well, and it seems that responsibility goes both ways in this important relationship, at least as these students perceive it. Each of these students also discussed their own use of teacher comments within their writing and revising processes. These three case studies related to current issues within our field, like transfer, engagement, motivation and the needs of nontraditional students, too. These three case studies and the subsequent comparisons that followed them, then, speak to several of the initial research questions that guide this study as well: 1) What factors make commentary dialogical and interactive?; 2) In what ways do students understand and value this dialogical and interactive commentary?; and 3) How do students interact with and use teacher comments? Of course, all of these questions, along with the fourth research question (What might an understanding of student values—with regards to dialogical and interactive teacher commentary—mean for FYC
My original intention for this chapter was to provide a rich description of the student experience within this particular beginning composition setting, and I desired for the students themselves to provide this data with their own voices. The number of voices included here is far fewer and less diverse than I initially intended to include as a sampling, yet the data from the three generative interviews allowed for the creation of thick and detailed descriptions of the student experience within the writing classroom. These descriptions showed the human aspects of the student experience along with the relational nature of their interactions with their teacher, and perhaps most importantly, these descriptions were comprised largely in the students’ own voices. Many valuable insights were shared within the three interviews, and these insights became the underlying framework for the ethnographic case studies in this chapter. And yet, I wonder if perhaps even this lack of voices can speak to the issues that these students face and the ways in which they approach a challenging course like English 111. After all, what should we make of the fact that only returning adult students responded to the invitation to participate in the focus groups? Why did none of the traditional-aged students respond? Is this difference just a matter of age, or does this also reflect upon the students’ level of maturity, their life experiences, and/or their personal priorities? Obviously, for all that we already know about the students who enter our classrooms each semester, there is still much that we do not yet know or understand about them, and much of what we need to learn about our students must come directly from them, in their own voices and from their perspectives. Are we ready and willing as a field to listen?
As a writing instructor, I am listening more intentionally now in order to become an even better student of my students. I listen to what is said (and to what is left unsaid) by my students, and I attempt to understand situations and learning experiences from my students’ perspectives. Because of my research work, I am intentionally giving more opportunities for my students to open and to direct our conversations about their writing, too. And as a means to more fully understanding and appreciating my students’ learning experiences, I have attempted to better understand my own reading and commenting processes and how these highly rhetorical processes might affect my interactions with my students about their writings. In fact, an autoethnographic account of how I read and then compose response to my students’ texts is included in the next chapter (Chapter 4) of this dissertation study. According to Sullivan (1992), “[p]articipant observation, a defining feature of ethnomethodology, allows researchers to reflect critically on their own subject position, both as researchers and as authors, in the twin sites of study—in the field and on the page” (p. 57). While this critical self-reflection is a necessary component of any study that works within a feminist theory framework, I especially appreciate Kirsch & Richie’s further suggestion to place the stories of both researcher and research participants into dialogue with one another as a means to gaining understanding (2003, p. 154). It is my hope that the autoethnographic account that follows (in the next chapter) will provide further context and understanding of the interactive dialogue between students and teacher, a dialogue that is an important aspect of the commenting relationship within the composition classroom.

Notes to Chapter 3
1. A copy of these interview questions can be found in the Appendices at the end of this text.
2. For a more thorough discussion of the assignment itself, please see the data collection instruments section within Chapter 2.

3. Please see the description of this activity within the data collection instruments section of Chapter 2.

4. For more discussion regarding student preferences toward local revising and their frustrations with global revising, please see Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 4: A TEACHER’S AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF COMPOSING RESPONSE

Within Chapter 3, I presented student voices and perspectives about their writing and their role within the commenting relationship. This chapter, then, since it includes an autoethnographic account of my own composing of response, may at first seem like a departure from my efforts to give students a voice in current conversations about teacher commentary. My intent here, however, is to use this autoethnographic account as a means to broaden the scope of my discussion of the many and varied contexts surrounding the commenting relationship. And by looking at specific interactions between me and several of my students, I hope to further complement, complicate or contradict previous assumptions about the commenting relationship. From the discussion of my personal processes of reading and then composing responses to student texts, along with the specific accounts of student-teacher interactions that are explored within the pages of this chapter, I attempt to place my story as teacher-researcher in dialogue with the stories of my student-participants, as suggested by Kirsch & Ritchie (2003, p. 154), in hopes of providing a window into academic culture, in general, as well as the more specific culture of our writing classroom. And as suggested by Canagarajah (2012, p. 113), I attempt to provide a balanced autoethnography that uses the self as a means to understand and interpret the surrounding culture and that makes use of narrative writing to accomplish its purpose. I understand, however, that while ethnography is a fairly common qualitative research methodology that is used in a wide range of disciplines, autoethnography may be a lesser known (or even unknown) methodology for many of my readers. For this reason, I have provided a more detailed explanation of autoethnography as research method in an Appendix at the end of this text.
While I would like to say that this chapter was a part of my master plan for this
dissertation from the very beginning, it actually was not. Instead, this chapter resulted from my
reading of a brief mention of the need for teachers to reflect on their own processes of response
as ethnographers (Huot, 2002, 134) in a text I was reading in preparation for my preliminary
exams. This brief mention in *Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*
(2002) is part of a larger argument by Huot regarding the need for a theory of response within
our field.¹ That brief mention of the need for teachers to reflect on their own processes of
response as ethnographers was merely a suggestion, a suggestion made almost in passing . . .
and yet, that idea kept rushing back to my mind, unbidden, and at random times in the months
that followed. Something about this idea of ethnographic research into my own process of
response as a writing teacher could not be ignored. And so, prompted by Huot’s suggestions and
my own curiosity, my journey into autoethnography (and this chapter) began.

The Value of Autoethnography within This Study

Within my larger study of formative teacher commentary from the students’ perspective,
an autoethnographic account of this teacher’s processes of reading and responding to her
students’ texts will add further context and depth to the overall discussion about the commenting
relationship. According to Huot, reading is an interpretive act that is based on multiple factors,
and the act of composing response to student texts is rhetorical and is based, at least in part, on
how the student texts are read (2002, 130-136). It seems logical, then, that an autoethnographic
exploration of the teacher’s processes of reading student texts and of then composing responses
to these student texts would yield valuable contextual details and insights into the commenting
relationship itself and about all participants involved in the commenting dialogue. Additionally,
autoethnography, with its emphasis on including the self within the story being told, can be seen
as a way to address concerns about teacher bias or the tension between performing dual roles (as both teacher and researcher) within a teacher research study. By explicitly exploring, describing, and analyzing the contexts surrounding the self in relation to other important contexts within the research, a more inclusive and complete picture of the classroom culture and contexts can be shown. Thus, by investigating my own process of response with autoethnography, I can begin to discover new insights about, or better my understandings of, the students’ role and their actions (and reactions) within the commenting relationship. Including my own autoethnographic account within this study will add rich detail to the contextual “story” being told and will allow for the further triangulation of existing data as well.

Since the purpose within my overall study is to consider the formative commenting relationship (including both dialogue and interactions that occur on and off the page) from the student’s perspective, my autoethnographic account of my process of response will emphasize points of intersection or interaction with my students within my process. I want to be especially careful that my story does not overshadow the larger story being told within this study, though. As discussed earlier, autoethnography as a research method connects the personal with the cultural; in this case, my personal teaching ethos can be connected to the larger academic culture or the more localized writing classroom culture and the many demands that these cultures place on me and on my students. I want to focus attention on my intentional teaching pedagogy and on the relationship between me (as teacher) and my students, showing in the process that this relationship is one that is grounded in interactive dialogue. To this end, then, I will give detailed descriptions of my general reading and response processes, followed by thick descriptions of several specific commenting exchanges and the contexts surrounding each of them, along with my reflections regarding my process within each situation. This chapter will end with a
discussion of how the data within this autoethnographic account connects back to the rest of the overall study, then.

My Processes of Reading and of Composing Response

My teacher identity or ethos (as discussed by Quintilian within ancient rhetoric) is a composite representation of who I am AND what I do; I am who I am as a teacher in part because of what I do in and out of the classroom and I do what I do in and out of the classroom in part because of who I am as a teacher. My personal teaching ethos is student-focused and intentional. Relationships are important to me, and I show respect for all within my sphere of influence. I also place great value on life-long learning. I understand the importance of being a student of my students, so from the beginning of the semester I intentionally work to get to know my individual students, their abilities, and their needs. And as a life-long learner myself, I understand life-long learning to be an on-going pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, a pursuit that depends largely on the student’s choice to participate and to engage in the learning. Within this process of learning, I encourage my students to become critical thinkers who can become informed citizens, citizens who can then go out and effectively impact the society around them. I look for ways to intentionally connect the classroom writings and activities to “real life” outside of the classroom in order to help my students to see how their learning within the classroom relates to their lives outside the classroom as well. To become those informed citizens who can have a meaningful impact on the world around them, though, my students must build critical literacy by becoming strong consumers of texts (readers) as well as strong producers of texts (writers). This critical literacy is especially important within our increasingly digital world where the contexts surrounding a given text are often complex and increasingly interconnected. For this reason, I attempt to help my students to understand these complex rhetorical contexts and to
understand their subsequent choices as readers, writers and thinkers. I model this critical literacy in the ways in which I read and respond to their texts and in the ways in which I encourage dialogue about their texts throughout their writing processes as well.

Critical thinking and reflexivity are both important aspects of my personal teaching ethos, aspects that I practice on a regular basis as a teacher-scholar. For this autoethnographic study of my processes of reading and of composing responses to student texts, however, I have engaged in a deeper and a more focused critical reflexivity than ever before. While both the reading of student texts and the composing of responses to those student texts are highly contextual, rhetorical practices, I discovered that several key aspects are true for me within each of these processes (as shown in Figure 4.1 below).

**Figure 4.1: Key Aspects of My Reading and Composing Response Processes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Aspects of My Reading Process</th>
<th>Key Aspects of My Composing Response Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Active</td>
<td>• Based on careful &amp; intentional read of the student text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intentional</td>
<td>• Rhetorical in nature (consider audience, situation within project/semester, purpose for response, message that I want student to understand, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rhetorical in nature (contexts matter!)</td>
<td>• Geared toward individual student’s writing &amp; revising processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acts as a means to assess student understanding and progress within a project and of writing in general</td>
<td>• Attempts to respond to student’s self-assessment of writing, struggles, questions, etc. about the project (i.e. continue existing dialogue within project)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Includes some interpretation of student writer’s intentions, understandings, and purpose within the student’s text</td>
<td>• Purposeful (to guide, encourage, teach, support student in her or his own writing process within the project and beyond)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Constant awareness of student writer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Influenced by multiple factors within and outside the student text</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Influenced at times by factors outside of the classroom, too</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These key aspects imply a certain amount of consistency within my reading of student texts and my composing of responses to those texts, even though the rhetorical nature of both of
these processes leads to variances as well. Some of these contextual variances I can predict because of obvious differences in projects and differences in student writing abilities, but other variances might be based on contexts that are less predictable, like weather, personal health or technology issues. Even so, regardless of the contexts, I found that for me the steps that are followed within the processes themselves are somewhat generalizable from one student to another and from one writing project to another as well.

Since my reading of the student text must come before the composing of a response to that text, it makes sense to discuss my general process of reading student texts here as well. Upon careful and critical reflection, I discovered that I tend to adhere consistently to the following multi-stage process when reading student texts:

1. an initial skim through the text to assess fulfillment of basic assignment requirements (i.e. content, format, documentation, source or page requirements)
2. a careful read of the entire text
3. a second read-through of the text with pen in hand, pausing to make comments or ask questions in the margins of the text
4. a quick read back through textual comments that I made (on 2nd read-through) as I write my end-note to the student with specific references to particular passages or issues [if a final draft, I would do a quick read of earlier drafts & comments before completing the end-note so as to give a project-as-a-whole perspective, and I would assign a grade at this point as well]

Interestingly, I can recognize definite differences in how and why I read at different stages within this process. For example, at stages 1, 3, and 4, I am reading as a teacher and for different types of assessment, but at the 2nd stage, I am attempting to read the text as any reader
might read it in order to get a sense of the text itself, “as is” and within its full context. As a teacher, this 2nd stage read is sometimes tough to manage, to become “just another reader” when clearly I am not, but it is also very important, at least for me, because this type of read often allows me to see what the student was attempting to do within the overall text. The type of assessment made at the very first stage within this process relates only to the basic (i.e. obvious) requirements of the particular project, with some consideration given for the draft or the stage within the overall project. In the third and fourth stages of my reading process, however, the assessments that I make regarding the text may be based, at least in part, on my own interpretations of the following as I read the text:

• this student’s self-assessment of her or his progress within the project & plans for revisions
• this student’s understanding of the assignment and its requirements
• this student’s effectiveness in putting her or his ideas on the page (basic writing ability, critical thinking)
• this student’s level of control over her or his own text (creativity, stylistic control)
• this student’s effort within the project (putting forth the best effort possible, just enough to get by, or seeming not to care at all?)
• this student’s level of engagement (purpose) within the writing and revising processes for the project

When I reflect on my reading process I can recognize numerous factors that may influence my interpretations and thus my assessments of student texts at different times as well. Several of these factors are student-focused, like student attitude and effort level within class and on the project; student use or misuse of time given in class to work on a project; student
questions or our interactions and conversations regarding the assignment/text; and student
writing ability. Other factors may have more to do with contexts surrounding the text than with
the student himself or herself. These factors might include the type of writing project; the time
within the project or the drafting stage within the project; the timeframe within the semester; and
the type or amount of assistance/guidance already given by the teacher. And, unfortunately,
several factors outside of the general classroom context may also be influential, factors like:
teacher fatigue or health issues; time constraints on the teacher, especially related to the number
of students & texts; and outside stressors on the teacher. There is, of course, no way to fully
control or to eliminate every one of these potentially influential factors, but knowledge does
afford a certain degree of power, so recognizing these potential influences could be helpful as I
compose my response to a student’s text. Incidentally, while some teachers may see my multi-
stage reading process as being more labor-intensive than necessary, I would argue that this multi-
stage reading process provides me with a better understanding of the text and the student’s
writing within that text than a one-time, cursory read would do, no matter how careful a read.
And for me, this multi-stage reading process actually makes the composing response process
easier, more straight-forward and rhetorically-based.

For me, the act of composing a response to a student text can never be far removed from
my reading of that text. In fact, the lists within the “Key Aspects of My Reading and Composing
Response Processes” visual (see Figure 4.1) reflect this close relationship between the reading
and the writing involved. Additionally, when response is considered to be part of an on-going
classroom conversation between teacher and student about the student’s text (i.e. response as dialogical), I
believe that this connection between reading and writing processes becomes stronger and more
important within the overall contexts of the writing classroom. Response, after all, is an
important piece of that overall classroom context because it allows for individualized teaching (and learning) that is formative and that is rhetorical in nature. I think that it is important to note at this point, though, that the composing of response can occur both on and off the page, and many of the same aspects and factors are involved in the process, regardless of whether the response is written, typed, or spoken. While some of the discussion that follows may seem to focus on the composing of written responses, I would argue that much of the information could just as easily apply to spoken response as well. After all, the goal of response (whether written, typed, or spoken) is to engage the student as an active participant in a conversation about her or his writing, so the same rhetorical and dialogical principles apply within this intentional activity. For me, then, the act of composing a response to a student text will generally include the following:

- a very careful and intentional read of the text (see the explanation of my reading process)
- consideration of what the student was attempting to accomplish within the text versus what the text actually says/does at this stage in the process (i.e. what works, what doesn’t, and why)
- consideration of the audience for my response (the student) and how she or he will best understand any issues or concerns about the text (both global and local)
- connection of response to overall classroom context (i.e. textbook readings, classroom discussions & activities, and individual conversations about the project)
- emphasis on the student’s need to understand writing and revising as personal processes and to recognize the impact of these processes on the current project as well as applicability for future writing tasks
acknowledgement of risks taken (even if the attempt is less than successful!) and recognition of progress made within the text

• inclusion of detailed explanations or examples of what is meant, connections between ideas or concepts, questions to promote creativity and critical thinking

• advice beyond just telling the student what to change and how to change it—attempts to help the student understand why the changes/revisions are needed or desirable, too

As is true within my reading process, my composing process involves some consistency (as shown in the list above) amidst contextual variances as well. For example, I consistently (and intentionally) use specific colors of ink for my commenting on different types of projects and for commenting at different stages within a particular project. I find that many students have a deep aversion to red ink being used on their papers, often because of negative educational experiences in their pasts, so I never use red ink to respond to a student text. Instead, I choose bright, fun colors like pink, purple, or orange to use on in-class writings, and I use green ink when I respond to second drafts of major writing projects because of its symbolic connection to growth and to moving forward (like at a stop light) and because I hope that the students will grow and move forward in their writing and revising processes within the projects. Responses on final drafts of projects (which include notes within the text, an endnote and a final grade) are written in blue or black ink, then. In another example, I consistently write detailed notes within each student’s text (i.e. marginal notes) and I reference these notes within my note at the end of the student’s text, but the contents of each endnote are specifically tailored to that particular student and that specific draft. I intentionally write detailed notes and explanations within my student’s texts because I believe that they deserve more than vague scribbles like “fix this” or “confusing” written in the margins. After all, how can I expect my student to approach her or his text
rhetorically if my response to the text shows no attention to rhetorical matters at all?²

Additionally, my responses within my students’ texts include references to the text itself along with references to larger classroom contexts as well. In this way, I attempt to further model the rhetorical thinking and attention to contexts that my students need to learn. After all, I am keenly aware of the audience for my response, my intended purpose for my response and the message that I want that student to understand from the formative response that I compose specifically for her or him.

**Figure 4.2: General Aspects of My Endnote Response**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Endnote Response to a Student Draft Will:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Address the student by name (as in a personal letter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Begin with something positive about the topic or some aspect of the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Give a sense of global assessment of text and approach needed for revising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reference a few of the local concerns (and marginal comments about them) and suggest approach for revising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Re-emphasize my intent to help them with their writing &amp; revising with notes given throughout text and within endnote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• End with an invitation to talk with me (in person or via email) about any questions, confusion or concerns about the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Close with my signature at end of note (as in a personal letter)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As I reflected on my composing process for responses to student texts, then, I discovered that my composing process for these responses (whether on the page or within our verbal discussions) includes an emphasis on individual writing and revising processes, an emphasis that I attempt to model within my individualized responses to my students as well. Even though the endnotes that I compose for students within their drafts are individualized and thus vary greatly in specific content, I found that my endnotes tend to consistently include a few general aspects as well (see Figure 4.2 above). And while the contents of the formative response to each draft itself are important, I have found that the classroom contexts surrounding the return of the student
drafts (with my responses to them) have value as well. For this reason, I attempt to follow a consistent process for the return of drafts:

- Before returning the individual drafts, I discuss my reading and overall assessment of the drafts for the entire class at this particular stage in the project. This discussion is especially helpful if many students seemed to struggle with the same or similar issues because I can explain or describe the problem and then show how to correct or improve the text with examples on the board. If a serious or wide-ranging problem exists, I might take some time to have the students participate in an in-class activity that actually gives them hands-on experience of dealing with the problem, too.

- I tend to write many in-text notes within student drafts, so before returning the individual drafts, I encourage my students to turn to the endnote and read it first so that the in-text notes will make sense instead of being overwhelming. The endnote provides necessary context that the individual notes cannot provide, too.

- When returning drafts, I walk around the room and personally hand the drafts to their authors. To me, this seemingly simple personal exchange is symbolic of the larger relationship involved within the response process.

- After returning the drafts to their respective authors, I allow several minutes of class time for the students to read through the endnote, and then we take a few minutes for them to ask questions of me. I think that this step reinforces the importance that I place on reading and allows for student-initiated dialogue as well.

- If we have time in class, then, I like to give students the last few minutes of class to plan their revisions and I encourage them to make a few notes for themselves while their revision ideas are fresh (and clear!) in their minds.
And finally, I encourage the students to come to see me during my office hours or to email me if they have questions or encounter problems as they revise. While not every student will take advantage of these opportunities for student-initiated dialogue about their writing projects, I find that students are more likely to seek out that dialogue with me if they know that I am open to it.

Now, of course, time constraints or other contextual factors may limit the amount of time that we can spend on particular stages within this process at different times, but this is the basic process that I attempt to follow when returning drafts for the major writing projects. My students seem to find comfort in this consistency; when my students receive their drafts back from me, they know that I will have carefully read their texts and then composed personalized responses to those texts, and they know that they will be able to read those responses and then ask questions about their texts and my responses as well.

Commenting Exchanges from My Composition Classroom

My goal within this section is to provide thick descriptions of several specific commenting exchanges between me and several selected students within the contexts of the argumentative research project. Further contextualization of these exchanges is provided by my reflections surrounding my processes of reading the student texts and of composing responses to them. While not intended to be an exhaustive sampling, I hope to provide a small collection of samples that will highlight the types of interactions and exchanges that are common when the dialogical and interactive nature of commentary are stressed within the composition classroom. Because of the attention given to returning adult students within Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I intentionally chose to include data here from three traditional aged students and only one returning adult student. Of the three traditional aged students, two were female (Connie and Zoe)
and one was male (Cory), while the lone returning adult student was male (Nate). I selected these four students, in part, because they seemed somewhat representative of different levels of writing ability which then allowed me to explore contextual factors and their varying effects on the interactions within the commenting relationship and beyond. During their semester in my beginning composition course, these four student participants exhibited writing abilities that ranged somewhere between struggling writer and strong writer. In fact, the three traditional aged students included a strong writer (Connie), an average writer (Cory) and a struggling writer (Zoe). The lone returning adult student (Nate) was an average writer. The selected experiences of these four writers and my interactions with them are explored in the pages that follow.

Zoe

While Zoe struggled some as a writer throughout the semester, she was a very motivated student who attended class regularly and worked hard to improve in her writing abilities, no matter what the challenge. Zoe was a cheerful student who arrived to class each day with a smile on her face for me and for her peers. She always sat near the front of the classroom and she regularly participated in classroom discussions and activities. Unfortunately, Zoe was one of many students who happened to be absent on the day when the argumentative proposal was due. When she returned the next class session, I saw that she was noticeably confused, frustrated and overwhelmed as we discussed different aspects of the argumentative research project in class, much like we had been doing for several weeks. On this particular day, students were asking questions about creating more focused arguments from their initial topics, and we had worked through several examples together on the whiteboard. Students also asked questions about finding sources for specific topics and arguments that they were pursuing. Zoe looked utterly lost, and I soon discovered that not only was she struggling to understand the assignment itself,
but she was also struggling to decide on a topic area and an argument to make within that topic. As the end of the class session neared, I noticed that Zoe was getting increasingly frustrated and was fighting back tears. I went to where she was sitting and quietly asked her, “Would you like to chat with me after class about some of your ideas for your argument?” At that moment, I was almost afraid that any attention might be too much for her, and I halfway expected her to bolt for the door in tears, but Zoe’s eyes brightened slightly as she asked hesitantly, “you sure you got time?” And before I could respond to that question, she tried to explain what she meant: “I’m so confused! . . . I got no idea . . . I mean, I got so many ideas in my head . . . but I got no idea what to argue and how to research and all. . .” She paused for a moment, then, and sighed as she breathlessly added, “I need alotta help.” I smiled and assured Zoe that I had plenty of time between classes to talk with her, and relief showed on her face and in the immediate relaxing of her posture.

After class, we walked to the student commons area that was near our classroom with the goal of talking through some of Zoe’s ideas and interests, along with potential arguments that she could make. After finding a table and sitting down, Zoe and I talked about a wide range of minority issues, socioeconomic issues and educational issues that interested her. From our conversation, though, it seemed that Zoe was particularly interested in minority students and their misuse of financial aid funding, so I tried to help her to consider different arguments that could be made within that topic. I wrote down a few of the potential arguments that we discussed on a sheet of paper for Zoe to take with her, and Zoe also took notes as we talked. I suggested to Zoe, who was herself a minority student, that she should think through her argument options and that she might even find it helpful to complete some preliminary research as she worked to decide on one specific argument as her focus for the project. We even talked through some of the
places to research where she would be likely to find the information that she wanted and needed for her argument. When we finished talking that morning, Zoe was excited and hopeful about the project, and that optimism continued as she found information and began to write.

Several weeks later, as I read her Status Report post at the 2nd draft stage within the project, I could tell that Zoe was still optimistic about what she was learning about the topic and about her progress within the project-as-a-whole, but she recognized that she was really struggling with writing in 3rd person instead of in 1st person (a problem that she had encountered in the previous project as well) and she specifically asked for my help with this. Zoe answered all of the questions within the prompt for the Status Report, but as I read her post, I noticed that her plans for revision were fairly general and somewhat vague. When I did my initial read-through of her 2nd drafts, I began to understand why she was general and vague in her post—she wasn’t quite sure what she was doing, let alone what she needed to do as she revised.

For her 2nd draft of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography, Zoe had a solid title in place for the argument she wanted to make, but she had given no bibliographic citations and some of her paragraphs contained information from multiple sources. Because this is a new and unknown genre of writing for many beginning writers, I had spent quite a bit of time in class explaining how this type of project would be helpful to the overall argument and why the format for the information was the way that it was. I also drew diagrams on the whiteboard and showed samples of annotated bibliographies that I had completed and that I then placed electronically within Blackboard for easy access for my students. Even so, many students like Zoe still struggled with the seemingly strange format demands. Since visual explanations tend to work best for many of my students, I placed the following at the top of Zoe’s draft to help her to get started:
I also made a couple of notes within the text itself & then included an endnote for Zoe that was addressed to her:

Zoe,

It sounds like you have some good info from your sources. The quotes & ideas that you’ve included here are interesting, but it seems like you have combined sources in some paragraphs. The format you’ve used is partly to blame, I think. If you look at the directions for the project & at the samples that I’ve posted to Blackboard, you’ll see that you need to have the bibliographic citation for each source & then a summary/evaluation paragraph for that source. That way, it’s easy to tell what info comes from which source. Please come see me if you have questions!

Mrs. M

As I read the 2\textsuperscript{nd} draft of Zoe’s Argumentative Research project draft, then, I was well aware of what she was attempting to argue, but what I read was far from her goal. From our conversations about the project, I knew that Zoe intended for her project to inspire minority students to take education (and their means for paying for it) more seriously but she also saw a need for colleges to better prepare all students (but especially minority students) for the education-related decisions that they would need to make—like understanding their financial options, setting personal priorities, setting future goals and having a sense of direction for their lives. What I read in this draft, however, was actually more like a 1\textsuperscript{st} draft than a 2\textsuperscript{nd} draft—some of the main ideas were in place and some of the information from sources was included, but there
was no main focus or argument yet and much of the text was in 1st person and was simply personal opinion. So, for example, what seemed to be Zoe’s thesis/main argument at this point was this: “Students in that category of minority rather buy the latest shoe or shirt then an education that’s worth more than a compliment of ‘I like those shoes’.” That statement seemed to place responsibility fully on the student and seemed to imply that all minority students misuse funds and don’t value education, but I knew from our conversations that this particular stereotype was in part why Zoe was interested in this topic in the first place.

As I read (and re-read) her draft, then, I paid careful attention to what seemed to be her main points within the draft, and I considered how best to respond to her text in order to help Zoe to take what she had attempted to begin in this draft and revise it to achieve what she intended with the project. Knowing her personal struggles with writing and her initial frustrations with this particular project, I wasn’t exactly sure how to approach my formative response to this draft, though. In the end, I decided to do something that I have never done before—I typed up a separate document which included a re-working of her Introduction using her ideas from within the text and re-framing the ideas and information in 3rd person instead of her original 1st person, and including a possible thesis/main argument created from the information that she had and what I knew about her intentions for the project; a note explaining what I had done with her ideas (stressing that they were her ideas, not mine); and an outline that simply took her original ideas and information and created a focused organization with them. As usual, then, I made specific comments within the text itself and I included a personalized endnote to provide some overall context and to refer to the additional document that I had created for her:
Zoe,

This is a good start to the project. ☺ As you mention in your Annotated Bib, your topic is a bit different and so it’s harder to research & write in ways, too. I can tell as I read, though, that you are passionate about this topic & I am proud of you for taking on the challenge! ☺

Learning to frame ideas in 3rd person is not as tough as it may seem, but it does take some practice before it can feel “right.” ☺ Since that was a struggle that you mentioned in your Status Report, I re-worked your 1st paragraph some and framed your ideas more objectively, as an example of how to do it. ☺ (*Please see the typed pages that I’ve included with your drafts! ☺) I also made some other notes throughout your draft regarding this type of re-framing info more objectively. (I hope these notes are helpful as you revise!) I also noticed that you seem to switch perspective in places within your draft. In places you seem to be presenting the facts of your argument to an interested audience, but in other places in your draft you seem to be speaking directly to minority students and calling them to action. These switches back & forth are a bit confusing as a reader, I’m afraid. As you work to re-organize & re-focus ideas, though, you will likely notice & change these shifts anyways. ☺ The interview info may actually work better when certain ideas are connected to similar ideas from other sources, too. Please come see me with any questions. ☺ Mrs. M

Admittedly, the idea of typing up a separate document with sample re-working of ideas and sample outline seemed a bit heavy-handed in ways, but honestly I was not sure what else to do in this case. Zoe’s writing struggles were on-going, and though we had worked all semester on these struggles, some things just did not yet “click” for her—like writing objectively and organizing ideas. And so, I decided to try a new tactic. It was a calculated risk: time-consuming for me, but I thought that it would be worth the extra time and effort if it helped Zoe to make progress in her writing abilities. Zoe was a motivated student and she was passionate about her topic, so if ever there was an opportune time to take such a risk, that time had seemed to arrive.

When I returned her drafts to her, Zoe carefully read through the endnotes and then the separate document before approaching me with several questions. At that time, she seemed more concerned with the formatting issues on the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project than with
any of the issues within the Argumentative Research project itself. She did reference the additional document near the end of our conversation, though, and seemed pleased that her ideas “could sound better like that.” When she left class that day, Zoe seemed optimistic about the project and motivated to revise.

Two weeks later, however, neither one of us was fully satisfied with the final product and our experiences throughout the process of her completing it. Zoe ended up being exhausted and exasperated in trying to finish and then revise the final drafts at the last minute, and I ended up being disappointed (and feeling somewhat defeated) when most of the final draft of the Argumentative Research project was the same as it had been at the 2nd draft stage. There were a few bright spots along the way, of course, but the entire process was definitely a learning experience for both Zoe and me. And for my part, some serious critical reflection followed this experience. Looking back, I discovered a few contextual factors that impacted our experiences throughout the process for both of us, though perhaps in different ways and for different reasons:

*Time*

Zoe began the project later than what she should have, so she struggled to complete the different aspects of the project by the scheduled due dates. And as a struggling writer, Zoe actually needed more time to work through her writing & revising processes rather than less time. Her personal issues with time outside of class and being behind on the project also created stress for Zoe. As an instructor, I would have liked to have had enough time to have structured, out-of-class workshops to work with students like Zoe throughout the process of completing these projects. Scattered informal conferences just didn’t seem to provide enough assistance for Zoe when she needed it, and many of her peers had similar struggles, I think. Struggling writers actually need more individualized attention than many of their peers as they write and revise, but
this is something that is difficult for teachers to manage in larger writing classes and with busy schedules.

**Peer Reviews**

Even though I carefully design Peer Review sheets to allow a peer reader to give strong, formative feedback to the writer of the draft, the actual feedback that is given often varies based on the writing level (or interest level) of the peer reader. I try to have students seek out different peer readers for each draft in order to gain different feedback, but sometimes students will seek only readers whom they see as “equals” in writing ability or social status. In Zoe’s case, she had multiple peer reviews completed by different peer readers, but interestingly, all three peers were minority students who were also struggling writers so the level of feedback that she received was minimal. While all blanks were filled with some sort of response, the reviewers gave only positive feedback and often did not fully answer the prompt/question. Additionally, Zoe did not complete the “author’s section” (where she should have explained her revision plans for the project at this point) on any of the peer review sheets.

**Writing Level**

As mentioned above, student writers often seek out others who are on their same writing level for feedback and for help on projects. And in the case of struggling writers, this can be much like “the blind leading the blind.” For struggling writers like Zoe, every project is a challenge, and the temptation to just give up is ever-present, too. Working with Zoe reinforced the notion of encouragement and patience as necessary ingredients for every interaction with a struggling writer, whether on or off the page! I also learned that progress is often painstakingly slow for struggling writers, but motivated students like Zoe will show growth over the course of a semester, though this growth may not be measurable or visible by grades alone.
Every semester I have many students who, like Zoe, struggle with writing. And yet, every individual student story is slightly different. Zoe does not represent every struggling writer because writers struggle due to a wide range of contextual factors, even within a single classroom, but Zoe’s story and the story of our dialogical interactions are important aspects of our overall classroom context and the story of our spring 2012 experiences in English 111.

Nate

As a returning adult student, Nate entered my classroom with a certain amount of apprehension about his abilities as writer. Nate was an average writer, but he seemed to enjoy writing and I could tell that he was motivated to improve in his writing abilities. Nate sought me out before our second class session, though, and asked, “Is my writing good enough for college?” I had assured him that his writing was good enough to get him started in college, and then, with a smile, I had reminded him that his writing also was bound to improve with all of the writing that he would be doing in my class throughout the semester ahead. Surprisingly, while he was somewhat unsure of himself as a writer, Nate felt comfortable enough in class to freely ask questions and he also had no qualms about asking for help when he needed it. He sat near the front of the classroom, attended class regularly, and was always prepared for that day’s activities. As we started into the Argumentative Research project with the proposal assignment, though, Nate was called out of town for a family funeral. He contacted me via email because he was worried about missing class when something was due, but I assured him that he could email his proposal to me for some feedback on his plans. When I read Nate’s proposal, it showed his strong initial interest in the topic of wind energy and included several possible options for his argument. He lacked specific research questions, search terms and research plans at this point,
but when we discussed this lack in a later conversation, Nate sheepishly admitted that he had to research a bit more to know what he really wanted to argue within his project.

Once he decided on an argument, that wind power could benefit society, Nate dove into the research project. He asked many questions of me along the way, often in the minutes before or after class or in emails on the days between our class sessions. Nate had both general and specific questions about documentation and about working with information from sources since he had never had to do a research project like this before. Throughout the project he asked many of these questions via email. In one email he wondered what to do with multiple authors for the same source—“Do I have to list all of the authors for a source in the in-text citation? And how do I know what order to put their names in?” Another email included a question about quoting information—“What do I do when my article quotes somebody else? Who do I put in the in-text citation for that quote?” And as he continued to put together his project, Nate would email questions and I would send him detailed responses or, when applicable, I would refer him to specific examples within our textbooks. Through our face-to-face and email dialogue, then, I was able to keep track of Nate’s progress as he researched and then began writing within the project.

As I read his Status Report post at the 2nd draft stage, Nate expressed positive feelings about the overall subject and his argument. He also seemed to have a strong sense of the benefits for using a survey for his primary research source. While he didn’t’ specifically answer all of the questions in the prompt, as I read his post it seemed that Nate was progressing as he needed to be within the project. When I read his 2nd drafts, then, I noted some issues with both texts being more informative than argumentative, a fairly common problem for beginning writers on a project like this one. Nate had the basic formatting in place for the Amplified Annotated Bibliography, but the bibliographic citations needed some work and his summary/evaluation
paragraphs lacked some of the necessary information. His Argumentative Research draft was not bad for a 2nd draft of this project, though. As I read the draft, I noted that his main problems (aside from the lack of an argumentative focus) seemed to be with documentation and clarity of sentences. For example, he had used three different works that were written by the same group of writers, but there was no way to tell what information came from which source. There were no lead-ins for many quotes either, so quoted information just seemed to be “dropped in” throughout his draft, too. He also had used a strange mixture of MLA and APA documentation styles, a typical issue for beginning writers who access information for their arguments from sources that are documented in each of the styles and the students don’t realize that they must use one or the other style to present all of the information within their own projects then. Additionally, Nate had some strong ideas but some sentences were worded awkwardly and some ideas just needed more detail and explanation. For example, in his lead-in paragraph for his Argumentative Research project, Nate had written:

> Believing that the positives definitely outweigh the negative aspects of using wind power. Explaining those processes and the workings of wind power shows some of those positive aspects that will be explained in my argument.

As I read his text, I understood what Nate was trying to do. Nate was attempting to state his personal beliefs about the use of wind power, along with giving a glimpse of how he intended to prove its value within his text. However, Nate needed more than incomplete or confusing sentences to get his position or argument across to his readers. As I read his text, it seemed that Nate basically knew what he wanted to say, but he struggled with how to express that message. In other words, Nate’s underlying instincts were correct, but his actual approach needed some additional work. So, my in-text note at the end of the first paragraph read like this:
You have some good ideas here, but we need to re-work this some to make it clearer. ⊗ Remember—you want your reader to know the argument that is being made in the pages that follow!

And unfortunately, Nate had ended his 2nd draft in much the same way as he had begun, with incomplete and confusing sentences. His last two sentences read as follows:

Wind power is the new wave of the future and can benefit everyone that leads to approving these projects.
Providing enough information to disprove people who are against wind power will hopefully accept the benefits of this wonderful new and innovative technology.

Once again, as I read his text, I understood what Nate was trying to do, but the existing text was incomplete and confusing. In an in-text comment for the first of these sentences, I suggested to Nate that he could explain his ideas more fully if he used multiple sentences. And my in-text comment for his final sentence in the draft read like this:

Ok—this is the final sentence, your final thought that you are leaving with your readers, so you want it to be very clear. Unfortunately, you have several different ideas here and you seem to be trying to go multiple directions with this one sentence. Slow down. Take a moment to think about the individual ideas and how you might separate them and give them each the attention and explanation that they deserve. ⊗ Your conclusion is so important! It is your final wrap-up, so you will want to restate your thesis/main argument and give a brief summary of your main points of support from within your argument.

Per Nate’s request, I sent my feedback to him via email at this 2nd draft stage in the project. I composed comments within his draft using the Word in-comment feature and then attached that electronic file to an email that included my personalized endnote to him typed within the text of the email itself. [For me, it actually takes longer to send feedback electronically. As a reader, I prefer to work from hard copy and this is my personal preference as I compose response as well. So, in cases like this when a student requests electronic feedback, I write out my comments on the hard copy—as I normally would do—and then type them into the electronic copy as well. Essentially, then, it is like I am commenting twice when I send]
electronic feedback. After receiving my comments on his 2nd draft, then, Nate emailed me several times with specific questions that arose as he began revising.

In his Reflection page for the Argumentative project, Nate said, “This project was probably one of the most frustrating and challenging writings that I have ever completed. The comments that I received from my drafts were informative and really helped (me) to revise and redraw out my writing.” While it’s always nice to hear compliments like this, I sometimes wonder if students just say things like this because they think that it’s expected or that it will help them to get a better grade. In Nate’s case, I think that the sentiment was sincere because he expressed similar thoughts at various times throughout the semester and he did actually seem to use the feedback that was given to him. In fact, as I read Nate’s final draft of the project, I could tell that Nate had attempted to revise according to my comments and notes within his earlier draft. Nate’s entire draft was stronger and his argument in particular was stronger and more focused than before. Nate had given attention to transitioning in and out of quoted material and he had used his sources well to support his argument. Many sentences that had been unclear or awkwardly worded before were now clearer and more effective. In his Reflection page, Nate attributed this sentence-level revising to my suggestion to him to read his text aloud in order to really hear what it sounded like. And as he worked to revise in-text documentation issues within his draft, Nate took my advice to “use (his) resources” to heart and he explained in his Reflection that he became very adept at using A Pocket Style Manual (a required course text by Diana Hacker) to determine how to cite his different sources. Nate acknowledged in his Reflection over the project that his new-found ability to work with sources and to cite them correctly will be helpful to him in other classes, too. What a great example of a student recognizing the transferability of skills! Unlike some of his peers who just wanted to be told exactly what to do
to “fix” their drafts, Nate was truly interested in learning how to determine what needed to be done and then doing it (i.e. critical thinking and processing or application of concepts/ideas). While his final drafts were not perfect, Nate’s revision work had helped to strengthen the overall focus of his argument within both aspects of the research project. And by the end of the semester, Nate truly was a stronger and more confident writer. In looking back over my interactions and experiences with Nate throughout this project, I noticed several contextual factors that impacted our experiences:

**Peer Reviews**

Nate had several different peer reviewers throughout this project and each one (regardless of her or his own writing level) recognized (and commented on) his awkward sentence constructions. This helps to reinforce the value of peer readers, I think, and seems to suggest that one’s own writing level does not necessarily hinder one’s recognition of what is “not right” in a peer’s text. What does seem to be affected by a peer reader’s own writing level, however, is that peer reviewer’s knowledge and ability to explain to the writer why something is problematic or how to revise or correct problems within the text. In my classes, I remind students of their value as readers to recognize what they appreciate within their peer’s text or what bothers them within that peer’s text. I also remind them that they don’t necessarily have to know or understand why they appreciate something or why something doesn’t seem quite right in their peer’s text because all feedback is important in that it allows the writer to begin to see her or his text from the reader’s perspective. This also allows the writer to begin to understand what is working within the text and what needs more work yet as he or she is writing and revising. I encourage my students to dialogue about the peer review with the reviewer, too. This allows the writer to ask questions of the reader/reviewer and to better understand the reader/reviewer’s comments and
notes. And if the writer needs more assistance in understanding how to approach a problem area within the text, then he or she is encouraged to come and talk with me about the text and about the comments received from the peer reviewer. In this way I strive to validate both writer and reader as active and engaged learners within the writing process. And in Nate’s case, both he and his peer reviewers learned how to approach awkward sentence structures through their dialoguing with each other and then with me.

*Previous Experience*

Many of Nate’s struggles throughout this project were related to his lack of previous experiences with documentation and using sources. Even though students are assumed to have a certain level of experience with different aspects of writing when they enter into a FYC course in college, I have found that there is much variance in my students’ levels of experience with research writing, with using sources and with documentation. In some cases, students have been taught incorrect or incomplete ways of searching for sources, of using quoted information or of documenting sources. This results in confusion and frustration for the students when we begin the research projects in class and I attempt to teach them the correct ways to research and document sources. For other students, though, the confusion and frustration come from never having encountered research writing and documentation before. This is the case for many returning adult students, like Nate, and until these students begin to understand the logic and rationale behind documentation rules and guidelines, it all can seem like an illogical and unruly foreign language. Nate was understandably confused by all of the requirements when working with outside sources, but he was determined to learn how to do it correctly so he asked questions . . . many, many questions. And I patiently answered each and every one.
In ways, my interactions with Nate throughout the research project were simply building on the dialogical relationship that was begun that second day of class when he came to ask me about whether his writing was good enough for college; from that point on Nate knew that I would always willingly respond to his inquiries and that I truly wanted to help him to learn, so Nate felt free to initiate dialogue about his writing throughout the semester. And late in the semester I was very proud indeed when I overheard Nate (who began the semester with no experience in research writing) explaining to a peer how to document a particular source within her project and why it needed to be documented that way (something that he had asked of me earlier in the semester). Dialogical commentary can have a “domino effect,” it seems . . . a positive learning effect that can multiply exponentially.

Cory

Cory was a traditional aged student who had already struggled at the college level when he walked into my class that semester. After an unsuccessful semester living on the campus of a large state university, he had come home and somewhat begrudgingly agreed to attend the local community college to get himself (and his GPA) back on track. Cory chose to sit near the front of the classroom, right in front of my desk, and we would often chat about current events or sports (his passion) before class began. Cory’s quick smile and his big personality added fun to our class discussions, and he was quick to supply comic relief for his peers whenever he deemed that our class discussions had become too serious. As the semester progressed, I found that Cory was a decent writer, but I could tell that he was doing just enough to get by. In fact, at one point early in the semester he even asked me, “What will it take to get a C in this class?” to which I responded, “Is that all the higher you’re aiming? Don’t you want to know what it will take to get an A?” My quick, witty response was not what he had expected, so Cory had a good chuckle
about it, but then he explained to me that he was just an average writer and he just needed to pass my class, that was all he really needed.

When he was in class, Cory was an involved and engaged student, but from our pre-class chats it seemed that school was the last thing on his mind outside of class. About a month into the semester, then, Cory’s attendance became sporadic and he began to fall behind on his coursework, too. My encouragement to make attendance a priority and my gentle reminders about coursework seemed to fall on deaf ears. As we neared the middle of the semester, it seemed to me that Cory was in a downward spiral that would almost certainly end in another academic failure for him. And somehow, I felt like a failure. Why can’t I motivate him to want to succeed? I wondered. After Cory completed the Midterm Self-Assessment, however, something amazing happened: Cory decided to become a serious student. And he told me as much.

Cory’s personal turnaround at mid-semester involved a complete change in perspective; suddenly, Cory wanted to do his best work instead of just passing my class. And coming into the Argumentative Research project, I was thrilled that Cory had finally decided to care about his writing because I saw real potential there. On the day that the proposal was due, “new Cory” (as he would later refer to himself) came to class with a full-page explanation of his intended research. When I conferenced with Cory that day, it was clear that he had strong interest in the topic and he had a clear plan for his proposed argument. As an aspiring sports announcer, Cory felt strongly about lax rules that seemed to benefit the NBA while setting young basketball players up for failure on and off the court. Cory explained that unlike other professional sports, NBA teams could recruit young basketball players after they had completed only one year of their college educations, and as a result, some college programs focused more on getting players
draft-ready than on getting them an education. While it was not a typical argumentative research topic, I felt that it would be a good topic for this particular student to pursue. His initial proposal lacked specific research questions and search terms, but from our conversation I knew that Cory had already considered how to research and where to find the information that he would need, so I gave him a few more ideas and turned him loose with an encouraging “Can’t wait to see what you do with this!”

In the weeks that followed, I kept up with Cory’s progress within the project largely because of the many questions that he asked. Cory preferred face-to-face interactions over email, so he would arrive to class a few minutes early to ask questions before class began or would ask questions during workshop sessions in class or would wait a few minutes after class to ask questions before he headed home to work on his project. His Status Report post (at the 2nd draft stage) revealed Cory’s positive, up-beat attitude and his on-going excitement about the project. Cory was feeling good about the text that he had already written at this point, even though he was still waiting to complete a scheduled interview that he hoped would add more detail to his text. Cory was also still struggling some to find a required academic or scholarly source since his topic was a bit unconventional, and this was something that we had discussed face-to-face as well.

As I read through the actual drafts themselves, then, it seemed like Cory was on track for this stage within the project. Within the Amplified Annotated Bibliography, the basic format was in place and Cory’s introduction for the project provided a strong lead-in and presented the argument that he was making, but a conclusion was still needed for the project. His bibliographic citations were partially correct, but it seemed like most needed at least minor revising. And while he had summary/evaluation paragraphs for each of his sources, most of those paragraphs needed
some additional detail and explanation. The 2nd draft of the Argumentative project itself was a
good draft at this stage in the project as well. His title reflected his main argument and his
supporting evidence was in place throughout the draft. Cory had organized his ideas well
throughout the draft, but in-text documentation of ideas from sources needed some work. I asked
questions and made suggestions throughout the draft, with many of these in-text comments being
related to the need for more explanation and detail for ideas along with the need to deliberately
connect some points back to the main argument being made. So, for example, Cory began his
final paragraph like this:

It’s not just the fact that these players are coming out after one year and then doing nothing in the NBA,
it’s also how they got recruited and what happened during their seven or eight months on campus.

As I read this, I knew what Cory was trying to convey within his words, but I also knew that he
wasn’t quite getting all of his argument made. So, my in-text comments related to this sentence
asked “What’s not?” about the “It’s not” beginning of the sentence, and I encouraged him to be
more specific there. And in the margin to the right of the paragraph, I asked several questions
that I knew related to his full argument, questions that were intended to help him to recognize the
need to “fill in the gaps” within the paragraph:

Is education even part of the deal? Are these young players used and taken advantage of? What exactly is
(or isn’t) happening while they are on campus? I think that you need a bit more explanation here. 😊

When Cory received his 2nd drafts from me, he carefully read the notes and comments
and then asked a few questions to make sure that he understood what I meant before he began
revising. By the time he left class that day, he knew how he wanted to approach his revision
work and had already begun some of that revising during class.

Weeks later Cory turned in his final drafts, and as I read Cory’s projects, I noticed how
he had attempted to revise according to my written comments within his earlier drafts and our
informal conversations about the projects. In fact, in his reflection page over the Argumentative Research project, Cory admitted that he had known that “there was something missing that connected the quotes from the players to how they performed in the NBA” but he had struggled to determine what he was missing throughout his draft. He went on to say, “[a]nd then you suggested I give stats, something so simple that I felt like I could have thought of, but it was right in front of my face.” I had to smile at that—the young man who could rattle off a string of sports stats with seemingly little effort had forgotten to include valuable stats within his project. Admittedly, it was gratifying that he later recognized the value of my suggestions and help within his project, too. Cory turned in stronger final projects as a result of his revising work and he found his academic voice along the way, but perhaps most importantly, I think, Cory found himself—“new and improved” (as he told it)—within this project and he determined that he could be a strong writer if he really wanted to be. In fact, Cory told me that he was considering revising his argumentative research project some in order to attempt to have it published in a sports magazine.

Once again, as I looked back over my interactions with Cory throughout the semester, and especially throughout the research project, I recognized several contextual factors that impacted or influenced the formative commenting relationship:

*Student Attitude*

Admittedly, Cory began the semester with an attitude that would not allow him to be successful in the course. He showed up and participated in class, but he didn’t really care outside of class. For Cory, having fun with his friends outside of class was more of a priority than spending time on his studies. So, while he seemed like an engaged student when he was in class, he actually left all concern for school in the classroom when he walked out the door at the end of
the class session. As an instructor, I want to believe the best about my students, but I am also a realist in that I have learned to recognize the signs of attitude trouble. Most disturbing for me, I think, is the sort of ambivalence that Cory began to exhibit when his attendance became sporadic and he failed to complete assignments. While he might have seemed to care at times in class, the inconsistencies in his behavior screamed otherwise. And while a teacher like me can try to encourage positive attitudes and strong priorities in her students, the reality is that students like Cory have to choose to make those changes in themselves. Thankfully, Cory made that choice while there was still time left in the semester to allow him to be successful in the course as well.

**Student Motivation and Engagement**

Like many students, Cory was not initially motivated to learn or to do his best in his courses, but instead was motivated to do only enough to get by. Motivation can come from many places, but in learning a certain amount of intrinsic motivation is necessary. Grades and verbal encouragement from a teacher might garner some motivational power, but in the end, once again, the student has to want to learn, and the student has to want to learn even more than the teacher wants him or her to learn.

**Encouragement**

I have long understood that encouragement can be a powerful force in the classroom, but I am learning that the results of the encouragement that I offer my students may not be clearly evidenced until long after it has been rendered. So, I am learning to continue to encourage, even when it seems to make no difference—something that can become an exercise in patience, to be sure. In Cory’s case, there were plenty of times when I was tempted to give up on him, to throw up my hands in defeat, yet I continued to offer encouragement whenever possible. One day late in the semester when we were talking about his transformation from “old” Cory to “new” Cory, I
told him that I was proud of all that “new” Cory had accomplished in the last half of the course. Cory smiled, clearly pleased with himself, and said simply, “you never gave up on me.”

Now, not every student who begins the semester with attitude and motivation issues will make such a drastic transformation within the semester like Cory did. And not every student story has a happy or positive ending either. I think that my interactions with Cory, however, show what can happen when an interactive and dialogical commenting relationship exists in the writing classroom.

Connie

As a traditional aged student, Connie was probably the strongest writer from within both sections of the course that I taught that spring semester. She was a confident writer who had completed AP (Advanced Placement) English in high school. Connie attended my class regularly and was well-prepared each day, but at times she seemed to be bored with the questions that her peers asked and our class discussions for concepts that she had already mastered. Clearly, she assumed that she already knew all that she needed to know. In truth, I saw much of myself in Connie. I remembered the ease with which I had written so many of my early papers, the high scores I had received, and the sparse comments from teachers and professors along the way, and I wondered if Connie really understood her own writing process or if she knew why she was able to write well. My biggest challenge with Connie, then, was in getting her to challenge herself, to pursue her personal best in her writing and to not just settle for her writing being “good” or “better than everyone else’s” or even being worthy of an “A” as a grade. I wanted Connie to pursue an understanding of her personal writing process because I knew that this understanding would benefit her in her future studies by allowing her to approach even unfamiliar writing tasks with confidence.
Early in the semester, Connie didn’t really see the need for multiple drafts of a project. In fact, when she received a draft of an early project back from me with comments on it, she was shocked that I had found anything “wrong” with her draft. She was even more surprised, though, when she read through her draft and realized that the comments and questions weren’t necessarily about what was wrong but more about what could be even better. As the semester progressed, Connie seemed to actually enjoy our dialogue within the pages of her texts and would actually write her own responses next to my comments within the draft, a fun surprise for me when I would look back through the early drafts of a project when grading the final draft. These direct responses corresponded with revision choices that Connie made within the project drafts and showed the influence of my formative feedback within her writing process. These responses also showed how Connie was beginning to understand her own writing process and the intentional choices that she was making within that process.

As we began the Argumentative Research project, I was not at all surprised when I read Connie’s proposal for the project. Her proposal showed that she had strong interest in her overall topic, she was passionate about the argument that she wanted to make, and she had carefully planned out her research strategy and approach to her argument. As a pre-nursing student, Connie was arguing that a prerequisite for the nursing program should be that the pre-nursing students must first become CNAs (Certified Nursing Assistants) in order to have more hands-on learning and practice that directly relates to the nursing profession that they are attempting to enter. When we discussed her project in an informal conference on the day that the proposal was due, Connie had already begun gathering sources for her project and she was anxious to get to the actual writing of the project.
Several weeks into the research project, Connie’s detailed response to the Status Report prompt explained that she had all of her sources and had her information organized in preparation for writing. I learned from her post, however, that she had gotten somewhat behind schedule when researching; she couldn’t find a particular required source, and rather than asking me for help, Connie had struggled on her own and had gotten behind where she wanted to be on the project. Within her post, Connie lamented that she was struggling with the writing of the Argumentative Research project because of having to work on the Amplified Annotated Bibliography at the same time. Of course, the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project was intended to be mostly complete—needing only minor revisions—before the Argumentative Research project itself was written because this project is intended to assist the writer with organizing and using the information found within the chosen sources. Since she had struggled with finding her sources, though, Connie had ended up trying to work on both projects simultaneously. However, while this little setback did cause her some stress, I noticed that Connie still had a better handle on where she was going with the project than many of her peers did at this early stage in the project!

As I read through Connie’s 2nd drafts, then, I noted that Connie already had a strong, complete draft of the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project at this point. A strong introduction included a strong working thesis/main argument and bibliographic citations for her sources were mostly correct. Strong summary/evaluation paragraphs for the sources followed the bibliographic citations, and a strong concluding paragraph provided an overall assessment of the sources gathered for her particular argument. Aside from a few minor revisions, the project was nearly ready to turn in as a final draft. As I read through her incomplete Argumentative Research draft, then, I could understand why this high-achieving student was frustrated. Of the required
six-to-eight pages for the project, Connie currently had less than two pages of text, and she had never before turned in an incomplete draft at the 1st draft stage of a project, let alone at the 2nd draft stage of a project. In fact, even though she had already alerted me to her struggles within her Status Report post, Connie included another hand-written note to me at the bottom of her existing text within the draft:

Haven’t decided on a title yet . . . been too focused on Annotated Bib to really get any further on this paper. But it will get done. I have plenty of info, just haven’t had enough time to give equal amounts to both papers. I’m kind of frustrated, but I will be okay! 😊 If it would be possible for me to send you a further developed paper along with this one before the final is due, that would be great! But if not, it’s okay 😊 Thanks!

While not as complete a draft as she was accustomed to turning in at this stage, I recognized as I read that Connie already had a strong start to the project and clearly knew where she was headed within the project as well. The text that she included was clear, focused and well-organized. So, while she was obviously behind on the project, it was clear that Connie was not “lost” within the project or struggling to make her argument; instead, Connie had simply run out of time to put down on the page what she had already planned and organized in her head. In addition to several in-text notes and comments, I included the following endnote for Connie:

Connie,

You have put together a strong Annotated Bib project & you have a strong start to this Argumentative Research project as well! 😊 It seems like you have a good grasp of the information that you have found, & you seem to have a clear vision of what info to use as support for which points of your argument. You have a strong working thesis & that will provide an organizational framework within which to work as you continue to write. 😊

I’ve made a couple of suggestions within your draft thus far, but, yes, feel free to send me a more complete draft for additional feedback. 😊

Mrs. M
When I returned her drafts to her and she read my feedback, then, Connie seemed both pleased and relieved. And since in one of my notes within her draft I had questioned her plans regarding the required visual element for her project, Connie came and talked with me about her ideas for a visual during the provided workshop time in class. Connie explained to me that she really wanted to create a visual from her primary research data (she had surveyed both health professionals and non-health professionals to gain their opinions about requiring CNA training for pre-nursing students), but she wasn’t quite sure how to present that data in visual form then. We discussed a couple of different options for the visual, and Connie left class that day with a determination to turn in a strong final project. I had very little dialogue with Connie about the projects in the following weeks, but I knew that she would contact me if she needed assistance.

As I expected, on the due date for the projects, Connie turned in strong final drafts of both the Amplified Annotated Bibliography and the Argumentative Research projects. As I read, I noted that she had made a few necessary revisions within the Amplified Annotated Bibliography project (per my earlier notes). And the final draft of the Argumentative Research project that I read was now a strong, complete draft that presented a strong, well-supported argument. With the inclusion of strong evidence and support from her sources throughout the draft, Connie was able to make a focused and well-organized argument about the value of CNA experience for pre-nursing students and the nursing field. She provided good synthesis of ideas and closed with a strong, effective conclusion. In fact, Connie’s final draft of the argumentative project was so strong that I suggested she consult with one of her nursing instructors about attempting to publish her research work as an article in a nursing journal. Connie seemed both surprised and pleased by my assessment of her work and my suggestion about possible publication. Like most FYC students, Connie previously had seen her strong writing skills as a
means to a single end, good grades (in Connie’s case, “A”s) or academic progress, rather than seeing potential beyond the classroom setting for that writing ability. In fact, Connie even concluded her Reflection page for the Argumentative Research project with a statement that seems to express this typical assumption: “I am so glad to have conquered this class with a high A and cannot wait to move forward in my college career.” So, I wonder, if even a strong writer seems incapable of seeing a larger purpose for her strong writing skills, a purpose that goes beyond grades in the classroom and extends into her life and career beyond the walls of academia, how can I ever hope to help struggling writers, writers who are just hoping to write well enough to pass the class, to begin to see beyond the classroom walls to that larger purpose for writing in their lives? As I reflected back on my interactions with Connie throughout the research project, then, I recognized a number of lessons about the impact of a formative commenting relationship with regards to strong writers:

*Writing level*

While struggling writers will often seek those of similar writing ability for feedback on their writing, strong writers sometimes believe that they need no help with their writing or they assume that their writing is already “good enough” to successfully fulfill the requirements for an assignment. Rather than seeing the writing process as a means to understanding how and why they write as they do, thus further strengthening their writing abilities, strong writers may initially see the writing process as being an unnecessary waste of time. This was definitely true for Connie at the start of the semester. She already knew that she could write “A” papers, so why should she have to spend her time writing and rewriting the same paper? Unfortunately, teachers may be at least partly to blame for these student assumptions; when writing teachers simply skim “above average” papers and scribble “A”s without taking the time necessary to interact with
these students and their writings, to really challenge these writers to learn and to improve in their individual writing processes, these students will assume that they already know all that they need to know about writing. As a result, these students will continue to “roll the dice” and hope that they are lucky enough to write an “A” paper whenever needed throughout their academic careers. I am a firm believer that writers at every skill level deserve to experience the benefits of intentional teaching and dialogical interactions with their teachers about their writing!

**Time**

Managing time on a large writing project can be tedious for students, especially for beginning writers. While Connie had a strong start to the Argumentative Research project, she fell behind when she struggled to find a particular required source for her project. At the 2nd draft stage within the projects, then, Connie turned in a complete draft of one project and an incomplete draft of the other. Incomplete drafts are often seen as signs of a student’s “lack of effort” or as a signs of “struggling” within a project, but as I read both of Connie’s drafts, I saw something else—a very intentional choice: realizing that she didn’t have enough time left (after finding the elusive source) to complete both aspects of the project well, Connie had decided to use the majority of her remaining time to complete a strong Amplified Annotated Bibliography project and she had allowed herself to turn in a partial (in-process) draft for the Argumentative Research project itself to show that she was indeed working on it. Having to make this choice, and having to prioritize her writing time in this way, had been frustrating for Connie, but by this time in the semester she knew and understood her own writing process enough to know that a choice had to be made. And, she knew that she could still be successful in the end by prioritizing in this way at the 2nd draft stage. I am not sure that Connie could have successfully managed her time in this way if she had not already learned to understand her own writing process, though.
Connie is likely not representative of the majority of beginning writers, especially in my particular college setting, yet our interactions and experiences throughout the semester add depth to the overall story of an interactive and dialogical commenting relationship in the writing classroom.

Adding Context to the Overall “Story”

My personal processes of reading and of composing response (as shown in Figure 4.1 & discussed throughout this chapter) are intentional and highly rhetorical processes that are responsive to my individual students and to their particular writing needs. Even as such, however, my processes maintain a level of consistency in their execution that makes them generalizable to a point. So, regardless of differences between students or projects, both of my processes will consistently be active, purposeful, rhetorical and student-focused. As an engaged reader of each student text, I can recognize what the student writer has accomplished as well as what she or he may have attempted or intended to accomplish within the text. As I read, I am particularly interested in the choices that the writer made within the text, and I consider the text along with what I know about the writer and her or his writing process as I read. The response that I compose to each student text, then, is designed to be personal, formative and contextual, with an emphasis on the individual and her or his writing process, especially as related to the particular project and/or draft at hand. I attempt to engage the student writer in a conversation about the text through the comments that I compose within the margins of the text and in my endnote to that student as well. And as a result of my personal processes of reading student texts and of then composing responses to those texts, I believe that my students are encouraged to begin to focus on their own processes of writing, perhaps for the first time in their writing lives.
My students recognize the careful attention that I give to them and to their writing. In fact, every semester I hear a similar comment, a surprised exclamation, from somewhere within my classroom as I am returning an early writing assignment and the student notices my comments and notes on the page: “you really DO read everything!” It is always exclaimed with a great sense of wonder by the pleasantly-surprised student, but somehow, as a teacher, this oft-repeated classroom scene bothers me a great deal. Why is it that students find it odd that their writing teacher actually reads what they have written? I wonder about my students’ past experiences with writing and with writing teachers. I wonder if some students have not cared about what they have written because they knew that their teachers would not read it anyhow. At times, my students will talk about their past experiences, but mostly I am just left to wonder and muse on my own.

It is interesting, however, to watch my students’ responses to my responses to their texts as the semester progresses. Not only do they quickly learn that I carefully read all that they write and turn in, but they also quickly learn that I will write little notes, just for them, within the text on the pages that they turn in. Whenever I am returning papers of any kind, many of my students wait expectantly to see what I have written to them on the pages of their assignments. So, I might hear, “Aw, yeah! I knew I’d get a smiley face for that example!” from a student as I return an in-class assignment, or I might hear, “Oh, I never even thought about adding a personal example. That’s a good idea!” from a student as I return a project draft. In cases like these, I need not wonder if my comments on the page are being read because my students audibly acknowledge their receipt. In other cases, students mention specific comments or suggestions that I gave within their drafts when we informally converse about a project or personal writing concern. But regardless of whether a student chooses to respond overtly to my feedback or chooses not to
acknowledge it at all, I intentionally choose to compose my responses to my students’ texts as a means to interact with them individually and to encourage an ongoing dialogue with them about their writing and their writing processes.

With some students, this dialogue surrounding their writing is welcomed by the students and is easily maintained throughout the semester (as suggested by the examples in the previous paragraph), but with other students, the process of building a dialogue surrounding their writing is slow and is at times fraught with frustration (mine and theirs). And sadly, in a few cases, a student may not be interested (or engaged) in her or his learning, so the student will avoid any and all interactions with me or with peers. From a teaching standpoint, interacting with engaged and self-motivated learners is fulfilling and, of course, easier to do since the effort toward maintaining the commenting dialogue is more balanced (i.e. both teacher and student are interacting) and my efforts toward providing formative instruction may seem more worthwhile when they are openly valued by the students. Building interactive dialogue with some students, however, is neither natural nor easy for me. In fact, in some cases it is downright difficult for reasons that are varied and often complex. For example, I am learning that sometimes what may seem like disinterest or ambivalence in a student is really extreme shyness or personal insecurity. Or, it might be that the student has been “trained” or “normed” within past academic experiences to see the teacher as an unapproachable expert. Or, perhaps the student does not even realize that she or he has a role within the dialogue. Engaging these students in interactive dialogue, then, requires my patience, my understanding, and my continued encouragement (sometimes in the form of repeated reminders of “permission granted”) for them to ask questions and to be involved in the commenting relationship throughout the semester. With some students, I may spend the entire semester doing my part to create an interactive dialogue with them (whether on
the page or in the classroom) with only limited success in getting the students to actually initiate dialogue, too. And yet, even if the students do not initiate dialogue themselves, some express appreciation for my commenting within their reflection pages and still others interact with my comments as they write and revise their projects in the course. Of course, writing and dialoguing are both highly rhetorical acts, so it should not be a surprise that the commenting relationship is complex, contextual and differs between students.

An interactive, collaborative and dialogical commenting relationship does not simply happen, though. In fact, after revisiting my descriptions of my own processes of reading my students’ texts and of composing responses to those texts, along with the descriptions of my interactions with several of my students, I have come to recognize a number of specific activities within my overall classroom context that seem to encourage and nurture a dialogical and interactive commentary relationship between me (as teacher) and my students: Q & A Sessions, Small Group & Workshop Activities, Self-assessment Activities, Email Correspondence, Office Hours, and Outside Interactions.

As shown in Figure 4.3 (on the following page), these activities may include student-initiated or teacher-initiated dialogue, and the benefits of each activity may vary based on the wants or needs of the specific student (and/or teacher) and the particular context(s) surrounding the activity. Additionally, while two of the activities are more formal and structured in nature, the others are more informal in nature and may even occur spontaneously or impromptu. It is important to note, I think, that most of these activities allow the students to choose if and how they would like to participate or interact with the teacher (in this case, me), and likewise, the teacher has choices to make within each activity category as well.
**Figure 4.3: Activities within a Classroom Context that Encourage Dialogical and Interactive Commentary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q &amp; A Sessions</th>
<th>Small Group &amp; Workshop Activities</th>
<th>Self-assessment Activities</th>
<th>Email Correspondence</th>
<th>Office Hours</th>
<th>Outside Interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Student-initiated dialogue</em></td>
<td><em>Teacher-initiated activity that pushes for involvement &amp; stresses dialogue &amp; interactions between students</em></td>
<td><em>Teacher-initiated or student-initiated dialogue</em></td>
<td><em>Student-initiated dialogue</em></td>
<td><em>Student-initiated interactions &amp; dialogue</em></td>
<td><em>Teacher-initiated or impromptu interactions</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Personal &amp; contextual (yet sometimes benefits others, too)</em></td>
<td><em>Provides opportunities to “work through” ideas, skills &amp; struggles, too</em></td>
<td><em>Personal &amp; contextual</em></td>
<td><em>Personal &amp; contextual (ask questions about their projects or progress in class)</em></td>
<td><em>Personal &amp; contextual</em></td>
<td><em>Meeting students on their turf (i.e. going to see them at school activities or programs) gives the opportunity to see their accomplishments beyond ENGL classroom</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Opportunity offered consistently (@ beginning or end of most every class session)</em></td>
<td><em>Requires critical reflection</em></td>
<td><em>Emphasis is on personal writing process</em></td>
<td><em>Offers access to teacher outside of class (i.e. availability to ask questions &amp; get assistance on projects outside of class)</em></td>
<td><em>Informal (appointment or drop-in)</em></td>
<td><em>Taking a minute to chat when seeing the student somewhere else on campus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Allows student to confirm or question assignment details or ask about confusing ideas &amp; concepts</em></td>
<td><em>Usually connected to current writing project</em></td>
<td><em>Confidence in response (usually within 24 hours)</em></td>
<td><em>Offers accessibility &amp; opportunity for assistance outside of class</em></td>
<td><em>Relationship-building through dialogue &amp; interactions (may begin with specific project issues, but may also include life concerns outside of class)</em></td>
<td><em>Being willing to meet with student to discuss non-class issues/mentor (result of student-initiated dialogue)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In my case, I choose to consistently offer Q & A times during class sessions; I choose to emphasize dialogue and interaction within class sessions rather than simply lecture; I choose to require periodic self-assessments from my students about their writings and their writing processes; I choose to remind my students of my availability to them via email and office hours; I choose to respond to every student email and to maintain consistent office hours in order to make myself available to my students (even though I am not required to have office hours); and, I choose to acknowledge my students outside of the classroom setting, even attending other
school events in which they are participating. Of course, just as not every student will make the same choices, not every teacher can or will make the same choices either. For example, offering Q & A sessions takes valuable class time and may at times be an exercise in patience when the questions (or the students) are not focused. Additionally, for many teachers, it is easier to lecture about a topic than to manage a discussion or group activity or workshop session; after all, in lecture, the students sit quietly and listen (theoretically, at least) whereas a discussion activity or workshop session tends to be noisy and may seem more like “controlled chaos” at times. Creating self-assessment activities for students requires critical thinking on the part of the teacher, but it also requires that students have been taught the value of honest self-assessment within their learning; without students first understanding its value, self-assessment is merely an exercise in futility. With over-flowing email inboxes, it is sometimes difficult to check email and see a dozen or more student emails in the mix, especially when they are emails that require special attention. Additionally, many teachers do not like to feel that they are “on call” for students outside of class. For many part-time or adjunct instructors, office hours are not required because instructors are only paid for “contact” hours in the classroom and many instructors do not care to (or cannot afford to) work essentially “for free.” Busy schedules sometimes make it difficult to juggle course load demands, so attending student events outside of class may not be possible for every teacher either. I understand some of these concerns with including these specific activities, and yet, I also recognize how valuable these activities are in the building of a classroom context that encourages a dialogical and interactive commenting relationship between teacher and students. For me, then, the pedagogical choices that I make represent an intentional investment of my time and energy into what I deem as valuable: building an interactive dialogue with my students about their writing.
Interestingly, this study suggests that students do seem to desire and value dialogue with their teachers about their writing, whether these dialogical interactions are teacher-initiated or student-initiated. For example, within the three ethnographically-inspired case studies in Chapter 3, all three student participants emphasized the importance of dialogue/conversations with the teacher (both verbal and written) within their writing and revising work. They also stressed teacher involvement in this dialogue as being necessary and important. At least two of these students mentioned the importance of being able to ask questions when they don’t understand something, something which some past teachers had frowned on. The unfortunate implication here, I think, is that some teachers choose not to be involved in any sort of dialogue with students about their studies. And yet, within the anonymous responses to the short answer questions on the first questionnaire, student respondents expressed that the purpose of teacher comments is to: “provide guidance and direction” for revising, give assessment of “progress within a project,” and help them to “become better writers.” Additionally, respondents thought that teacher comments should give “more ideas” or “tips” and provide encouragement. And when considering what the students wrote within their Final Reflective Essays about their own needs, students seemed to look to their interactions with their teacher (on and off the page) for: motivation, confidence, help, and encouragement. Students seemed to have a pretty good idea about what makes teacher comments helpful or not helpful, too, as evidenced by their responses to another question on the first questionnaire. Students mentioned learning, understanding and being able to use helpful comments, but they expressed frustration with comments that are not helpful—like comments that are vague, general or broad in information; comments that contain no detail or explanation or that give incorrect or confusing information; and comments that the teacher cannot even explain to them in a conference. The type of comments that they listed as
“helpful” seem to be ones that are contextual, purposeful and encouraging of progress—like comments that explain what doesn’t work or what is done incorrectly, or that explain what is done well; comments that explain how to improve writing or make revisions; comments that provide detailed explanations and ask questions to help the writer; comments that point out both the writer’s strengths and weaknesses; comments that provide a different perspective or point of view; comments that give encouragement or compliment the student as writer; and comments that inspire creativity and a desire to work harder. As I consider their responses, it seems that the types of comments that the students shared as being helpful are comments that are more intentional and rhetorical than those they listed as “not helpful” comments. Incidentally, this type of helpful comments also cannot be composed without a careful read of the student text.

As I read back through the selected interactions with Zoe, Nate, Cory & Connie (included earlier in this chapter), I recognize, yet again, that differences in student writers may also mean differences in what those writers want, need and value within the contexts of the writing classroom and specifically within the commenting relationship. Additionally, these variances may require that I respond differently to individual students, based upon their wants, needs, and values within our interactive commenting relationship. With this in mind, for each of these four students, I listed contextual factors that might have impacted or influenced our interactions and experiences within the commenting relationship. In considering my interactions with Zoe, a struggling writer, I listed time, peer reviews, and writing level as being influential factors. For Nate, an average writer, I listed peer review and previous experience as influential factors. For Cory, another average writer, I listed student attitude, student motivation and engagement, and encouragement as factors, while writing level and time were factors that I listed in considering my interactions with Connie, a strong writer. In a couple of cases, similar factors impacted
interactions with multiple students but perhaps in different ways or for different reasons. For example, in Zoe’s case, peer reviews did not give her accurate or strong feedback about her project, but for Nate, peer reviews were beneficial for him in recognizing problems in his project. Additionally, time and writing level affected both Zoe, a struggling writer, and Connie, a strong writer, but the impact of each factor on the individual student varied much. While both Zoe and Connie got behind schedule on the project in the beginning, their reasons for being behind differed greatly as did their responses to this time issue. Zoe’s time problems began with a missed class and initial confusion about the project itself, but the effect was on-going: Zoe became increasingly more frustrated and felt rushed to complete the project, especially to revise between the 2nd and final drafts. Connie’s time problems, on the other hand, began with a struggle to locate one particular source and led to her turning in an incomplete 2nd draft of the Argumentative Research project, but Connie made specific choices about how to manage her time and her work within the project and her final drafts were strong projects. In Zoe’s case, her writing level meant that she actually needed more time and stronger peer feedback as she worked on the projects, but Connie began the semester thinking that her writing level meant that she did not really need any feedback so she had to learn to value feedback. As for Cory, then, he was impacted by largely internal and personal factors—matters of attitude, motivation, engagement, encouragement-- that he had to recognize and deal with during the semester in order to be successful.

These contextual factors that I have listed above as possibly impacting or influencing my interactions and experiences with these four students within the commenting relationship include some familiar concepts to our research discussion in this dissertation. These contextual factors are topics for discussion and debate within educational circles, and they fill many pages of
scholarly works in our particular field, but they were also on the minds of Liz, Sarah, and Jacob (case study subjects in Chapter 3) who mentioned them within their interviews and reflections. Additionally, these contextual factors appeared numerous times in responses to the various questions on the two questionnaires that study participants completed during the semester. These are factors that wield influence in multiple contexts, but within the writing classroom, their influence or impact may become even more multi-faceted and complex. More research into these contextual factors is needed in order to better understand how (and why) these factors may influence a dialogical and interactive commenting relationship in the writing classroom. Additional research that considers these contextual factors from the students’ perspective would be especially helpful.

Students often tell me that my class is different from any other English class they’ve ever had. Students also claim that they’ve never had a writing teacher emphasize writing process like I do. Of course, I realize that students may exaggerate as well, but I also recognize that my intentional reading and formative responding, and my efforts to build interactive dialogue between myself and my students about writing, do seem to run counter to what many in the composition field practice. For whatever reason(s), it seems that some writing instructors never get beyond what is the 1st stage of my writing response process: an initial skim through the text to assess fulfillment of basic assignment requirements. In fact, some even seem to believe that they do not need to move beyond that initial step. I cringe when a colleague brags about being able to speed-read student papers when grading, or when another colleague brags that a quick skim of a bad paper is all that is needed to assign a grade. Neither of these practices is effective or formative as a means to teach the student about her or his writing process. Neither of these practices models rhetorical aspects of writing either. And yet, as discussed in Chapter 1, minimal
marking (the shortened version) and other time-saving strategies like generic rubrics have become the response goal for many. Summative assessment within commenting is often more common than formative assessment as well. So, once again, for a field that clearly emphasizes “process” within our theory, much of what is actually being practiced by teachers within their classrooms seems to emphasize a focus on “product” instead. When will what we already know about writing and about the role of teacher commentary in students’ writing processes become common in the classroom practices of teachers within our field? When will our practice finally demonstrate our theory-in-action?

In “Feminism in Composition: Inclusion, Metonymy, and Disruption,” Ritchie & Boardman remind that “feminist writing in composition is grounded in accounts of personal experience” (Rpt. in 2003, p. 9). I appreciate this reminder of that grounding, for it is this valuing of experience as a source of knowledge that has allowed for more in-depth, detailed, multi-faceted, complex, and, at times, unconventional research across many disciplinary lines. This grounding in personal experience is particularly valuable in composition, especially since composing is itself a personal and highly rhetorical act. How else could we possibly explore composing, then, except through personal experience? Within my particular study, personal experience is valued as knowledge on multiple levels: beginning with my choice to complete a teacher research study from within my own classroom; continuing on to my attempts to include my students’ voices and experiences within my research by using grounded theory and specific qualitative research methods, like an ethnographic perspective; and by including the autoethnographic account of my process of composing response that anchors this chapter. I have worked to include multiple voices and personal experiences within this study in order to better understand the overall contexts of my writing classroom, especially those contexts surrounding
the commenting relationship. And yet, I appreciate how Canagarajah explains the value of autoethnography in comparison with other methods:

Though the autoethnography provides a case among cases, there are benefits from getting this very concrete and intense focus of a single person. Just as there is value from scope, there is value from depth. While objective descriptions that come from interviews or surveys with numerous subjects provide one kind of perspective, the descriptions of a single subject provide a different insight into cultural life. (2012, p.123)

As I consider my own autoethnographic account and its value within my overall research project, then, I especially appreciate Canagarajah’s closing words in his chapter: “If all knowledge is local and personal, we must all become story tellers—both inside and outside the academy. Let a thousand flowers bloom” (2012, p.123). What a wonderful idea, and what beautiful imagery! My story is but one of many stories to be told in our field. It is my hope that many other writing teachers will tell their own stories of reading student texts and of composing response, thus helping to cultivate a vast and beautiful garden of stories, stories that are dedicated to growing student writers and their stories, too.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation (See Chapter 1), Brian Huot argues that any theory of response must also consider multiple factors or influences, including the teacher’s process of reading of the students’ texts. Huot also acknowledges that rhetoric is at the heart of much of what goes on within the reading and response processes as well (130-136).
2. Within his text, Huot also addresses this paradox of expecting students to write rhetorically when we often do not teach them how to do so. Historically, Quintilian and other great thinkers/teachers strongly advocated for the value of modeling rhetorical concepts for students, too.

3. Please see the Data Collection Instruments section of Chapter 2 for a detailed description of the Mid-Term Self-Assessment assignment.
CHAPTER 5: MAKING CONNECTIONS, RECOGNIZING CONTRADICTIONS, AND SUGGESTING CHANGES

Nearly twenty years ago, noted composition scholar and practitioner Richard Straub (1996) explained the value of teacher commentary in this way:

More than the general principles we voice or the theoretical approach we take into the class, it is what we value in student writing, how we communicate those values, and what we say individually on student texts that carry the most weight in writing instruction. It is how we receive and respond to the words students put on the page that speaks loudest in our teaching. (as cited in Batt, 2005, 207)

This powerful quote reminds me of a Native American saying I learned many years ago: “What you do speaks so loudly, I can’t hear what you say” (author unknown). After all, words and/or good intentions cannot compete against the impact of one’s actions, especially if those actions contradict or seem to compete against what is stated. In ways, both of these quotes could speak to the current dichotomy that seems to exist in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, a dichotomy between stated values and everyday practices. What do we really value in student writing? Bob Broad (2003) asked us to consider this question individually, within our programs, and as a field in recent years, and he has done so by building on Brian Huot’s (2002) call to reconsider how (and why) we assess student writing with respect to those values. What we value in student writing and how we choose to communicate those values (often through our assessments), then, require intentional pedagogical decisions in teaching writing, decisions that are at the heart of formative teacher commentary.

As Straub has suggested above, and as I have argued throughout this text, teacher commentary matters, both pedagogically and personally, in the composition classroom and it
matters even more than many teachers may realize. The pedagogical value of teacher commentary results from commentary being a means of individualized or direct teaching as well as being a complex and interconnected part of the overall classroom context. In particular, teacher commentary can offer formative assessment for individual student writers as they work through the full context of their writing processes. This type of teacher commentary functions as a partnership between student and teacher, an ongoing and interactive process, with the student’s text acting as the contextual center of the conversations and interactions. The personal value of dialogical and interactive teacher commentary, then, is grounded in the dynamic and rhetorical nature of the relationship itself. And this particular teacher research study considers both the pedagogical and the personal value of formative teacher commentary within a dialogical and interactive commenting relationship, a relationship that includes the voices, values and perspectives of the student writers along with those of the teacher.

Relationships and dialogue are important concepts within feminist research, concepts that can be considered on multiple levels and that can be researched in various ways. In particular, Ritchie and Boardman have suggested that maintaining a “dialogical relationship between theory and experience” (Rpt. in 2003, p. 22) has bolstered feminist work in the past. In my own work, then, I have attempted to maintain a dialogical relationship between the relevant theories and the personal and pedagogical experiences chronicled within this study. I began this study by attempting to move beyond basic understandings of teacher commentary as I presented existing conversations in the field, with particular attention given to what we know about commentary (theory), what occurs in writing classrooms (practice), and the seeming contradiction that currently exists between these two. Additionally, I introduced recent research on teacher response pedagogy that emphasized the need for student voices and perspectives within
composition research, particularly in conversations about teacher commentary or response. Past conversations were largely one-sided, considering the teacher’s comments and the student’s writings from only the teacher’s or researcher’s perspective, so I presented my intended research study which would employ mixed methods and a variety of data collection instruments that would allow the students to voice their own perspectives about teacher commentary and what they value within the context of the composition class. I also explained my intention within this study to complicate current notions of teacher commentary as isolated words on a page or as some fixed formulaic practice. Instead of focusing on textual analysis or the mode of delivery of the comments themselves, I explained my intention to focus on commentary as the dynamic and interactive relationship between teacher and student that it can and, I would argue, that it should be. And as I discussed my purpose with this teacher-research study, I stressed my desire to gain insight and understanding on the commenting relationship from the students themselves, to consider their voices and their perspectives as a means to better understanding formative teacher commentary as a multi-faceted, dynamic and highly contextual happening in the composition classroom.

I discussed aspects of the primary research study itself in Chapter 2: a teacher research study, within a feminist theory framework, that was designed to explore the complexities and the contexts of my composition classroom, especially those complexities and contexts surrounding the commenting relationship. To this end, I introduced the quantitative and qualitative research methods and methodologies employed within the study. These mixed methods included teacher research, grounded theory, an ethnographic perspective, and autoethnography, and I explained my rationale for using each of these within this study. Thick, detail-rich descriptions of the study location, the participants, and the data collection instruments, along with attention to the
subsequent collection and analysis of that data, allowed for some initial aspects of the classroom contexts to be shown. Other aspects of these contexts, however, required consideration of multiple variables and required different means of analysis, analysis that later made the triangulation of results possible in some cases as well.

Because of the importance of student voices and student perspectives about teacher commentary and the commenting relationship in this study, Chapter 3 presented ethnographically-inspired case studies of three student writers and their individual journeys through my ENGL 111 course. The case studies were built around personal interviews, email/conference discussions with each student, analysis of student-generated texts, student reflections, and my observations as teacher-researcher. I worked here to give as much information as possible in the students’ own voices, whether their words were verbally spoken or written on the page. After initial analysis within each case study, I employed Charmaz’s “constant comparative method” of analysis as a means to discover connections and intersections between the writing lives of these individual students and their peers.

As a means to develop a richer and more complete picture of the overall context of my composition classroom, then, I composed an autoethnographic account of my own processes of reading student texts and of composing responses to those texts which became the foundation of the fourth chapter in this dissertation. This autoethnographic account, along with selected accounts of interactions between me and four of my ENGL 111 students, allowed for the further exploration of the commenting relationship and the complex contexts that are inherent to that interactive dialogue. In particular, points of connection and disruption between the personal experiences of both teacher and students were noted. Deep reflexivity and intentional contextualization of data made this chapter a valuable part of the overall study.
This final chapter, then, provides an opportunity to look back at the various aspects of the study (as detailed in the previous four chapters), to reconsider earlier findings, and to further analyze those findings in relation to the research questions that guided this particular study as well as in relation to current conversations in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. This chapter also provides an opportunity to look ahead, to consider possible implications of this study for me personally, for the training of future teachers of composition, for future research in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, and for how we might begin to re-imagine FYC pedagogy so that our practices might better reflect the values of our field.

A Look Back at the Study Findings

In my discussion of the three case studies in Chapter 3, I noted a number of shared beliefs by the participants: Liz, Susan & Jacob. These students shared beliefs about the value of education and learning, the value of hard work and perseverance in learning, the value of dialogue or conversations with the teacher (both verbal and written) while writing, the value of a process approach to writing that allows for multiple drafts and revising between drafts to improve writing, and the value of learning—even when that learning may not be fully represented in the final draft of a writing project. Most of these beliefs seemed to be shared by their ENGL 111 peers as well, as demonstrated by their peers’ words in their written reflections and emails, and their short answer responses on the questionnaires. For me, however, the following account may be the most powerful example of how one of my students expressed the value that education and learning hold for him:

*On the last day of class that spring semester, one of my returning adult students approached my desk with tears in his eyes. He and his wife (also one of my students in that class) were coming up to say their good-byes. It was an emotional good-bye for all*
three of us, but especially so for D.P. who keenly recognized the value of his learning that semester for his future. At 54 years of age, he decided to begin college for the first time, and he had encountered many challenges (both in and out of school) along the way. A sudden, traumatic death in his family had made it difficult to focus in school, and the writing had not come easily for D.P. either, but he was determined to do his best and he never gave up. “Failure is not an option for me,” he had said throughout the semester, and he meant it. That day, when he tearfully thanked me for my patient instruction and encouragement along the way, and he hugged me good-bye, D.P. suddenly became aware of the bewildered stares of a few younger classmates. He smiled at them as he wiped his eyes and then shook his head sadly as he said, “you’re too young to understand just how much this class means . . . . what it means to have a second chance at learning . . .” He turned to me then with a nod and a wave, and then D.P. and his wife left my class for the final time.

D.P. and his wife were active participants in my ENGL 111 class and were well-respected by their younger classmates, but I think this scene might demonstrate a recognizable difference in the intensity with which older, nontraditional students value their learning versus the valuing of learning that is often expressed by their younger, traditional-aged peers. For the one, the valuing is grounded in real life experiences from the past, a desire for change, and with an understanding of the future impact of that learning, while for the other, the valuing of the learning may be based simply on perceived future benefits with no grounding in real life experiences. But for many community college students, and especially for nontraditional students like D.P., the road to learning is often littered with struggles that could become road
blocks if not for the students’ personal support systems (e.g. family, friends, mentors, etc.) and their “inner strength” and “desire to achieve against all the odds” (Tinberg & Nadeau, 2010, 58).

I always admired D.P. for his “Failure is not an option” attitude because there were many times when a lesser man would have simply given up. D.P. was very open about his struggles, and he was not afraid to admit that he was “new, like a baby” to college learning and prone to make mistakes along the way. He was not always successful in his attempts, but D.P. exemplified hard work and perseverance in all that he did throughout the semester, and I know that at least some of his peers took note of this. Interestingly, many FYC students assume that their hard work and perseverance alone will guarantee them successful projects and good grades. The reality, however, is that hard work and perseverance will almost always result in some success in actual learning, but that learning may or may not be clearly evident in the level of success within a particular project or in a specific grade earned. In other words, contrary to the beliefs of many students, it is what they actually accomplish within the writing process that matters, not just the amount of time spent on a project and/or their level of effort on that project. For some students, then, this might seem like an emphasis on “product” rather than on “process,” but this is where formative assessment (i.e. assessment that occurs throughout the process of their writing and revising within a project) can help students to begin to recognize and value their work within their process as a means of learning and growing, regardless of other outcomes (like grades). And this perspective aligns nicely with what the WPA (the Council of Writing Program Administrators) says about learning to write in its WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition: “Learning to write is a complex process, both individual and social, that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance” (2000). Within this statement, the WPA presents five learning outcomes that it expects by the end of FYC: rhetorical
knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and writing; processes; knowledge of conventions; and, composing in electronic environments. The discussion of each outcome includes a listing of activities that demonstrate the suggested outcome, along with suggestions for faculty to further build on the outcome. The choice of wording in the statement is intentional; the WPA clearly differentiates between “outcomes” (which it defines as “types of results”) and “standards” (which it defines as “precise levels of achievement”) within its statement, acknowledging that students learn to write in ways that cannot be simplified or reduced to standardized formulas (2000). Instead, students may demonstrate these suggested outcomes in different ways and at different times, according to the student’s individual learning of writing. Demonstrating these outcomes, then, rather than earning a particular grade, represents student learning.

Throughout this study, many students expressed their belief that a process approach to writing was valuable because it allowed for multiple drafts and revising between drafts which then allowed for improved writing and stronger final drafts. My emphasis in the classroom was on writing and revising, along with the critical thinking and reflecting that are necessary within these processes. I intentionally focused attention on the actual writing itself rather than on the expected page count or the eventual grade for the project. While I worked to de-emphasize grades in my course, though, many students acknowledged that their motivation for writing better and turning in a stronger draft ultimately related to their desire for higher grades. This belief in the value of a process approach to writing was shared by students in their interviews, emails, written reflections and in their responses on the questionnaires. For students like Liz, being able to write multiple drafts and revise in between allowed the students to relax some throughout the process of writing. Interestingly, though, not every student entered into ENGL 111 with this belief in the value of multiple drafts and revising. And for some students, it took
the Argumentative Research project (the last major writing project, completed in the last 6-8 weeks of the semester) for them to comprehend how understanding their writing and revising processes could actually benefit them personally. Of course, some of my students had never been taught about the process approach in writing. In fact, in one class session, a student raised his hand and exclaimed, “I have never had an English teacher emphasize process in writing like you do!” This student was excited to begin to understand what he was doing and why it made a difference in his writing.

While I know that most teachers of writing teach a process-based pedagogy, I wonder what kind of process is being taught. After all, as James Berlin (1982) once explained, “[e]veryone teaches the process of writing, but everyone does not teach the same process. The test of one’s competence as a composition instructor, it seems to me, resides in being able to recognize and justify the version of the process being taught, complete with all of its significance for the student” (Rpt. 2003, 269). So, I wonder, how many teachers are still teaching writing as a process of linear steps to follow or as a static formula or standardized system of writing rather than teaching writing as a complex and active process that is reflexive, recursive, and personal? And, if they do teach the latter, a complex and recursive writing process, I wonder about how intentionally and explicitly some of these teachers are doing so. Do teachers simply assume that the students know what they are doing as they go through the motions of writing and that they understand the value of how they are doing it, or do these teachers intentionally teach students about writing and revising through multiple drafts and about their individual writing processes?

Interestingly, within this study, many students connected the value that they recognized within their writing processes with the value that they recognized for teacher comments within their writing processes.
In attempting to understand what my students wanted from teacher comments and what my students valued in teacher comments, then, I once again turned to the students themselves for answers. Not surprisingly, many of my students seemed to desire and value commentary that “lived” both on and off of the pages of their texts, commentary that included on-going and interactive dialogue about their projects as they worked to write and revise within those projects. This desire for interactive dialogue was expressed by numerous students in multiple ways and at various times throughout this research study. These student perspectives were found within interviews, emails, student-generated texts, student reflections and questionnaire responses. For example, within their interviews, Liz, Susan, and Jacob all expressed strong ideas about what that commenting relationship needed to be like, and all three of these students seemed to understand and embrace their own roles in the conversation as well. While all three appreciated having the comments on the page to consult outside of class, the ability to ask questions and to converse about their writing throughout the project seemed even more important to them. Liz and Susan, in particular, valued being able to ask questions and then receive thoughtful and helpful responses to those questions as they worked through their writing projects. And while all three students seemed to recognize that both teacher and student have responsibilities in this relationship, it was Jacob who very clearly emphasized responsibility and choice on the part of both participants in order to have effective communication (and learning!) in the commenting relationship. In reflecting over my interactions with Liz, Susan & Jacob, as well as my selected interactions with four more students—Connie, Zoe, Cory and Nate---included in Chapter 4, I also found that students responded differently and at times very unequally within this commenting relationship. For some students, the dialogue and interactions with me about their writing seemed natural, but for other students, any interactions with me about their writing
seemed forced at best, and at times even undesired. Studies in composition have at times considered the general effects of various contextual factors (e.g. writing level, motivation, past experiences or understanding of academia) on student writers. A few studies have even considered student understanding and use of commentary. From this study, however, I have begun to understand, largely from the students’ perspectives, how student responses and interactions within the commenting relationship may vary based on numerous contextual factors from both within and outside of the classroom context itself. These factors may include (but are not limited to): individual personality, level of confidence, past experiences, individual writing level, personal motivation level, or even the student’s understanding of her or his role in the commenting relationship or the student’s understanding of academic culture-as-a-whole. To begin to consider several of these factors, I explored student responses on the Pre- and Post-Project Questionnaires.

As discussed earlier (in Chapter 2), the Pre- and Post-Project Questionnaires, completed anonymously by student respondents, provided both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. Questionnaire 1 (the Pre-Project Questionnaire) was completed during class time in week 8 of the 16-week semester and before the Argumentative Research project was started. Questionnaire 2 (the Post-Project Questionnaire) was completed during class time in week 15, soon after the students submitted the Argumentative Research project to be graded. These two questionnaires provided baseline data for the rest of the study as well. The initial questions (with pre-set answer options) on each questionnaire provided basic demographic data (questions 1, 2 & 3) as well as a general sense of what the students valued in writing (questions 5 & 6), as shown in Tables 5.1 and 5.2 in the pages that follow.
As reflected in the data in Table 5.1, not every student who completed the first questionnaire also completed the second questionnaire. This phenomenon is not at all uncommon in the college setting; unfortunately, not every student who begins the semester will finish that semester in any given class, but core, or entry level, courses like FYC seem to have the greatest rates of attrition. This phenomenon of loss is generally true in all college settings, but it is particularly true in the two-year college setting where retention can be impacted or impaired by numerous factors, many of which are completely out of the teacher’s or the school’s control.

Table 5.1: Demographic Data from Questionnaires (Pre- & Post-Project)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Project %</th>
<th>Post-Project %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-21 years</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 or older</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons for Taking ENGL 111</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placed into it</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed ENGL 093</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-taking it</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, during this spring 2012 semester alone, students came to me with their need to drop my course (or, in several cases, leave school altogether) because of personal health issues, a
health crisis for a spouse, the need to get out of a violent domestic situation, the loss of financial aid funding, and changes in work hours or demands. Of course, these are only the reasons that I know about because the students came to me to discuss their need to leave my course; unfortunately, several other students simply disappeared.

Perhaps most telling in considering the drop in number of respondents between anonymous questionnaires, though, is who amongst the respondents seems to have disappeared from my course. From start to finish of the research project, the percentage of student respondents who placed directly into ENGL 111 increased, while the percentages of those student respondents who passed ENGL 093 (a developmental writing course) to place into ENGL 111 and those student respondents who were re-taking ENGL 111 after an earlier failed attempt both dropped. In fact, in the case of those respondents who were re-taking ENGL 111, none completed the second anonymous questionnaire.

While the fact that some students who completed the first questionnaire did not complete the second questionnaire is not, in and of itself, conclusive evidence that these at-risk students had disappeared completely from my class, this does suggest their absence from class on this day. Statistically, however, attendance issues are common with at-risk students and can be an indicator of eventual failure or attrition from a course. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Thomas R. Bailey suggested that “fewer than two-fifths of students who start in community colleges go on to complete a degree or certificate within six years” (2012). Complete College America is a Washington-based nonprofit whose mission is to increase college completion rates in America’s colleges. The organization works with individual colleges to assess completion rates and to strategize about possible solutions to retention issues. The organization has suggested that college completion rates at both four-year and two-year colleges
can be linked to factors like student unpreparedness and the subsequent need to take developmental/remedial courses, and completion rates for students requiring developmental or remedial courses are even lower at two-year colleges than at their four-year counterparts (as cited in Amos, 2012). In fact, Denise Smith Amos acknowledges “a trend that education policymakers and college presidents are fighting: Students who are academically unprepared for college and forced into developmental (formerly called remedial) college classes withdraw before earning a degree” (2012). Complete College America suggests that “6 of 10 students (at two-year or community colleges) take developmental courses, compared to 20% at four-year colleges” and further suggests that this difference between two- and four-year colleges may be linked to college acceptance practices (as cited in Amos, 2012). In the two-year college setting of my own study, institutional research in 2006 showed that at least 68% of our students (nearly 10% more than the figures by Complete College given above) are unprepared for college-level coursework and are required to take at least one remedial course, whether in English or Math, and many of our students actually take more than one remedial course. Unfortunately, this is the reality in many two-year colleges, and efforts to understand student needs and to support students in their attempts to complete their educations continue, often with only limited success. According to Stan G. Jones, president of Complete College America, “The ACT (college entrance exam) tells us that only about a third of high-school students are college-ready, and yet we send about two-thirds of (them) to college every year, [. . .] We used to just send our A and B students; now we’re sending our C students to college—and they’re not ready” (as cited in Amos, 2012). And when considering scores on the SAT (college entrance exam), “only 43 percent of 2012’s high-school graduates are prepared for success in college” (as cited in Peterkin, 2012). Of course, scores on entrance exams like the ACT and SAT are not definitive indicators of future college
completion or success, but they are suggestive indicators. According to College Board (the company that owns the SAT), “[t]he strongest indicators of college success [...] are taking a rigorous high-school curriculum and having parents with postsecondary degrees” (as cited in Peterkin, 2012). Ironically, for many minority and low-income students, neither indicator of college success is very likely, and yet, these are the students who are most likely to end up in remedial courses at two-year colleges and who are least likely to successfully complete their educations.

In looking again at the demographic data from my own study, then, I find it interesting that while the number of respondents who placed into ENGL111 after passing ENGL 093 (a developmental or remedial course) did decrease between questionnaires, it was those respondents who were re-taking ENGL111 who seemed to disappear completely. Without more specific data about the individual student respondents, though, it is difficult to determine a cause for their disappearance. I do wonder, however, if these respondents had taken ENGL 093 before their first failed attempt at ENGL 111. If so, then this finding within my own study would seem to agree with data and findings from Complete College America and others regarding a connection between unpreparedness for college and low levels of completion.

My purpose in collecting this basic demographic data in the initial three questions on the questionnaires was to begin to create a picture of my ENGL 111 students themselves. The fourth, fifth and sixth questions on both questionnaires, then, added to this picture by beginning to explore what the students valued in the contexts of the writing classroom and in the writing itself. The fourth question on each questionnaire listed twelve aspects or factors that help to make up the learning contexts in the composition classroom. Student respondents were asked to rank these factors from 1 to 12, with 1 meaning “most important to me” and 12 meaning “least
important to me.” Using T-tests to analyze the raw data, I was able to not only determine how the students ranked (or valued) each factor but also how those rankings changed between questionnaires (i.e. from Pre-project to Post-project questionnaire). As shown in Table 5.2 on the following page, the difference in students’ ranking/valuing of factors showed improvement or positive change (as shown in the lowering of the mean) for every factor except for two: “Teacher explanations” and “Spellcheck.” While the improvement or positive change in valuation for each factor was generally insignificant from Pre- to Post-project questionnaire, the change for the “Peer reviews & conferences” factor was statistically significant (p<.05). So, from these results it would seem that students came to value “Peer reviews & conferences” substantially more throughout the research project, but came to see less value in “Teacher explanations” and “Spellcheck” throughout the process of completing their projects.

As also shown in Table 5.2, the same six factors were ranked amongst the top six places on both the Pre-and Post-project questionnaires, though in some cases their placement within that ranking differed between questionnaires. I found it interesting that “Multiple drafts” moved up from its fifth spot on the Pre-project list and into the fourth highest spot in the Post-project rankings. This move up the list for the “multiple drafts” factor would seem to suggest a higher valuing of this factor and seems to align with responses given later on question 6 as well. The most notable move in rankings belonged to the “Peer reviews & conferences” factor, though, which jumped from the sixth place on the Pre-project questionnaire to the second highest place on the Post-project questionnaire. Interestingly, the “Teacher comments on drafts” factor held the highest value (deemed “most important to me”) on both the Pre-and Post-project lists. From the changes in rankings or valuations of factors between the Pre-and Post-project questionnaires, it seems that students consistently valued most those factors that were interactive and that had a
direct or personal impact on their writing—factors like “Teacher comments on drafts,” “Peer reviews & conferences,” “Teacher explanations,” “Multiple drafts,” “Classroom discussions,” and “Sample papers” were within the top six places on the list for both the Pre-and Post-project questionnaires, while “In-class activities,” and “Workshop time in class” simply traded the seventh and eighth spots between questionnaires.

Table 5.2: Comparison of What Students Value (T-test of data from Pre- & Post-Project Questionnaires)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Project</th>
<th></th>
<th>Post-Project</th>
<th></th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Rank</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Rank</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher comments on drafts</td>
<td>2.96 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.67 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher explanations</td>
<td>3.00 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.28 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom discussions</td>
<td>5.63 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.22 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample papers</td>
<td>5.75 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.44 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing multiple drafts</td>
<td>5.92 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.50 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer reviews &amp; conferences</td>
<td>6.04 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.89 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class activities</td>
<td>6.50 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.28 8</td>
<td></td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop time in class</td>
<td>6.75 8</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.00 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spellcheck</td>
<td>7.08 9</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.44 12</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbook reading</td>
<td>7.17 10</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.78 10</td>
<td></td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer &amp; online resources</td>
<td>7.63 11</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.94 11</td>
<td></td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading rubrics</td>
<td>8.13 12</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.44 9</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Statistically significant at p<.05.

I found it interesting that consistency existed at the other end of the valuation spectrum as well since the same four factors were valued least by students on both questionnaires.

“Spellcheck,” “Textbook readings,” “Computer & online resources,” and “Rubrics” occupied the
last four places on the list of twelve factors, though their placement within those four places changed some between questionnaires. Since all four factors could be deemed impersonal or merely tools, I wonder if the students’ consistent placement of these four factors in the lower third of the list might be indicative of the students’ desire (whether consciously or unconsciously) for personal interactions surrounding their writing. The changes in the valuing of the “Spellcheck” and “Rubrics” factors that occurred between Pre-and Post-Project Questionnaires, however, may also be significant: the students seemed to devalue technological tools, “Computer & online resources” and “Spellcheck,” in favor of those tools that were more familiar or comfortable to most of them, “Rubrics” and “Textbook readings.” I wonder if this devaluing of technological tools could be due in part to the students’ levels of technological literacy and the struggles that some students had in finding sources, drafting and revising throughout the Argumentative Research project.

Student demographics vary widely in the two-year college which makes this setting particularly important for the study of differences in how students learn. With this in mind, I continued my work with this questionnaire data and looked for potential differences in how my students might value the various aspects of the composition classroom. When considering the differences in valuations by gender, no significant differences in valuations emerged; however, when the differences in valuations were further analyzed based on age, some significant differences in valuations emerged. Regardless of gender, students in the “22 years or older” age range showed improvement or positive change in their valuation of every factor except for two: “Workshop time in class” and “Computer/online resources.” Perhaps even more interesting, though, is the number of factors for which a significant difference in valuation is shown by the students in this “22 years or older” age range. As shown in Table 5.3 on the following page, from
start to finish of the research project, these older, or nontraditional-aged students found more value in: “Classroom discussions,” “In-class activities,” “Peer review & conferences,” “Teacher explanations,” and “Teacher comments on drafts.” Each of these factors showed significant difference (from p<.01 to p<.10) for this “22 years or older” age group. In light of the earlier results for all student respondents, it is particularly interesting that this age group found “Teacher explanations” to be more valued at a significant rate (p<.10).

Table 5.3: Comparison (by Age Group) of What Students Value (T-test of data from Post-Project Questionnaire)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>18-21 years</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>22 years or older</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher comments on drafts</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sig. at p&lt;.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop time in class</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer reviews &amp; conferences</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sig. at p&lt;.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing multiple drafts</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher explanations</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sig. at p&lt;.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer &amp; online resources</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.40</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom discussions</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sig. at p&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample papers</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading rubrics</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbook readings</td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class activities</td>
<td>8.63</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sig. at p&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spellcheck</td>
<td>9.88</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant difference from (p<.01 to p<.10)
These differences in valuations by age group seem to suggest that, through the process of completing the research project, non-traditional-aged students (those “22 years or older”), found those aspects of the composition classroom contexts that were personal, interactive and dialogical to be more valuable. And as I considered the two factors for which this age group found less value after completing the research project—“Workshop time in class” and “Computer/online resources”—I wondered if these students’ level of digital literacy and/or their level of comfort with composing on the computer might have influenced their responses, especially since some of the workshop time given to work on the research project was when we were in the computer lab. The low value given to “Workshop time in class” by this age group is also interesting, however, because I was accessible to students during this time to answer questions and offer assistance when needed, something that could be considered under the “Teacher explanations” factor as well and this factor was highly valued by this age group. Interestingly, the ranking of factors for each age group included ties in rankings for a number of factors in the lower half of the list. It should also be noted here, however, that whether in the “18-21 years” age range or in the “22 years or older” age range, the composition classroom factors that were valued most highly by the respondents were those that were personal, interactive and dialogical.

As I reviewed the differences in valuations between age groups, I noticed that both valued “Teacher comments on drafts” as their number 1 or “most important to me” factor. Surprisingly, while several differences in valuations existed later in the list, both age groups shared the same factors at number 3 and number 4 as well, with “Peer review & conferences” at 3 and “Writing multiple drafts” at 4 on the overall valuation listing for both groups. I found the differences between what the age groups chose as their second most valued factors especially
interesting, though. For the “18-21 years” group, “Workshop time in class” was valued, while the “22 years or older” age group chose “Teacher explanations” as their second most valued factor. I found this difference to be particularly interesting considering how the “22 years or older” age group de-valued “Workshop time in class” from their pre-project responses to their post-project responses [See Table 5.3] and this age group also placed this factor in the tenth place on the list of twelve classroom factors. I have already pondered a possible reason for the lack of value that this older age group placed on “Workshop time in class,” but I remain curious as to why this factor ranked so highly on the list for the younger age group. I wonder if this valuation is a remnant of their high school educational experiences, during which much of their assigned work was completed during class time. So, perhaps with their work schedules, busy lives, and newfound freedom outside of class, these younger students wanted to be able to complete as much of their assigned work during class time as possible. Ironically, as I considered my students’ use the scheduled in-class workshop times throughout the research project, it was often these younger students who did not seem to be fully utilizing the time that was given. Of course, I also know that it is virtually impossible to accurately assess a student’s usage of workshop time, especially when considering individual writing and revising processes within a project.

When I initially considered questions 5 and 6 on both questionnaires (as shown in Table 5.4 on the following page), the responses about what the student respondents valued in writing seemed almost contradictory. Question 5 asked, “In general, how do you feel about revision as a part of your writing process?” and then gave three pre-set response options: “I typically write a single draft of a paper and then turn it in;” “I typically write a draft, fix misspelled words and punctuation errors in that draft, and then turn it in;” or, “I typically write and revise multiple drafts before I turn in my final draft.” On the Pre-Project Questionnaire, no one marked the first
option of only completing a single draft, while 39.1% marked the second option about basic edits and a majority (60.9%) of respondents marked that they write and revise multiple drafts. In question 6, then, the respondents were asked, “In general, how do you feel about writing multiple drafts?” and were given three options: “Writing multiple drafts is not helpful for me as a writer;” “Writing multiple drafts is somewhat helpful for me as a writer;” and, “Writing multiple drafts is very helpful for me as a writer.” Once again, on this Pre-Project Questionnaire no one marked the first option about multiple drafts not being helpful, but 25% of the respondents marked the “somewhat helpful” and 75% of respondents marked the “very helpful” option for this question.

Based on the responses on this Pre-Project Questionnaire, then, multiple drafts seemed to be valued highly. On the Post-Project Questionnaire, the responses to question 6 seemed to imply an even higher valuing of multiple drafts since the “somewhat helpful” response rate dropped down to 11.1% and the “very helpful” response rate climbed to 88.9%. But the responses to question 5 on this Post-Project Questionnaire (shown in Table 5.4 below) were less clear in their implications.

Table 5.4: General Student Values in Writing from Questionnaires (Pre-and Post-Project)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Project</th>
<th>Post-Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feelings about revision in process</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single draft</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic edits (minimum)</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple drafts</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feelings about multiple drafts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not helpful</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Respondents</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Surprisingly, the rate of response for writing and revising multiple drafts dropped slightly (from 60.9% to 58.8%) on this Post-project questionnaire while the rate of response for basic edits rose slightly (from 39.1% to 41.2%). While both the changes in percentage rates for responses and the overall numbers of respondents who gave those responses were too small for the difference to be considered statistically significant, this difference was interesting and worth pondering nonetheless. After all, how can multiple drafts be valued less in one question while being more highly valued in the very next question? Could this seeming contradiction represent a difference between what the students actually do within their writing processes versus what they believe is helpful for them as writers? Additionally, I wondered if my presence as teacher and researcher had any effect on the student responses. In particular, I wondered if students responded to questions 5 and 6 as they believed I wanted them to or as they believed they should respond (i.e. “social desirability bias”). Even though the questionnaires were anonymous and I encouraged the students to respond honestly, the students obviously were aware of the focus of my research study and that knowledge could have affected responses.

As previously discussed, the initial questions on both questionnaires allowed students to respond with pre-set response options, and these student responses yielded quantitative data that provided an important baseline for further analysis. The short answer questions at the end of each questionnaire, then, allowed students to give more detailed explanations of what they valued, and in some cases, why they valued certain aspects or factors within the context of the composition classroom. This qualitative data/information made it possible to triangulate with other findings later in the study as well. Since the first questionnaire was completed pre-project, or before the argumentative research project was begun, the short answer questions on this questionnaire dealt with student opinions about past experiences with comments and their perspectives about what
kind of comments would be helpful for them in their writing. So, for example, question 9 asked students, “What kind of teacher comments or responses do you think would help you most in your personal writing and revising process?” Students responded that they wanted truth and honesty from teacher comments, but they also stressed the need for some balance between the number of positive and negative comments. The students suggested that all negative comments can leave them frustrated, but a positive comment here and there can motivate them in their writing. And when they talked about criticism, the students gave some qualifications for that criticism, asking that it be helpful as well as corrective, and asking that it give thorough and detailed explanations for revisions. Additionally, the students desired criticism that is positive and encouraging in its delivery. And compliments were welcomed by students, too, especially those that recognized good points within a paper or those that recognized the student’s progress and effort within a project. The students responded that they wanted the teacher’s comments to ask questions when the text is unclear or when the teacher needs to gain clarification about something within the text. The students further responded that they appreciated getting another viewpoint about their texts, especially to gain new ideas or to receive help about what is needed to make the text better. And these anonymous responses on the first questionnaire were later corroborated with the ideas shared by Liz, Susan, and Jacob in their personal interviews as well as with the ideas shared by numerous students within their Final Reflection essays. So, it would seem that students value honest and truthful feedback about their writing, feedback that is helpful in its content and encouraging in its delivery. In other words, my students did seem to know what they wanted from, and what they valued in, teacher comments.

Since the second questionnaire was completed after the argumentative research project was submitted for grading, the short answer questions on this questionnaire were focused
specifically on the comments and feedback that the students received throughout the process of completing the research project. For example, question 10 asked, “In what specific ways did the teacher’s comments affect your revision work between the 2nd draft and your final draft of the research project. Please give details in your explanation.” From their earlier valuations of those twelve classroom factors, the student respondents clearly showed that teacher comments on their drafts were important to them. In fact, the “teacher comments” factor was valued highest both before and after the argumentative research project and across age groups as well.

Figure 5.1: Specific Ways the Teacher’s Comments Affected Revisions between 2nd & Final Drafts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Helped me . . .”</th>
<th>“Gave me . . .”</th>
<th>“Showed me . . .”</th>
<th>“Made . . .”</th>
<th>Teacher’s comments . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*a lot</td>
<td>*ideas on how to be more detailed</td>
<td>*what I was doing wrong</td>
<td>*me look at what information was necessary or not</td>
<td>*told me exactly what I needed to fix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*to revise my project/with revisions</td>
<td>*ideas on how to make my argument stronger</td>
<td>*ways of editing</td>
<td>*my revising process clear-cut and easy to do</td>
<td>*found little mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*to know if I was doing it right</td>
<td>*suggestions for my problem areas</td>
<td>*where to put new ideas</td>
<td>*detailed notes on drafts</td>
<td>*were extremely helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*with organizing the papers</td>
<td>*helpful hints on citing sources &amp; punctuation, etc.</td>
<td>*better words to use</td>
<td></td>
<td>*dramatically influenced the way I articulated my writing to make it flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*write the paper</td>
<td></td>
<td>*need for taking time (on projects)</td>
<td></td>
<td>*didn’t leave me wondering about the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*focus on details</td>
<td>*another perspective on my writing</td>
<td>*need for researching</td>
<td></td>
<td>*had a big effect on revisions, but not good—the final project was not good enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*decide how I was going to use that information</td>
<td>*good advice</td>
<td>*need for following directions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*stay focused on the main argument</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*to know if the flow of my paper was alright</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*with peer review</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In their responses to question 10, the students responded with specific ways in which the comments helped them or showed them what they needed to do within their writing. The student responses, as shown in Figure 5.1 on the previous page, reflect the students’ own wording in most cases.

In considering these responses, then, it was clear that the students recognized multiple functions for teacher comments as they revised their texts. While several responses were rather general, others were specific and seemed to show an understanding of the rhetorical function of teacher comments. For example, one student wrote, “It helped me to revise my project because I really didn’t know if I was doing it right.” Another student said, “they (my teacher’s comments) made me look more at what information was necessary or not.” And yet another student wrote, “she (the teacher) gave me ideas on how to be more detailed. She gave me ideas on how to make my argument stronger.” And, for the most part, these responses seemed to indicate positive attitudes about the comments received from the teacher and the benefits to the students’ writing processes. For example, one student explained, “Her comments told me exactly what I needed to fix and gave me further suggestions for my problem areas, making my revising process clear-cut and easy to do.” One response, however, seemed to indicate some frustration from the student, not necessarily with the comments themselves but seemingly more with how the results from the revising apparently did not match the student’s expectations: “the teacher’s comments had a big effect on revisions, but not good—the final project was not good enough.” This just goes to show that even with the best of intentions on the part of both teacher and student throughout the entire process (i.e. the teacher as she reads and gives the feedback, the student as she reads and uses the feedback, the teacher as she reads and assesses the final project, and the student as she reads and understands that assessment), miscommunication and misunderstandings are always possible.
My very intentional and rhetorical processes of reading and of composing response (as explored in Chapter 4) may help to lessen the number of times that these miscommunications or misunderstandings occur within my composition classes, but there is no way to guarantee student understanding (or use) of my comments (whether spoken or on the page) or to completely eliminate the occasional communication issue, especially with so many contextual factors involved within the commenting relationship specifically and within writing in general. An additional way to consider the negative example given above, however, is to recognize that while students say that they want honesty and truth from their teachers, these same students may not always be happy with that honesty or truth when given, especially when the reality does not quite match their preconceived hopes or expectations.

The next question on the second questionnaire, question 11, asked, “Looking back and reflecting over the entire research project, what (feedback) do you see as the most important feedback that you received from your peers or from your teacher?” Since the respondents, regardless of age, valued both teacher comments and peer reviews highly in their rankings for question 4, it was no surprise to find that respondents deemed both types of feedback to be important within their short answer responses here as well. One respondent claimed that “all of the comments from my peers were very helpful,” while another told how peers helped with “documentation style questions and asking if I could elaborate more in the detail department.” For another respondent, the response was that peers “told me how good my topic was.” In some cases, the source for the feedback was not specified as being teacher or peer, and in other cases, the respondent stated that “both helped” or that “my classmates were equally helpful.” Of course, for most students, the teacher’s feedback was declared most important, with one respondent even going so far as to say, “the best was from the teacher because she was the one who gave me the
grade in the end,” and another claiming that the teacher’s feedback is “always more helpful because she is the professional.” In considering the full listing of what the student respondents deemed to be the most important teacher feedback, then, it seemed that all of the responses could fit within three categories of teacher feedback, categories that emphasized authority, help, or support on the part of the teacher. These student responses (given in the students’ own words), and the categories to which they seem to fit, are shown in Figure 5.2 below.

**Figure 5.2: Most Important Teacher Feedback throughout the Research Project**

| Emphasis on authority | *always more helpful because she is the professional*
| | *most important [ . . .] because (she) could explain what she wanted to see in our final draft*
| | *the best was from the teacher because she was the one who gave me the grade in the end*
| | *most helpful was always the teacher’s opinion*
| | *I feel like my teacher wanted a lot more*
| Emphasis on help | *helped me organize and create a stronger argument*
| | *helped me form correct citations*
| | *informed me I was missing items/giving me ideas of what was missing*
| | *(giving me ideas of) better ways to phrase something*
| | *told me my topic was good*
| | *all of the comments from my teacher were helpful*
| | *most important for me was knowing that I was on track*
| | *pretty much helped me get the paper to the final draft stage. I would write, she would comment, I would write more, etc. etc. . . . ☺ [Note: smiley face was part of the student response ☺]*
| Emphasis on support | *her confidence in my writing eased the stress of the project for me*
| | *my teacher giving unconditional support through her comments*
Throughout this study, the students frequently connected teacher comments to the act of helping. Their responses here on question 11 were no exception, so the category title (“Emphasis on help”) that I chose here seemed fitting. Several of the responses in this category seemed to recognize the feedback as being formative, feedback that helped them in the midst of working through their writing/revising processes on the project. One response even acknowledged the interactive nature of the feedback, the back and forth between me and that student within her or his process of writing: “I would write, she would comment, I would write more, etc, etc. . . . 😊” And the smiley face in the student response seems to indicate a positive attitude about the experience.

The “Emphasis on support” category included the fewest responses to question 11, but both responses really seemed to emphasize the importance of this more personal aspect of teacher feedback. One respondent explained that “her (my teacher’s) confidence in my writing eased the stress of the project for me.” Confidence was mentioned by numerous students and in various contexts throughout this study. In this case, my confidence in the student was emphasized, but in other places, students discussed their own emerging confidence as writers. I am learning that when my students are prone to doubt their own abilities, it is important for me as teacher to encourage them along the way; at times, it is only my confidence in them that keeps them going until they can begin to see what they are capable of as writers and can gain confidence in themselves. The second response in this category, then, seemed to further underscore the importance of giving encouragement and support within teacher feedback. This respondent stated that the most important feedback was “my teacher giving unconditional support through her comments.” As I read (and re-read) this particular response, I was struck by the respondent’s choice of words: “unconditional support.” Writing is such a subjective act, and
though we try as writing teachers to be as objective as possible within our assessments while also considering rhetorical contexts surrounding a particular piece of writing, “unconditional” is not likely a word that we would generally associate with any form of assessment. I wonder then if formative assessment, when practiced as an interactive and dialogical commenting relationship between student and teacher, creates more of an understanding in the student about the underlying intent of the teacher comments. Rather than reading comments as an impersonal verdict of impending doom (as in summative assessment), the student can read the formative comments as a personal message of hope and opportunity.

When considering the overall “balance” of responses within the respective categories in Figure 5.2, then, the number of responses within the “Emphasis on help” category was greater than the number of responses in either of the other categories, but personally I would have liked to see even fewer responses in the “Emphasis on authority” category. This just goes to show, though, that no matter how a teacher downplays (or attempts to downplay) grades and her own authority in the classroom and over the students’ writing, the students themselves are still very aware of academic power structures and of the ultimate authority and power that is inherent in the very position of teacher or instructor.

As discussed within Chapter 4, I am very intentional in my efforts to give my students a voice and an active role in the writing activities of our classroom, within our commenting relationship surrounding their writing, and in their own learning overall. I let my students know from the beginning of the semester that we will be working together toward a common goal: their successful growth as writers in ENGL 111. And as shown in Figure 4.3 (in Chapter 4), a number of specific activities within the overall context of my composition classroom seem to encourage and nurture a dialogical and interactive commentary relationship between me (as
teacher) and my students. These activities range from classroom activities (e.g. Q & A sessions, small group activities or workshop sessions, and self-assessment activities) to out-of-class activities or opportunities to interact (e.g. email correspondence, office hours, and outside interactions). While a couple of these activities are teacher-directed, most of these activities allow for, or even encourage, student-directed dialogue or interactions, thus allowing the student to make choices and take responsibility for her or his own learning throughout the semester.

**Figure 5.3: Student Perceptions about Their ENGL 111 Journeys (from Final Reflective Essays)**

| Progressing/Growing | • As a writer  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>• In understanding of writing as process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Reflecting Back     | • On successes of semester  
 |                     | • On disappointments/failures of semester |
| Recognizing         | • Personal responsibility for semester outcomes (both positive & negative)  
 |                     | • Value in different aspects of class |
| Beginning with      | • About ENGL 111  
 | Fear/Insecurity/Unfamiliarity | • About writing itself |
| Needing             | • Motivation  
 |                     | • Confidence  
 |                     | • Help  
 |                     | • Encouragement |
| Appreciating        | • Teacher feedback  
 |                     | • Teacher attitude/passion  
 |                     | • Helpfulness  
 |                     | • Encouragement |

In fact, as I completed process coding of the Final Reflective Essay, the last major writing project that the students completed for the semester, I noticed that most students included very similar ideas about themselves and their individual journeys through ENGL 111, ideas that
seemed to reflect some awareness of personal choices throughout their journeys and responsibility for their own learning. These student perceptions about their individual journeys in ENGL 111 (as shown in Figure 5.3 on the previous page) also seemed to complement findings within other parts of this study, such as the case studies in Chapter 3, the teacher-student interactions discussed in Chapter 4 and the anonymous student responses on both questionnaires.

Questions, Answers, and More Questions

My decision to complete a primary research study for my dissertation project represented a very conscious and deliberate choice on my part. Of course, researching one’s own classroom from within that same classroom can present numerous risks, challenges and complications, but it also can afford special insights and new discoveries that are grounded in the everyday realities of that classroom context. My initial research questions helped to guide my early plans for my study, from what kinds of data I wanted to collect to how that data might be collected and then analyzed. In addition to the data collected and analyzed within a study like this, though, the methods and methodologies that a researcher chooses to employ may affect the findings as well. In fact, certain affordances and challenges can be associated with any method or methodology that is employed within a research study, and these affordances and challenges should be both acknowledged and discussed. As discussed earlier, and as shown later in Figure 5.4, I employed multiple methods and methodologies in this particular study, and while I have discussed each in previous chapters, some attention to these choices and their effects within the overall research study is warranted here as well.

As discussed earlier, Feminist theory provided the foundational framework for the research work of this study. With its emphasis on multiplicity, reflexivity, and intertextuality, feminist theory was inter-woven throughout every aspect of the study and within the various
methods and methodologies employed: multiple perspectives (and voices) were valued; critical reflection allowed for re-visioning, re-evaluating and contextualizing; and the connectedness of individual perspectives, stories, experiences, and learning was uncovered and explored. Of course, while these emphases were beneficial for a study like mine, these same affordances also created certain challenges as well. For example, challenging assumptions without providing conclusive findings is frowned upon by some, and residual resistance to qualitative research and the subjective or personal still exists within some fields as well. As a researcher, then, I have attempted to show value within the overall process of exploration and to highlight possible conclusions while also acknowledging the inherent situatedness and complexity involved in studying my own students from within my composition classroom.

Teacher-Research allowed me to study the multiple contexts surrounding student learning and relationships in my composition classroom. The convenience of location and context (i.e. my classroom as setting, my students as subjects, and my own pedagogy at work) eased some aspects of research by allowing me to simply teach and interact with my students in a natural, familiar way, but these same affordances brought about challenges as well. For example, maintaining the necessary business-as-usual attitude and actions as teacher-participant in the study was difficult at times, especially when additional time or action was required of me as researcher to complete tasks (e.g. copying student texts or taking reflective notes). Additionally, it was difficult not to be concerned or disappointed with the rate of student participation in the study, and I found myself wondering at times why students had chosen not to participate. And admittedly, since I attempted to maintain transparency both as teacher and as researcher, it was tough to balance this transparency at times, especially when fatigue, frustrations or disappointments set in.
Grounded theory allowed me to employ mixed methods in my research (both quantitative and qualitative), gave me the ability to let the data guide my research, and enabled me to consider multiple possibilities and to answer questions with more questions. Of course, the potential for information overload was ever-present with grounded theory research, and the lack of definitive answers could be deemed challenging as well.

Employing an ethnographic perspective throughout this study afforded me the ability to delve more deeply into a specific population (my students) and culture (my composition classroom) to create a detailed “picture” that considered perceptions, motivations, actions and interactions of all involved. While detail and description are valued in ethnography, this type of thick description is not valued in all disciplines and fields. Additionally, if the researcher is not careful, valuable insights can be lost amidst a vast sea of details. Even with these challenges, however, an ethnographic perspective allowed me to create case studies that included deeper exploration into the lives and experiences of individual students than is possible with other research methods. In particular, these case studies allowed for the exploration of individual ENGL 111 experiences and perceptions about the commenting relationship when data from interviews, emails, writing projects and reflections were combined. One challenge in using case studies is that an isolated (and incomplete) perspective might be given unless the case study is placed in conversation with other data. For this reason, I employed the Constant Comparative Method which allowed me to consider data from multiple perspectives, at different times, and in different ways. So, when the case studies were compared with each other and then with data from their peers, these multiple comparisons allowed me to discover/uncover the larger context and to show the interconnectedness of data. Of course, not all comparisons yielded new insights
or greater understanding, though; some comparisons instead lead to more questions, additional uncertainties or possible areas for future study. But isn’t that what research is all about?

**Figure 5.4: Affordances and Challenges of Research Methods and Methodologies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method/Methodology</th>
<th>Affordances of Employing</th>
<th>Challenges of Employing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Theory</td>
<td>• Encourages the inclusion of missing voices (in this case, students) &amp; of multiple voices</td>
<td>• Residual resistance to qualitative research and value of the personal in some fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emphasis on intertextuality &amp; connectedness of “texts” or stories within research (i.e. everyone’s story matters)</td>
<td>• May challenge or contradict current assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emphasis on the personal &amp; subjective perspective</td>
<td>• Research findings are merely plausible, never absolute or conclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Always room for reinterpretation of findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Context matters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Research</td>
<td>• Convenience of location, classroom setting, context &amp; subjects</td>
<td>• Maintaining business-as-usual attitude &amp; actions in spite of additional needs/requirements of study (esp. time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to study multiple contexts surrounding the learning &amp; relationships</td>
<td>• Not being concerned or disappointed when not everyone wanted to participate in study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to provide transparency as teacher &amp; as researcher</td>
<td>• Trying to maintain transparency as teacher &amp; as researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>• Ability to let the data guide the research</td>
<td>• Potential for information overload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to consider multiple possibilities &amp; to answer questions with more questions</td>
<td>• Multiple possibilities, but no definitive answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to mix methods in research (quantitative and qualitative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnographic Perspective</td>
<td>• Ability to delve deeply into a specific population &amp; culture and create a detailed “picture”</td>
<td>• This thick description is not valued in all disciplines or fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Detail &amp; description are valued</td>
<td>• Valuable insights can be lost amidst a sea of details if researcher is not careful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Allowed consideration of perceptions, motivations, actions &amp; interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Studies</td>
<td>• Provided a chance to go deeper into the lives &amp; experiences of individual students than with other methodologies</td>
<td>• Might give an isolated (and incomplete) perspective unless placed in conversation with other data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Allowed for exploration of individual ENGL 111 experiences &amp; perceptions about commenting relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autoethnography</td>
<td>• Allowed inclusion of data from larger context of writing classroom</td>
<td>• Personal risk since it was unfamiliar method at onset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Allowed for deeper reflexivity and intentional contextualizing by teacher-researcher</td>
<td>• Required intentional contextualizing with student data to be beneficial for my study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focused attention of intentions &amp; interactions between teacher &amp; students within the formative commenting process</td>
<td>• Found it difficult to fight feelings of being “too personal” (difficult to over-ride earlier training &amp; experiences)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant Comparative Method</td>
<td>• Ability to consider data from multiple perspectives, at different times, in different ways</td>
<td>• Not all comparisons yield new insights or greater understanding; some comparisons may lead to more questions &amp; uncertainties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to discover larger context and interconnectedness of data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
My decision to employ autoethnography in this study occurred well into the research process, and, admittedly, after much careful consideration of the personal risks involved in pursuing an otherwise unfamiliar method in a study that might forever represent me as scholar. Though daunting, the affordances of such a method were enticing. Perhaps most importantly, autoethnography allowed the inclusion of additional data from within the larger context of the writing classroom and encouraged deeper reflexivity and intentional contextualizing by me as teacher-researcher. Additionally, this method allowed me to focus attention on intentions and interactions between teacher and students within the formative commenting process. Keeping the overall emphasis of the study on the students and their voices, however, required that I intentionally contextualize or place my autoethnographic account in conversation with my students’ voices and perspectives, something which I attempted to do through the selected interactions that I included in the chapter. In this way, the autoethnographic data helped to create a more detailed overall context surrounding formative commentary. Even though my chosen means of presentation for my personal account was more traditional than those in some other autoethnographic accounts that I read, I still fought feelings of being “too personal” at times within this autoethnographic experience and I realized when completing this study that I am more comfortable when focusing attention on others.

Just as certain research methods and methodologies afforded benefits and created challenges when employed in my study, the same could be said about the data collection instruments that I chose to use. In fact, two specific data collection instruments deserve attention here because of the important affordances associated with their usage in this study, but equally important, I think, were some of the challenges associated with their usage. As shown in Figure
5.5, specific affordances and challenges were associated with the both the Pre-and-Post-project questionnaires (Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2) and the personal interviews in this study.

**Figure 5.5: Affordances and Challenges of Specific Data Collection Instruments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Instrument</th>
<th>Affordances of Usage</th>
<th>Challenges with Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Questionnaire 1 (Pre-Project) and Questionnaire 2 (Post-Project)** | • Anonymous & voluntary in hopes of attaining more honest responses  
• Completed during class time, so no extra time required of students  
• Allowed for collection of both quantitative (questions with pre-set answer options) & qualitative (short answer questions) data  
• Initial processing & coding of data provided baseline data for rest of study  
• By giving Questionnaire 1 (Pre-Project) & Questionnaire 2 (Post-project), this allowed for comparison of how students valued classroom factors, & how they considered multiple drafts & comments before & after the Argumentative Research project  
• Short answer questions on Questionnaire 2 could focus specifically on experiences with comments on research project | • Because of anonymity, it was not possible connect questionnaire responses with individual student data  
• Not everyone followed directions in answering questions  
• Took time from class to complete (time which never seems to be enough anyways!)  
• I found 3 questionnaires completed by non-consenting students (2 signed the form & I recognized handwriting on another). I removed these 3 from the data, but I wonder if there were others??  
• Ideally, Questionnaire 1 should have been given at start of semester, before my teaching could influence student responses, but gaining HSRB/IRB approval held up this process. |
| **Interviews** | • Allowed collection of data in individual student’s own words & voice  
• Specific questions allowed students to share personal feelings, attitudes, perspectives & values surrounding their writing process & commenting relationship | • Fewer responses to invitation to participate than expected/desired  
• Difficulties in scheduling of interview sessions  
• Transcribing the interviews was slow & tedious |
Employing anonymous questionnaires allowed me to attain direct responses from students with much of the data provided in their own words as well. This anonymity, however, made it difficult at times to connect the data from the questionnaires to data from other data collection instruments with any specificity. The two questionnaires allowed for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, though, which provided baseline data for the rest of the study. Of course, not everyone followed directions when answering questions, and I found (and removed from data) three questionnaires that were completed by non-consenting students (two actually put their names on the form & I recognized the handwriting on the other form), so these were other frustrations or challenges with anonymous questionnaires. Administering Questionnaire 1 before the start of the Argumentative Research project and then administering Questionnaire 2 after the project was submitted allowed for some comparisons of responses over time and in different contexts. These pre-and-post project questionnaires allowed for comparisons over time of how students valued classroom factors and how they considered multiple drafts and comments before and after completing the Argumentative Research project. And because of this intentional timing around the completion of the Argumentative Research project, the short answer questions on Questionnaire 2 could focus specifically on the students’ experiences with comments on this particular research project. Admittedly, I had hoped to administer Questionnaire 1 at the very start of the semester, before my teaching and my positive attitude toward formative commentary could influence student responses, but HSRB/IRB approval took longer than expected and I was not able to administer the questionnaire until just before our work on the Argumentative Research project began. Still, I think the questionnaires afforded the collection of valuable data about my students, what they valued, and how they
perceived the commenting relationship, with much of this data provided in the students’ own voices.

The personal interviews afforded me the opportunity to collect data in the individual students’ own words and voices (literally). By asking specific questions, the students could share personal feelings, attitudes, perspectives, and values surrounding their personal writing processes and their involvement in the commenting relationship. Interestingly, I found that when talking, the students tended to give more detailed responses to questions than when asked the same or similar questions in a written format (like on the questionnaires). Of course, this particular data collection instrument involved numerous challenges, too, from the limited number of participants who responded to the invitation to the difficulties in scheduling the interview sessions to the countless hours required to painstakingly transcribe the interview sessions. In spite of these challenges, however, I still believe that the three resulting case studies add much depth and insight into the student writing experience and the student perspective about formative commentary. So, while some might question the value of including only three interviews in a study like this, I would argue that the depth and specificity in data afforded by these interviews makes up for any lack in breadth.

Now that I have discussed some of the affordances and challenges associated with my chosen research methods and methodologies, and their potential effects on research findings, I would like to consider how my research findings have (or, perhaps, have not) answered my initial research questions:

1. What factors make commentary dialogical and interactive?

2. In what ways do students understand and value this dialogical and interactive commentary?
3. How do students interact with and use teacher comments?

4. What might an understanding of student values (with regards to dialogical and interactive commentary) mean for FYC pedagogy?

For each of these questions, I look back at related research data and findings to show how the question was answered by the findings or to suggest additional questions that emerged in my initial search for answers.

*What Factors Make Commentary Dialogical and Interactive?*

This first research question emerged from my desire to better understand formative commentary from the student’s perspective. I wanted to learn what my students considered to be “dialogue” and what it meant to them for commentary to be “interactive” as well. The most explicit answers to this question were given within the personal interviews and discussed in Chapter 3. Within these interviews, all three of the students emphasized their desire to be able to initiate discussions with their teachers about their projects and their learning in general. In the writing class in particular, the students stressed the importance of student-directed communication, the ability to ask questions and to discuss possibilities, as they began projects and while in the midst of working on their writing projects. And these ideas were shared by their classmates. For example, in discussing her fears about writing her first college paper, Bev stated, “I asked my instructor so many questions about this project that I was afraid that I was starting to annoy her with the same questions, but Mrs. Morris proved time and time that she was there for me and to ask as many questions as needed” (from the student’s Final Reflective Essay). And another student, D.P., noted in his Final Reflective Essay that “the discussions (in class) were helpful to me as the course progressed.” For each of these students, then, dialogue implies more than a passive or one-sided conversation; dialogue implies that the student has a necessary and
vital role in the conversation, a role that includes the authority to initiate or to direct that
conversation with the teacher about her or his writing. Bev also shared the following in her Final
Reflective essay: “I have learned that asking questions and not being ashamed of not knowing
something is not considered to be a bad thing. I feel that the person who does not know the
answer to a problem that they have and does not seek out help has limited their ability to
succeed.” Additionally, this type of dialogue includes a responsibility to act and to interact on the
part of both teacher and student, according to these students. As discussed in Chapter 3, Jacob
stated this idea most strongly in his interview response:

During the revising process the communication link between the teacher and the student
must remain strong and as constant as possible in order for the student to get the greatest
good out of the instructions from the teacher. If the link between student and teacher is
not formed by the teacher who really wants the student to learn and the student who
really wants to learn then failure will almost always occur. (interview)

In particular, these students discussed the back and forth nature of this interactive commentary
throughout their processes of writing and revising. And in ways, as discussed earlier in this
chapter, the anonymous responses to the short answer questions on the two questionnaires often
implied similar ideas about the dialogue and the interactions that the students desired in teacher
commentary. In addition, students shared their ideas about dialogue and interactions with their
teacher (me) about their writing in their Final Reflective essays. While most students in this
study expressed a desire to dialogue and interact with the teacher about their writing, I wonder
why some students struggled to take an active role or engage in the commenting dialogue. I also
wonder why it seemed to be easier for returning adult students to engage in the commenting
dialogue than their younger peers. And I wonder how academic “norms” might have affected each student’s level of engagement in the commenting dialogue.

In What Ways Do Students Understand and Value This Dialogical and Interactive Commentary?

The responses on the two anonymous questionnaires provided some baseline data regarding student understanding and valuing of commentary as well. In considering the anonymous responses to question 9 on the Pre-project questionnaire, I found it interesting that what the students stated as desired aspects of commentary, those aspects that they thought would be most helpful to them, are also foundational aspects of effective communication in general: being honest, explaining ideas clearly, balancing criticism with encouragement, and questioning when something is unclear, for example. This should be no surprise. After all, teacher commentary is most effective when it does model effective communication practices. And as my students clearly stated in the interviews, on the questionnaires, and in their Final Reflective Essays, being able to ask questions and receive formative feedback as they write and revise is important to students. In particular, the “Needing” and “Appreciating” sections of Figure 5.3 seemed to emphasize the importance of this type of commentary relationship for students. As they discussed their ENGL 111 journeys in their Final Reflective essays, students consistently stated that they were needing motivation, confidence, help and encouragement as they worked throughout the semester to grow as writers. For example, one student explained how she had avoided taking a writing class until the last minute, saying, “I was afraid of how harshly my writing would be judged” (student’s Final Reflective Essay). This student also emphasized the role of encouragement in her learning: “Your encouragement helped a lot. [. . .] The positive comments on my work have helped to build some confidence in my writing ability” (student’s
Final Reflective essay). In her Final Reflective Essay, another student wrote: “[t]he more I went to class, the more Mrs. Morris gave me confidence in myself that I could achieve my goal in writing.” As they reflected back over their journeys, the students also mentioned that they were appreciating teacher feedback, teacher attitude/passion, helpfulness, and encouragement. And within their responses to question 4 on both questionnaires, the classroom factor that all students valued most highly was “teacher comments.” In fact, responses to question 4 on both questionnaires showed the composition classroom factors that were valued highest by these students were those that were personal, interactive and dialogical.

*How Do Students Interact With and Use Teacher Comments?*

Answering this question would be easy if all of our students would respond directly to our comments with comments of their own on the page, explaining how they understood our comments and how they planned to use that information as they revised, but that scenario rarely happens. In fact, in nearly ten years of teaching beginning writers, I have had only a handful of students who have chosen to directly respond to me within the pages of their drafts. Admittedly, it is a fun experience to actually carry on a conversation with a student within her or his text, but even when this happens, at least part of the conversation necessarily takes place off the page and within the other related classroom contexts (e.g. informal conferences, email, in-class discussions and activities, etc.). As I looked through students’ drafts, though, I recognized some other ways in which my students acknowledged and then used my written comments within their drafts. Many of my students highlighted certain comments within their drafts and some placed checkmarks or “X”s beside comments as they addressed issues within their texts. Other students made notes to themselves near my comments or scribbled in their planned corrections or additions to the text nearby. Additionally, many of my students referenced my written or verbal
comments to them about their writing and revising when emailing or conferencing with me, and many of these students discussed these conversations and interactions in their Reflection pages for the projects as well. And when I looked at the students’ projects themselves, I could trace much of my students’ revision work back to my comments within their drafts or my feedback within other classroom contexts (as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4). This is not to say that every student managed to effectively use my comments, but most students did try, and even their attempts could be traced back to my comments in most cases. And as stated within their Reflection pages, several students considered my suggestions but then decided on their own approaches to handling the issues within their texts. For example, rather than working to re-focus her existing text within the 2nd draft of the Argumentative Research project, Susan decided to set the existing draft aside and basically start over in order to make the intended focus of her project clear from the beginning. Since I emphasize the importance of critical thinking and rhetorical choices with my beginning writers, I am proud of my students when they step out and take risks, whether their attempts are fully successful or not. After all, writing and revising involve risks, and mistakes invariably occur along the way. In considering how students interact with and use teacher comments, though, it is important to also consider the effect that contextual factors might have on student writers. As discovered in this study and discussed in Chapter 4, contextual factors like time, peer review, writing level, motivation level, and level of engagement affected my student writers within their writing processes and thus potentially affected our interactions within the commenting dialogue as well. Interestingly, these factors (as shown in Figure 5.6 on the following page) affected students differently, and individual factors also affected the impact of other factors on these students as well. For example, as discussed in Chapter 4, running out of time to work on a particular project can have a very different effect on a student, depending on
that student’s writing level; for a struggling writer, running out of time can lead to frustration and
defeat, but for a strong writer, the time crunch may mean that time is managed differently than
desired (but still effectively managed) within the project. I wonder why (as I discovered within
my study) these contextual factors have such varied and wide-ranging effects on student writers.

**Figure 5.6: Contextual Factors Affecting Student Writers and the Commenting Relationship (from data in Chapter 4)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextual Factor</th>
<th>Manner of Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>• Limitations or constraints due to amount of time available to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limitations or constraints due to actual use of available time to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May limit ability to ask for or receive help from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review</td>
<td>• Level of benefit may vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reasons for ineffectiveness may vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing level</td>
<td>• Ability/inability to make choices within own writing (whether on project at hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or in overall writing process)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability/inability to assess or evaluate writing (either own, peer's or both)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and recognize need for revisions within the writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation level</td>
<td>• Motivated by intrinsic means, like personal desire to succeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Motivated by extrinsic forces, like outside stakeholders (family, friends, mentors, advisors, teachers, etc.) or education outcomes (course or major requirements, grades, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Engagement</td>
<td>• Level of interaction and role in interaction may vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intentional choice to interact (or not)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is there any way to minimize the negative effects of contextual factors like these? Is there any
way to maximize the positive effects of these contextual factors? How might formative teacher
commentary be helpful and effective with regards to these contextual factors? Of course, in
considering this question, another question emerges: what makes commentary “effective,” and
from whose perspective do we gauge this effectiveness? Clearly, the full context surrounding
student writers and the commenting relationship deserves more attention in future research.
What Might an Understanding of Student Values (with Regards to Dialogical and Interactive Commentary) Mean for FYC Pedagogy?

When asked, students in this study consistently responded that they wanted and needed help and support from their teacher while they were writing and revising, and “Teacher comments” was the most highly valued factor (on question 4) amongst all students and on both questionnaires. At various times throughout this study, my students also stressed the importance to them of being able to initiate or direct the conversation surrounding their texts. In particular, the ability to ask questions and to receive helpful responses to those questions (i.e. formative assessment) was explicitly valued by numerous students. A pedagogy like mine that includes dialogical and interactive commentary, then, seems to encourage and inspire students to engage more fully in their own writing processes and to engage in new and deeper ways with their teacher and with their peers than one-sided, static commentary could ever hope to inspire.

Active, engaged learning by students involves critical thinking, reflecting, and interacting with people, ideas and/or words in myriad ways to create something new. Vague, formulaic commentary that suggests a standardized “product” or that is impersonal and disconnected from both the writer and her or his text will inspire little more than passive action and inattention in students. Active, engaged learning and growth as writers is most likely to occur in students when the teacher’s pedagogy is intentional and dynamic. Can an intentional and dynamic pedagogy guarantee this active, engaged learning (or any learning, for that matter) and growth, though? And can a passive, static pedagogy necessarily guarantee that no student learning will occur? Neither premise can be given with an absolute guarantee, but existing research has already shown the impact of intentional teaching on student learning. And as this study has attempted to show, students value intentional teaching, especially within the dialogical and interactive
commenting relationship. Unfortunately, in the culture of the composition classroom, student involvement in the dialogue and the interactions surrounding student writings is not necessarily the norm. In fact, in many cases, students are expected to care about what they write and how they write it, even when the teacher does not seem to care about them or their writing but seems to care only about mistakes, project requirements and grades. As discussed in Chapter 4, though, my personal processes of reading student texts and of composing responses to those texts (as a teacher) are intentional and student-centered. My entire pedagogy is intentional and reflexive and includes activities within the classroom context that encourage the kinds of dialogue and interactions between teacher and students that I suggest above and that the students in this study have valued. These activities (i.e. Q & A sessions, small group & workshop activities, self-assessment activities, email correspondence, office hours, and outside interactions) were shown in Figure 4.3 and discussed in more depth within Chapter 4. It is important to note here, though, that while these activities could stand alone and could be beneficial as separate interactive activities, these activities are each more effective and powerful when they are combined and connected within the overall classroom context. In fact, intentionally combining activities like these with formative commenting in the FYC classroom could create a context in which dialogical and interactive teacher commentary becomes the “norm” for teachers and students.

In the next section of this chapter, then, I further consider how my study findings might speak to current conversations in the field of Rhetoric & Composition, with particular attention given to how my findings might complement, complicate or contradict current assumptions about the commenting relationship, assumptions held by teachers and scholars as well as those held by students.
Connections and Contradictions

In *The Community College Writer: Exceeding Expectations* (2010), Howard Tinberg & Jean-Paul Nadeau acknowledged the seemingly “contradictory mission of the community college to prepare students both for transfer to a baccalaureate institution and for the workplace” (6) along with recognizing the struggles that many community college students must face to get to college in the first place and the struggles that many must then face to persist in their studies (35). The author-researchers went on to include information from the “Two-Year College Facts and Data Report,” a report compiled by TYCA (the Two-Year College English Association) in 2005. In the report, TYCA declared that “75 percent of two-year college students were nontraditional” (as cited in Tinberg & Nadeau, 2010, 58). Nontraditional students were defined as such within this report based on matching at least one item from a listing of characteristics:

- Delayed enrollment into college after high school
- Attended (college) part time
- Worked full time
- Were financially independent for financial aid purposes
- Had dependents other than a spouse
- Were single parents
- Did not have a high school diploma or equivalent

(as cited in Tinberg & Nadeau, 2010, 58)

It is important to note here that, while use of the “nontraditional student” label is often based solely on age, many students who fall within the “traditional student” age range actually should be considered “nontraditional” because they match characteristics from this list. As a result, the actual percentage of “nontraditional” students in community college classrooms is likely even
higher than the 75% suggested by TYCA. Additionally, while this listing from TYCA covers many of the characteristics of the nontraditional students in my classes and in my particular college setting, I would add several other characteristics to the list from my own research study, including:

- Were first generation college students
- Had to take at least one developmental or remedial course (whether in English or Math)
- Were ESL or ELL learners (i.e. not native speakers of English)
- Were reserve members of the U.S. military or were returning veterans
- Were physically or mentally disabled (i.e. requiring special accommodations for learning)
- Came to school after losing their place in the workplace

Of course, an exhaustive list of characteristics for nontraditional students would be difficult to compile, but I think that it is important to recognize how even one of these characteristics that are listed could cause struggles for the student. Additionally, many students could claim multiple characteristics from the listings as their own. For example, Liz (one of the case study participants in Chapter 3) could claim five-out-of-seven characteristics given by TYCA, and since she was also a first generation learner who was attending school after losing her job, she could claim two additional characteristics from my list of six above as well.

Tinberg & Nadeau suggested that it is increasingly normal for students to work at least twenty hours a week in addition to taking a full-time course load (57), and I found this assertion to be true with many of my students as well. In fact, I would argue that it is increasingly normal, at least in my community college setting, for students to be working full-time or to be working
multiple jobs (often two or three different part-time jobs) while taking classes full-time. It should be no surprise, then, when students struggle to make every class session or struggle to find time to work on assignments outside of class; between work hours and family demands, many of my students were barely keeping their heads above the proverbial water throughout the semester of this study. And when work schedules are coupled with the other characteristics of nontraditional students that were given earlier, retention, persistence and attrition statistics for courses like ENGL 111 should not be a surprise.

And yet, the number of students who had to drop my course or who simply disappeared from my classes (as discussed earlier in this chapter) still bothers me. On the one hand, I realize that every student success story can be viewed as a monumental victory, but on the other hand, I always fight feelings of failure with each student that I lose, wondering if I could have done something, anything, more to keep that student in my class. In the end, however, when I look at the larger contextual picture, I realize that success and failure are not fully mine to determine; I only play a small part in the overall story for each student. And, in fact, I am learning to recognize student “success” and “failure” differently, too; success goes beyond completing the course with a passing grade and might be different for each student, and failure, depending on the student, might occur even with a passing grade in a course. For example, while D.P did complete ENGL 111 with a passing grade, I think he would tell you that his biggest success was staying in school amidst the struggles and fighting to understand and learn; the grade was much less important to him than the learning he accomplished. Instead of being neat and tidy or something that fits a particular formula or set of rules, success is learning that means something, learning that will make a difference for that student and moves her or him forward in life’s journey. So, I would argue that some students are successful in learning even though they might
fail the course. For example, it is not unusual for me to have a student who faithfully attends class, participates in classroom discussions & activities, and completes early drafts of projects, yet never fully completes a major writing project. In one such case, when I discussed final grades with the student (who had perfect attendance for the entire semester), he responded, “I’ve known for a while that I wouldn’t pass the class, but I really feel like I learned a lot from your teaching and the class sessions. This semester helped me understand writing and how to get myself organized for school so I can actually pass ENGL 111 when I take it again next semester.” A look at final grades in my grade-book would not show this kind of success, but I would argue that it is every bit as important as (and maybe even more so than) a passing grade at the end of the semester. Of course, college administrators would prefer that students successfully complete our courses with passing grades because any other types of success are tough to quantify or prove for budget committees, but perhaps we need to begin to understand “success” and “failure” as the complex and highly-contextual assessments that they truly are.

Within Chapter 3, I noted numerous struggles shared (at least to some degree) by my FYC students, especially within research writing. These struggles emerged out of the three case studies in Chapter 3, were corroborated by ideas shared in the students’ Final Reflective essays, and included the following:

- Lack of familiarity or inexperience with a particular genre of writing
- Lack of preparedness or indecisiveness at the start of a project/pre-planning or pre-writing struggles
- Inability to differentiate between writing to inform and writing to argue
- Fear &/or inexperience with documentation and the correct use of sources
- Inability to recognize revision needs within own writing &/or understand how to approach needed revisions

While preliminary explanations of each of these struggles were given within Chapter 3, further attention to several struggles is warranted here. In particular, I found it troubling that my FYC students were not as experienced or familiar with any genres of writing as they should have been and as course objectives assumed that they were. And even with lengthy discussions about what makes a particular genre unique and why certain expectations for that genre are especially important, even with extended question & answer sessions about the assignment requirements, practice activities, and the sharing of sample papers, many students struggled to grasp what they needed to do for an assignment and why they needed to do the assignment in a particular way. On one level, my students struggled to simply follow directions or copy an example, but the problems seemed to go much deeper than that even. Within my study, I found that critical thinking and problem solving abilities, abilities that are included as ENGL 111 course objectives and as expected WPA outcomes, seemed to be lacking in many students and the lack of these abilities was especially evident within the contexts of the Argumentative Research project.

Research writing has some innate struggles all its own, especially for nontraditional FYC students like mine, and this is an area of FYC research that deserves much more attention. Whether it is the need to determine a topic or focus, the need to differentiate between writing to inform and writing to argue, or the need to gather effective sources and use them correctly, FYC students tend to struggle with research writing more than any other genre. For some of my students, deciding on a topic was a major feat. For others, finding appropriate sources for the arguments they wanted to make was a struggle, especially since they had to access websites and interact with online databases in order to locate those required sources. This particular struggle,
along with the apparent low value given to online activities by student respondents on the questionnaires, seems to suggest that my students struggled with technological literacy, too.

In a recent reread of Stuart Selber’s *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* (2004), I was drawn to his explanations of what he terms “Functional Literacy,” “Critical Literacy,” and “Rhetorical Literacy” with regards to computers and technology. For Selber, there are multiple categories of computer or digital literacies, and these categories require different kinds of skills from students (24). Selber argues that, “[s]tudents who are not adequately exposed to all three literacy categories will find it difficult to participate fully and meaningfully in technological activities” (24). In other words, meaningful participation with technology requires that students have at least some skill or capability in all three literacies, or what Selber terms “multiliteracies” (24). In an accompanying table, then, Selber began to outline these literacies conceptually, including a metaphor, subject position and objective for each one (25), concepts that Selber further delineates in the discussions within the chapters that follow. While the entire text was an interesting and thought-provoking read, I found myself returning to that initial table time and again. After studying Selber’s initial table, I came to a troubling realization: many of my students would fall into his “Functional Literacy” category (and some would barely manage that), and considering all of their other struggles as mostly nontraditional students, I have struggled to help them to acquire basic “Critical Literacy” within one semester, let alone make it into “Rhetorical Literacy” in my ENGL 111 course. In fact, the more I studied Selber’s table and thought about my own students, the more I began to realize that in my setting I must often help my students to manage traditional literacy (reading and writing) categories more fully before Selber’s multiliteracies can even be possible. This is not to say that the two types of literacies cannot be practiced simultaneously, (I think that they can be at some levels, and traditional literacies
inform aspects of computer literacies), but I do believe that at least a functional level of traditional literacy is necessary for most students before they can begin to navigate effectively through computer literacies. Additionally, just as Selber emphasizes the necessity for students to be able to work within all three categories of technological literacy (“multiliteracies” as he terms it) in order to “participate fully and meaningfully in technological activities” (24), it seems to me that students must also attain some mastery within functional, critical and rhetorical literacy in order to be able to participate fully and meaningfully in their own reading and writing processes. Inspired by Selber’s ideas, then, I reimagined his table design with reading and writing as the “technology” being considered (as shown in Figure 5.7 below).

**Figure 5.7: Conceptual Framework for Understanding Reading and Writing [Or, Taking a Step Back from Selber’s “Conceptual Landscape of a Computer Multiliteracies Program” (2004, 25)]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Subject Position</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>Reading &amp; writing as tools</td>
<td>Student as passive audience, user, or consumer of texts</td>
<td>Basic understanding of information &amp; ideas presented mostly by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Reading &amp; writing as means of inquiry &amp; learning</td>
<td>Student as active explorer, discoverer, or inquirer of others’ texts and within own texts</td>
<td>Informed critique, analysis &amp; learning from information &amp; ideas that is based on questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical</td>
<td>Reading &amp; writing as action</td>
<td>Student as active consumer &amp; producer of texts with control over choices made</td>
<td>Reflexive, purposeful action and interaction with information &amp; ideas that is based on intentional choices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to note here that while the ENGL 111 Course Objectives (listed in Chapter 2) require all three levels of literacy, many students come to ENGL 111 with little more than functional levels of traditional literacy, and every semester I have a few students who are barely into that functional level. The semester of this study was no exception; while I had a couple of students (like Connie, from Chapter 4) who entered ENGL 111 with at least some Rhetorical literacy, most of my students were somewhere along the Functional Literacy spectrum at the start of the semester. Interestingly, the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) has suggested that “[a]s new technologies shape literacies, they bring opportunities for teachers at all levels to foster reading and writing in more diverse and participatory contexts” (2007, 2). In other words, reading and writing are at the heart of what we do with new technologies, but those new technologies may also change the ways in which we practice those traditional literacies as well. In the same 2007 Policy Research Brief, 21st Century Literacies, the NCTE also explained that, “[r]esearch shows that effective instruction in 21st-century literacies takes an integrated approach, helping students understand how to access, evaluate, synthesize, and contribute to information” (5). This quote seems to suggest the necessity of Functional, Critical and Rhetorical literacies in both the traditional and the technological sense. Additionally, and as suggested earlier, this quote seems to suggest at least some simultaneous practicing of both types of literacies. And interestingly, the above quote fits quite nicely in a discussion of student writers and their struggles within research projects, struggles that seem to be based, at least in part, on matters of literacy.

In 2011, three major organizations within the Rhetoric & Composition field joined forces to produce the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing. This collaboratively-created document identified and then explained “habits of mind” and “writing, reading and critical
analysis experiences” that were deemed necessary for student success by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP). These requirements for successful college writing are largely rhetorical in nature and also reflect necessary skills for 21st-Century students. The active learning required of students is dependent upon teaching methods that were suggested in this document as well. It is worth noting, I think, that the suggested teaching methods described in this document are intentional and formative in nature, though these specific terms were not necessarily used. Within my own pedagogy, I intentionally connect reading and writing, and I attempt to integrate 21st-Century literacies, especially with regards to technology, as well. Some aspects of these 21st-Century literacies were suggested or required within my college setting and within the stated objectives for the ENGL 111 course, but other aspects of these literacies I have included simply for the benefit of my students. For example, in their 2007 report, NCTE stated that “approximately 30 percent of community colleges use electronic course management tools” (1), though I would imagine that the percentage is much higher now in 2014. At the time of this study in 2012, instructors of face-to-face courses at my college were required only to post an electronic copy of the course syllabus within Blackboard, the chosen course management program used by our college. In addition to posting the syllabus as required, however, I also posted electronic copies of assignment sheets, in-class activities and helpful resources within Blackboard for my students to access as needed or desired. I also posted grades within Blackboard for easy student access, and I regularly used the Discussion Board function to engage my students in interactive classroom activities. In truth, I would have liked to use additional functions within the program, but my students’ literacy levels (both traditional and technological) made this difficult to do. In fact, every semester I have spent valuable class time
teaching my ENGL 111 students how to navigate within Blackboard and how to use its various functions, along with how to save documents in Word, create file names, and attach document files to emails. These are all basic technological tasks that are necessary or “Functional” literacy activities for all of my students as they work through my ENGL 111 course and beyond, but they are also activities that require (at least on some levels) more than a mere functional level of traditional literacy as well, and herein lies the struggle for many of my students, whether considered traditional or nontraditional.

Huot (2002) has suggested that “[c]urrent classroom practices require evaluative skills from students which we do not, for the most part, teach” (68). In other words, while we (writing teachers) ask students to use critical or rhetorical literacy skills in our classes, these are often missing from our pedagogies. Some teachers may argue that these skills are implicitly taught within their pedagogies, yet many students do not seem to be gaining these necessary skills. So, I wonder: if we (as teachers of writing) are not explicitly teaching these skills, who is? As stated earlier, many of my students have entered my ENGL 111 classes with only functional literacy, if that. So while I should be able to assume a certain level of literacy based on the students’ placement or progression into ENGL 111, I have learned that I cannot make this assumption. As a teacher, then, I have designed my course assignments and activities in such a way as to help my beginning writers begin to navigate between functional, critical and rhetorical categories of literacy (within both traditional and technological literacies). Through intentional connecting of reading and writing, along with teacher commentary that is dialogical and interactive, I have attempted to teach and model critical and rhetorical literacies in action (as discussed within Chapter 4). For my students, though, the biggest and perhaps most difficult step always has seemed to be the first: the step from functional to critical literacy. For some of my students,
growth and understanding have been swiftly achieved, but for others, the process of beginning to learn how to navigate between literacies has taken the entire semester and beyond. As my students have moved from functional to critical literacy, though, they have become more active participants in their own literacies; through questioning, the students have become smarter consumers of the information and ideas within their own texts and within the texts of others, and the students became stronger producers of their own texts as well as more informed analysts of others’ texts, too. When they gained rhetorical literacy, then, my students became fully active and intentional in their choices as both consumers and producers of texts. This is the goal that I work towards every semester with my students. As discussed in Chapter 4, however, the journey for some students is rougher than for others, and not every student gains this rhetorical literacy during our sixteen-week semester.

Returning to my earlier discussion of the students’ shared struggles within research writing, then, I would like to suggest that a majority of these struggles were directly related to the students’ need for critical and rhetorical literacies (both in the traditional and technological sense). And as discussed earlier in this chapter, these critical and rhetorical literacies are often required in writing course objectives and expected student outcomes (as in WPA, 2000), yet as Huot (2002) and Selber (2004) have cautioned, these required literacies are not always taught in our writing classrooms. It should be no surprise then that my students tended to struggle with understanding a new genre of writing, differentiating between genres of writing, making decisions at the start of a project, locating sources (especially online or electronic sources), evaluating possible sources, using (and documenting) information from sources correctly, and assessing their writing to determine revision needs—all of these actions require the use of critical and rhetorical literacies. Of course, other connected contexts and factors (e.g. writing level or
time) may have further complicated the situation, but critical and rhetorical literacies were at the core of all of these struggles. For this reason, it would seem that an emphasis on building and strengthening literacies would benefit student writers, especially struggling student writers and especially within the context of research writing.

Research writing requires access to sources, but contrary to current popular belief, granting students greater access to information by providing laptops or iPads does not necessarily guarantee improved learning; instead, students must learn how to effectively sort and evaluate the information they find and they must also learn how to effectively (and ethically) use the information they choose for their intended purposes. Evaluating sources seemed to be particularly difficult for my beginning writers, and many of my students struggled with how to effectively synthesize the information from their sources with their own ideas within their texts. For example, within her reflection page for the Argumentative Research project, Beth explained how her research writing process had changed in my class:

The annotated bibliography helped me organize my thoughts when I was working on this project. It was much easier to find good information that I was able to use while writing the argumentative portion of this project with the bibliography already completed. I approached this project a little differently since I already had the sources and information. I usually write the paper and then add in my sources during or after I have written a good portion of the paper. This time I had the sources and information already handy and organized so it was much easier to stay on track and only use information that specifically pertained to that part of my project.

When I read student drafts in the past I had wondered at times if a few of my students had merely inserted the quotes from sources into their texts to fulfill the research requirements for the
I was somewhat surprised, however, to learn that Beth, a fairly strong writer, had followed this write-then-insert-quotes strategy. Surprisingly, I found that many students had never really considered how well the information from their sources actually “fit” for the arguments they were trying to make. Without any specific earlier training about how to evaluate sources based on their needs for a particular project, though, many students learned to get by with this just-insert-quotes strategy that had seemed to work so far in their academic careers. For this reason, I found it necessary to intentionally teach and model this type of critical and rhetorical thinking and decision-making that was required (for research writing) within the contexts of my writing classroom.

Tinberg & Nadeau (2010) have suggested that preparing our students for academic writing beyond the current semester should be our goal in teaching, and they further emphasize the need for “preparing students to write and think in ways that are transferable to other academic subjects” (128). Transferability of skills is highly desired at all levels of education, though this idea of transferability is more frequently misunderstood than achieved, I’m afraid. Critical thinking and active learning do seem to cross disciplinary borders, though, and both are at the heart of the “habits of mind” as presented in the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (CWPA, NCTE & NWP, 2011). It would seem, then, that critical thinking and active learning should be emphasized within the teaching of writing. Tinberg & Nadeau have noted, however, that “[s]ome students have arrived at college disengaged in terms of their writing, thinking that good writing is about correctness, in terms of both grammar and responding properly to the assigned prompt; it doesn’t matter what they say, just how they say it” (126). This preoccupation with correctness and rules rather than with the development of their ideas might
relate back to the students’ past experiences with summative, product-focused responses to their writings. This preoccupation might also be related to the students’ inexperience as writers.

In her influential 1980 article “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” Nancy Sommers explored differences in perspectives about revision and differences in revision activities between the two groups of writers. Sommers found that student writers viewed revision largely as an exercise in rewording while experienced writers viewed revision as a means to further developing ideas and considering audience concerns within their texts. According to Sommers, student writers generally believe that rewording can solve most of the problems in their texts (Rpt. 2003, p. 47). In fact, “[b]ecause students do not see revision as an activity in which they modify and develop perspectives and ideas, they feel that if they know what they want to say, then there is little reason for making revisions” (Sommers, p. 48). And this does often seem to be the case with my FYC students who are more prone to make simple or straight-forward (what I would term “local”) revisions than more complex or rhetorically-motivated revisions. Student writers also struggle to consider the composition-as-a-whole, according to Sommers, because they have not been taught the strategies to handle the entirety of the text (p. 48) or what I would term “global” revisions. So even if they might recognize that something does not seem quite “right” within their texts, student writers might not be equipped with the critical and rhetorical skills necessary to assess their own texts and then make the required revisions. These critical and rhetorical skills that are necessary for assessment and decision-making in the writing process must be taught to students and then the students must be allowed to practice them in a supportive environment. For this reason, formative teacher commentary is especially valuable for students throughout their processes of writing and revising. Martin Nystrand and Deborah Brandt (1989) emphasized the formative nature of
teacher commentary when they explained that “ongoing feedback allows them (the students) to connect textual choices with the effects of those choices on readers” (p. 226). And Huot (2002) further emphasized the role of assessment in revision explaining that “[i]nstructive evaluation demands that students and teachers connect the ability to assess with the necessity to revise, creating a motivation for revision that is so difficult for students to obtain” (70). Huot’s words here seem to imply a collaborative and dialogical relationship between teacher and students throughout the revision process as well.

Revision is largely misunderstood and under-valued by FYC students, but as Sommers has pointed out, “experienced writers see their revision process as a recursive process—a process with significant recurring activities—with different levels of attention and different agenda for each cycle” (Rpt. 2003, p. 52). Unfortunately, FYC students often are not equipped to write and revise like this when they enter our classrooms at the start of every semester, and these necessary critical and rhetorical skills can take varying amounts of time for students to master. As Tinberg & Nadeau (2010) have reminded us, students may differ in their comfort levels with response and in their revision skills, so these will likely change at varying rates, too (125). Additionally, Nystrand and Brandt (1989) have offered this reminder about learning to write: “[t]ypically the process of composing takes a rather bumpy road, and as much as writing, the writer is engaged in scratching and rewriting” (p. 211). In other words, writing is a complex and sometimes messy recursive activity for any writer. For my FYC students who were just beginning to learn about their own writing and revising processes, then, my formative commentary began to bridge the gap between what they knew and what they needed to know as writers.

I would argue here that my dialogical and interactive teacher commentary, commentary that provided formative assessment throughout the students’ processes of writing and revising
within their projects, served an important purpose in the contexts of my composition classroom. During the process of working on the Argumentative Research project, my students received written comments from me on their drafts, just as they had on their earlier projects. Many of my students also sought out additional dialogue and interactions with me about their projects. In fact, my students asked more questions in class during this project than at any other time in the semester, and I received more than twice as many emails from my students per day than I received earlier in the semester. I also had many informal conferences with students during this time. Most of these interactions were student-initiated and student-directed, with my goal in response being to meet that student wherever she or he was within the project. Once decisions were made about topics and main arguments, many of these student-initiated interactions related to documentation issues and concerns. While not every student pursued additional interactions with me, many of my students did, and from their responses at various junctures within this study, it seems that my students desired and valued this dialogical, interactive and formative commenting relationship, especially in the contexts of the Argumentative Research project.

Implications from This Study and Suggestions for the Future

As stated earlier, my purpose in this small, localized study was to complicate current understandings of teacher commentary as a fixed, predictable or isolated entity and begin to consider it instead as a dynamic, on-going, and collaborative relationship between teacher and student. Additionally, I hoped to begin to understand this multi-faceted, highly-contextual, and dynamic act of formative assessment from the students’ perspectives. On a personal level, then, this study allowed me the opportunity to unpack, explore, and critically assess my own pedagogical assumptions and practices through the lens of my students’ perspectives. Their voices, along with the interconnected contexts of my composition classroom, have provided
insights into not only what worked (or didn’t work) in the commenting relationship but also how and why certain practices did (or didn’t) work well and what the students actually wanted and valued within the commentary. This teacher research study confirmed that my students did value the dialogue, collaborative interactions, and formative nature of the commenting relationship that I intentionally included in my pedagogy. Additionally, my students expressed time and time again that they valued being able to initiate and/or direct conversations about their writing, so I will continue to look for ways to encourage and promote these interactions with my students. In most cases, study findings confirmed my pedagogical assumptions and my intentional practices, but some findings complicated my earlier assumptions and suggested a need for further research. For example, I found that various factors (like time, writing level, motivation, and confidence) affected different student writers in different ways and at different times while also affecting my interactions with these students within the commenting relationship as well. These study findings have suggested that these factors require more attention in FYC research if we are to understand what student writers truly want and need from us as teachers of composition. Further study of student revising choices within their writing processes is needed as well. As a teacher-scholar-researcher, I would like to better understand how and why the various factors listed above affect FYC students differently. I am interested in the effects of formative teacher commentary on student choices within writing and revising as well. Additionally, this study has suggested that student issues with literacy (in both the traditional and technological sense) require more attention in my pedagogy, in my personal research, and in future research within the field of Rhetoric and Composition as well. Though this was a small study that was situated in the particular contexts of my community college setting, numerous implications for composition scholars in other settings emerged as well.
Students are at the heart of what we do as teachers of writing. The long hours we spend reading and responding to student texts should bear witness to this, but as Huot (2002) has reminded us, “[i]f students do not understand what we say to them, then all of our efforts at response are futile” (131). And sadly, a sense of futility is felt by far too many teachers of composition and for varied reasons. Some teachers may not have the specialized training needed to provide formative teacher commentary for their student writers, and others may be too overburdened by excessive course loads or bulging class sizes to offer the feedback to students that they would like to provide. Other teachers of composition, however, have convinced themselves their students don’t ever read the comments that they write, and still others believe that students aren’t capable of understanding their own writing processes, let alone any feedback their teachers might attempt to give them. And yet, some recent research (including this study) has suggested otherwise. Perhaps part of the problem all along has been the lack of student voices and perspectives in conversations about teacher commentary and student writers. After all, as Broad (2003) has reminded us: “Since student learning is at the heart of what we do, it needs to be the reference point for discussions by which writing programs not only record and discover but also shape and refine what they value in students’ writing” (134). The voices and perspectives of student writers need to be included in future conversations in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, especially in conversations surrounding what is valued in student writing.

Many students are used to teacher commentary that talks at them (i.e. monologue) rather than commentary that talks with them (i.e. dialogue) about their writing. We need to begin to understand the possible long-term effects of past academic “norms” on student engagement in today’s composition classrooms, and we should consider the possible role that today’s writing teachers may inadvertently play in perpetuating those out-of-date “norms” as well. As a field, we
need to better understand academic power and authority in the composition classroom, especially with regards to the difference between students *being allowed* to engage in conversations and interactions about their writing and students *being encouraged* to engage in and to direct these conversations and interactions. As a field, we also need to begin understand how our reading of student texts affects our composing of response to those texts. Reading, after all, is neither passive nor objective, especially when reading student texts. I hope that this study will inspire other teacher-scholars to critically and reflexively consider their own reading and composing processes as well, so that we (as individual teacher-scholars and as a field) can begin to better understand how and why we compose response as we do. Understanding our own processes of reading student texts and of composing responses to those texts, especially with regards to the choices that we make as readers/responders, can help guide us (as a field) to a theory of response that better reflects what we value and how we choose to communicate those values to our students then. Our training of future teachers of composition may need to change in order to reflect what we are learning about commentary and student writers, too. Another implication from this study is that more research in the field needs to focus specifically on FYC struggles within research writing and revising, too. Since research writing requires the critical and rhetorical abilities in student writers that we claim to value, more attention needs to be given as to how we can best help students to achieve these desired outcomes within these types of assignments. The effects of student literacy levels (in both a traditional and a technological sense) on student writing deserve additional research attention as well. And as digital technologies become more prominent in our classroom settings and in our pedagogies, we need to continue to study how emerging technologies affect the writing and revising processes of our students and the ways in which we respond to and interact with our students about their writing
as well. Attention to the effects of these technologies on particular student populations is especially needed.

Perhaps as Straub, Sommers, Huot, Broad, Mathison Fife & O’Neill, and others have encouraged us to do, it is time for us (as a field) to reconsider how we teach students to write and how we then assess their writing. Huot (2002) has suggested that,

If we can change the ways in which we respond to our students in our classrooms and the ways in which we think and write about response in our scholarly literature, then we can harness the power of reading and writing to teach writing to our students, instilling in them the same wonder and struggle that guides all of us who work with language. (136)

Inspired by Huot, I find myself wondering what would happen in the field of Rhetoric and Composition if these changes in thinking, writing, and practicing would actually occur. Might our praxis more clearly align with our understanding of theory then? Would our pedagogies clearly demonstrate and effectively reinforce our values? What would happen if we would reconsider teacher commentary as an interactive and collaborative dialogue between teacher and students rather than viewing commentary as isolated words scribbled by the teacher in the margins of the student’s text? How might our reconsideration of teacher commentary affect student writing and revising processes? What effect might this type of formative commentary have on retention efforts in college writing classrooms across the country? How might our reconsideration of teacher commentary affect the ways in which we train future teachers of composition at all levels?

This study has attempted to add to the existing conversation in the field of Rhetoric and Composition by considering what the student writers in one localized context wanted and valued in teacher response. By including the voices and perspectives of the students themselves, this
study has attempted to consider the complex contexts surrounding the commentary relationship. In reading each of the previous chapters, I hope you have noticed the prominent role that the students played throughout this study. I hope you have heard their voices, listened to their perspectives, and perhaps even learned from their insightful words and ideas regarding writing and regarding the commentig relationship.

I have argued within this text that teacher commentary should be considered as a means of formative assessment that works beyond the margins of the page, an on-going conversation between the teacher and her students about their writing projects with an emphasis on rhetorical contexts and on choices made. My argument for this type of formative assessment may require a shift in how individual teachers consider teacher commentary, but I am not arguing here that every teacher of writing must devote more time to commenting or must replicate my pedagogical practices exactly; instead, my argument here is that every teacher of writing should intentionally construct a personal pedagogy that allows her or him to provide formative assessment for student writers that is rhetorically-based, collaborative and dialogical. What this formative commenting relationship will look like in practice may differ substantially for each teacher since it must be based on individual pedagogies, student needs and classroom contexts. I would further argue, however, that changes are needed within our field before this type of formative commenting relationship can become the “norm” in every classroom. For example, while specific guidelines for class sizes, teacher training, and effective praxis already exist, many colleges choose not to adhere to these guidelines, thereby weakening the potential effectiveness of individual teachers’ pedagogies and lessening the students’ potential for successful learning as well. Though no simplistic or formulaic answers for these on-going issues exist, a push toward intentional and consistent reinforcing of what we truly value in student writing at all levels of writing instruction
would be a step toward positive change in our field. Responding rhetorically and dialogically to students about their writing throughout their processes of writing and revising will send a more powerful and much truer message to those student writers about what we value and about what we know about writing than the message that is sent by a few vague, isolated and summative comments on the page. By intentionally interacting and collaborating with our students throughout the contexts of their writings, we show our students how we value their words and ideas, and we show them how we value them as writers as well. Reconsidering teacher commentary in this way (i.e. as interactive and collaborative dialogue) allows us to send a more personal and powerful message about what we in the field of Rhetoric and Composition value, a message that has the potential to encourage and engage our students far beyond the boundaries of the page.
REFERENCES


Maxwell, J.A. (2012). The importance of qualitative research for causal explanation in Education. *Qualitative Inquiry, 18*(8), 655-661.


DATE: January 9, 2013
TO: Deborah Morris
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [290418-3] Reconsidering Teacher Commentary as Interactive & Collaborative Dialogue: Implications for Student Writing & Revising
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: January 13, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: January 12, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exempt review category # 2

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on January 12, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL  
(STUDY SITE)

November 18, 2011

Ms. Deborah E. Morris  
Ivy Tech Community College – Northeast  
3480 N. Meridian Road  
Bluffton, IN 46714

Dear Deborah,

Subject: “Reconsidering Teacher Commentary as Interactive & Collaborative Dialogue: Implications for Student Writing and Revising”  
HSRB Request #11035

Thank you for your recent submission of an Application for Human Subject Research Project Approval. As called for by our policy, I have reviewed your application along with a subgroup of the Human Subject Review Board.

Your application has been approved to conduct the research within the next 6 months as described in your application materials received October 2011. Please note that our approval of your project does not obligate other regional faculty members to participate in this study.

Please be aware that it is the responsibility of a principal investigator to oversee his/her project in compliance with all local, state and federal guidelines for human research (e.g. 45 CFR 46; FERPA; HIPAA; CFR 21). Additional approvals for use of copyrighted materials, if applicable, are the investigator’s responsibility.

Please let the Human Subjects Research Committee of Ivy Tech know about any adverse events associated with your study. Should the research approach need to be modified, be sure to let us know. Any procedural modifications must be evaluated and approved prior to being implemented.

Approval of this research does not convey authorization to publish findings that identify Ivy Tech (or its students, faculty or staff) as a study participant. As with all research projects conducted among Ivy Tech students, faculty or staff, we also request that Ivy Tech receive a copy of the final report and analysis, for internal use.

50 WEST FALL CREEK PARKWAY NORTH DRIVE  
INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA 46208-5752  
317-921-4882

Ivy Tech is an accredited, equal opportunity, affirmative action community college.
We hope things go well with your research and look forward to reviewing your findings.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Karen A. Stanley
Executive Director of Institutional Research
And Planning

cc: Human Subjects Review Board
    Chancellor Jerrilee Mosier,
    Candy Schladenauffen, Ph.D., Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs
    Jim Clark, Asst. General Counsel
    Cherry Kay Smith, Ph.D., Asst. Vice Provost, Academic Policy/Assessment
Morris Research Study-Questionnaire #1
ENG111 students (Spring 2012)

Please indicate your response to each question by checking the appropriate box.

1. Please indicate your age.
   - ☐ 18-21 years
   - ☐ 22-30 years
   - ☐ 31 years and over

2. Please indicate your gender.
   - ☐ female
   - ☐ male

3. Which of the following best describes your reasons for taking ENG 111?
   - ☐ I took the placement test and tested directly into ENG 111
   - ☐ I advanced into ENG 111 after passing ENG 093 (or prior to 2011, ENG 024 &/or ENG 025)
   - ☐ I am currently re-taking ENG 111

4. Here are some things that students may or may not find helpful in their writing. Please rank each of the following from 1 to 12, with “1” meaning “most important to me” and “12” meaning “least important to me.”

   ____ classroom discussions
   ____ sample papers to study
   ____ in-class activities
   ____ workshop time in class
   ____ peer reviews/conferences
   ____ grading rubrics
   ____ teacher explanations
   ____ textbook readings
   ____ writing multiple drafts
   ____ teacher comments on drafts
   ____ Spellcheck
   ____ computer & online resources

5. In general, how do you feel about revision as a part of your writing process? Please indicate your response by checking the box below that best matches your view.

   - ☐ I typically write a single draft of a paper and then turn it in.
   - ☐ I typically write a draft, fix misspelled words and punctuation errors in that draft, and then turn it in.
   - ☐ I typically write and revise multiple drafts before I turn in my final draft.
6. In general, how do you feel about writing multiple drafts? Please indicate your response by checking the box beside the statement below that best matches your view.

- Writing multiple drafts is not helpful for me as a writer.
- Writing multiple drafts is somewhat helpful for me as a writer.
- Writing multiple drafts is very helpful for me as a writer.

7. In your opinion, what is the purpose of a teacher’s comments on a student’s draft?

8. Describe some of the comments that you’ve received about your writing in the past from teachers. In what ways were these comments helpful (or not helpful) to you as a writer?

9. What kind of teacher comments or responses do you think would help you most in your personal writing & revising process?
Morris Research Study-Questionnaire #2

ENG 111 Students (Spring 2012)

Please indicate your response to each question by checking the appropriate box.

1. Please indicate your age.
   - ☐ 18-21 years
   - ☐ 22-30 years
   - ☐ 31 years and over

2. Please indicate your gender.
   - ☐ female
   - ☐ male

3. Which of the following best describes your reasons for taking ENG 111?
   - ☐ I took the placement test and tested directly into ENG 111
   - ☐ I advanced into ENG 111 after passing ENG 093 (or, prior to 2011, ENG 024 &/or ENG 025)
   - ☐ I am currently re-taking ENG 111

4. Here are some things that students may or may not find to be helpful in their writing. Please rank each of the following from 1 to 12, with “1” meaning “most important to me” and “12” meaning “least important to me.”

   ___ classroom discussions  ___ teacher explanations
   ___ sample papers to study  ___ textbook readings
   ___ in-class activities  ___ writing multiple drafts
   ___ workshop time in class  ___ teacher comments on drafts
   ___ peer reviews/conferences  ___ Spellcheck
   ___ grading rubrics  ___ computer & online resources

5. In general, how do you feel about revision as a part of your writing process? Please indicate your response by checking the appropriate box beside the statement that best matches your view.
   - ☐ I typically write a single draft of a paper and then turn it in.
   - ☐ I typically write a draft, fix misspelled words and punctuation errors in that draft, and then turn it in.
   - ☐ I typically write and revise multiple drafts before I turn in my final draft.
6. In general, how do you feel about writing multiple drafts? Please indicate your response by checking the appropriate box beside the statement below that best matches your view.

- Writing multiple drafts is not helpful for me as a writer.
- Writing multiple drafts is somewhat helpful for me as a writer.
- Writing multiple drafts is very helpful for me as a writer.

7. Which of the following statements best describes the role that you think writing will play in your major? Please indicate your response by checking the appropriate box below.

- I do not think that writing will be important in my future studies within my major.
- I think that writing will be somewhat important in my future studies within my major.
- I think that writing will be very important in my future studies within my major.

8. Which of the following statements best describes the role that you think writing will play in your future career? Please indicate your response by checking the appropriate box below.

- I do not think that writing will be important in my future career.
- I think that writing will be somewhat important in my future career.
- I think that writing will be very important in my future career.

9. How helpful were the teacher’s classroom explanations for your personal writing and revising on the argumentative research project? Please indicate your response by checking the appropriate box below.

- not at all helpful
- somewhat helpful
- very helpful

9. Were the teacher’s written comments that you received on the 2nd draft of the Argumentative Research Project the type of comments that you expected to receive? Please indicate your response by checking the appropriate box below.

- The teacher’s comments on my draft were not what I expected.
- The teacher’s comments on my draft were what I was expecting.

10. In what specific ways did the teacher’s comments affect your revision work between the 2nd draft and your final draft of the research project? Please give specific details in your explanation.

11. Looking back and reflecting over the entire research project, what do you see as the most important feedback that you received from your peers or from the teacher?
Autoethnography as a Research Method

Since I initially approached this research with only vague notions of what autoethnography was and how it worked, I was very confused by the lack of substantive articles that I initially found when I began my research into this methodology. I found numerous articles that were declared to be “autoethnographic” but all were distinctly different, and I was left wondering if I should just give up on my idea to attempt something like this within my own larger study. An article by Roxanne Lynn Doty, however, made me excited to venture into this otherwise “unknown territory.”

In her article “Autoethnography—making human connections” (2010), Doty explained the context for this type of study and presented some of the research behind this methodology. Doty’s explanations were clear and, admittedly, inspiring. Within her article, Doty referred to Elizabeth Dauphinee’s work with autoethnography, in particular Dauphinee’s recognition of the dichotomies between “fieldwork and tourism between scholarship and voyeurism” (Doty, 1047). Researchers, after all, are expected to actively pursue their scholarly work and research rather than to passively consider ideas and research ventures. Researchers are further admonished, however, to walk that fine line between being fully invested in one’s research and becoming personally immersed within that research; strong scholarship within accepted modes of research is welcomed, but too much personal involvement, too much of the researcher herself or himself, is unacceptable and should be absent from that scholarship, it seems. But as Doty questions, then, how can we make human connections within our scholarship without allowing our own humanity into that scholarship?
What Doty is advocating for goes beyond the generally acceptable “intellectual reflection” about experiences or situations and includes what she terms “pure gut level awareness” (1048), something that requires a very different type of writing than that found in most academic journals. But for Doty, this different type of writing makes it “possible to connect with the human beings at the centre of what (she) write[s] about” (1048). Doty explains the role of the self within academic writing in this way:

While I believe that the self is really always present in academic writing it is usually only present by virtue of its absence. A power inheres in this absence, a power that enables scholars to present their work as authoritative, objective, and neutral. Autoethnography shuns this power and makes it clear that writers are part of their work, part of the story they tell, they are connected (emphasis in original). (1048).

Researchers practicing autoethnography, then, intentionally set aside this power of supposed objectivity in order to openly become connected to their research, to clearly show their role within the story they are telling within their research work. Of course, some scholars are concerned that deliberately including the self within academic writing could be self-indulgent, and the stories of the other participants could get lost in the process, but Doty further explains how “[t]he self can have a strong presence without dominating the story” (1049). According to Doty, we might better understand ourselves through autoethnography, and that’s not entirely a bad thing, but she also admonishes that personal insight/learning about self should not be our goal. Doty cautions that “[i]t must be about much more than ‘us’” (1049). Instead, our goal within autoethnography should be to “try and do justice to the human beings at the centre of what [we] write about, to do justice with [our] words” (1049). For Doty, these changes in the ways that we write must create a more human story to share, a story that creates connections to
human life outside of the academy, a story that connects with readers and makes them care
(1050). In short, autoethnography should allow the telling of a more complete, more accurate and
more human story that will ring true for readers.

For some scholars, however, another very obvious concern about autoethnography is the
current lack of a “clear methodology” for this very different type of writing. Is something
autoethnographic merely because its author claims it as such? As mentioned earlier, I read
numerous works in my initial research of autoethnography that were labeled “autoethnographic”
but that varied greatly with regards to content, approach, and writing style—does this mean that
any of them were any more or any less autoethnographic than others?

A.S. Canagarajah (2012) explains this research method in this way: “the
researcher/subject roles are fused in autoethnography. The researchers study the practices of a
community of which they are members, and they are visible in the research”(114). This
intentional visibility is one way in which autoethnography differs from traditional ethnography.
In fact, Canagarajah suggests that “[a]utoethnography is oppositional to research approaches in
both the quantitative and qualitative traditions that are informed by modernist principles of
objectivity, empiricism, rational analysis” (114). Canagarajah goes on to explain several
differences in what tends to be emphasized within autoethnography: 1) “the self as the basis for
knowledge”; 2) “the role of narrative in constructing knowledge”; 3) “learning from emotions”;
4) “the validity of constructivism”; and 5) “the objective of social change” (114-115).
Canagarajah suggests that what is emphasized within autoethnography is related to the
epistemological beliefs of the researcher (114), and thus, as I found, autoethnographies may
vary.
For Canagarajah, autoethnography requires a “balance between the self, culture, and narrative writing” (114), though other scholars seem less concerned with this balance. In her article, “‘I Can See You’: An Autoethnography of My Teacher-Self,” Erika Franca de Vasconcelos describes autoethnography as “[a] merger between autobiography and ethnography” that . . .

highlights the researcher and her own reflexivity and reflections as viable data sources in a given study. Because autoethnography is a blurred genre or hybrid form, it combines autobiographical writing with the conventions of narrative writing. (2011, np)

De Vasconcelos goes on to explain that autoethnographers might use a variety of narrative forms to present their self-study, including “short story, essay, poem, novel, play, performance piece, or other experimental text” (np). In other words, autoethnography seems to offer a certain amount of literary freedom of expression for one’s research ideas (which also would explain the wide range of examples that I found). And like Doty, de Vasconcelos acknowledges that this new and different method of research writing allows her to use “fresh language and imagery” to enhance her meaning within her text (np), which also makes autoethnography “reader-friendly” as Canagarajah points out (118).

Interestingly, according to Canagarajah, there are actually three different types of autoethnography: “self-in-the-collective, interactive, and self-reflective” (118). Canagarajah describes “self-in-the-collective” as research in which “the author/researcher describes a collective experience as an insider to the community” (118). Interactive autoethnography occurs “when two or more subjects each become researcher-cum-subject as they interview each other to co-construct the experience” (118). And self-reflective autoethnography is much like autobiography in that the “authors reflect on their own experience, in light of social and cultural
life, to represent their perspectives” (118). While not specifying types of autoethnography, de Vasconcelos suggests that “autoethnography has increasingly become the term of choice to describe studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural” because, as she explains, it “displays multiple layers of consciousness” (np). De Vasconcelos does offer this caution, however:

As researchers ‘zoom backward and forward, inward and outward’ between their personal, social, and cultural experiences and selves, ‘distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.’ (2011, np)

This blurring of lines between the personal and cultural may also challenge current ideas and rules about what is acceptable research within some academic fields. In a review of Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics (2002) for The American Journal of Semiotics (2005, 174-176), Jennifer L. Adams describes autoethnography as a “new form of ethnographic writing” and suggests that this edited collection of conference papers (and corresponding meta-texts) may challenge existing boundaries, particularly in “academic social inquiry,” but Adams also seems to applaud what she terms “alternative ways of academic research and writing in social studies” as shown within the reviewed text.

Interestingly, while some texts related to autoethnography and composition now exist (eg. Canagarajah, 2012; Belcher, D. 2007; Ellis, C. & Bochner, A.P. 2000, for example), most of the articles about autoethnography that I found in my research were related to anthropology, the social sciences or communications fields, though I expect the pursuit of autoethnography to become more widespread as more and more researchers begin to explore the role of self within the overall contexts of their research work. Future ventures into this newer type of research writing, however, will require researchers to intentionally work to balance their new-found
freedom of expression within the overall contexts and purposes of their research studies. In ways this methodology seems to be tailor-made for a field like Rhetoric and Composition, so it is a bit surprising that there are not more autoethnographic texts from within our field. After all, according to Doty, “[a]utoethnography has the potential to create spaces that challenge the status quo, make our work more interesting, and connect in more meaningful ways to our subject matter and the human beings that inhabit the worlds we write about” (2010, 1050). The worlds that we as compositionists and rhetoricians write about involve humans, their ways with words, and their relationships with their texts and with each other, and we carefully consider contexts and connections along the way as well. Qualitative research methods, like case studies and ethnography, have been championed as being a means to creating fuller, richer, and (hopefully) more complete pictures of our research subjects, settings, situations, experiences or activities. Perhaps the greatest value of autoethnography within research is that it encourages deeper, more complete reflexivity by the researcher and allows for more intentional contextualization of data within the research. Including data on the researcher-self seems like a very natural and necessary aspect within the qualitative research process, then, especially since this autoethnographic data provides an oft-missing piece of the overall story or context within the research puzzle.
Amplified Annotated Bibliography
(Objectives: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11 &12)
Created by Deborah Morris

This project is designed to be a helpful part of your writing process for the Argumentative Research project. The Amplified Annotated Bibliography project itself is simply a formal version of the thinking/analyzing that you should be doing any time that you are required to research for a project.

It is important to realize that we all make evaluation on a regular basis in our daily lives. While we don’t necessary make a formal listing of the criteria that we are using, we do use criteria in the decisions that we make! Think about the limiters that we set as we use EBSCOhost to find articles. We might look for articles based on particular criteria: full text available, peer-reviewed, and at least 4 pages in length. But this is only the start, isn’t it? As you look through articles that meet those initial criteria and turn up on your “results list,” you may also inadvertently use other criteria in deciding which article to choose. You might not make a formal listing of these extra “limiters,” but you probably also consider things like readability, compatibility with your other sources, length, and your perceived interest in the material that is being presented. In the end, you will choose an article that best fits the requirements of the project while also fitting your own personal criteria as well.

Learning Objectives:

*To critically read texts and to understand the rhetorical situation that surrounds the writing & reading thereof

*To effectively and correctly summarize and paraphrase the texts of others

*To recognize the importance of critical reading and reflection within your personal writing process

*To evaluate sources not only for validity and level of bias but also for their relevance for the project at hand

*To organize and plan an intended project with attention to the rhetorical situation/context

*To work with sources and learn correct documentation

This project builds on previous projects and on material from chapters 10-13, 40, 43-50 in The Norton Field Guide to Writing textbook, along with ideas and information from classroom discussions and in-class activities.
Assignment Specifics:

In four to five double-spaced pages (approx. 1,000 to 1,250 words), you are now being asked to formally evaluate your required sources for your next project—the Argumentative Research project. The Amplified Annotated Bibliography project should be comprised of an introduction, Citations (with summary and evaluation within the paragraphs), and a conclusion. The expectations for each of these section-types are listed below.

- **Introduction** should include a general overview and the intended approach to the argumentative project. A research question and working thesis should be a part of this introduction as well.

- **Bibliographical citations** should include all of the necessary information for the source and should be in the correct MLA or APA format.

- **Summary/Evaluation paragraphs** should follow the appropriate citation and should give a strong summary of the content of the source, along with a careful evaluation of the source. The evaluation of the source should be based on aspects of the source itself and on its relevance for your project. Please see the textbox on the next page for more details.

- **Conclusion** should include a discussion of your perceptions about the strength of your sources and the support that they will provide for your argument. You should also recognize any additional needs for your project. Do you need to complete more research? Do you need to change your approach to your argument at all?
**Aspects of the source:**

*What do you know about the author? What are his or her credentials? Do others in the field respect this author and reference him or her in their work?*

*When was this information published? Is the data current, or does the information come from past studies?*

*What do you know about the publisher? What other types of works does this publisher publish? Is this publisher well-respected?*

*How consistent are the facts in the article? Do other articles present similar data?*

**Relevance for your project:**

*Benefits—How will this source help to support your argument? What is the specific function of the information from this source for your project? Why did you choose this source over other options that you might have had?*

*Limitations—Is this source at all biased? Is the information good, but perhaps dated? Does the author take a completely different approach than others in his or her field? Is the information related to your argument but more loosely than you would like for it to be?*

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**Grading Criteria:**
A strong project will . . .

- Provide a full evaluation of the required sources and their relevance for your project
- Demonstrate careful consideration of the project-as-a-whole (self-assessment)
- Include accurate citations and correct MLA/APA format throughout
- Fulfill all requirements for the project (including format, grammar, & mechanics) and meet expectations for a strong ENGL 111 paper
Argumentative Research Project
(Objectives: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12)
Created by Deborah Morris

This six to eight page (approx. 1,500 to 2,000 words), double-spaced research project will be our focus for the next few weeks. Because you will be spending a significant amount of time and energy on this project, you should choose your topic carefully. You may decide to delve deeper into a subject that you are already somewhat familiar with, or perhaps you will decide to look into something that has just piqued your curiosity. And remember—a specific focus is necessary for a strong argument; broad topics and vague arguments will not work! You may, in fact, need to do some initial research in order to make this important choice. After all, you will want to choose a topic that is not only researchable and arguable, but also interesting enough to hold your interest for the next few weeks.

Your research project must be argumentative in nature, and your topic choice must be approved by your instructor. You goal with this project is to convince your chosen audience to believe or to act in a certain way, so your arguments must be carefully-constructed and well-supported. This project builds on previous assignments, material found in the reading of chapters 7-9, 30-38, 42-50, & 51 in the Norton Field Guide to Writing textbook, along with material from classroom discussions and in-class activities.

Learning Objectives for this project:
*To determine a strong research topic and then construct an arguable thesis
*To critically read texts & gain an understanding of the rhetorical situation surrounding the texts
*To effectively and ethically summarize and paraphrase the ideas of others
*To synthesize one’s own ideas with those from sources
*To develop an argument with strong support from credible sources
*To use information from sources effectively and ethically
*To choose and then effectively use a visual element as support for an argument
*To organize & develop an argument effectively for the intended audience and for the purpose of the project

Assignment Specifics:

- Your topic choice must be approved by your instructor. You may not change your topic without instructor approval! If a change in topic is allowed, all pre-writing, drafts, etc. must be completed for the new topic as well.
• **At least four sources (but no more than eight sources!) must be used** for this project. Choose your sources wisely!

• **At least one source from each of the following four categories must be used:**
  1) scholarly, peer-reviewed article; 2) book with scholarly relevance; 3) credible website;
  4) primary research with YOU as researcher (i.e. personal interview, survey, or questionnaire)

• **A visual element must also be included.** This might be a photograph, illustration, chart, diagram, table or figure that you find within one of your sources, or it might be a visual that you create from the data that you discover.

• You should **use the scheduling plan chart to keep yourself “on track”** for the project. Just fill in the required due dates (per the course syllabus or your instructor’s instructions) in the appropriate spaces for those tasks. Then, set your own personal deadlines for the other tasks.

• **Your final draft will only be accepted if all previous parts of the project (ie. all pre-writing, drafts, peer reviews, primary research notes, annotated bibliography, and related in-class activities) are complete as well. Copies of all sources must also be turned in with the final draft.**

*For your convenience, a scheduling plan sheet for the Argumentative Research project is provided on the next page.*

**Due date for the final project is:**________________________
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project task list:</th>
<th>Try to do by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1-Get ready, get set, go!</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
  - Make sure that you understand the assignment
  - Do some preliminary research & carefully choose your topic
  - Write a working thesis/intended argument
  - Get teacher approval for your argument topic & approach to topic
  - Analyze your intended audience (both primary & secondary)
| **2-Find sources and research!** | | 
  - Decide on research questions & key research terms; develop a search strategy
  - Narrow search if necessary
  - Find credible sources that are relevant for your argument
  - Plan your own primary research (interview, survey, questionnaire) and then work to complete it
  - Create a working bibliography or listing of your sources
| **3-Read, and then analyze, your sources!** | | 
  - Take notes over what you read. Print copies of articles and web information so that you can highlight and make annotations in the margins
  - Analyze and evaluate the information that you find (Is it accurate? Timely? Relevant to your project?)
  - Put together your formal Annotated Bibliography
| **4-Plan, organize and outline!** | | 
  - Reread all of your notes and annotations.
  - Carefully consider your argument and your intended audience (Is every point logical? Will inductive or deductive organization better suit your topic and argument?)
  - Organize your information into a working outline
  - Consider possible visual elements to use as support for your argument
  - Consider how to best include your primary research information
| **5-Write!** | | 
  - Using your working outline, write your first draft of the project
  - Peer review/workshop your draft in class
  - Modify your working thesis &/or outline as needed, obtain additional information as needed
  - Revise your project and then peer review your 2nd draft
  - Write, re-read, revise, re-read, write, revise . . . . 
  - Turn in a polished final draft (include all pre-writing, earlier drafts, peer reviews, copies of sources, etc.)
Grading Criteria:

A strong Argumentative project will:

- Include a strong, focused argument that is well-supported by information and ideas from your research and contains no logical fallacies
- Demonstrate critical thinking and effective organization of ideas and arguments
- Make use of credible sources that are relevant for your particular project
- Effectively and ethically use the words/visuals and ideas of others (documentation)
- Transition smoothly between your own ideas and the words of others (synthesis)
- Include detailed explanations and specific examples; language will be focused and clear
- Fulfill all of the particular project requirements as well as the general expectations for a strong ENG 111 paper

Assignment Sheet for Reflection Page (Argumentative Research project)

ENG 111 (Spring 2012) D. Morris

A Reflection Page must be completed to accompany every major writing project and must be turned in with that project’s Final Draft. For this particular one-page reflection, please consider the following:

Look back through your drafts for this project and the comments that you received from your peers and from me. Now, discuss 2 or 3 of these comments in your Reflection as you “respond” to the author(s) of the comments. Tell how each of the comments affected your writing and/or revising of the project. (i.e. What did you do with what was suggested? Will this comment help you in the future, or change the way you do things in future writing assignments?) Give specific details wherever possible!

Assignment Sheet for Reflection Page (Amplified Annotated Bibliography)

ENG 111 (Spring 2012) D. Morris

A Reflection Page must be completed to accompany every major writing project and must be turned in with that project’s Final Draft.

For this particular one-page reflection, please consider the following:

Look back through your drafts for this project and then describe your writing/revising process for the project. How was your process different on this project from other things you’ve written? How was your process on this project similar to your process on other projects? What specific things did you learn about yourself as a writer through this project?
Informed Consent for Subjects

For a Research Study by Deborah E. Morris (Doctoral Student)

Reconsidering Teacher Commentary as Interactive & Collaborative Dialogue:

Implications for Student Writing & Revising

Ivy Tech Community College-Northeast

3800 N. Anthony Blvd.-Fort Wayne, Indiana 46805

Introduction: You are invited to be in a research study on teacher commentary as formative assessment. As an adjunct instructor of English/Beginning Writing at Ivy Tech Community College-Northeast and a doctoral student in the Rhetoric & Writing Program at Bowling Green State University, I am very interested in the topic of teacher commentary as interactive dialogue and its effects on student writers like you. In fact, as part of my dissertation work toward my Ph. D degree at BGSU, my current research project requires that I obtain student responses about teacher commentary and how it is used in student writing and revising. Since you are a student in one of my ENG 111 classes this semester, I am asking you to participate in my research. Please note: you must be 18 years of age to participate in this study.

Purpose: This research study is a part of my dissertation work. The purpose of this research study is to focus attention on student understandings and perceptions about teacher commentary and classroom activities in order to better understand how students are influenced by, and make use of, these interactions within their writing and revising. There is no immediate, direct benefit to subjects, though this study will benefit future students and teachers in creating stronger understandings of effective teaching and assessing of writing.

Procedure: Because this is teacher-research conducted within my own classroom, most of the data that will be collected will be from regular assignments and not from any extra requirements. This study will ask you to complete pre-and post-project questionnaires (during our regular class time) as you work on the argumentative research project. Classroom artifacts will be collected throughout the semester as well. Your paper drafts, my teacher comments, our journal entries, your self-assessments, evaluations, and reflective essays that will be collected are already a part of the semester curriculum so collecting these written artifacts presents no additional work for you. The voluntary interviews &/or focus groups will be conducted with those of you who are interested after the semester ends and will require approximately an hour of time, to be scheduled ahead and at a time that is convenient for participants. These interviews &/or focus group discussions will be audiotaped. My teacher observations and reflections (including those about both formal and informal commentary) will be included in the data as well. These will be recorded throughout the...
semester. The two questionnaires will be kept for later analysis after you complete each of them. And since most of the written artifacts will be part of the normal “paper exchange” of the course, I will simply make copies of your papers before returning them to you.

Voluntary nature: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions on the questionnaires or discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your grades or your relationship with Ivy Tech Community College or your teacher.

Confidentiality Protection: For your protection, all collected data will be stored in a locked file drawer during the research process. The only people who will have access to this information will be this researcher (Deborah E. Morris) and my BGSU advisor (Dr. Lee Nickson). In the final write-up of this research study, pseudonyms will be used in place of actual student names.

Risks: The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life. Since this study mostly makes use of written artifacts that are already a part of the normal ENG 111 curriculum for the semester, and since student participation is voluntary, the risks to you are minimal or non-existent. No extra demands are placed on you and participation in the research is not required. This research study poses no physical or emotional risks to you.

Contact Information: Any questions regarding this research study or your participation in this study should be directed to me, Deborah E. Morris, via email: dmorris99@ivytech.edu or demorri@bgsu.edu, or to my BGSU advisor, Dr. Lee Nickson, via email: leenick@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at 419.372.7716 or hrsb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research.

Thank you for your time and interest in this research study!

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I am 18 years of age or older, and I agree to participate in this research.

____________________________  ____________________
Participant Signature           Date
Email Script:

Hello English 111 students!

As we discussed earlier this semester, you are each invited to be involved in a focus group as a part of my dissertation research study into teacher commentary. A focus group is a small group comprised of 5 or 6 students who discuss their responses and ideas about the questions posed by this researcher. The number of focus groups will depend on the number of students who are interested in participating. Participation in these focus groups is completely voluntary, but you must be 18 years of age to participate. Each focus group will meet once, for approximately an hour. The session will be scheduled ahead of time and at a time that is convenient for that group’s participants. The focus group session will be audiotaped (and later transcribed) for use within my research study.

Participation in the focus groups is completely voluntary; you do not have to participate. If you are interested in being involved in this part of the research project, please respond to this email by the end of the week. If you do not respond to this email, then I will assume that you are not interested in this invitation and I will not contact you again. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns regarding this research or your participation in this study: dmorris99@ivytech.edu.

Thank you for your time and interest in this research study.

Deborah Morris

Potential Interview or Focus Group Questions:

1. What kinds of teacher feedback were most likely to engage you in your writing & revising process? (i.e. What feedback made you want to work on your project?)

2. What specific types of revisions did your teacher’s feedback encourage? Why?

3. As you reflect back on the Argumentative Research Project, what types of revisions did you actually make throughout your writing and revising process? (i.e. major content or focus-driven changes, or more minor surface-level changes?)

4. What role did you have in the conversation or dialogue about the project and your writing?

5. How did your responses to her comments affect your teacher’s later responses to your work?

6. How much do you think interpersonal commenting/response is related to student thinking and learning, especially with regards to writing and revising?
Purpose of teacher comments (from Q1, question 7)—Initial Coding

“Help me” to _______

- Identify & fix mistakes
- Understand (by explaining, by being detailed)
- “think outside the box”
- “become better writers” / “improve writing skills”
- “write the best you possibly can”
- “make a better final draft”
- “get a better grade”

“Provide (me with)” _______

- “guidance” / “direction”
- Assessment of improvement or needs in writing
- Teacher expectations
- project requirements and grading standards
- Recommendations
- Awareness of issues or problems
- Another perspective on writing
- “a great way to learn”
- “encourages further writing”
- “ensure success”

“Give me __________”

- “time to revise problems”
- “more ideas” / “helpful ideas” / “tips”
- “insight on the progress that is being made”
- “(insight on)any corrections (needed)”
- More than just “what’s wrong”
Most Important Feedback from Peers & from Teacher (from Q2, ques. 11)

Teacher's Feedback

- “always more helpful because she is the professional”
- “helped me organize and create a stronger argument”
- “helped me form correct citations’
- “informed me I was missing items”/ “giving me ideas of what was missing”
- “[giving me ideas of] better ways to phrase something”
- “most important for me was knowing that I was on track”
- “Her confidence in my writing eased the stress of the project for me”
- “I received good feedback on my final papers after using all of the suggestions to revise them”
- Told me my topic was good
- “I feel like my teacher wanted a lot more”
- “most important feedback [ . . .] because (she) could explain what she wanted to see in our final drafts”
- “all of the comments from my teacher were very helpful”
- “I would have to say both helped, but the best was from the teacher because she was the one who gave me the grade in the end”
- “Pretty much helped me get the paper to the final draft stage. I would write, she would comment, I would write more, etc. etc. . . . 😊” (smiley face was part of the student response 😊)
- “the most helpful was always the teacher’s opinion”
- “from my teacher giving unconditional support through her comments”

Peer(s)'s Feedback

- “told me how good my topic was”
- “all of the comments from my peers were very helpful”
- “I would have to say both helped . . .”
- “documentation style questions and asking if I could elaborate more in the detail department”
- “my classmates were equally helpful”

Source not specified (as to peer or teacher), but most important feedback received:

- “research is important and (takes) time”
- “having the annotated bibliography with all of the summaries was [sic] very helpful”
- “All of it!”
- “more information and putting it together the right way”
- “the final three drafts”
- “to keep writing because I have become skilled in it”
- “the most important comment was not to worry about the length of the paper”
- “the in-text citing on my papers and the rewording of the sentences”
Past Experiences, Helpful (or Not Helpful) Comments (from Q1-question 8)

Past comments were . . .

- Focused on spelling, grammar, structure/organization
- Critical
- Both good and bad
- Vague or broad, lacking in detail & explanation
- Filled with incorrect information

From past comments, students “learned what was needed,” “learned what was wrong,” and “helped me still today because I know that I can write better.”

Comments are “Helpful” when they are__________________

- Explaining what doesn’t work or what is done incorrectly
- Explaining what is done well
- Explaining how to improve writing or how to make revisions
- Providing detailed explanations
- Pointing out errors or weaknesses
- Showing writer’s strengths and weaknesses
- Providing a different perspective or point of view
- Giving encouragement
- “compliment[ing] me as a writer”
- Asking questions to help writer
- Inspiring creativity and desire to work harder

*Students mention learning, understanding, and using these “helpful” comments.

“Not helpful” comments are those that are__________________

- Giving vague/general/broad information
- Commenting without detail or explanation
- Giving incorrect or confusing information

*Students also mention it being “not helpful” when the teacher isn’t able to explain his/her own comments within a conference with the student.
Specific Ways Teacher’s Comments Affected Revision Work Between 2nd & Final Drafts (Q2, ques. 10)

Initial Coding Notes

“Helped me” __________________________

- “a lot”
- “to revise my project”/ “with revisions”
- “to know if I was doing it right”
- “with organizing the papers”
- “write my paper”
- “focus on details”
- Decide “how I was going to use that information”
- “stay focused on the main argument”
- To know “if the flow of my paper was alright or not”
- “to focus on the error that I was making”
- “with peer review”

“Gave me” ____________________________

- “ideas on how to be more detailed”
- “ideas on how to make my argument stronger’
- “suggestions for my problem areas”
- “helpful hints on citing sources and punctuation, etc.’
- Another perspective
- “good advice”

“Showed me” __________________________

- “what I was doing wrong”
- “ways of editing”
- “where to put new ideas”
- “better words to use”
- Need for taking time (on project)
- Need for researching
- Need for “following directions”
“Made” ________________

- “me look more at what information was necessary or not”
- “my revising process clear-cut and easy to do”
- “detailed notes on drafts”

Teacher’s comments________

- “told me exactly what I needed to fix”
- “found little mistakes”
- “were extremely helpful”
- “dramatically influenced the way I articulated my writing to make it flow”
- Didn’t leave me “wondering about the project”
- Had a “big effect’ on revisions, but not good—the final project was “not good enough”
Student Perspective/Perceptions--Initial Coding (from Final Reflective Essay)

Progressing/growing

- As a writer
- In understanding of writing as process

Reflecting back

- On successes of semester
- On disappointments/failures of semester

Recognizing

- personal responsibility for semester outcomes (both positive and negative)
- value in different aspects of class

Beginning with fear/insecurity/unfamiliarity

- about ENGL 111
- about writing itself

Needing

- motivation
- confidence
- help
- encouragement

Appreciating

- teacher feedback
- teacher attitude/passion
- helpfulness
- encouragement