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Digitized Audio Commentary in First Year Writing Classes

Submitted by [Susan Sipple](#) on August 16, 2006 - 11:00pm.

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Instructor: Susan Sipple

Course: English Composition I

Institution: University of Cincinnati Raymond Walters College

Overall aim of the course

English Composition I (ECI) is designed to help students master effective writing processes and critical thinking skills. To that end, it requires that they write several papers and make substantial content revisions in all essays. In addition, ECI encourages students to reflect upon their writing processes in order to help them to recognize successful and unsuccessful patterns in their work. The course attempts to enhance their skills in choosing appropriate rhetorical strategies, to develop sophisticated arguments and interpretations, to think and write in increasingly complex ways, and to become better critical readers and more effective writers.

Course design and scope of the project

ECI is a quarter-long course—one in a sequence of composition classes required of all students at Raymond Walters College, a two-year branch of University of Cincinnati. Enrollment is capped at 20 students per section. In my sections of ECI, students write four essays; on each one, they receive extensive instructor commentary. In addition, students make substantial content revisions and editing changes to every essay at least once during the quarter, using my feedback and new skills they have acquired along the way to guide them. My frustration with the time and space limitations of handwritten instructor commentary, combined with a sense that students sometimes ignore or misinterpret feedback delivered via this method, led me to experiment with audio commentary, beginning in 1990. Inspired by the work of Jeff Sommers (see References/Links), I began offering students extensive audio commentary on cassette tapes. Over time, my method of delivery changed: I now make audio CDs for students or e-mail them MP3 files. In an effort to better understand student attitudes toward instructor commentary on their writing and learning outcomes enhanced by varying commentary methods, I began in 2003 a series of qualitative, classroom-based research projects studying several aspects of handwritten and audio commentary. The results have convinced me that audio instructor commentary on student writing is received more positively by college composition students and leads them toward more substantive revision of their essays.

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About the Auth

Full name:

Susan Sipple

Bio:

Susan Sipple is an assistant professor of English at University of Cincinnati Raymond Walters College in Blue Ash, Ohio. Her current research involves projects investigating the differences between handwritten and audio instructor commentary on student writing in college composition and developmental writing classes.

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Essays

Incorporation of Technology

Audio commentary on student writing can be produced in a variety of ways, from the low-tech method of recording comments on cassette tape, to producing MP3 files that can be burned on CD-Rs, e-mailed as attachments to students, or even placed in the Digital Dropbox on Blackboard course websites. In addition, MSWord offers the option of introducing audio inserts into computer files of student texts, using the "voice comment" menu selection on the reviewing toolbar. For several years now, my primary method of delivery has been via CD-R. Using my PC, a microphone that plugs into the designated jack on my computer's CPU, and the Sony sound recording program, Sound Forge 7.0 (version 8.0 is now available), I am able to make high quality audio recordings for my students. Sound Forge is easy to learn, easy to use, and offers a variety of editing options as well. Audio recording software can also be downloaded free from a variety of sources (see <http://www.users.muohio.edu/sommerjd/recording.htm> for two options).

Lessons Learned

Audio commentary can be used in any class, regardless of discipline, where instructors want to offer students formative response to their writing, course projects, or presentations. This easy-to-learn method offers instructors the opportunity to provide students with the kind of detailed, expansive response to their work that might only be available in frequently difficult to schedule one-on-one conferences. While there are still occasions where I use handwritten commentary in response to student papers in ECI, they are rare and occur only in situations where students specifically request handwritten feedback because they feel they work better with that method (perhaps due to learning-style variations among that small number of students). For me and for the majority of students I have studied and taught, audio commentary is simply a better method of feedback. My audio comments, on average, are approximately ten minutes in length per student essay. Ten minutes of spoken feedback allows me to do several things I simply cannot do in the margins and endnotes of a student's paper in that same amount of time: continue and individualize classroom instruction to help the student understand problems in the paper--issues like content development, focus, argumentation, or writing errors. In addition, the added space allows for more specificity: I can offer students concrete suggestions and occasional examples concerning how they might improve portions of the paper in revision; I can elaborate on the things they do well so that they are better able to recognize successes and repeat them in the future. This added detail, specificity, and length, in turn, not only provides students with more extensive feedback, but clearer feedback, as well. Furthermore, the fact that audio commentary is closer in style to conversation than handwritten allows the instructor to adopt a more relaxed approach to the student audience, thus making this method more enjoyable for the instructor and better received and more highly valued by most students. While I have not conducted research on the following lessons learned, my sixteen year use of the method has convinced me that students who receive audio commentary make fewer grade complaints and spend less time during office hours asking me to explain or elaborate on my comments in preparation for revision of a paper. These last two subjective observations lead me to suspect that students who receive audio commentary understand in a more complete way what they will need to do to revise a particular paper, as well as why they received the grade they did on the draft under review.

References, links

- Editorial Note: The L Path to Building a Commons
- Using World of Warcraft and Other MMORPGs to Foster a Targeted, S and Cooperative Approach Toward Language Learning

Reviews

- The Horizon Report: NERCOMP SIG Event
- Review of "Connect Technology & Liberal Education: Theories Case Studies" A NEF event (4/5/06)

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2. Anson, Chris M. "Talking About Text: The Use of Recorded Commentary in Response to Student Writing." *A Sourcebook for Responding to Student Writing*. Ed. Richard Straub. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1999. 165-74.
3. Mellen, Cheryl and Jeff Sommers. "Audiotaped Response and the Two-Year-Campus Writing Classroom: The Two-Sided Desk, the 'Guy with the Ax,' and the Chirping Birds." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 31.1 (Sept. 2003): 25-39.
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Measured Results

While my own long-term use of audio commentary has convinced me of its usefulness as a pedagogical tool, two of my qualitative, classroom-based research projects--one on ECI students' attitudes toward handwritten vs. audio commentary, and one on differences between revisions completed by ECI students using handwritten vs. audio commentary--have offered some measurable results. For instance, as noted on a website I co-created with Jeff Sommers, out of 197 composition students surveyed about their commentary preferences, 176, or 89%, stated a clear preference for the audio method over the handwritten method (see http://www.users.muohio.edu/sommerjd/images/survey_results4.gif). In interviews I conducted with ten ECI students who volunteered after completion of the course to be study participants, I found that student preference for audio commentary was predicated on their belief that they were praised more fully in audio, remembered teacher commentary better and longer, were given more detailed feedback, and understood comments more accurately than they did when they received handwritten responses. One study participant remarked that the audio method increased her motivation to write better, saying, "it really boosted my confidence as a writer...It made me try harder." Another noted that audio commentary helped him internalize feedback better, saying, "I would usually just skim over written comments unless something caught my eye; however, on the... [audio] I had to listen to all of it and it seemed to sink in more, so I was able to remember what was said."

In a related study designed to determine whether or not revisions were different when students worked with audio vs. handwritten commentary, I studied original drafts and final revisions from the same ten student volunteers in two sections of ECI. These volunteers relied solely on my commentary during their revision process;

they did not meet with me in conference, nor did they consult writing center tutors for extra help as they revised. In this study, I looked at papers from two ECI assignments: a less complicated narrative essay where students were asked to write and reflect upon an important personal experience, and a more complex and challenging source-based argument essay. In order to help verify that the results were related to the method of commentary rather than the ease or difficulty of the assignment or the skill level of an individual writer, I made sure that students from one section received audio commentary on the reflective narrative, while students from the other section received handwritten feedback on that same paper. This was reversed, then, with the argument essay, allowing me to begin to examine whether or not individual writers revised differently with alternative feedback methods. The design also helped me examine whether or not different commentary styles on the same assignment with different writers yielded any revision variations. Furthermore, in my analysis of their final revisions, I was most interested in whether or not commentary style seemed to have any bearing on students' ability to negotiate substantial content changes in their essays. In particular, I was interested in revisions related to what I believe to be two of the most frequent requests made by composition instructors: significant content development (writing more in order to advance critical thinking, explain or clarify points, provide evidence, etc.) and revisions addressing problems pertaining to a paper's focus (linking ideas better, deleting extraneous or unrelated material, adding transitional phrases, sentences, and paragraphs to connect material, etc.).

My research results revealed that nine out of ten of the student volunteers revised more substantially in the areas of development and focus on papers where they received audio instructor feedback, regardless of the ease or difficulty of the assignment (sadly, one out of ten made insignificant revisions using both methods of commentary). Specifically, in nine out of ten cases, students who received audio commentary on their reflective narrative papers added more significant detail, description, action, characterization, and critical reflection than those who revised using handwritten feedback. Furthermore, students who revised the more challenging argument paper using audio comments developed content more significantly by adding more astute examples, evidence, counterarguments and refutations than their peers who worked with handwritten commentary. In addition, my research revealed that in the area of focus, the vast majority of students working with audio commentary, regardless of the assignment, were better able to delete extraneous material and add transitional sentences and paragraphs to connect previously unconnected ideas than those working with handwritten commentary. As one student stated about the influence of audio commentary on her writing, "I feel audio comments help me to focus better."

Perhaps because the audio method is more text-specific, more detailed, offers the time and space for individualized instruction, genuine praise, and real teaching, the majority of students in my studies who used it to guide their revision processes produced better final papers. One participant reported, "I think [audio comments] are an excellent idea because they give so much more information. [The professor's] mouth is going to move faster than her pencil, and her pencil is going to move slower than her brain." In interviews with the ten students whose revisions I analyzed, it became clear that in 90% of the cases, the expansive aspects of audio commentary allowed them to understand the holistic nature of the feedback better: in other words, the ways that individual comments related to the entire paper. Students reported vast uncertainty regarding handwritten margin notes in particular, leading one interview subject to wonder, "when a professor writes something like 'develop this idea' next to something, does that mean the sentence closest to the note or does it mean the whole paragraph, or what? I never feel like I know." In my study, student papers revised using handwritten commentary suggested that margin notes were read as completely localized, applying only to the sentence closest to the comment. In addition, study participants reported that global endnotes were often left unread. Conversely, the more inherently global nature of audio commentary--the way it allows a professor to quickly suggest how developing one section, for instance, requires development of several other sections--helps students understand the relationship between smaller, text-specific comments and the larger holistic issues required in revision. Ultimately, student attitudes and learning outcomes

might be best summed up by this study participant, who commented, "When I got stuck I could just replay my CD and somehow listening not reading...made it easier for me to get refocused. I wish all Profs. used audio comments."

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