# Comments to Progress:

## How to Achieve a Student Writer's Sense of Authority

## through Feedback in the Revision Process

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Building authority, or agency, in the undergraduate writing classroom is considered beneficial to producing confident and well-rounded student writers who later become integral members of society. However, it is widely recognized by scholars that this agency is lacking in many student writers. Students feeling a lack of authority over their work urges a closer look at how the revision process can assist in the development of greater student confidence and ownership. This paper seeks to examine factors that may influence student authority over their writing, and especially how teacher feedback and peer review can encourage students to gain and establish such authority. I argue that student writer authority is not established through a single task but, instead, through a process of multiple important steps. To support my claims, I use the findings from the field's prominent scholars as well as data gathered from a survey I conducted of thirty college students in writing courses at CCU.

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**Introduction**

Building authority, or agency, for student writers has been discussed and dubbed as needed by all contributing scholars. A cumulative definition of student writer authority and what it might look like when adequately developed could be stated as follows: that students would feel confident with their writing to the extent that the writing is thought provoking, inclusive of the student's critical thinking, and intended for a larger audience than the course/professor. With this definition in mind, there is definite value in developing student writers' authority as it produces confident, well-rounded student writers. This not only benefits the student writer in their current institution of learning but also in future endeavors. A student writer with authority can affect more than just the writing itself, but how they may perform in employment, that is the level of confidence they have to question authority, their innovation, and to what extent they become an integral individual in today's society. However, while there is much said about authority, there is  not a consensus between scholars on how to achieve it in student writers.

**A Review of the Literature**

The situation of a student's' lack of authority over their work urges a closer look in order as to which determine which revision process is best able to develop confidence. Some scholars have argued that such agency may be built by giving students a position of authority during the revision process via peer review. Peer review has been pushed for, and pushed against by multiple scholars of the revision and editing process. Two of the most foundational scholars in the field, Nancy Sommers and Donald M. Murray, make a claim in favor of the peer review process. They state that the process of reviewing a peer's work gives the student authority, and presenting their work to peers rather than instructors assuages fears and anxieties. Ann M. Penrose and Cheryl Geisler also argue for the process of peer interaction and group decision-making, naming this concept

"rhetorical knowledge" in their essay, "Reading and Writing without Authority." On the other side of the argument, scholars like Carol Berkenkotter suggest that students who write for peers and teachers do not necessarily feel the advantages as imagined by others. In Berkenkotter's essay "Student Writers and Their Sense of Authority over Texts" presented a study she conducted using four of her own students and measured how they responded to peer reviews. She explicitly presents her findings in contrast to Sommers and Murray's avocation for peer review, and disproves the benefits they argue. However, Berkenkotter finds herself at a loss for the solution to establishing authority over student's work. She instead suggests that answer is hinged on emotional and intellectual factors and asks a series of questions that, she believes, when answered. they will enlighten researchers and instructors alike:

> Under what conditions do they first experience the need for authority? How do they demonstrate it? How do they use it? Toward what end? And once having asserted their authority to their readers, are they likely to do so to other readers? How might a writer with a sense of authority be guided by other's advice? (Berkenkotter 319).

Another important scholar of student writing Peter Elbow agrees that the authority is installed by the individual—not through peer review, but instead through encouraging ways of developing confidence in writing. Elbow suggests free writing, multiple drafts, and notes instead of editorial checkpoints by outsiders. In a way, L. Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch agreed with this strategy of writing without teachers. They argued that teachers are part of the issue with authority. The argument presented in the 1982 essay "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response" asserts that a teacher's instruction and overall hierarchy discourage the student writer from saying what they want to say and how they want to say it. However, an essay published by Lester Faigley in 1981 entitled "The Role of Writing Apprehension in Writing Performance and Competence" indirectly supports Elbow's push for free and personal writing building authority.

Faigley examined high apprehensive writers in contrast to low apprehensive writers and found that on personal narratives and descriptive essays the high apprehensive writers were more anxious about expressing their own feelings, attitudes and experiences and therefore had much lower authority because of this.

Patricia Bizzell also addresses the issue of building authority in a classroom in her 1991 essay, "Classroom Authority and Critical Pedagogy." In this essay, Bizzell argues that in order to combat the authority a teacher has over the classroom, the teacher must allow the student and teacher to, in theory, become equals. That is, teacher or student can take control of the group if they have assured the group that everyone's interests are represented. This then transfers into writing, as it is not the teacher's job to provide criteria for good writing, but instead a classroom climate that allows the students to determine what is good writing. Christyne Berzenyi's 2001 essay "Comments to Comments: Teachers and Students in Written Dialogue about Critical Revision" also focuses on challenging the traditional teacher-student relationship, as she proposes her own solution to student writer's authority through her feedback process she has named "comments to comments." This process, which she used in her classrooms a full six years before writing her article, describes a process in which her students are required to engage with her comments, first through written responses and then through verbal responses. Her students may agree or disagree with her comments, and Berzenyi argues that this process alone improves student drafts and therefore also improves their authority over their writing.

## Establishing a Knowledge Base

This paper seeks to answer the question of what factors may influence a student's authority over their writing, and especially how the major concepts of teacher feedback and peer review can assist students in gaining and establishing such authority. Berkenkotter is not incorrect in arguing that

within the answers to her questions lie important insight on establishing student writer's authority over their work. In addition, I, like Berkenkotter, agree that the practice of peer reviews by themselves is not as powerful of a tool as proposed. However, I would extend this to say that peer review can be the powerful tool it is proposed to be, but only after the student feels fully equipped and confident in the area of writing. I argue that a plausible way of establishing this initial confidence and making the student feel equipped can be gained through the teacher's feedback. In order to gain further knowledge on this topic, I drew up a survey that was distributed to thirty students, differing in ages and intended majors. The questions are in response to Berkenkotter's essay mentioned above and Berzenyi's essay "Comments to Comments: Teachers and Students in Written Dialogue about Critical Revision," and each question is aimed to answer either peer review, teacher feedback methods and style, or student writer confidence as a whole. All questions were asked in an anonymous online survey format and answered in a fashion that involves the surveyed students circling a number on a 1-5 scale, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The questions were intended to be short so that students were not confused and the answer elicited was honest.

Berzsenyi's essay is helpful for seeing the effects an instructor's feedback has on a student's revision process and, I would argue, the student writer's overall authority. Berzsenyi alludes to the conference approach between a student and an instructor, a method scholars such as Brannon and Knoblauch would endorse as it calls for direct discussion between the teacher and student and allows explication of what the student wants to say and how they wish to do so, but Berzsenyi states that, "students have shown difficulty talking freely, specifically and spontaneously in real-time conversations about revising their texts" (72). Berzsenyi goes on to say, "Without conceptual vocabulary to 'talk' about writing, students cannot critically discuss their writing in terms of thesis statements, topic sentences, language conventions, support, audience, appropriateness, purpose and so forth" (72). I would agree that the correct vocabulary is a major element of authority, for without

knowledge or confidence in using such vocabulary the student not only does not feel agency over their own work nor do they feel authority in commenting on other's in opportunities such as peer reviews. In their 2007 essay "Developing Authority in Student Writing Through Written Peer Critique in the Disciples" Barbara Schneider and Jo-Ann Andre note this lack of vocabulary by claiming vocabulary is to be learned as it changes for each discourse:

> Each discipline has its own set of conventions in which particular ways of constructing and communicating knowledge are embedded. In learning a particular academic discourse, students must come to understand what research questions are appropriate, what counts as acceptable evidence, and the ways in which sources may be used in building arguments. (1)

This vocabulary can include basic writing elements such as voice, tone, diction, and syntax, or even the conventions of writing like regulating the use of personal pronouns, how to correctly refer and incorporate other literature, and the inclusion or exclusion of certain kinds of information needed in a paper. So then, the first act in building authority is the act of instructing and supplying the student writer with this vocabulary and instilling a confidence for the student writer to consider their work in these terms. Schneider and Andre corroborate my standpoint, "If we want to hear an authorial voice in student writing, we must ensure that students write their critiques from a strong knowledge base" (3). Students need exposure and practice with the language of revision before they feel confident and proficient enough to use it in oral communication such as student teacher conferences. This exposure is provided in class instruction, and the trial-and-error of students writing drafts and receiving draft feedback provide the practice.

**Promoting Disagreement to Promoting Authority**

While very radical in their claims, Elbow, Brannon, Knoblauch, and Bizzell are not completely off base or outdated in their arguments; the traditional role of the instructor does need to be shifted in order to allow for a student writer's authority. Unlike the aforementioned claims, the role of instructor does not need complete removal, nor do the student and teacher need to become equal in all senses. Instead, in the place of traditional teacher authority, there needs to be an opportunity for the student to challenge or disagree with feedback. It is typical for a teacher to leave written comments on a student's hard copy or electronic draft. What is not so typical is that the student is given this feedback and, with it, the credibility to present a response. Berzsenyi makes student response a required part of her feedback in the start of the semester for all her classes. She notes that despite the extra time, consideration, and writing this process takes from both the student and teacher, the overall effect is actually time saving because of improved oral conversation, and peer reviews that are clearer and more meaningful (73). This response requirement allows the student to do what Brannon, Knoblauch, and Bizzell argue for, which is making it possible for the student and teacher to become equals in a sense. When questioned whether having the opportunity to respond to a teacher's comments through written dialogue would be helpful, 50 percent chose a degree of agreement or completely agreed. The instructor must explain the feedback given on the student's work just as a student must explain why he or she made that decision in their work and why the choice is still valid despite the feedback, causing the student to think and argue critically about the work. Berzsenyi even concedes to changing her opinion if the student can persuade her with a critical argument.

Although I agree with Berzsenyi's method of requiring student response in order to express disagreement, I cannot accept her method of also requiring student response in order to express agreement. I believe that by focusing on the mere act of responding and requiring students to express agreement to the teacher's feedback, Berzsenyi overlooks the deeper problem of building

authority, as just responding does not enforce student writer authority over his or her work as much as it causes students to concede to traditional authority. It is only when the student must utilize the terms and vocabulary taught in critical argument and quite literally defend his or her work that they will feel any sense of ownership.

**How to Structure Teacher Feedback in Order to Promote Authority**

More than defending their writing, student writers' authority is also shaped by the nature of teacher feedback on their draft. In her article "Responding to Student Writing," Nancy Sommers explains that teacher feedback should motivate students to revisit their texts with curiosity and involvement (156). Berzsenyi takes this further by claiming "feedback should strive to invigorate students' inquiry into concerns of audience, purpose, terminology, conventions, genre, and form to comprise a critical revision process" (74). So while both of these speak to what feedback should do, the question is how feedback should be delivered in order to achieve these ideas as well as the overall purpose of authority. With the exception of a select few, most students turn in a rough draft as an honest attempt to complete the assignment with effective and capable writing. Then, in spite of time restrictions and other factors, it is necessary that teachers respond with similar thoughtfulness and effort. This, I argue, is only achieved through specific, reflective, challenging, and critical comments as opposed to vague, overly general, and ambiguous comments as argued for in Chris Anson and Michael Robertson's essays.

The results of my research corroborated that students appreciate this type of feedback. When asked if students feel more confident to revise their essay if the teacher has communicated on issues explicitly/specifically, all students surveyed expressed agreement. An interesting way to provide feedback that still maintains an equal and open level of authority, is a teacher's remarks on his or her understanding of the text. This does not force any one-way criteria as far as "good" versus "bad"

writing, but instead encourages expansion, clarification, explanation, and persuasion. The vague or general nature of criteria may only be applied, if at all, in instances when the instructor is relinquishing authority. Meaning, the teacher's comments should allow the student writer to utilize critical thinking instead of explicitly directing the revision.

Sommers, Brannon, and Knoblauch urge instructors to be careful about the amount of control teachers exert over students when reading and commenting. Teachers' "idealized texts" should not be imposed on student writing. In my experience of being a teacher assistant during my high school education, I provided feedback on student papers, and I was instructed to give explicit feedback and even to rewrite entire sentences. While the students were then given a much easier task of revising, they did not think critically about what they wanted to communicate and how they wanted to communicate it; by simply taking commands and direction students do not build their own authority over their writing.

Specificity is important when discussing the placement of comments. When students were asked which they prefer, marginal or end comments, 60 percent of students chose that the marginal comments most helpful, while only 45 percent chose the same "strongly agree" option for end comments. Berzsenyi remarks that she uses marginal comments for beginning writers and end comments are used for more advanced writers. Marginal comments offer little to no room for ambiguity or vagueness, meaning it is easy to tell what aspects of the paper the teacher is commenting on, especially when the teacher uses vocabulary the basic student writer may still be learning. Those who have more confidence in their writing do not necessarily find these comments necessary but are concerned with the overall cohesiveness or what the teacher understood, or did not understand, from the paper.

The final aspect of purposeful feedback is achieving a balance between negative and positive comments. Donald A. Daiker notes the importance of praise in his essay "Learning to Praise" by

stating, "Praise encourages students to overcome writing apprehension" (155). Writing is an act of confidence. It requires a writer to assert claims and open up these claims to the evaluation of others. So then, it is important, especially when responding to student writers, that teachers encourage students in what those students do well. Daiker asserts that highly apprehensive writers avoid writing because of the fear of negative comments or reaction, and because they let this fear inhibit their confidence or writing authority, they typically receive low scores and negative feedback. In Thomas Gee's findings the connection between writing apprehension and teacher response is clear. Those students who receive only negative or no feedback write much shorter essays than those who receive positive endorsement. This is due to the fact that the positive endorsement is building student writer authority, and, as a result, the student feels more confident in writing and asserting claims. While it is important to never to praise falsely praise, as Ken Macorie has argued, praise allows students to see what they are doing right and encourages them to continue to incorporate the praised strengths into future drafts. Praise can be used to inspire and motivate a student writer. When students were asked if they feel discouraged when given little to no praise on their essays, 45 percent of surveyed students expressed agreement. Discouraging a student writer is not a building block of encouraging authority. Thomas Newkirk makes the comparison of student writers to athletes, in that athletes are conditioned by their coaches to move past mistakes and instead focus on the positive. When a student writer creates an eloquent paragraph or explains something in writing well, the teacher should focus comments on helping the student create similar work in the future. Once the teacher has successfully instilled these practices in the classroom and feedback dynamic, the student writer can then exhibit authority in other proposed manners, such as the heavily favored peer review.

**Teacher Feedback to Peer Review**

It is only after the student has formed confidence in a knowledge base that they are able to comfortably provide feedback on a peer's work. Schneider and Andre specifically address this: "Students have no hope of writing an effective critique in an authoritative voice if they do not understand the material that forms the subject matter for their peers' writing" (3). This knowledge base is first and foremost established by a teacher's presence, both through teaching and the feedback methods addressed above. Unfortunately, all too often students are not provided this knowledge base and therefore do not feel comfortable providing authoritative and thought-provoking feedback. This is seen in my survey results. No category, expressing neither agreement nor disagreement, was exponentially higher than the other when asked if students feel confident in performing peer reviews. While more advanced writers may have gained this knowledge over time and therefore may feel slightly more prepared, the basic writers do not feel prepared and the effects of the peer review are not beneficial. That being said, the critics in favor of peer review are not incorrect in assuming its authoritative benefits. Once the student feels confident discussing a paper with a teacher, that student should be fully equipped to respond to a peer. This is because the teacher's model of feedback has paved the way for the student. When asked if they consciously think of a teacher's comments while performing a peer review, 75 percent of students expressed agreement. It is becoming more common that peer reviews may still be teacher-led, that is, a worksheet or other rubric, is given to the students instructing them how to reflect upon and provide feedback to their peer's work. Schneider and Andre argue for this type of guidance: "If instructors do not provide guidance in what is expected in a peer critique, students may simply focus on grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors in their peers' writing" (4). Though I concede that Schneider and Andre are correct in assuming the benefits of this guidance as it does create more thoughtful, specific, and critical feedback, I would modify their suggestion by endorsing the

supplementary guidance only at the initial peer review. This limited time guidance will still maintain constructive feedback but will not sacrifice a student's authority while doing so.

### Conclusion and Future Research

Student writer authority is not established through one task, but instead established through a process of multiple tasks. Through first establishing a knowledge base through teacher comments and revising the traditional form of how student and teacher interact when discussing a student's writing, and what specific forms of feedback the instructor provides for the student, is the initial step in building authority. After this knowledge base of feedback is established, the student will feel more confident in responding to peer reviews. This gained confidence allows the illustrious effects of authority proposed by scholars to take place. Requiring multiple student writers of equal ability to go through the suggested teaching and feedback process would be the next step to proving my claims. This would provide a direct look at the effect of teacher feedback and their development of student writer authority over a set period of time. Proving the effectiveness of this method in a classroom setting could possibly redefine teaching methods in the composition classroom for future generations.

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**Appendix A**

1. I feel more confident to revise my essay if the teacher has communicated on issues
   explicitly/specifically.

2. I feel more confident to revise my essay if the teacher has commented giving general
   feedback about my essay as a whole.

3. I usually take the peer review comments I receive on my work seriously.

4. I feel confident giving peer reviews on other's papers.

5. I feel discouraged when I am given little or no praise on my essay.

6. I would benefit by having the chance to respond to the teacher's comments through written
   dialogue.

7. I find comments in the margins throughout the paper most helpful.

8. I find general comments at the end of the paper most helpful.

9. I consciously think of teacher's comments (how a teacher may comment on the essay) when
   doing peer reviews.

10. I feel teachers use over vague or abstract vocabulary when commenting on my work.