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When Pragmatics Precede Pedagogy Post-Process Theories of Assessment and Response to Student Writing

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This article describes a hybrid, first-year composition program—part online instruction and part classroom instruction—that relies on anonymous assessment and response to student writing. Writing program administrators (WPAs) at Texas Tech University designed this program largely in answer to budgetary constraints to handle ever-increasing student populations and stagnant departmental funding. I examine the precarious balance between university pragmatics and classroom pedagogy, suggesting that when faced with budgetary restrictions, composition programs should not let the economic and pragmatic question of how teachers assess and respond to student writing precede the more important question of why: Why do we grade and respond to student writing? While both how and why we grade and respond to student writing remain important, this article considers how university administrators, WPAs, and instructors might keep the *why* center stage by engaging in productive, proactive dialogue using what Porter et al. (2000) call “rhetorical action,” for “engaging in situated theorizing and relating that theorizing through stories of change and attempted change” (p. 631).

In a perfect world, first-year composition courses would be capped at 15 students and taught by professional compositionists devoted to teaching, to reading and researching in the field, and to keeping up with the latest technology. Professional compositionists would create classroom environments that help students feel confident about sharing their work; they would understand how to respond to student writing in ways that lead students to thoughtful re-vision of their work, and they would understand the intricacies of how to assess the complex nature of writing growth and performances in multiple contexts. In a perfect world, com-

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position classrooms, writing centers, and offices would be updated to include the latest technology and technical support; diverse student bodies would become critically engaged in a variety of literacy communities; students would learn to reflect critically on their own writings as well as the writings of others and engage in individual conferences with faculty when they need help as they learn about the complex nature of the rhetorical situation. These descriptions are just some of the ways that process and post-process theorists define optimal learning environments for teaching and assessing college-level writing (Anson, 1999; Baumlín & Baumlín, 1989; Hillocks, 2002; Huot 2002a, 2002b; NCTE, 2004; Straub, 1997; Wiggins, 1998; Yancey, 2004).

Budget redistributions make it difficult, if not impossible, to create these environments; consequently, writing program administrators (WPAs) become frustrated “when global critiques exist only in the form of ideal cases or statements, which all too often bracket off discussions of materiality and economic constraints in favor of working out the best case scenario—which, all too often, does not come to pass” (Porter, Sullivan, Blythe, Grabill, & Miles, 2000, p. 615). Because we live in the real world with 25 or more students in each composition class, creating less than optimal teaching environments, and because WPAs rely on instructors who do not always put research and teaching composition as their first priority, many WPAs become disheartened when they see no realistic strategies for positive change. On local levels, WPAs face a variety of administrative and pedagogical challenges in structuring writing programs, among them inadequate funding, facility constraints, high student-faculty ratios, the need for time-consuming course development, graduate instructor training, and faculty development. Although departmental challenges seem insurmountable at times, change is possible. “Somewhere between the macro-level national critiques and the micro-level practices on individual campuses is space for an action plan informed by critique yet responsive to local conditions” (Porte, Sullivan, Blythe, Grabill, & Miles, 2000, p. 616). Some universities see “that space for an action plan” located in utilizing technologies in creative ways such as teaching via satellite, teaching fully online courses that require no classroom use, or using technology for teaching hybrid courses with reduced seat time in the classroom. For instance, the Composition Department at Texas Tech University (TTU) began offering fully online composition courses as well as hybrid composition courses, the latter being most often taken by first-year composition (FYC) students to address some of the administrative and pedagogical concerns just cited.

TTU piloted the hybrid program, Interactive Composition Online (ICON), on a small scale in 2001 and in Spring 2002. Then, in Fall 2002, TTU fully implemented the program for all FYC courses to address some of the above issues—for example, discrepancies in instructor pedagogies and inconsistencies in student experiences in FYC (Lang, 2005; Rickly, 2006). The composition staff at TTU—which consisted of three WPAs, a graduate student assistant, and one secretary—also learned they would receive 25% more FYC students with no additional funding to hire more teachers. During the years following the original pilot program, TTU program administrators continued using ICON for FYC courses to address problems such as “how to use inexperienced graduate students entering Texas Tech to teach composition to 3,000 freshman” (Wasley, 2006). Fred Kemp, associate professor of English said,

We make the assumption that students benefit more from writing and receiving commentary than by sitting in a classroom. . . . We are not grading the writer; we are grading the writing. . . . No longer can a student earn good marks by buttering up the instructor. Teachers can't inflate the grade of a student who turns in consistently poor work just because he or she is deemed to be trying hard. ICON is designed to inject objectivity in the subjective process of evaluating writing. Thanks to standardized assignments, standardized evaluation criteria, and shared grading . . . an A means something uniform. (cited in Wasley, 2006,)

Before ICON, WPAs at TTU reviewed instructor responses to student writing and observed classroom instruction. During this time, WPAs identified a need for further professional development. More specifically, WPAs wanted to answer complaints about "erratic instruction" and to address faculty reports that some graduate part-time instruction "was not up to acceptable standards" (Lang, 2005, p. 202). According to Lang, associate professor of English at TTU, many graduate instructors view teaching and assessing writing as secondary to their graduate studies:

Part of the problem is that GPTIs [graduate part-time instructors] are not attending the university for the purposes of gaining experience in teaching writing. They are, first and foremost, students of literature, creative writing, rhetoric and composition, and technical communication and rhetoric; to that end, they [and who can blame them] privilege their academic studies above their teaching, especially if they are studying in areas other than rhetoric and composition. (p. 190)

To address these concerns, TTU, in addition to requiring new graduate instructors to take a course in the history and theory of teaching composition, requires they also

attend at least two professional development workshops each semester, attend a 2-to 4-day orientation before fall and spring semesters, and be observed by a WPA during their first semester. MA [master's] students who have never taught serve as "apprentices" their first semester. Before teaching, they complete a practicum of teaching methods . . . (Rickly, 2006, p. 183)

New document instructors/graders (DIs) read online responses to student writing, and observe the more experienced teachers learn the ICON system. Program administrators at TTU say that ICON improves teacher training, especially in assessment and response to student writing, as teachers can observe others grading and responding to student writing before beginning the actual practice. Rickly (2006), associate professor of English at TTU, wrote, "By reading what others had written, by asking questions about negotiating the meaning of the criteria, and by simply practicing" (p. 194), GPTIs improve their assessment practices before working individually online.

Before ICON, Kemp first developed Texas Tech Online/Print Integrated Curriculum (TOPIC), a web-based application. TOPIC, similar to systems such as WebCT and Blackboard, was designed to manage course material and student writing. TOPIC, along with its over-arching program, ICON, makes it possible for students to turn in assignments online, as well as receive their grades, instructor

comments, and exchange anonymous peer critiques online. Although some students and instructors critique ICON, program administrators say the system works well for TTU and could work well for other large institutions (Lang, 2005; Rickly, 2006; Wasley, 2006). ICON “is the best deal for freshman that I’ve every seen,” said Kemp (cited in Wasley).

Rickly, like Kemp, wrote that ICON “offers the best—most pedagogically enlightened, the most economically responsible, and the most efficient for both students and teachers—model of delivering FYC to date” (p. 196). More specifically, ICON’s distributed system of anonymous, online grading and reduced weekly class meetings mean a “decreased reliance on lecturers/GPTIs who resist the recommended curriculum” (Lang, 2005, p. 195). “In addition to reducing the total number of sections offered for both ENGL 1301/1302, we are also reducing the number of meetings required for each individual section. The end result is that fewer classroom instructors would be needed for face-to-face meetings with students” (pp. 195-196). Overall, ICON reduces classroom meeting time by 65% as well as reduces classroom preparation time by 90% because of the common curriculum (Lang, 2005). These reductions free instructors for other work, such as grading and responding to student writing online.

Since 2002, anonymous, online graders have assessed all student papers in FYC courses at TTU, partly to allow classroom instructors to handle 36 students in each of the 1301 and 1302 FYC courses offered each semester, partly to create a more uniform experience for all FYC students, and partly to address budgetary issues. The overall pedagogical focus in FYC has shifted toward the pragmatic because of pressures to meet university demands to cut budgets. “If FYC serves a socializing and normalizing process in college, perhaps the inclusion of online, database-driven delivery mechanisms forecasts a new normalization focus: away from the aesthetic and toward the pragmatic” (Rickly, 2006, p. 196). Kemp (2005) suggested a need to balance pragmatics and pedagogy if universities intend to survive because, in a sense, English departments are “a kind of state-run small business” caught up in every aspect of management:

This is not to condemn any presumed commodification of English departments, but as a minor celebration of the pervasive and salutary effects of open information and organizational thinking on the human condition. . . . I hope to ameliorate some of the anti-business and anti-technology ideological fervor that continues to impede English departments and academic departments in the humanities from maintaining societal validation and administrative support. . . . If we stop thinking we are something other than what we are, we might do a better job of defending our efforts in the eyes of our colleagues, our administrators, our legislators, and in our own often confused minds. (pp. 80-81)

From 2003 to 2006, I taught FYC courses at TTU, working with ICON as a classroom instructor, an anonymous, online grader, an assistant WPA for one semester, and I managed the English portion for the extended Studies program for one summer, a fully online program that offers both 1301 and 1302 composition courses through distance learning.¹ During my 3 years at TTU, I noticed that the shifting concern toward pragmatics and organizational thinking that Kemp wrote

about included a pragmatic shift in pedagogy. In the beginning of each semester, TOPIC and ICON became the teaching subject. Students focused on ICON rather than teachers, peers, or classroom exercises, creating a barrier between developing student-teacher and student-student relationships. The ICON system also set the pace for all classrooms so that teachers could not change due dates if a class needed more time in one area, or if an entire class had not yet received feedback on one assignment before moving on to another.

In meetings, WPAs and instructors addressed educational concerns when revising the 1301 and 1302 course syllabi and assignments, and they discussed process and post-process theories of teaching and assessing writing in the monthly meetings; however, the decontextualized grading and response to student writing, the high student-teacher ratios (36 students per class), along with the reduced class time diminished collaboration among the students and between the teachers and students—the very collaboration so important to post-process pedagogies. To learn, students require assessments that are contextualized and authentic because students must first understand how they are doing (Wiggins, 1998). “Feedback is information about how a person did in light of what he or she attempted—intent versus effect, actual versus ideal performance” (p. 46). The anonymous grading and response to student writing at TTU separates teachers and students in such a way that students have a difficult time understanding “how they are doing.”

In what follows, with both theory and administrative issues in mind, I discuss my experiences with ICON and then discuss the tenuous balance between pragmatics and post-process theories of teaching and assessing writing. I first describe ICON’s program of anonymous assessment and response to student writing; then, in the section titled “ICON’s Assessment Practices and Theoretical Underpinnings,” I discuss some of the relationships of theory to practice as they relate to ICON’s anonymous assessment program, showing the precarious balance between pragmatics and pedagogy. In the last section, titled “Resistance Through Rhetorical Action,” I consider how university administrators, program administrators, and instructors might engage in productive, proactive dialogue using what Porter et al. (2000) called “rhetorical action,” for “engaging in situated theorizing and relating that theorizing through stories of change and attempted change” (p. 631). I discuss reasons why WPAs should challenge institutional edicts by renaming and reframing problems to situate them in current contexts that bridge communication gaps among administrators, WPAs, teachers, and students.

How ICON Works

Composition classes at TTU meet once a week for 80 minutes, in regular face-to-face classroom settings. The Composition Department experiences an average enrollment of 2,000 to 2,700 students each semester, most of whom are taught by GPTIs (Lang, 2005). Through TOPIC, students submit all assignments online—their preliminary drafts, final drafts, peer critiques, portfolio reflections, and writing reviews—on average two to three documents each week, more than 90,000 pieces of writing per semester. Because the classrooms are not wired, students turn in assignments using their own computers or using one of the

labs on campus. Except for occasional technical problems, TOPIC, which continuously records and reports updated grades and commentary, is available to students and faculty at any time, 24/7. Faculty and students log onto TOPIC from school or home to review the course syllabus, assignment due dates, and assignment descriptions.

Following is a list of sample 1302 assignments for the second of three essay cycles that students write each semester. These assignments are designed to help students write a well-supported Toulmin argument on a topic of their choice, the final draft during this cycle being assignment 2.5. Each of the major drafts, in bold type, is graded and responded to by two DIs (documentation instructors/ graders). DI commentaries should lead students toward revisions. The assignments themselves are also sequenced to help students write and revise each paper in a way that leads them toward the final drafts. In 2005-2006, the WPAs and DIs, together, developed the following headings for responding to student writing, although DIs may erase the headings in the comment box if they find them unhelpful: “Content,” “What you did well,” “What you need to work on,” “Grammar and Mechanics.”

- ^ • **2.1 Proposal for Research Paper (500–1,000 words)**
 - o 2.1 Peer Critique
 - o 2.1 Peer Critique
 - o 2.1 Writing Review
- **2.2 Revised Annotated Proposal (1,000–1,500 words)**
 - o 2.2 Peer Critique
 - o 2.2 Peer Critique
 - o 2.2 Writing Review
- **2.3 Annotated Bibliography (1,500–2,000 words)**
 - o 2.3 Peer Critique
 - o 2.3 Peer Critique
 - o Writing Review
- **2.4 Preliminary Draft of Research Paper (1,500–2,500 words)**
 - o 2.4 Peer Critique
 - o 2.4 Peer Critique
 - o 2.4 Writing Review
- **2.5 Final Draft of Research Paper (2,000–2,500 words)**
 - o 2.5 Writing Review

This assignment list is from the class text that students were required to buy in 2003-2004 (*Texas Tech's Interactive Composition*, pp. 23-24, 2003-2004). Each assignment is listed online with a due date next to it. Students can select links that take them directly to assignment descriptions where they can submit assignments online. (See Appendix A for a sample assignment description.)

TOPIC returns DI grades and written responses to student writing; it also calculates late penalties, course averages, and so on. Students know their grades on individual papers and course averages at all times without papers changing hands and without asking their instructors. As for unexcused absences, students lose 5

points after two absences and 10 points per day for late papers, although instructors can remove penalties at their discretion. Classroom instructors record only absences, grade changes, and they can remove late penalties.

ICON: Grading and Response to Student Writing

Classroom instructors at TTU grade anonymously, online, in a pool with other online DIs, some who teach and some who do not teach in the classroom. Two DIs read every major draft, each independently assigning a grade to the draft. If the two grades are within 8 points of each other, the computer then averages the two grades and releases the average to the student immediately after the second DI turns in the grade. When the point spread is greater than 8 points, the draft goes to a third DI, and the closest two grades are then averaged and released to the student. ICON places a graduated amount of weight on grades for major drafts, with the greatest weight on the later drafts of each assignment sequence. For minor assignments—peer critiques, writing reviews, and portfolio reflection letters—students receive only one grade, which counts less toward the final average than the major drafts.

The second DI has access to written comments of the first DI while grading, meaning the second DI has an idea of the grade the first DI assigned the paper. Although this reduces the second reader's objectivity, the second readings remain important for several reasons. They provide a check in the event DIs lack experience. If the comments are weak, for example, the second DI can write additional comments to students. ICON also has a feature that allows DIs to “flag” student drafts, which means DIs can send drafts directly to classroom instructors who can modify comments or delete and rewrite comments, if necessary, as well as notify administrators if serious problems exist. Although the latter happens seldom, it can protect students from novice or tired DIs.

Not only can the second DI grade as well as respond to student work, but the second DI can rank the first DI's comments. If the first DI receives a ranking below a 3, on a scale of 1 to 5, the WPAs examine that DI's work. Generally speaking, second DIs grade quickly and avoid ranking DIs or writing student comments except when they see exceptionally good or poor commentary. It is also important to note that the system of ranking DI comments does not suggest that second DIs have more experience than first DIs but that everyone grades in both capacities each week. In fact, each DI must grade an equal number of first and second drafts each week. Although new DIs may initially feel self-conscious during grading and responding to student writing, they will get beyond this after working in grading discussion groups and once they realize that DIs, in general, do not have time to respond to anything but extreme cases. Self-conscious DIs will soon trust in the anonymity of the system, and within a week or so they will be too busy to think about others reading their work. To provide an example of the numbers, in 2004 TTU filled 83 sections of first-year 1301 and 1302 composition classes, graded 97,000 documents, and had 33 classroom instructors and 46 DIs (Lang, 2005). Rather than the big brother scenario, more than likely weak commentary goes unnoticed, and students complain to their classroom instructors about grading and commentary.

Working at TTU Is Not for the Faint at Heart

Graduate instructors typically teach two courses, and most full-time instructors teach four courses, with 36 students in each classroom. With students turning in two or three assignments per week (one of which is a major assignment), with large grading quotas to meet, lesson plans to prepare, three office hours per week, student e-mails to answer (one venue where students challenge grades and late penalties), and graduate courses for which they must prepare, graduate instructors do not have time to read the work of the 72 students they meet in their classrooms. Full-time instructors who have 144 students cannot do so either. Instructors, at best, can address only the grade disputes that students bring to their attention.

The following is an example of graduate student grading quotas for 2005-2006, based on teaching two composition courses. (During previous years, the quotas were higher; however, WPAs have since continued to lower DI quotas.):

- As first readers, DIs grade and comment on 17 drafts each week .
- As second readers, DIs grade 17 drafts each week (comments optional).
- DIs grade 25 peer critiques each week.
- DIs grade 25 writing reviews each week.
- Total reading quota—84 drafts each week.

When acting as first readers, because DIs must grade and provide comments closely aligned with the assignment criteria, they spend most of their grading time reading first drafts. As second readers, DIs assign grades only; comments are optional. For the peer critiques and writing reviews, DIs normally check radio buttons that automatically provide feedback to students. In our monthly meetings, WPAs suggested DIs spend only 10 to 15 minutes commenting on early drafts (2.1, 2.2, and 2.3) and about 20 to 30 minutes on later drafts (2.4 and 2.5); however, many DIs agreed that thoughtful commentary takes more time and that it is important to proofread responses to student writing for clarity and for grammar concerns. Moreover, new graduate instructors need additional time grading and responding to student drafts as they must learn the weekly criteria for each assignment and then apply the new criteria to their commentary. New DIs must also learn the pull-down menus provided for marking grammar and mechanics online, so the short time allotments suggested above do not work for most novice DIs.

ICON's Assessment Practice and Theoretical Underpinnings

Ideally, practitioners read, respond, and grade student writing to teach students about the dialogic nature of writing, to teach them about audience, purpose, and the complex nature of communication. If students are to be taught, as opposed to ranked and sorted, if critical thinking is an educational goal in FYC, then post-process theories and practices that consider contextual matters such as diverse interests, diverse cultural backgrounds, and diverse educational experiences must remain part of assessment practices. Researchers and theorists who embrace

post-process theories often refer to writing as performance, suggesting a resonance among language, community, text, writer—the whole writing context. Post-process theorists regard writing and reading as transactional, as involving conversations that went on before the writing began and conversations that will continue in response to the writing. The goal under this paradigm is for teachers to respond to students by interacting with the entire writing performance, and for assessment to improve student performance (Anson, 1989; Baumlin & Baumlin, 1989; Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Carini, 1994; Daiker, 1989; Elbow & Belanoff, 1997; Straub, 1997; Wiggins, 1998; William, 2006).

Program administrators at TTU place a strong emphasis on consistency and objectivity in assessment (Lang, 2005; Rickly, 2006; Wasley, 2006). They suggested that anonymous grading, which removes the grading and response to student writing from the classroom context, allows DIs to do a better job of maintaining their obligation to knowledge and society—and to students (Elbow, 1994), because, they say, anonymity increases grader objectivity (Lang, 2005; Rickly, 2006; Wasley, 2006). Rickly suggested that ICON provides “a more uniform, distributed model of feedback, one where grading is more consistent both in terms of what was graded (drafts according to assignment-specific criteria) and how grading was done (in this case, online and blind)” (p. 193). Although objectivity may serve some purposes, most assessment theorists and researchers suggest that objectivity and fairness should not necessarily be conflated, nor should it be assumed that objectivity is a good thing:

Unlike measurement and description in the physical sciences, when we are assessing literacy, we are engaged in examining something that is personal and (consequently) cultural in nature, using tools that are similarly of cultural origin. In doing so we engage in a social interaction with the individual or group being evaluated, and thus influence in powerful ways the nature of the understanding constructed by all parties. . . . The text is a sociohistorically situated symbolic entity produced by another subject. Furthermore, these dialogical interchanges take place in particular social contexts. . . . The search for objectivity may not simply be futile. I believe it to be destructive. (Johnston, 1989, p. 511)

As George Madaus (1994) cautioned, institutions should not think about trying to homogenize the heterogeneous. In fact, teachers should embrace the heterogeneous because of its connection to multiple perspectives and critical thinking.

For teachers and students to understand the complexity of the writing situation and to interact with each other as individuals, each must develop an understanding of and respect for multiple perspectives because good writing requires an understanding of the rhetorical situation, that is, the context for which an individual writes—the writer, reader, and text—elements out of which the writer’s purpose arises (Anson, 1999; Baumlin & Baumlin, 1989; Fife & O’Neill, 2001; Greenlaugh, 1992; Straub, 1997; Warnock, 1989; Yancey, 2004). In professional writing situations, reading may not require face-to-face contact between writer and reader; however, the teaching situation is quite different in that the teacher needs to understand the student’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher needs to know the context of the writing situation in order to stretch the student

writer. Teachers need to understand context so they can challenge students to think about what they are doing and thinking. “Unless we are faithful to the demands of context, students will come away from school believing that giving back merely what was taught is a sufficient indicator of mastery and understanding, or that performance is merely a ritualized response to an academic prompt” (Wiggins, 1998, p. 29).

Students must also believe their audiences, the teachers/responders, are authentic if we want to create authentic writing situations. In the case of response to student writing, graders have a double context as they work to respond to each student’s rhetorical situation. As graders look through the primary audience (the student) at the secondary audience (the student’s audience and purpose), they must demonstrate acute listening skills if they are to set an example of good writing and reading. As Louise W. Phelps (2000) said, response is “fundamentally reading, not writing” (p. 93), and as Brian Huot (2002a) wrote:

Any constraints attached to the process of reading, therefore, are also constraints on the process of evaluating student writing. In other words, we are limited in our ability to evaluate student writing by the process we use to make meaning of text in the first place. . . . In this light, teacher’s previous experience with students and their texts adds to and control their ability not only to respond but to devise meaning from the text itself. Even the very role of teacher can affect the kind of reading given by an individual. (pp. 113-114)

In contrast to post-process, constructivist theories of assessment and response to student writing, the anonymous, online grading system demonstrates one-way communication with students who must remain silenced receivers, a practice that does not exemplify the dialogic nature of writing. In class, we *say* multiple perspectives matter but DIs often do not understand student perspectives, leaving the impression that instructors do not read closely, a point I discuss later in the next section.

Assessment and Response to Student Writing

Students at TTU wrote grade appeals and questioned DI responses by writing e-mails to instructors or by visiting instructors’ offices, depending on each instructor’s policy. During the Spring 2006 semester, one student (whom I call Lin) wrote an e-mail to me, frustrated over her grade and the DI comments—comments that demonstrated a need for understanding the complexity of the writing situation and a need for understanding the context of the student writer’s purpose. Lin had written an argument defending Wal-Mart against its many critics. Since her arrival from China in August, she had been confused about how U.S. citizens could criticize a store so prized in her country. On her second draft of the second essay cycle, her respondent made one comment, then wrote that her essay sounded like a Wal-Mart commercial. The DI also suggested she reverse her position and argue against Wal-Mart policies.

The DIs, who gave Lin an 87 and an 82, could not know that the writer is Chinese, that she was trying to answer typical objections of American citizens so

that we could see how Wal-Mart looks through her Chinese perspective—and that she would be in an English as a Second Language class if we offered one. (She spent hours each week in the writing center making sure her paper was written in Standard English, paying particular attention to her articles and prepositions.) When the grade of 84 came in and Lin visited my office about the above DI comments, I explained to her that some Americans view Wal-Mart policies critically and would not be able to appreciate her topic or perspective. However, Lin was passionate about trying to convince at least a few of us that we were wrongheaded about Wal-Mart's health care policies, hiring and firing practices, and so on. Since Lin's arrival in America 6 months earlier and her entrance into the TTU biochemistry program, she remained bewildered by many things, such as our lack of appreciation for easy access to shopping. Her work, when viewed out of context, was graded and responded to under a more current-traditional model with all of the emphasis on her isolated text. The focus was on the writing, not the writer (Kemp, cited in Wasley, 2006). When read in context, however, I could see connections between her ideas and the sources for her sense of reality (Huot, 2002a).

If I had been Lin's only grader, in the context of a conventional classroom setting, I would have responded to her grasp of the Toulmin argument during each draft, her understanding of the assignment criteria, and her progress in understanding her audience. My responses would have circumvented her negative frustrations to some degree because, although I would have challenged her perspective and requested further research, I also would have understood her audience and purpose. Lin made noteworthy progress as she moved through the five drafts answering the objections of the DIs and my written and oral commentary about the American perspective on labor and health care. I would not expect (or want) her to complete a full paradigm shift and become Americanized but, instead, to make progress and show that she understood the importance of audience and its relationship to focus and purpose. Only in the context of our conferences did I get to know Lin and understand her particular perspective and progress concerning an understanding of the rhetorical situation. By the end of the semester, Lin had a better understanding of the relationship between audience, writer, and purpose—and the importance of writer/reader perspectives—than most students I have worked with in 17 years; hence, she earned the A that I gave her, even though 9 out of 10 DIs gave her Bs on her drafts and did not recognize her progress. Nor, during any of the responses, did DIs work on her understanding of the relationship of audience to purpose. Out of the classroom context, of course, DIs could not have understood her particular case, so I do not present this as a criticism of the DIs but do question the practice of acontextual response to student writing, especially when grades are critical to a student's future, as they were to Lin who was working toward a pre-med degree.

Although some students do not hesitate to complain about DI commentary, as did Lin, one could argue that marginalized students, particularly students who struggle with low self-esteem, may not participate in grade disputes. Lin seemed to be a member of something akin to our upper middle class. I say this because in one of our conferences she talked about her maid in China, and to make her point that factory workers were not overworked or poorly paid in China, she said that work-

ers made enough money per day to buy one meal. Lin had not thought about how these workers would buy the other two meals or support elderly parents, spouses, or children. Clearly, Lin did not work; she did not seem to have a first-hand understanding of poverty, and she certainly had a great deal of confidence. I was her third English teacher during the Spring 2006 semester. She had asked to be moved two other times before entering my class because the two other instructors had not given her enough individual instruction. In dealing with Lin's visits to my office, and the five or six other students who visited my office regularly, I wondered how many of my students lacked the confidence to visit my office to contest grades or question DI comments. The high numbers of students prevent most instructors from encouraging office visits. Conferencing with students each semester is out of the question for those full-time instructors who have 144 students.

Much is lost in a system that places too many students in the classroom and assigns large grading quotas. For one, our future Mike Rose's (1990) may lose the chance to develop their sense of academic belonging. FYC is often the only place in large universities where students meet instructors and get individualized help. Students needing the most attention often get the least due to teacher overload, and "nothing changes, as the class system reproduces itself over and over" (Zebroski, 1994, p. 46). If practitioners are overworked and class sizes are large, then power-centers are not serving the populations that pay them, "widening the gap between the rich and poor" (Bleich, 1997, p. 21). Understanding and reducing the gap between the rich and the poor includes instructor consideration of multiple perspectives, which requires teaching and assessing in the classroom context because only in a one-on-one relationship can students receive the kind of teaching and assessing that supports "highly contextualized processes involving the abilities of individual students in classes and their particular learning needs and goals as defined by themselves and their teachers" (Williamson, 1994, p. 168).

Assessment and Student Revisions

After teaching full time at TTU during 2003-2004, I cut back to part time, primarily because of the heavy online grading during the first year. While teaching full time, I spent about 40 to 45 hours each week grading papers online, with no breaks for Thanksgiving or Spring Break. ICON allowed for breaks but I could not take them because I needed the breaks to catch up on my grading quotas. In addition to grading quotas, I held office hours, answered e-mails, planned for classes, and taught. During the second and third years, I taught 1302 courses and a senior-level, advanced writing course. I cut my hours so that I could read some of my own students' work rather than read only the anonymous work online. With lowered frustration levels and more time to research, I began asking questions of my FYC students. For example, I asked them why they did not come to my office more often for writing assistance. The overwhelming answer from several classes was that it did no good to revise—that their grades seemed to go down with each draft, regardless if they followed DI suggestions or not. Students said that following suggestions of tutors from the writing center, or previous DI suggestions often resulted in no improvement or even in lower grades.

They also complained about DI inconsistencies in marking their papers. For instance, one student, whom I call Abby, received the grammar comments on her five drafts shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Abby's Grammar Comments

Draft Number	Grammar Comments	DI Grades	Average Grade
Draft 2.1	1 comment	88/83	85
Draft 2.2	12 comments	86/60/89	87
Draft 2.3	6 comments	75/60/70	72
Draft 2.4	0 comments	82/81	81
Draft 2.5	6 comments/with a note that the draft had an excessive number of editing errors, meaning the DI marked on sample	78/85	81

Note in the table there are no comments for mechanics and grammar for the 2.4 draft, leaving the student to believe that her grammar and mechanics are acceptable. I use this example because of the number of times students complained that DIs did not mark any grammar or mechanics on early drafts but marked excessive errors on the last draft. Although DIs should not proofread for students, they can tell students that further proofreading is needed and point out the kinds of errors students are making so they can grow as writers.

I found other such examples of inconsistent markings in this and other classes. Another student, whom I call Brianna, received a DI response on her 2.1 draft that said her work was well-written and the subject workable. The DIs gave her paper a 92 and a 90. The DI on her second draft, 2.2, said her topic was unique, but the counter arguments were weak and the student seemed to have found the topic and counter argument in the college newspaper. The DIs gave her paper a 79 and an 82, although gave no reasons why the student should not use the college newspaper as a source for a counterargument. The other comments on this second draft, about 75 words in all, remain general with little instruction aimed toward re-vision. For instance, the DI says the “real thesis” seems to come in the middle of the paper, but the DI does not paste the thesis into the comment box or paraphrase it, so the student cannot know what the DI thinks the “real thesis” might be. The DI then says the student needs more intense research but does not give suggestions about directions for that research. The DI says the paper is more informative than argumentative but gives no examples to clarify. The only suggestion that is detailed enough to be followed could be considered more directive than facilitative, as the DI suggests a change in the overall claim statement—from changing the law about carrying

condoms in Columbia to improving sex education (see appendix C). However, in this draft Brianna devotes her entire third paragraph to the argument that condoms are sometimes ineffective and sex education would be better. What Brianna needed were comments on transitions; she needed to show where her arguments ended and the counter arguments began, and she needed comments on organization to help her understand how to group her ideas as distinct from the counter arguments. She was in my office soon after her grade came in because the comments did not help her, nor did they explain why the grade was 11 points lower on this draft (see Table 2).

On the third draft, the DIs gave Brianna a 96 and a 93, saying her arguments are clear and concise. This first DI also commented that Brianna presented fair and accurate counter arguments. Her material was new because the assignment called for rebuttals to the counter arguments to the previous 2.2 draft. On the fourth draft, DIs gave Brianna an 85 and an 80, with short comments that focus on the claim statement and on transitions. The DI comments say only that the transitions are clearer than in the second draft, that the student poses questions in the introduction (but there are no questions in the introduction), and that the claim statement is not stated until the final paragraph; however, the claim statement is clearly stated in both the first and last paragraphs (see Appendix C).

On the fifth draft, both DIs gave Brianna a 78, listing as issues: weak transitions, many grammar errors, and awkward phrasings, although her writing was essentially the same through all the drafts, and she had received few to no comments on grammar and mechanics on previous drafts. As the students in my 1302 classes said, revisions and editing go unrewarded; they see weak to no correlations between changes in their drafts and the grades and comments they receive. My 1302 student complaints and my own experiences call into question some of the claims concerning consistent experience for students of FYC; however, this article does not suggest consistency be privileged over contextualizing the rhetorical situation. This article also does not suggest that students revise solely according to teacher

Table 2: Brianna's Grammar Comments

Draft Number	Grammar Comments	DI Grades	Average Grade
Draft 2.1	0 comment	92/90	91
Draft 2.2	4 comments	79/82	80
Draft 2.3	1 comments	96/93	94
Draft 2.4	0 comments	85/80	82
Draft 2.5	7 comments / with a note that the draft had an excessive number of editing errors, meaning the DI marked on sample errors	78/78	78

response but that students were often frustrated and confused by lower grades when they revised according to grader comments.

Assessment and Effects of ICON on Classroom Theory/Practice

The lack of two-way communication among students, graders, and classroom instructors closed off the conversation in ways that suggest a top-down, current traditional approach to teaching and assessing writing. Teachers who subscribe to a social view of language, on the other hand, see response to student writing as conversation, viewing student texts in relation to the larger context of writing—the type of writing, the audience and purpose, and the conventions of the writer’s community (Anson, 1999; Baumlin & Baumlin, 1989; Himley, 1991; Yancey, 2004; Warnock, 1989). Collaborative, facilitative response to student writing should generate rethinking and re-vision that requires a relationship between students and teachers (Baumlin & Baumlin, 1989). For the most part, teachers at TTU do not get to know individual students and their writing in these larger classes and cannot control the pace of the curriculum. Because the department sets the pace, teachers cannot slow down or rearrange the curriculum during the semester to meet the needs of each class. It is essential, however, that instructors understand student needs in order to alter strategies to meet individual and group needs. “Assessment begins in the attempt to understand students’ needs and continues with our constant alterations in our pedagogical strategies to meet those changing needs” (Williamson, 1994, p. 169).

With too much attention given to pragmatic concerns—such as *how* rather than *why* we grade and respond to student writing—not only do pedagogical concerns fall by the wayside but so do the rewards that come from teaching. When grading anonymously, teachers cannot observe the development of student writing or engage in the dialogic aspect of teaching and responding to students, removing one of the great motivators that draw us into the profession (Huot, 2002a, p. 113). Although administrators may tell instructors about improvements in student writing, teachers cannot “see” and take pleasure in these changes. TTU instructors spend less time in the classroom and more time grading and responding to the same assignments over and over. These criteria- and quota-driven systems can be impersonal and tedious for DIs with large quotas. Not only can teacher attitudes suffer but so can student attitudes if students do not both understand and trust institutional goals. Building student-teacher trust so that students will listen to written responses to their writing, and building those relationships so that instructors will understand their students remain central to assessment and response. To develop understanding and trust, students and instructors of composition need to believe that teaching and learning remain a high priority over pragmatic issues, yet issues such as labor redistribution, efficiency and consistency dominate discussions of ICON (Kemp, 2005; Lang, 2005; Rickly, 2006).

Researchers suggest that the focus should remain on *why* practitioners grade and respond to student writing—rather than *how* they grade student writing—on pedagogy rather than pragmatics (Huot, 2002a; Sommers, 1982; Sosnoski, 1997). WPAs should ask the question, what is the purpose or goal behind reading student

writing? Teachers ideally respond in order to teach (Phelps, 1998): It is a teacher's "business to discover what students are learning (or not [learning]) and why: to experiment, observe, analyze, and reflect on students and their learning as a basis for planning and improvising further pedagogical implications" (p. 263). To better understand what parts of ICON are working well and where problems are located, empirical research needs to be conducted. At this point, anecdotal evidence is the only research currently available about student and teacher satisfaction, about student learning, or about what graduate teachers are learning about teaching (Lang, 2005).

To better understand the impact ICON has had on students, teachers, and the student-teacher relationship, questions such as the following should be considered for further research. For instance, do students make meaningful revisions to their drafts based on instructor and peer commentary? If so, how do DIs respond to student revisions when students struggle to answer DI and peer comments? How do DIs respond to student writing after students make research-based additions to their texts or when they make changes or additions to their texts in answer to the assignment criteria? What theories and practices are graduate instructors learning during their tenure at TTU based on analyses of their responses to student writing? In a study done by Carbone and Daisley (1998), there was a significant disagreement about the meaning of the criteria. Instructors focused on evidence found in the product of the writing, whereas students focused on the processes of the writing (Carbone & Daisley, 1998). With that in mind, are students and DIs working at cross purposes concerning process and product?

Finally, research should consider a time management accounting to determine if ICON actually saves time or if program administrators spend the same amount of time (or more) managing ICON and training instructors to use ICON as they would have spent before ICON. Administrators reported problems with graduate instructors prior to ICON (Rickly, 2006). Do some instructors still turn in inflated grades, all A's, quit mid-semester, or fail to complete their grading quotas? How does this effect WPAs?

These questions should reveal the extent to which ICON answers the pragmatic concerns it was designed to answer, and these questions should also reveal the cost-benefit ratio of the design. Is there a cost benefit and will it justify a pedagogical cost in terms of teacher job satisfaction, student trust, and student learning?

Resistance through Rhetorical Action

University administrators name and frame problems for individual departments when they define budgets within which each department must operate. As budgets get dispersed within English departments—among literature, rhetoric and composition, technical writing, and creative writing—those decisions about budgetary divisions are rhetorically constructed as well. WPAs should be proactive about naming and framing their own problems, whether they address problems within the department or between the English Department and university administrators. Because the cost of removing assessment practices from the classroom context remains high in terms of teaching writing, WPAs should seek

other solutions: first, they should resist increases in student/teacher ratios, ask for adequate tenure-track positions, request additional assistant composition directors, and/ or request more full-time instructor positions. Although each of these attempts at problem-naming may require additional funding, resisting departmental budget cuts, and/or turning away students, those who neglect the initial stages of problem-naming may find themselves facing the same issues they intended to solve, and they may find themselves facing unintended consequences (Schon, 1996).

Although ICON integrates a number of positive features—the elimination of grade books, no paper changing hands, no grades to average, new instructors entering the classrooms with a minimum of one semester grading experience, and new teachers can be monitored easily by program administrators—the unintended consequences cannot be ignored. The reduction of teachers to technicians reinforces that teaching FYC is drudgery; the weak student/teacher collaboration as a result of high student-teacher ratios, and the relayed message to students, through the acontextual assessment practices that academic writing means primarily following teacher instructions adds further to the list of unintended consequences. Moreover, ICON's assessment practices privilege consistency and standardization of writing assessment, and these practices separate the writing from the writer—suggesting that writing quality inheres in the isolated text. While several TTU administrators have said the professionals write to blind audiences and that students should also learn to write to blind audiences, I argue that first-year students are not yet professional writers. Students need contextualized guidance during their composition courses to learn rhetorical strategies. Anonymous readers have little idea of the students' purposes for writing and cannot effectively respond to student writing. Moreover, anonymous readers cannot teach students about the rhetorical situation because students repeatedly write to the same blind audience. Though students know their DIs vary in a literal sense, in a rhetorical sense they write to the same anonymous DI for each draft, leaving the rhetorical context the same for each draft.

The need for strong literacy skills in all fields of study and beyond graduation should mean that universities view FYC as integral to their educational curriculum. Conversations I have had with professors in business, nursing, and the sciences, and discussions with professionals in communities outside of academia who hire college graduates reveal that these professionals think many college students do not write well enough to succeed in their undergraduate studies, in graduate school, or after graduation. WPAs should present sound, research-based arguments to persuade university administrators that writing courses are critical to students and that it remains in the best interest of the institution to adequately fund writing courses.

To do this, however, we first need writing programs that produce significant numbers of writers who exit these courses not only producing sound rhetoric but who sign up for additional writing courses because they love to write as a result of taking FYC courses. This is critical because students need more than two semesters of writing practice. Researchers need to document successful teaching theories and practices by completing longitudinal studies showing the impact successful classroom theories and practices have during students' academic and postacademic careers. If we are serious about keeping classrooms smaller and budgets larger,

composition researchers need to devote more time and energy to research that justifies composition programs that mimic the ideal world scenario over the real-world scenario described in the introduction to this article because we know that on the continuum between the ideal world scenario and the real-world scenario, writing programs need to lean more toward the ideal scenario. However, WPAs need to present researched evidence to university administrators demonstrating the kinds of courses that will produce good writers; then, we can expect the endorsement and funding from the larger university.

Reducing budgets to please university administrators will suggest that FYC courses serve primarily gate keeping rather than teaching functions; it will also show to university administrators that writing courses are bargain-basement operations and that teaching FYC is an undesirable chore, lowering composition's status in the university, scenarios that will only continue to reduce our funding and status. Program administrators will succeed in producing strong writers only by keeping educational priorities in order: by persuading university administrators that the focus must remain first on why we grade and respond to student writing and second on the pragmatics of running the department. To do this, WPAs should keep the focus on problem-naming rather than on solving problems named by outsiders who do not understand the intricacies of composition classroom theories and practices (Schon, 1996).

Appendix A

Draft 2.1 Assignment Description

For the final assignment in 1302, you will write a Research Paper in which you will argue persuasively for a solution to a problem. In draft 2.1, you will write a proposal for your research paper. This draft, like all the drafts in the assignment sequence, should provide adequate information as to WHY a problem is significant or problematic, provide a solution with supporting evidence, address opposing viewpoints, demonstrate an awareness of audience, and show appropriate uses of outside sources for research. You will be able to use the information in your proposal to guide you as you conduct research to expand and revise your ideas into a final Research Paper.

Draft 2.1 Proposal headings and Criteria

Your Draft 2.1 will use the topic headings below. The evaluation criteria appear after the headings.

Topic

As specifically as you can, give a detailed description of the subject that you'll be writing about. Try to focus on an issue that isn't too broad, and provide enough background so that your audience can follow your ideas.

Problematic Nature of the Issue

Explain why this issue is problematic. You might begin to explore various viewpoints here.

Audience and Purpose

Describe who the audience will be for your argument, and what your purpose is in arguing. Try to be as specific as possible; simply restating general ideas will not help you here.

Issue Claim

Describe the issue that you'll be arguing for/against. You'll probably want to state your claim in the form of a "because" clause here.

Fleshing Out a Solution

Identify a possible solution, and begin fleshing out the details as best you can.

Opposing Viewpoints

Describe the various opposing viewpoints that audience members might have. Make sure you show them respect, and that you take them seriously.

Rebuttal

Address some of the arguments the opposition might make. Once again, try not to simplify the opposing position(s) too much; take it/them seriously, and address it/them as completely as possible. For instance, what logic can be presented to show why your opposition's argument(s) might be flawed?

Research Plan

Describe where you intend to look for information about your topic, how you plan to go about evaluating this information, and what your contingency plan will be if you are unable to find the information you need.

Guidelines and Evaluation Criteria for Draft 2.1

- The subject of the essay must be a problematic issue related to one of the topics introduced by the classroom instructor.
- The problematic nature/significance of the issue must be clear.
- The draft should at least forecast a possible solution.
- The draft should have a clearly identified audience and purpose
- The draft should be organized as a proposal, using the sub-headings provided.
- The draft should have a workable research plan.
- The draft should be around 500 words (within 50).
- The draft should demonstrate reasonable error control; while Draft 2.1 will not be penalized for containing a few minor grammatical errors, sloppy editing, spelling errors, and excessive grammatical and mechanical errors will be noted and, in extreme cases where the readability of the document is compromised, will affect the document's grade. (*Texas Tech's Interactive Composition*, 2003-2004, pp. 155-156).

Appendix B

My time sheet from TOPIC Group Grading, Fall 2003

Your quota average for first readings of drafts: 100%
 Your quota average for second readings of drafts: 84%
 Your quota average for readings of critiques: 101%
 Your quota average for readings of writing reviews: 100%

Drafts

Share for graded and commented: 981

You've numerically graded and commented: 981

Second Readings

Share for graded only: 1079

You've numerically graded: 906

Critiques

Share for graded and commented: 1024

You've numerically graded and commented: 1030

Writing Reviews

Share for graded and commented: 727

You've numerically graded and commented: 725

Total Documents Graded Fall 2003

First Reader of Drafts—981

Second Reader of Drafts—906

Peer Critiques—1030

Writing Reviews—725

Total Student Documents Graded: 3,642

Appendix C—Brianna

Second draft/ First paragraph for Brianna:

In January 2006 a Columbian councilman, William Penal, stated he would be proposing a new law that has raised quite an issue. This law would be specifically for the town of Tulsa, where anybody whether male or female must carry a condom with them if they are over the age of 14, even those who are visiting. A \$180 fine will be imposed on those who are caught without at least one condom. This effort is to hopefully reduce the amount of people becoming infected with HIV, AIDS, and teenage pregnancy. Currently, Tulsa is among the highest ranked towns when it comes to AIDS (Vanderheyden) with 190,000 people infected (De Leon). **The law of always having to carry a condom on you if you are over 14 or otherwise fined should not be passed.**

The last sentence shows some of the qualities of a Toulmin claim/argument, although the agent of change is missing. She does not say who should not pass the law.

Fourth draft/ First paragraph for Brianna:

In January 2006 a Columbian councilman, William Penal, stated he would be proposing a new law that has raised quite an issue. This law would be specifically for the town of Tulsa, where anybody whether male or female must carry a condom with them if they are over the age of 14, even those who are visiting. A \$180 fine will be imposed on those who are caught without at least one condom. This effort is to hopefully reduce the amount of people becoming infected with HIV, AIDS, and teenage pregnancy. Currently, Tulsa is among the highest ranked towns when it comes to AIDS (Vanderheyden) with 190,000 people infected (De Leon) out of a population of 42 million recorded by the World Fact Book (Colombia). **The residents of Tulsa should support better education on sexual intercourse and birth control measures instead of letting the law pass.**

Fourth draft/ Last Paragraph for Brianna:

A 15-year-old boy was also quoted, "Not everyone over 14 is having sex," (Columbia). In most journals or articles a person can find about how the people feel the government is infringing upon privacy. It is a person's personal decision to or not to engage in sexual intercourse. Not to mention those married couples have no need to carry condoms unless a personal decision of birth control was made. People just passing through the town would have to stop to buy condoms in order to not be fined. **The residents of Tulsa should support better education on sexual intercourse and birth control measures instead of letting the law pass of carrying a condom if a person is over the age of 14.**

Above, the Toulmin claim/argument statement is highlighted in bold type in the opening paragraph and the closing.

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