Promoting Teacher Presence: Strategies for Effective and Efficient Feedback to Student Writing Online

Stephanie Cox, Jennifer Black, Jill Heney, and Melissa Keith

This essay uses the Community of Inquiry model to discuss strategies online writing instructors can use to provide effective feedback to students while intentionally creating a sense of human presence.

One of the most daunting issues of teaching writing online is how best to give feedback to student work in an atmosphere devoid of the nuance inherent in a face-to-face situation. When attending a class in person, students have a variety of experiences to help them know us: how we dress, move, and speak. They can see the smiles on our faces and the twinkle in our eyes; they can engage in casual conversation before and after—and often during—class. These may seem like trivial interactions tangential to teaching and learning, but these exchanges affect how students interpret their instructor’s identity, and those interpretations underscore how students receive feedback on their writing. If they perceive us as friendly or empathetic, as well as knowledgeable, they will receive our responses as such.

In the online environment, extracurricular interaction and its accompanying identity markers tend to fall away. Online writing students and instructors know each other primarily through the direct learning process, which brings certain benefits. A drawback to the online environment, however, is that the majority of individual student-teacher interactions occur as feedback to students about their writing, and this situation always contains some degree of evaluation. Students can be insecure and possibly defensive when they perceive they are being judged, and this may cause them to see the teacher as harsh, dismissive, or distant even when instructors do not think they are. We online teachers must consciously mold our presence to create an identity that will make students feel acknowledged, guided, and cared for, so they will be more receptive to our instruction.

In this article, we first describe the Community of Inquiry (COI) model (Garrison 37) as a framework to consider how teachers create and sustain presence in online classes. Next we discuss the purposes of feedback and the rhetorical choices of delivery methods. Then we draw on our years of responding to student writing in online, asynchronous classes to present a menu of some effective and
efficient feedback methods for both informal and formal student writing and some considerations of how these methods promote instructor presence according to the COI Model.

**The Community of Inquiry Model**

Like any learning situation, online writing classes work best when teachers and students have established a community built on mutual trust and respect. The Sloan Consortium—an organization dedicated to promoting quality online courses in higher education—describes the ideal environment for online learning as a trusting, interactive atmosphere where “communications and community building are emphasized” (Moore 5).

One model that works well for representing the processes by which teachers and students interact in online courses is the COI framework, developed by D. Randy Garrison. The COI model divides the elements of interaction within a course into three interdependent aspects: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (39). These elements relate to both instructor and student participation on multiple levels, but for our purposes they are especially important in determining the medium and content of feedback students receive.

Garrison defines social presence as “the ability of participants to identify with a group, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships” (39). Online learning scholars Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt explain social presence as “the ability to present oneself as a real person online” (32). Teachers’ social presence is especially important in the early days of the semester when they need to establish the tone of the class and the foundations for a trusting community. Developing an online course where students’ main form of interaction is through writing can be challenging for instructors, especially when that writing is shared asynchronously. Without effective course design, students can experience isolation and a sense of disconnection rather than the “social presence” so vital to online student satisfaction (Palloff and Pratt 31). The kinds of feedback that students receive can have a tremendous influence on their sense of social presence in an online course.

Cognitive presence describes the ability of members of the learning community, both students and teachers, to “construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse” (Garrison 40). This creation of meaning is both individual and communal; it takes place through solitary work but also through engaging ideas together in a group. Online teaching can present new challenges in providing students opportunities to interact in meaningful ways.

The third element in the COI model is teaching presence, the way teachers facilitate student learning and share their subject-matter expertise (Garrison 70–71). Teaching presence describes the essential role that instructors play in creating courses that allow students to experience social and cognitive interaction (71). Teaching presence encompasses the instructors’ role as designer, facilitator, and content expert, and it makes the difference between effective and ineffective
learning experiences for students. Although teaching presence is important in all kinds of courses, it is especially important in online classes, where students may be working in an unfamiliar environment without immediate physical access to their classmates and instructor (77).

We wanted to know how our own online writing students experienced these presences, so we surveyed them. When asked what they liked best about our courses, our students reported that they liked the class interaction. This survey comment is typical: “I love the interaction with others [just as] I would have if I were actually commuting.” The experience of interacting with others is the primary “pillar of student satisfaction,” in Moore’s term, in our particular online writing classes (5). In light of that, creating experiences for students to receive instruction through both teaching and social presence is central to our course design, including the design and delivery of feedback methods.

Most writing teachers would agree that responding to student writing is a complicated interaction, and giving feedback in an online environment intensifies it. As Patricia Webb Peterson explains, research demonstrates that students have difficulty gauging their instructors’ opinions about their work in online courses, often because they don’t have the visual cues—body language, tone of voice, and so on—that they expect will accompany instructor feedback (381). Webb Peterson continues by saying that teachers may be unaware of their students’ lack of understanding: “If students are having difficulty understanding the teacher’s written communication in a face-to-face course, they can simply ask the teacher to clarify; in an online course, that option is not available” (381). Although Webb Peterson might overstate her case, since online students can ask for clarification, her point is still valid. In our experience and in observing other instructors’ online courses, we have seen that many students tend not to make the extra effort to ask teachers for clarification about content or class procedures. Therefore, it is even more important that online teachers think carefully about how to maximize the forms of social, cognitive, and teacher presence that their feedback can facilitate.

**Purpose and Delivery**

Giving feedback can be an opportunity to use teaching presence in ways that not only move the students forward with their writing but also strengthen community bonds by establishing relationships. To make intentional decisions about how to embed our presence into feedback, teachers must understand three factors: 1) the purpose of the feedback at different points of the writing process, 2) the importance of delivery methods, and 3) how these elements relate to teacher workload and satisfaction.

**Purpose of Feedback**

When teachers talk about *feedback* or *response* to student writing, they often use the terms to refer to both *ranking* and *evaluation*, as defined by Peter Elbow. Ranking is “the act of summing up one’s judgment of a performance or person into a single,
holistic number or score,” and evaluation is “the act of expressing one’s judgment of a performance or person by pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of different features or dimensions” (Elbow 175). Although these two kinds of feedback are certainly interrelated and are often used in conjunction, they are distinctly different. Teachers may offer a rank, such as a letter grade or numerical score, without accompanying commentary. This kind of ranking is typically not considered beneficial for students during the drafting stage of the writing process. A ranking score, however, may work well to allow teachers to provide a quick response to whether or not students have completed an informal writing task in an acceptable manner (think: ✓, ✓+, ✓-) .

Evaluation, on the other hand, entails communicating with students about the potential of their work during the drafting stage or enabling students to understand the rationale for their grades on final drafts. Evaluation is substantive; it should do more than point out error, and it should be a learning experience from which students are able to understand what they did well, what they need to do to improve, and how to take that to the next step—be it revision or a new assignment. It should be done in a manner that ensures students feel valued and respected.

Delivery

The delivery method of response is a crucial rhetorical choice. Instructors must consider how the method allows them to project any or all of the elements of the COI model. In “Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric” James E. Porter argues for resurrecting the neglected rhetorical canon of delivery and reconsidering it for the digital age (207). He points out that classical rhetoricians (except for Aristotle, who dismissed it) valued delivery along two lines: “(1) emphasizing the role of the body in rhetorical action and (2) stressing the importance of emotional impact” (209). Porter’s argument applies to all digital writing but is particularly useful for the rhetorical situation of the online writing classroom since instructors can use technology to represent body communication (voice, video, and emoticons) to better employ the elements of social, cognitive, and teaching presence and thus effect the desired emotional impact on our students.

Workload

Another factor for determining the type and delivery of feedback is instructor workload. This is no small point—the workload of an online course can grow exponentially. Without limits on the volume of communication between teacher and student, online writing instructors could easily shift into becoming a personal tutor for each student. The Sloan Consortium pillar of “faculty satisfaction” cannot be achieved if the workload for an online class is not similar to that of a face-to-face class (Moore 5). It is healthy for online writing instructors to limit their comment load to students, and we encourage teachers not to feel guilty about setting limits. However, students need formative feedback during the writing process, for much of the rich learning and teaching occurs there. When considering how to
offer feedback, online writing teachers should balance the needs of their students with their own time and energy and then decide how available technology can best leverage those. An instructor with over a hundred students will by necessity make different choices than one with only twenty students. With that in mind, we have tried to provide feedback methods that are both effective for students and efficient for instructors. Whatever feedback plan instructors make, they must make it transparent to the students so they know when, how, and what kinds of responses to expect.

**Feedback Methods for Informal Writing**

While formal writing projects ask students to demonstrate their writing abilities through finished products submitted for evaluation, informal writing comprises a broad range of activities that may or may not lead to or support formal writing. In-person classes frequently use informal writing to develop and expand students’ ideas. Often such activities take place during class time and may not be revised or edited because they are intended only to stimulate thinking. Instructors can use this same approach for online classes. In face-to-face classes, we often do not respond substantially to informal student writing. We may wander around the room and give feedback to a few students, and then we may choose one or two pieces to use as examples to illustrate the point we aim to make with the activity. In our face-to-face classes we certainly do not collect every piece of informal writing that every student produces throughout the semester; nevertheless, our students know that we are present, and they could ask us for feedback or direction. So how can instructors use informal writing activities to create social, cognitive, and teaching presence in an asynchronous, online environment?

When deciding which response methods to use for informal student writing, instructors should consider the entire rhetorical situation: the content of the response, the delivery, and the context—from the teacher to the whole class, from the teacher to an individual student, student-to-student response in a peer feedback model, or no response. Instructors should consider how the delivery of the response assists the student and how it affects the class community.

**Group Feedback**

Instructors should determine if every student needs a response to a particular piece of writing, or if making a generalized group comment will serve to show all students what they need to do to move forward with their writing. By providing group feedback, the instructor emphasizes the forms of cognitive and teaching presence, which should reinforce to students that they are in a class with a human teacher guiding the group. Porter identifies digital distribution—a component of his delivery rubric—as referring to “rhetorical decisions about the mode of presenting discourse in online situations: What is the most effective way to distribute a message to its intended audiences, in a timely manner, and in a way that is likely to achieve the desired outcome?” (214).
Group feedback can often be the most effective method to address common concerns in online classes. When students are struggling with the same problems or the teacher wants to draw everyone’s attention to a certain issue, group feedback can save time and make sure all students receive the same message. It might say, for example, “Most of you did a good job with the first two parts of the exercise. I did notice that several of you did not finish the final part. Next time, please make sure you complete the entire exercise because [instructor provides various pedagogical reasons].” It also allows the teacher to call students’ attention to helpful examples. The teacher can make a generalized comment such as, “Several of you did well on the discussion of the reading.” The instructor can then point to a specific student’s work: “If you’d like to see an outstanding example of a post about rhetorical strategies, please read Sam’s.” Group feedback helps to establish the teacher’s authority and in-front-of-the-class teaching presence, while often saving time and energy.

We typically choose between three distribution methods: written, audio, and narrated screen capture.

1. **A brief written comment.** Most online course management systems offer easy ways for teachers to share written comments with the whole class, usually through announcements, emails, or items added within the course site. Giving written feedback to whole classes need not take much time for teachers; a brief announcement is often sufficient to address a common concern. The feedback itself may take little time, yet this method demonstrates to students that they have an attentive instructor who is present in the class.

2. **An audio comment.** There are many ways to embed audio comments within course sites. Some systems allow audio recording through the course site itself, but instructors can also use any recording device (including cell phones) or programs like Audacity. Because this format allows for the affective dimension of vocal intonation, it can be particularly effective when the instructor wishes to scold mildly. Scolding in print runs the risk of sounding strident, dismissive, or mean, and it may inadvertently undo the goodwill a teacher has sought to construct through positive social presence elsewhere in the course. If teachers choose to deliver feedback via audio, they can use their voice to moderate their words and maintain their identities as supportive readers. In fact, social presence can moderate teaching presence and can build the role of an accessible teacher who provides students with a safe environment for writing. Creating an audio file can be time-effective (after conquering any initial technology hurdles) since for most of us it takes less time to speak than to write. Letting a recording stand in its mild imperfections may sustain a positive, accessible social presence because we present ourselves as real humans who do not always speak perfectly.

3. **A narrated screen capture.** We use JING, a screen capture program, because its free version is robust enough for our usage, and it’s easy to use. Producing screen captures may take more time and planning on the teacher’s part than recording audio, but it can be especially effective for highlighting particular elements of informal writing. Instructors can use screen captures to showcase student work in much the same way as in-person classes. Narrating screen captures can also be an effective method of modeling the behav-
ior teachers want students to exhibit. When we use this method, we feature a particular piece of writing on the screen—we record ourselves scrolling through actual student posts or, prior to recording, paste student work into presentation software—and then narrate the points we want to make. This method has the advantage of providing visual material as well as voice modulation through which the instructor offers social presence and may continue to build teaching and cognitive presence via subject-matter instruction. According to the survey of our own online writing students, viewing screen captures was one of their favorite response methods. One student remarked, “I love that my instructor sends out videos every now and then tying our readings and discussions together, it helps tie everything we’re learning together in a way that makes this class more cohesive and knowledge-promoting.”

**Individual Feedback**

While students can benefit greatly from group feedback, there are times that call for more individualized attention. When instructors decide to respond to a piece of informal writing from every student, we suggest doing it publicly in, for example, a discussion board, and limiting instructor feedback to one formative point per student while encouraging students to read all of the class postings and the instructor responses. This helps students see what is working well—or not—in their peers’ writing and can provide students with ideas about how to improve their own writing. We have found this practice particularly effective when used in conjunction with peer feedback because it creates an opportunity for the elements of cognitive, teaching, and social presence to emerge more overtly.

We have identified three situations where individual feedback on informal writing is usually best for the student:

1. **The first week or two of the semester when instructors need to establish social presence and connections with each student.**
2. **When students propose ideas for their formal writing assignments.** Instructors may use their teaching presence to redirect anyone who is heading down an unfruitful path, and the instructor’s use of cognitive and teaching presence may help students reformulate their ideas.
3. **During the middle portion of a semester when, as Palloff and Pratt point out and our experience confirms, student engagement in the course can wane** (79). Sustaining instructor social presence through individual response can remind students that a real person cares that they are in the class and that their continued participation matters.

Of course, there are times when public feedback is not appropriate. If the feedback contains a grade, then in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), it must be delivered privately to the student. Certainly if a student might find a comment embarrassing, it should be given privately.

**No Feedback**

There are some situations where giving no feedback to your students can provide
rich learning opportunities that encourage students’ cognitive presence. Discussion forums can be used as spaces for students to post early material (freewriting, outlines, sketches) that serve as milestone assignments of a larger project. Students can also post such material privately in Learning Management System (LMS) features such as a journal or drop-box that only the instructor accesses.

We have found that private posting can benefit students particularly in the early stages of invention. We have also found that students benefit from posting more formalized invention, such as structured freewriting, sketches, outlines, and very early drafts, without evaluation or comment in a more public setting, such as a discussion board. Early student work may not be ready for comment from classmates or the instructor, yet by posting their work publicly for a completion grade, students can benefit from reading each other’s material in order to glean ideas for their own projects. Additionally, we have found that students tend to invest more attention into any work, including early-stage material, if they know that others can see it. Designing public and private no-feedback zones also demonstrates that the instructor values the freedom to let early writing exist in all its imperfection. Many students hold the erroneous belief that first words—or even all words in all writing situations—should arrive on the page in polished form. Many students also assume that they are the only class member wrestling with writing. Instead of keeping the writing process hidden from each other, sharing early works in safe, public spaces without comment reinforces to students that they are not alone in the writing process; in fact, drafting imperfect work is part of the process. Designing comment-free and evaluative-free spaces can demonstrate to students that the instructor trusts the writing process and signals to students that they might be able to trust it, too.

It is important that instructors explain the pedagogical purposes of feedback-free spaces and reassure students that they will be available if students need help.

Table 1 lists three common methods of feedback for informal writing, what each method might suggest to students about instructor presence in the class in terms of the COI model, typical delivery modes, and some potential benefits and drawbacks to each method. The most effective or efficient response method for one teacher may not be so for another, so we encourage much experimentation and sharing of strategies among colleagues.

**Feedback Methods for Formal Writing Assignments**

There are a variety of methods for giving feedback to formal student writing, and deciding which method to use is often a matter of experimentation and personal preference. All four of us taught (and still teach) first-year writing in person for years before teaching online. For in-person classes, we use rubrics to evaluate formal writing and student conferences to deliver our response. For in-person courses, conferences enable us to present ourselves as empathic, real humans. We give students a sense that we genuinely care about their growth as writers. We have conversations with them, ask questions, and offer criticism with a friendly tone
coupled with encouraging suggestions. In the asynchronous online environment this is difficult to convey consistently, so we aim to enhance our social, cognitive, and teaching presence by employing the six conversational response strategies as defined by Richard Straub. He suggests teachers do the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METHOD</th>
<th>INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE</th>
<th>DELIVERY</th>
<th>BENEFITS</th>
<th>DRAWBACKS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual feedback</td>
<td>Teaching, Cognitive</td>
<td>Email or message on LMS (private). Discussion board post (public).</td>
<td>Establishes connection between instructor and student. May be able to redirect wayward ideas early in the process.</td>
<td>Can be time-consuming for instructor. Can be confining for students early in writing process.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized group feedback</td>
<td>Teaching, Cognitive</td>
<td>Announcements through LMS. Multimedia presentation through a variety of software.</td>
<td>Establishes instructor presence. Can highlight examples of student work. Opportunity to point out class trends and redirect when necessary.</td>
<td>Can miss individual needs. Students may perceive a lack of individual attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No feedback</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Space to explore ideas. Can be liberating for students.</td>
<td>Some students may need feedback. Students can feel isolated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social</td>
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</table>
1. Create an informal, spoken voice, using everyday language.
2. Tie commentary back to the student’s own language on the page in text-specific comments.
3. Focus on the writer’s evolving meanings and play back their way of understanding the text.
4. Make critical comments but cast them in the larger context of help or guidance.
5. Provide direction for the student’s revision but they do not take control over the writing or establish a strict agenda for that revision.
6. Elaborate on the key statements of their response. (380–82)

Straub’s principles remind us to make our responses as much of a conversation as possible to soften the evaluative nature of formal writing response. With the COI model and conversational response strategies in mind, we approach formal writing response in a variety of ways: rubrics, in-text written comments, in-text audio comments, holistic end comments, and synchronous conferences.

**Rubrics**

Although the term *rubric* can apply to a broad range of assessment approaches, we generally use the term to refer to Heidi Goodrich Andrade’s definition of an instructional rubric: “an assessment tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work or what counts” (27). Using a structured assessment tool such as a rubric can overtly build the instructor’s cognitive and teaching presence through directive language to students. Rubrics help instructors give more focused feedback and provide students with visual evidence of fairness, an important issue in student satisfaction (Moore 5). Rubrics can be used for assignment guidance, draft feedback, and final comments. By providing a checklist for both students and teacher, rubrics can become springboards for student revision as well as for other types of instructor response such as in-text comments, audio or video feedback, or conferences. As Andrade explains, a rubric can contain descriptions of different levels of quality for each of the criteria (27). However, we believe an effective rubric should not be too complex; sometimes descriptions of criteria can be communicated more effectively through examples and discussions rather than as part of the rubric. Complicated rubrics tend to be rigid, which can make assessment difficult and unwieldy, so we err on the side of simplicity and directness. In any case, a rubric should be easy for students to understand, as well as for teachers to apply. At the same time, rubrics should be flexible enough to allow the “multiple ways to engage with students on writing” that David Martins describes in his discussion of rubrics (134). As Martins explains, rubrics—as tools to which we “delegate” some of the work of responding to student writing—can save instructors time in grading but must remain in dialogue with other course assignments and the larger writing process (126–29). Rubrics should not act as a substitute for meaningful individual feedback, but rather as a way of maximizing that feedback’s value for students.
Essentially, a rubric emphasizes different aspects of the paper that the instructor will grade, including categories such as organization, format, revision, evidence, and description. Two of our team, Jen and Melissa, make rubrics available in their online classes early in a unit and encourage students to use them as tools for their writing. By reading such specific criteria, students can get a sense of to which parts of the paper they should pay most attention in the drafting process. By assigning a score to each of the different elements in the paper, instructors can be more consistent in their grading and are more able to help students see the strengths and weaknesses of particular drafts. Rubrics help to demystify teachers’ expectations by offering a clear set of grading criteria (Martins 130).

We recommend that instructors include comments on the rubric or use a rubric in conjunction with another form of feedback; the rubric can provide brief assessment and reinforces instructors’ teaching presence while other feedback provides more substantive response that includes the affective dimension. Due to space constraints, many rubrics tend to encourage terse language. Such feedback as written communication may be difficult for students to receive, especially when a grade is attached, and students can take in the worst way what the instructor may view as an utterly objective, bland statement. Additional problems may arise if the rubric voice is steeped in the vocabulary of academic discourse because this conflicts with the more personable, authentic, and social voice teachers use in everyday interactions with students—a conflict Anne M. Greenhalgh identifies as problematic (405). Beth L. Hewett reinforces the importance of accessible language in online writing courses, noting that instructors should use “short sentences, repetition, and familiar vocabulary (or, at the least, contextually defined vocabulary)” in their feedback so that students will be able to understand and apply it in their revisions (89). The use of Straub’s conversational strategy provides feedback students might receive more easily while enhancing instructors’ social and teaching presence. Jen and Melissa include comment space on their rubrics, so that students receive a score for each major feature of their papers along with written explanations for each score. Both instructors also include holistic comments written in a conversational tone at the end of the rubrics.

Using additional forms of feedback that contain teachers’ conversational tone can bridge the affective gaps between the assessment and the response. Visual cues like emoticons can also help to temper the academic voice that often accompanies evaluative responses.

In-Text Written Comments

Many face-to-face teachers are well versed in reading, with pencils in hands, stacks of physical papers to mark up before ascribing grades. If not over-used, this method can work well as the bridge between the evaluation that occurs on the rubric and the conversation that occurs in the response. Many first-time online teachers find themselves at a loss without that stack of papers and a newly sharpened pencil. Some online teachers do print student papers, write on them, and email scanned copies to students, but we do not encourage this approach. This unnecessarily uses paper while
failing to take advantage of the efficient and effective options for in-text comments that online teaching offers. The review features in most word-processing software and apps make comments easier for students to read and allows instructors to reuse, yet tailor, those comments we often repeat. In-text comments offer an opportunity to have a conversation with a student about the text, and that can help the teacher better present herself in the role of coach or what Mary Rose O’Reilley calls the “friendly visitor” (74). Such friendly dialogue may include questions, emoticons, and the conversational vocabulary that Hewett and Straub encourage. Further, in-text comments can be one way to intertwine social, cognitive, and teaching presence in an ongoing dialogue with the student.

**In-text Audio Comments**

Embedded audio files are now convenient to record, so rather than write comments, instructors can speak them. Steph uses audio as her primary method of feedback to formal writing. She became tired of how much time it took to compose written response and wanted to communicate her feedback to her online students in a method as effective and efficient as holding conferences with face-to-face students. Steph discovered she feels more connected to her students when she speaks—rather than writes—to them, and many of her students have remarked that hearing her voice makes them feel more connected to her. Through her social, cognitive, and teaching presence delivered vibrantly via audio, the teacher–student relationship is enhanced (Sipple 26). Many students report that it is easier to listen to feedback than to read it. “Being able to hear the WAY she was saying things, not just reading what she wrote, was incredibly helpful (and often times funny). It felt much more like a face-to-face experience than a typical online class,” remarked one student (Cox et al.). Another said: “It was nice to hear a voice and not just see a bunch of comments. To have a voice to explain is in some instances more detailed and effective than written comment” (Cox et al.) To have and to share a literal voice allows instructors to share more facets of their presence than what written text alone may communicate to students.

**Holistic End Comments**

Many teachers employ holistic end comments when responding to student writing. Saving comments for the end of a paper helps us focus on higher-level concerns for revision. Holistic comments may reinforce instructors’ teaching presence and can save time since we can read papers quickly without stopping to comment on every issue. Such reading can assist instructors in gaining some distance from individual words and sentences, can encourage instructors to look at each paper as a whole, and can help instructors avoid the temptation to edit or revise students’ papers for them. Holistic comments can be time-consuming to write, however. Audio recordings can be an effective way to reinforce teacher presence while taking less time to produce. In a self-study of four classes, Steph found audio end comments took half the time to create as written ones.
Holistic comments alone, however, do not necessarily encourage students to return to the body of their drafts to find specific examples of issues or achievements. So we suggest highlighting or otherwise marking within the text to point out instances the end comments summarize. For example, an instructor’s comment might say, “I’ve highlighted in yellow some places where you might include more detailed descriptions of your experience.” This points the student back to the draft and places the end comments into context. Nancy Mack describes a more comprehensive use of highlighting. She holds mini-lessons on targeted concepts and then asks students to color-code the concepts in student examples as well as in their own rough drafts. She adds general comments and a highlighting key at the top of students’ second drafts; she then highlights passages according to the key and inserts brief, in-text comments explaining the highlighting (251). We agree with Mack that color-coded highlighting works best for addressing particular writing strategies such as “development, specific details, citation, and commentary targets” (251). Highlighting, moreover, can relieve instructors of writing detailed feedback within the holistic end comments.

**Synchronous Conferences**

If instructors teach at a traditional brick and mortar university, there is usually no reason they cannot invite students to meet with them for in-person conferences. For online classes, however, instructors probably should not require a face-to-face conference because that could be impossible for some students. Institutions and programs vary on what synchronous requirements are allowed or encouraged in exclusively online classes. Instructors should be aware of their local guidelines and policies.

If structured well, a synchronous conference via any method can be less laborious for providing formal feedback than written responses. Upon reading student drafts, instructors often know exactly what feedback to provide, and talking is faster than writing. In addition to providing feedback through LMS grade-book comments, Jill conducts teleconferences with her writing students twice a semester. She affords exceptions when synchronous communication would be prohibitive. For those cases, Jill offers written or screen-capture feedback that features highlighting. In teleconferences, she and her students discuss revision strategies in preparation for the final portfolio as well as questions students have about the course. Many students express relief to talk with a live person. The formal purpose of the conferences is to discuss writing projects, but students may also wish to discuss other concerns. These conversations provide opportunities for them to collaborate not only on revision plans but also on strategies for students to complete the course. Jill has discovered that synchronous conferences may increase student satisfaction. On her course evaluations, students consistently report conferences to be their favorite part of the class, even for those students initially hesitant about the requirement. Teleconferences amplify Jill’s teaching, cognitive, and supportive social presence.

Table 2 addresses some benefits and drawbacks of five common methods of feedback to formal writing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METHOD</th>
<th>INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE</th>
<th>BENEFITS</th>
<th>DRAWBACKS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rubric</td>
<td>Teaching Instructor appears organized and deliberate.</td>
<td>Keeps instructor focused and consistent.</td>
<td>Impersonal, if not accompanied by another response method.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Makes grading criteria clear to student.</td>
<td>Writing may be strong or weak in ways not addressed by the rubric.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Text Written Comments</td>
<td>Teaching Instructor gives focused attention on sentence-level writing.</td>
<td>Gives student specific feedback at point of need.</td>
<td>Can be too “error-focused.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Can be used conversationally.</td>
<td>Can overwhelm both student and teacher if not used judiciously.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Can be impersonal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Holistic End Comment</td>
<td>Teaching, Social Instructor has opportunity to be more personal and personable than when using a rubric alone.</td>
<td>Student receives summary comments that highlight key areas.</td>
<td>May not be specific enough for student to understand grade.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>End summaries are often brief and less overwhelming for the student than other methods.</td>
<td>If comments are aimed at revision, the suggestions may not sufficiently cover everything needing change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchronous Conferences</td>
<td>Teaching, Cognitive, Social Instructor is a real person with a voice.</td>
<td>Real-time student-teacher interaction.</td>
<td>Scheduling challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor is embodied through telecommunication or physical presence.</td>
<td>Personable and friendly.</td>
<td>Can be time-consuming when not managed effectively.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Immediate feedback.</td>
<td>Student must take notes to have a written record.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Opportunity to ask questions immediately.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Response</td>
<td>Teaching, Social Instructor is a real person with a voice.</td>
<td>Vocal intonation provides flexibility in communicating.</td>
<td>Instructor can ramble, not give clear feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personable.</td>
<td>Student must take notes to have a written record.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Faster than typing, saves instructor time.</td>
<td>Some students find listening to comments difficult.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Final Thoughts

A teacher’s online presence is essential for creating the class tone and establishing the learning community. Like in-person teaching, online teaching makes it possible for each interaction between student and teacher to build a relationship of trust and mutual respect. In online teaching, these interactions tend to be more difficult to interpret accurately. Consequently, online teachers should be conscious of the personae they communicate through their feedback to students, since it forms the basis of that relationship. Fortunately, instructors have a multitude of resources through which they communicate their presence and expertise. In our experience, thoughtful, well-planned feedback can help students feel connected to their instructor and can empower them to take responsibility for their success in the course. As Deborah E. Crone-Blevens reminds us, “Styles of response seem to matter less than this underlying message [that the first goal of reading student writing is to listen to what the student has to say], which imbues writers with a sense of worth and takes them seriously, regardless of the quality of the work” (97). When students know we pay attention to them and respond to their writing in meaningful ways, they feel motivated and connected—and so do we.

Works Cited


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Jennifer Black is a lecturer in English at Boise State University, where she teaches British literature and first-year writing classes and helps train faculty to teach online. She has been an NCTE member since 2011 and a CCCC member since 2009. Stephanie Cox, an NCTE member since 2006, is a lecturer in English at Boise State University; she teaches first-year writing, nonfiction writing, and foundational studies courses. Jill Heney is a lecturer in English at Boise State University; her teaching and research interests include first-year and digital writing pedagogies, nonfiction writing and its intersections with geospatial humanities, and the literature of the American West. She has been a member of NCTE and CCCC since 2009. Melissa Keith is the assistant director of the Writing Center and Writing Across the Curriculum at Boise State University, where she also teaches classes in first-year writing, nonfiction writing, argument, and writing center theory. She has been an NCTE member since 2009. Together we comprise the Collaborative for Teaching Writing Online (CTWO), which seeks to assist professional development for online writing instructors and to publish scholarship on issues related to teaching writing online.