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### Writing Labs: Commenting on Student Work-In-Progress

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editing effect, because I prepare the slides beforehand, it is a useful way to emphasize and display editing points.

Using technology to enhance the interactive class editing exercise has several benefits. It appeals to visual learners who

can see the editing process occur. Editing, a topic some students may perceive as a necessary evil, becomes lively and interesting. The class is collaborative and interactive because everyone participates with suggestions and responds to others'

remarks. By participating in the editing process and watching it unfold, students enhance their editing skills. Students then apply what they have learned when they self-edit their papers.

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## COMMENTING TECHNIQUES



### WRITING LABS: COMMENTING ON STUDENT WORK-IN-PROGRESS

*E. Joan Blum*

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Over the past several years, my colleagues and I at B.C. Law School have been dividing writing assignments into smaller and smaller segments, and commenting on student writing at shorter and shorter intervals. When I started teaching 15 years ago, we required students to write three memos, but they handed in only one draft of each, and our comments on those drafts were the only feedback the students received. Now, we assign the same three memos (plus a fourth more informal one), but each of those memos has at least two drafts, and most of us break down the drafts even further so we can teach the students by responding at an earlier stage of their writing process.

For example, most of us divide the writing of the Discussion section of the first objective memo into three parts. This memo divides naturally into three major parts because the court divides the analysis into three equal requirements. After working together to analyze and synthesize the relevant cases, we give the students a sample of the analysis of the first requirement. Then they write and we comment on the second, and finally, the students rewrite the second and add the third, together with other parts of the memo,

and we comment on the whole thing.

Recognizing that commenting on student writing is individualized teaching that is extremely valuable to students, I decided to experiment with giving students “early intervention” comments even before they got to the first formal draft of Objective Memo II (OMII), their first major integrated research and writing assignment. I decided to do this experiment in the context of a “writing lab.” My colleague Judy Tracy had used a writing lab last spring for a different purpose, and I thought that Judy’s idea could be adapted to my goal of responding to student writing at a very early stage, while students were actively engaged in thinking through what they wanted to say.

My writing lab came after a sequence of classes on analysis of the OMII problem, and the day after they had handed in their “OMII Exploration,” essentially an idea draft that allows me to check for gaping holes in their reasoning (for example, leaving out a subpart of the analysis). Having thought through the problem for the Exploration, the students were in a position to pull their thoughts together about the overall structure of the memo. I therefore felt that they were ready to tackle the introduction to the Discussion section (which many people call the thesis paragraph).

I held three separate writing labs because I decided that I could work with groups of no more than 15 students, and I have 45. I scheduled one lab during my regular class time, and two additional labs during open slots in my students’ schedule. The lab met in one of the law school’s three eleven-work-station computer learning centers, which complement the several

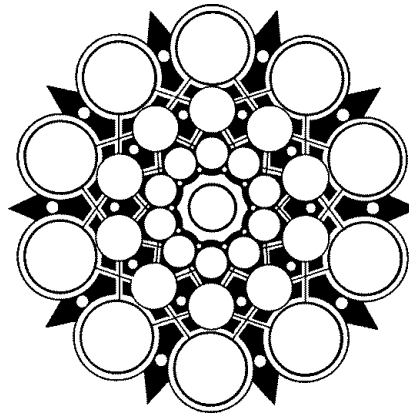
classrooms that are wired for data and power at each seat and the thirty-work-station student computer center. To accommodate 15 students at a time, I asked students who owned laptops to bring them to the lab; students without laptops used the learning center’s computers.

I used the beginning of the lab to refresh the students’ understanding of the audience and purpose of the objective legal memo. I asked the students what, in light of the audience and purpose, they thought a reader might want to know in the first paragraph or two of the Discussion section. This line of questioning led them to understand that the introduction to the Discussion section is an introduction to the topic and the analytical structure of the memo. I then asked the students what concepts or words they might want to see in the introduction, and listed on the board, in no particular order, the ones that I validated. Then, I directed the students to use what was on the board to write a draft of the introduction. I told them that I was not at all interested in whether their writing was polished, but rather in whether they had all the ideas they needed in the introduction, and whether the ideas were in logical order. I told them that as soon as they were ready to show me something, they should call me over to read it and give them comments. It took a few minutes for the first student to summon up the courage to call me over, but then in a matter of minutes, just about every hand went up.

I wanted to comment on the students’ writing while it was still on the screen because I wanted to intervene in the students’ writing process before their work

went into fixed form. I limited my comments to whether the first paragraph of the introduction had a topic sentence general enough to take in all the analysis in the memo, whether the introduction identified all the subparts of the analysis and their relationship, and whether each sentence was sufficiently linked analytically to the sentence that preceded and followed it. I gave these comments primarily orally, although with some students I did highlight and drag blocks of text. In each of the three labs I was able to give comments to more than 10 students. I invited students who did not receive my oral comments to spend no more than 10 additional minutes on the introduction (because I was not interested in commenting on a finished product) and e-mail me their drafts. Just about every student took me up on my offer and by return e-mail I gave the same type of limited comments as I had given live in the labs.

Although the labs required me to teach two additional hours (and probably another hour to handle the e-mail submissions), the benefits to the students outweighed the extra cost to me. First, the labs enabled me to teach the students how to write an introduction, and also to give them an immediate opportunity to apply what they learned and get immediate feedback on their first effort. Second, the labs helped build the students' confidence. Each student left the lab knowing that he or she had written the first paragraph or two of the actual Discussion section and that he or she was in the ballpark. When I saw how much I could accomplish with limited comments early in the students' writing process, I confirmed my hypothesis that early intervention in the students' memo writing was what was needed to move them from the idea generation phase to the first draft of the document. And I had the satisfaction of making a contribution to our continually developing curriculum. When I described the writing labs to Jane, Dan, Lis, Judy, and Mary Ann, my colleagues gave me their highest compliment: "I'm going to try that!"



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#### ENGAGING STUDENTS IN IMPROVING TECHNICAL WRITING SKILLS

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As I pondered the topic for this fall's Second Draft, it occurred to me that getting students to pay attention to the feedback we provide on their written work has been the biggest challenge I have faced as a professor of legal writing. Even though I would conscientiously write comments on student papers, often I would get the next assignment with many of the same mistakes. It became clear to me that students were not reading my comments, or if they were reading them, they weren't putting them to good use. Perhaps they were just looking at the score at the top of the page. In spite of the fact that our class is not graded, students still care about getting good scores on their papers. It seemed, at times, the students cared more about the score than the substance of what they were learning. I considered getting rid of scores altogether; however, many students found that working to improve a score and achieving that goal was extremely satisfying. So how could I keep using scored comment sheets and still get the students to pay attention to the written comments as well as the numbers?

To get the students' attention, I tried several things. First, I made a student's lack of attention to comments cost him or her more points for the next paper. Second, I decided to try making my comments into interactive exercises for the students. Both seemed to have greatly improved the quality of student writing.

I told my students that any error that had been corrected on their draft had better be corrected before the next draft. If I saw any of the mistakes repeated, those errors would count off double. I started requiring the students to turn in their drafts with my comments along with their final draft. I would place the papers next to one another, and I could see that students had checked off each correction I made, which required them to actually read the comments. I had always used score sheets that had the various areas of the paper assigned certain point values so students could see where they were losing points. Now if the student repeated a mistake, I would write the specific double point deduction and explain why he or she lost the points. I also started writing the total score at the bottom of the score sheet, rather than at the top. Forcing the students' eyes to at least skim over the comments as they scanned down the page to their score seemed to help the students to pay more attention to the comments.

In addition to making individualized comments on student papers, I began drafting a list of common errors made by students in the class. This was mainly to insure that, even though I was pretty certain that I had corrected the same types of errors on every student's paper, if I missed one, that student would still have the common error sheet that discussed the error and gave an example of how to correct it.

This approach definitely got the students' attention. Suddenly, papers were being turned in with many fewer mistakes and I could tell that my corrections were being thought about and fixed. But it wasn't just simple corrections (like misspellings) that I wanted them to learn; it was more comprehensive skills. To achieve this goal, I had to go beyond merely pointing out errors in spelling, punctuation and so on. In addition to teaching, in the classroom, rules that would translate beyond the particular sentence in a given paper to other sentences and documents, I wanted to give the students something to refer to outside of class.

To do that, I reread common error sheets