Title: Responding to Student Writing: Low Stakes Homework and Incremental Drafts
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Abstract:
Last semester, I discovered two techniques that are revolutionizing my teaching.

The first technique is that of requiring students to write informal, one-page responses to all readings in a given unit. Each unit is comprised of six to ten texts read over a period of several weeks. By reading and responding to these low-stakes pieces of homework--a total of five to six pages for each unit--I can spot student challenges, such as reading comprehension problems or grammar needs, and can start helping students address them as soon as Week 1. In addition, this low-stakes writing functions as a kind of “warm-up” for students. Somehow, their writing seems to improve on its own over the first few weeks before any formal essays are due!

Instead of having students submit an entire essay, I break essays into parts, and ask students to submit one part at a time as homework. I then respond to each part as described above. This allows me another opportunity to address student challenges before high-stakes essays are due, and also allows me to tailor class content to class needs, using examples from their own homework.

Although these methods may seem time-consuming, I can respond to homework and partial drafts fairly quickly on an easy-to-use platform like Google classroom, and by the time I get those final essays on Turnitin, my work is largely done.

Keywords: Hybrid Instruction, Online Response, Feedback, Interaction
Related Hallmarks:
#2 (Interacting concerning student writing)

Speaking Notes:
When I first started teaching, the model I followed went something like this:

- Guide through students through the process of writing (topics, templates, thesis, outline, peer review, skills needed, etc.) and then respond to the high-stakes essay at the end.

This used to work OK, but gradually it occurred to me that I was dreading responding to essays.

- I knew they would be fraught with errors that I would mark up and very few would actually read.
- I’d return the essays and feel overwhelmed that so many students needed so much help. I’d ask them to meet me outside of class and some would but some wouldn’t and there were too many to keep track of. Some would slip through the cracks.
- Because the essays were so weak, I knew that in order to get students through class and help them meet the course SLOs, I’d need to accept revisions, and go through the process again effectively doubling my grading workload.
- I was lucky to have access to Turnitin, but that platform is super time-consuming when it comes to responding to student writing.
Another problem is that I wouldn’t get students’ first essays until about Week 3 or 4 in the course. It might take me another week to respond to those essays, so students weren’t getting feedback on them until Week 4 or 5. Then, the semester was ¼ over—and the race was on to help them with some critical reading and writing challenges. In addition, habits had been set...
(Yes, I’d asked them to respond to some reflection questions to get to know them at the start of class, but it felt wrong to mark these up for grammar and punctuation errors and etc.)

Then a few things happened:

- First was the acceleration mandate for the UHCCs, and all of the pedagogy I’d read said that emphasizing critical reading comprehension on challenging academic texts was critical.
- Another was my introduction to Google classroom, a free and easy-to-use platform that allowed me to organize, score and receive student homework and to respond to it relatively quickly.

I cannot say I had a grand plan when I started this, but here’s the result:

1. **Responding to HW:**

   In the past, in ENG 100, I’d assign readings and then use class time to discuss them. (I’d also started to shy away from assigning challenging texts because student reading comprehension seemed to be so low).

   Now, I assign readings (including super-challenging readings!) and ask students to respond to them by answering a series of comprehension questions, much as I do in my lit courses. This semester, my first class didn’t start til 10:50. HW was due by 8 AM (with a grace period til class start). I’d start reading homework, and on a good day, I could get most of it back by the time class started. *This revolutionized the way I taught: suddenly, I knew what most students understood, what they did not understand, and where I needed to focus—all before class started.*

Here’s what I discovered about commenting on HW:

- It helped engage students and made them accountable for reading. My guiding questions could focus reading comprehension, too.
- I could encourage and leave positive comments.
- It helped me see spot reading comprehension challenges and address them in class
- It helped me spot writing challenges—and coach students from week one on things like developing their ideas, and providing “tips” on grammar and punctuation, etc.
- I think the word “tips” was important—kind of like the word “hacks”—everyone likes tips, right?
- What I found was that low-stakes writing functions as a kind of warm-up. Before my eyes, their writing was blossoming without me even doing anything.
- It also told me one thing I’d never realized before: some students don’t appear to read anything. I’d always wondered if they did, but now I pretty much knew.

**Responding to Drafts:**

I’d heard that Katie Hern, one of the giants in Accelerated Pedagogy, had abandoned Peer Review, saying it was a waste of time. While I did not want to admit this, I had to acknowledge that no matter how much
I worked to structure peer review sessions, my students were telling me the same thing. Class time was short as it was, and Hern’s pronouncement gave me license to drop peer review, too.

In its place, I required students to submit drafts as HW. Again, I read drafts before class and then “draft day” consisted of student examples of both things the class was doing well, and skills that needed work.

This feedback again, enabled me both to address group skills needed and provide individual attention before the essay was due in a low-stakes just-in-time way that was relatively easy for me to respond to.

As the class built longer essays, I broke assignments into parts and required students to submit drafts of parts of essays. Students said this helped keep them on track and provided feedback that they could apply to the rest of their essay. In other words, they didn’t have to write the whole essay, only to find out that all of their quotations were floating, or that they needed to add more examples or develop their ideas, or add a page number for a parenthetical citation, etc.

While you may think responding to sequential drafts is a lot of work for me--you are right. But: it’s rewarding work, because I’m providing tips to help them on their final essays informally in a Google doc. And--I’m not judging--not trying to weigh the essay against a rubric for a grade. I can pretty much fly, motivate, compliment, and help and gather tips that apply to many in the group and provide for all, using the students’ examples.

It also means that when I read that final essay on a platform like Turnitin, I’ve already read it.

Some students don’t submit all three incremental drafts. That’s OK. I just tell them to get back on track when they can and get the feedback they can.

**Interesting thing:** On essay three, one of my classes ASKED me if they could get feedback from their peers. They weren’t dreading it--they wanted it, and I happily said, yes! At this point in the semester (Week 10), they could both give and receive feedback effectively. I think a lot of that had to do with the fact that I had been modelling this feedback for them for the first two essays and they had internalized it. I was happy to turn this responsibility over to students, and as my mentor LaRene Despain used to say, my goal all along had been to “work myself out of a job.”