CHAPTER ONE

TOWARD CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

AFFECT AND ACTION IN STUDENT INTERACTIONS

WITH INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK

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In writing-intensive courses, instructors spend copious amounts of time providing students with written and oral comments on their writing. These extensive efforts have fueled a long line of research in writing studies devoted to instructor feedback. Across this body of scholarship, clear patterns have emerged that encourage instructors to make their feedback dialogic, reflecting an engaged conversation with students rooted in classroom contexts and instructor voices (Sommers; Connors and Lunsford); to place control over writing—as much as possible—in the hands of students (Sprinkle); and to prioritize students’ purposes for writing, emphasizing the need for instructors to work both to understand those purposes and to help students realize them in their writing (Brannon and Knoblauch; Sommers). Although these best practices are widely agreed on by writing studies scholars and instructors alike, according to Brian Still and Amy Koerber, they have emerged from studies that “have framed the problem of instructor commenting from essentially the same perspective. . . . That is, they have sought to determine how instructors can comment on student writing in ways that they perceive as most beneficial to their students’ long-term success as writers” (207). What is missing here, Still and Koerber argue, are “students’ perspectives on commenting” (207).

This absence is as notable in the writing classroom as it is in the literature exploring instructor feedback. Instructors may not have the opportunity to learn how students feel about their feedback. In the absence of information about students’ affective responses, instructors may focus on the actions that students take, noting whether they implement or ignore the instructor’s suggested changes. In many cases, an instructor’s only evidence about how a student is engaging with feedback
is the final draft that shows how many of the instructor’s comments the student decided to act on. In this way, understandings of students’ engagement with feedback are often instructor-focused and narrowly defined, with little room for student perspectives to expand the notions of feedback that circulate in the writing classroom.

Even when researchers take students’ perspectives into account, these perspectives often do not inform the notions of feedback that shape studies of student response. Even when researchers take students’ perspectives into account, these perspectives often do not inform the notions of feedback that shape studies of student response.1 Few studies have asked students what they identify as feedback in the writing classroom. Instead, researchers often ask students to complete surveys or questionnaires ranking or evaluating predetermined examples of instructor feedback, which may not even reflect the classroom context (Lynch and Klemans; Reed and Burton; Burkland and Grimm; Straub). In this study, we seek to build on existing narratives by representing students’ dispositions toward and engagement with instructor feedback solely as the students themselves identified and described them in relation to their writing development. The students who participated in this study were never directly asked about the role that feedback played in their writing process. Instead, they were asked questions like “To what extent would you say you’ve grown as a writer?” and “How would you say that growth happened? What do you think influenced you?” as one interviewer asked a study participant.2 Consequently, the depiction of feedback that emerges in this chapter is entirely student-generated, representing an important step toward filling this gap in the literature. From the perspectives of the students who participated in this study, it becomes clear that a student’s decision to make a revision in response to the feedback he or she receives is only one small part of the full picture of that student’s engagement with instructor feedback, particularly as it relates to his or her writing development.

For instance, if an instructor comments on a rough draft suggesting that a student delete a paragraph and in the final draft the paragraph is deleted, it is clear that the student has implemented the instructor’s feedback. What is unclear, however, is whether the student actually agreed with the feedback. Did the student make the change willingly, thinking that it made the writing better? Or did the student resist the change, thinking that it made the writing worse, but make the change anyway due to the desire to earn a good grade? As they reflected on instructor feedback on their writing, students in this study expressed moments of accepting—where they articulated an openness toward feedback, a desire to receive feedback, or a willingness to change their writing in response to feedback. They also expressed moments of resisting—where they articulated closure toward some or all feedback, a desire not to receive feedback, or an unwillingness to change their writing in response to feedback. While moments of accepting and resisting were key to the students’ experiences with feedback, these dispositions did not always align with the actions
students reported taking when they revised their writing, suggesting a need to distinguish between affect and action when studying student response to feedback.3

Students’ dispositions were the most salient feature of their engagement with instructor feedback, as minors and nonminors expressed moments of accepting and resisting across the data collected in this study. These moments emerged in students’ entry and exit interviews and in the writing that minors included in their Gateway and Capstone eportfolios. However, these dispositions were not in and of themselves the most direct indicators of writing development. It might be tempting to assume that a student’s acceptance of instructor feedback indicates writing development and resistance to feedback indicates a lack of development, particularly when those dispositions align with students’ actions. In fact, instructors often draw such conclusions when they look with dismay at final drafts that seem to have disregarded most or all of the feedback that students received. From this perspective, the more accepting of feedback a student becomes, the more he or she appears to develop as a writer.

Implementing an instructor’s feedback, however, did not always indicate that students were learning from the changes they made to their writing. One non-minor, Lauren, for instance, expressed considerable acceptance of instructor feedback. As she explained, “It really does help your writing to actually read what they have to say. . . . You have to know for the next time you write that you have to read that and see what they thought you did wrong.” Feedback is important, according to Lauren, because instructors “are gonna be the people that are gonna be grading your paper, so like if you get feedback directly from them, you cannot go wrong, because you just follow what they say.” In this moment, Lauren expresses not only openness toward instructor feedback, but a willingness to make changes in her writing in response to it. If an instructor suggested that a paragraph be deleted from one of her essays, Lauren would likely make this change willingly. The question that remains, however, is whether she would actually learn anything about her writing by doing so. By “just following what they say,” Lauren simultaneously expresses an absence of critical engagement with the feedback she receives and a dependence on instructor feedback. If Lauren is not thinking about what she can accomplish in her writing by making this change, she is not developing an understanding of writing that could help her be more successful in the future. Because she equates success with directly following the feedback she receives on a draft, she is forced to rely on outside input instead of her own metacognitive awareness to revise her writing. Certainly this approach can lead students like Lauren to produce successful writing in academic settings, when feedback is readily available, but what impact does it have on writing development?
Lauren was not the only student who participated in this study to express this type of uncritical acceptance of instructor feedback. Nonminors and minors alike described using feedback to determine what their instructors wanted in their writing. One nonminor, Katie, explained that her understanding of writing was shaped by “going to the [instructor] in office hours and finding out what they’re looking for in a paper, like what it means to them to be a strong writer.” Sidney, a writing minor, similarly described going to her instructors’ office hours and saying, “Okay. What do I have to do to get to that next level? What do I have to do to get that A?” In these moments, Katie and Sidney equate success in writing with directly implementing their instructors’ feedback. Like Lauren, then, it seems unlikely that these students would engage critically with the feedback they receive, ultimately leaving them dependent on instructor feedback to produce successful writing.

These three examples offer only a snapshot of each student's engagement with instructor feedback, one that was taken from their entry interviews when they were presumably less developed writers. Even so, they demonstrate that a student's disposition—in terms of feeling accepting of or resisting toward feedback—is not a reliable indicator of writing development, just as a student's implementation of an instructor’s suggestions does not indicate whether he or she has learned anything from that feedback. Instead, we argue that critical engagement with feedback plays a much more significant role in shaping students’ development as writers. In this study, we define critical engagement with feedback in terms of one or more of the following actions:

1. Using feedback to develop awareness of purposes for writing beyond the assignment
2. Using feedback to develop awareness of broader audiences than the instructor
3. Using feedback as a springboard for reflecting on one’s own writing
4. Analyzing or evaluating the feedback itself, rather than accepting it without question

In the remainder of this chapter, we share stories like Lauren’s, Katie’s, and Sidney’s not only in snapshots but also over time, using evidence from students’ survey responses, interviews, and the reflective writing included in the minors’ eportfolios. We aim to show how students who participated in this study described their engagement with instructor feedback, both in terms of disposition and action, and how that engagement ultimately helped them develop as writers.
Feedback as a Key Factor in Writing Development

In this chapter, we add our voices to prior studies that have argued that feedback is a key factor in students’ development as writers. In this study, instructor feedback was a frequent focus in both student interviews and the writing minors’ eportfolios, suggesting that this pedagogical tool played an important role in students’ experiences with writing. Of the 89 students who participated in at least one interview, 70 students—or 79 percent—discussed feedback. These figures are even higher for the students who participated in both entry and exit interviews, as 19 of the 24 minors and all 18 of the nonminors described experiences where they received feedback on their writing. The minors’ eportfolios also frequently addressed instructor feedback (84 percent, 37 of the 44 eportfolios); students often noted direct ways that feedback had informed their writing process. Seven of the eportfolios, or 16 percent, included actual examples of instructor feedback, and three of these, or 7 percent, also included examples of peer feedback. One eportfolio even included examples of peer feedback the student had given to her classmates, highlighting both the value that minors ascribed to peer feedback—as Benjamin Keating argues in chapter 2—and the important role that feedback generally played for these students.

The value students placed on feedback was also reflected by the number of students who described efforts to actively solicit feedback from instructors. In their interviews, just over a third of the minors, 38 percent, described actively soliciting feedback on their writing, and the majority of nonminors—78 percent—also reported doing so. The discrepancy between these numbers might suggest that nonminors valued instructor feedback more than minors did, an interpretation that could be explained by the extent to which nonminors retained a focus on their instructors as their primary audience members, as Anne Gere observes in the introduction to this section. It would be reasonable, then, to conclude that the nonminors placed more emphasis on their instructors’ feedback, as that feedback served as a direct indicator of their perceived audience’s needs. Nonminors’ emphasis on instructor feedback over peer feedback also appears to align with Keating’s findings, which highlight nonminors’ general opposition toward peer feedback in class. Nonminors tend to foreground instructor feedback much more than minors; however, the majority of minors incorporate references to and examples of their instructors’ feedback in their eportfolios. This may indicate that these students either did not have to seek out instructor feedback as often as their nonminor counterparts (i.e., they regularly received instructor feedback in their writing minor courses without soliciting it) or that they did not find their efforts to seek out feedback interesting.
enough to bring up on their own during their interviews. In any case, that so many students discussed and wrote about feedback without prompting indicates that this pedagogical method is important not only to writing studies scholars and instructors, but also to students.

When students were prompted to report on their experiences with instructor feedback, these figures were even higher. Among the students who completed both entry and exit surveys, 97 percent of minors and 95 percent of nonminors reported at the conclusion of the study that they discussed grades or assignments with their instructors at least some of the time, figures that represent increases of 10 percent and 2 percent, respectively, from what they reported in their entry surveys. In their exit surveys, every student reported receiving prompt written and oral feedback from faculty members at least some of the time, with 74 percent of minors and 68 percent of nonminors indicating they received this feedback often or very often. Students reported receiving a similar amount of instructor feedback during the drafting process. As figure 1.1 shows, in their exit surveys 71 percent of minors and 52 percent of nonminors reported receiving instructor feedback on some, most, or all of their assignments as they were developing their ideas. These figures demonstrate that the students who participated in this study were frequently exposed to instructor feedback on their writing.

Even more compelling is the number of students who directly attributed their writing development to engaging with the feedback they received from their instructors. In their Gateway and Capstone eportfolios, 13 of the 44 minors (30 percent) whose eportfolios are part of the study’s data set (see endnote 4) described moments where their instructors’ feedback directly contributed to their growth as writers. Jenna, for instance, wrote about the feedback she received from one instructor that pushed her to try a new revision strategy:

I met with my [instructor], and she pushed me to reorganize my entire essay—completely switch up the structure. I had never done that. I felt like I was pouring my essay into a food processor and dumping the chopped up bits onto a new page, trying earnestly to make sense of it all. . . . Although I was initially resistant to rearranging my essay, pushing myself to try something completely different really strengthened my writing. It was the struggle that made me realize I could step out—or be forced out—of my comfort zone and be successful.

In this moment, Jenna suggests that her instructor’s feedback encouraged her to try something she wouldn’t have otherwise done, as she was “initially resistant” to the suggestion that she reorganize her essay. As she reflects on the effects of doing
so, however, she does not simply say that the draft she was working on improved, but that her writing as a whole became stronger. What Jenna learned about writing in this moment, then, was that she could try new approaches—even approaches that made her uncomfortable—and be successful. Consequently, this feedback was essential to her development as a writer, as she learned a lesson that could be extended to any future writing experience. In contrast to students who simply did what they were told in order to make a draft successful on an instructor’s terms, Jenna was able to change her whole approach to writing, making it more likely that she would not only consider reorganizing her writing, but that she would continue trying new approaches in the future.

Similarly, one-third of the 42 students who participated in both entry and exit interviews also attributed their writing development to their experiences engaging with instructor feedback. For 4 of these students, comments from instructors on essays were particularly influential. When Natalie, a writing minor, was asked what had helped her develop as a writer, for instance, she explained, “I think the faculty at Michigan call you out on things, and they say, ‘What are you trying to say?’ or ‘What does this mean? This doesn’t mean anything to me. You have to make this
mean something to me.” As she concluded, “I think they push you to be more definitive in what you’re writing. I think that was a big thing.” For Natalie, critical comments from her instructors not only directly informed her development as a writer, but were actually the key factor she identified as shaping her writing.

A number of students, however, did not identify comments alone as contributing to their development as writers. Instead, ten students said that their writing development was informed more by their conversations about writing with one or more of their instructors. In her exit interview, for example, Ariana explained that her instructors’ knowledge of her writing and writing assignments was an important reason that talking with them, as opposed to others, supported her writing development. “A key thing in my own development was talking with the [instructor],” she said, “cause I think talking to someone who knows how you write, and knows what the assignment is, and knows the ideas you’re grappling with is the most important thing to get to making something that you like.” In this moment, Ariana prioritizes her own purposes for writing, suggesting that the conversations she had with her instructors were useful for her development because the instructors had enough context to help her achieve her goals, a conclusion that reinforces Anna Knutson’s argument in chapter 7 that individualized feedback can support students’ writing development. However, Ariana also indicated that she may not have perceived her development solely in terms of producing writing that she liked. As she went on to explain, “Talking to the [instructor] who has an awareness, a little bit, of who you are is more helpful than talking to someone else who’s gonna critique it based on someone else’s standards.” Here, Ariana opens space for two distinct interpretations of the role that instructor feedback plays in her development. The first, in line with her comment above, suggests that instructor feedback is valuable because an instructor knows her writing goals and therefore can help her accomplish them. However, Ariana might also be suggesting that instructor feedback is valuable not because it contributes to her overall growth as a writer, but because it helps her to meet (or perhaps even exceed) her instructors’ standards, which are ultimately used to evaluate her writing. In either case, what is clear in this moment is that Ariana privileges her instructors’ feedback over all other types of feedback she might receive, suggesting that it has a powerful impact on her development as a writer, regardless of whether she understands her development in terms of achieving her own goals or her instructor’s. Other students described the relationship between instructor feedback and their writing development with much more emphasis on fulfilling their instructors’ expectations. For example, Sidney—the student who reported visiting her instructors’ office hours solely to figure out how to earn an A on her assignments—recalled:
My issue was making sure I was getting all of my arguments across. I think it had more to do with the classes and the content and learning what was most important to make my argument. I think office hours was the biggest help for that. I don’t think I ever sat down in a class and learned. I think through trial and error and through seeing what teachers wanted included, talking to them one-on-one like this. I think that is probably where I learned to get better at that and what I needed to do.

For Sidney, getting better at writing entailed getting better at giving teachers what they wanted, something that she reported learning to do by using her instructors’ feedback. Sidney was not alone in the emphasis that she placed on meeting her instructors’ standards. In their exit surveys, every minor and 95 percent of non-minors reported working harder than they thought they could at least some of the time in order to meet an instructor’s standards or expectations. The emphasis that students placed on fulfilling instructors’ expectations increased over time; in their exit surveys 84 percent of minors and 73 percent of non-minors reported striving to do so often or very often, an increase of 11 percent and 3 percent, respectively. For these students in particular, instructor feedback would likely influence their development as writers, because it directly communicates instructors’ standards and expectations. For those unwilling to move beyond this focus, however, that development may be limited.

Across the examples considered here, it is apparent that the largest impact on students’ writing development is not simply whether they choose to use instructor feedback, but how they engage with that feedback. Consequently, in the next section, we more carefully explore moments of accepting and moments of resisting as students described their engagement with instructor feedback, always with an eye toward the criticality they expressed in the process and the ways that criticality (or lack thereof) contributed to—or hindered—their development as writers.
the nuances of how they critically engaged with their instructors’ feedback and what that engagement meant for their development as writers. Some students expressed resistance toward instructor feedback without critically engaging with that feedback. In her entry interview, Adrienne, a writing minor, expressed perhaps the strongest moments of resisting across all the interviews when she described written comments she received from an instructor on a paper about *Jane Eyre*. She stated:

> I was just like done. I felt like I had written a good paper, but I didn't get the grade I wanted on it and I didn't feel like it was appreciated. It was just like, *am I going to take class after class where I have to write what the teacher thinks and write what the teacher's opinions are?* I feel like English gets a really bad rap for doing this and sometimes I think it's deserved, in my biased opinion.

While this moment does not fully represent Adrienne as a writer, this is a case in which resistance, in the form of sheer frustration, caused her to “quit thinking about English as a major.” She did not analyze or evaluate the instructor feedback she received, nor did she use it to reflect on her writing. Instead, she concluded that the only option was to tell instructors what they want to hear, and as a result, she disengaged from her course work. Consequently, Adrienne’s uncritical resistance in this moment is a move that likely constrained her development as a writer.

Although Adrienne was willing to meet instructors’ expectations for her writing, she went on to observe that fulfilling their seemingly subjective requirements had sapped her confidence as a writer. In response to the question of how she views herself as a writer now that she has taken some challenging courses, Adrienne stated, “I would say I’m much more concerned with fulfilling the requirement of my [instructor] and making sure that my paper is clear and concise. . . . For me, I’m just less confident because I’ve realized that there’s not an ideal paper, like it doesn’t exist. Even if I wrote it, an [instructor] wouldn’t think it was the ideal paper.” Instructors would be likely to read her implementation of their directions as evidence of development, but they might be surprised to learn that uncritically fulfilling requirements had resulted in Adrienne feeling diminished confidence. She attributed her lack of confidence to the belief that good writing was utterly arbitrary, a matter of opinion that differed from one instructor to the next. Focused on giving instructors what they wanted to read, Adrienne had begun to feel that she herself did not know what good writing was—or even if it existed.

In her exit interview, Adrienne’s relationship to instructor feedback had changed significantly. In response to one instructor’s feedback, she explained: “I wanted more, ‘How is it working as a whole? What is your feeling as a whole? . . . I
feel like I didn’t get enough feedback. At the same I—the feedback I got wasn’t what I wanted.” Her disposition seems like a moment of resistance in that she did not like the feedback she received. However, she actually desired and was open to receiving feedback in general; in fact, she wanted more feedback than she received. Rather than implementing feedback unquestioningly, Adrienne analyzed her instructor’s comments and made choices about what kinds of feedback she found most helpful. In this moment, she was resistant to the feedback she received from one instructor, while being open toward receiving other kinds of feedback. Her analysis of her instructor’s feedback is an indicator of critical engagement.

Later in the exit interview, Adrienne expressed even more of an accepting disposition toward the feedback she received in a different class in which her instructor radically redirected her writing to meet the expectations for a specific genre. “My Gateway course was with my faculty advisor, and she gave me more of the kind of feedback I wanted,” she said. “It was more looking at the overarching thing. She was really great at keeping in mind form.” In this moment, Adrienne was specifically accepting of what she perceived as tough-yet-generative feedback she received from her advisor:

In my developmental essay, she made me—I said I wanted to do a CNN news report. Instead, I wrote a very lovely creative non-fiction piece. . . . She was just like, “No, this is not what you—” [laughter] “This is not what you did.” I wrote something that would be a news article. It was killing my darlings, but it was learning form and purpose.

Across both exit-interview examples, Adrienne was open toward instructor feedback, but she strongly distinguished what she perceived as more and less helpful questions and comments, indicating that she only found certain kinds of feedback conducive to her development. She wanted instructors to direct her attention to global concerns and build her knowledge of discipline-specific genres, so that she could acquire knowledge of such things as “form and purpose,” even if it meant “killing her darlings.” While instructors might view Adrienne’s resistance toward certain kinds of feedback as stubbornness, the fact that she analyzed and evaluated the feedback she received, rather than implementing it unquestioningly, demonstrates a critical engagement with feedback, and therefore, an important step in Adrienne’s development as a writer.

There were times when students expressed the same disposition in both entry and exit interviews, but subtle changes occurred beneath the surface in those moments of accepting or resisting. For example, a writing minor, Tim, expressed moments of resisting instructor feedback in both his entry and his exit interviews.
In his entry interview, Tim stated that he felt receiving instructor feedback was not helpful: “Yes, you can go to your [instructor] or whatever, but I feel like they’re not as open to helping you or whatever... It’s more just like, ‘Well, what do you think?’ It’s like, ‘That doesn’t help me, ’cause I’m asking what you think.” Like Adrienne in the exit interview, Tim expressed acceptance toward certain kinds of feedback—he believed that learning the instructor’s thoughts was helpful—and resistance toward questions that prompted his own thinking, which he perceived as unhelpful. Unlike Adrienne’s, Tim’s resistance to the specific feedback these instructors gave him was rooted in a desire to produce the kind of writing his instructors wanted. His frustration is understandable; Tim was closer to the beginning of his undergraduate experience and was trying to navigate various expectations for coursework. From his perspective, being asked what he thought was a waste of time, because he wanted to give his instructors the writing they wanted so that they would give him the grade he wanted. However, his development as a writer would be limited if he were told exactly what to do and then followed directions without some kind of critical engagement with feedback, including a broader consideration of the purposes and audiences for his writing.

Although Tim expressed moments of resisting his instructors’ feedback, there is evidence that he implemented that feedback, albeit without much indication of substantive critical engagement. In the reflective introduction to one of the essays he included in his Gateway eportfolio, Tim stated, “Once I had had some time away from my ‘Why I Write’ paper, I took my instructor’s suggestions and ran with them.” In an introduction to another assignment, where Tim was tasked with repurposing an essay he had previously written, he noted, “Once my original [first-year writing] paper had been repurposed into a personal letter, I then looked to remediate it into a new media presentation using PowerPoint. After some discussion with my [instructor], however, I was later encouraged to create a video instead.” These excerpts do not indicate that Tim evaluated or analyzed his instructors’ feedback, used it as a springboard for reflecting on his writing, or decided how to synthesize it with his own ideas. While directly following instructors’ suggestions and being able to meet their standards is a kind of development, it does not encourage broad rhetorical awareness or cultivate a sense of agency within the student writer.

In his exit interview, Tim talked differently about how he interacted with instructors’ expectations in his writing process. He reflected on moments when his instructors required him to write multiple drafts:

[One instructor] made me do multiple drafts, which I don’t do... I write and I edit as I go, so if I can’t think of something I’ll go back to what I’ve written and just tweak it or
make it sound better, but it takes a long time for me to do that. I don’t write like—[the other instructor] was all about the shitty first draft, like you write a bunch of crap and then you take those ideas and you write it again. In my mind that’s a waste of time—to waste your time writing crap—and then you take your crap and turn it into gold. It doesn’t make sense to—for my style. It works for some people.

Even though Tim followed his instructors’ directions, this quote represents some distance from his assertion that he did not want to be asked what he thought. His resistance in this quote did not stem from wanting to be told what to do with his writing, but from not wanting to be told what to do with his writing process. Like Adrienne, he believed he knew what worked best for him as a writer, and he expressed opinions about the writing process that were informed by experience. He articulated an understanding of why his instructors set those requirements: he knew that multiple drafts worked for some people. Although Tim indicates in both the entry and exit interviews that he implemented his instructors’ directions, there is more nuance in his exit interview statements regarding his resistance toward the specific instances of feedback he received.

Critically engaging with feedback is something that many students in this study learned to do during their undergraduate years, including those who expressed primarily accepting dispositions toward feedback. For example, Dariella, a nonminor, enthusiastically accepted feedback during her time at Michigan, but moved from a generally uncritical acceptance of feedback toward a more critical engagement. In her entry interview, she demonstrated the same unquestioning acceptance that other students evinced in many of the entry interviews, explaining that her instructor “told me what she thought could be improved, and then I just followed those instructions.” Like Tim, Lauren, Katie, and Sidney, Dariella described employing a strategy that is useful in the short term to help her achieve success in her classes, but might not be as successful over time in promoting agentive, rhetorically sophisticated development.

Dariella’s strongly accepting disposition toward feedback was evident in her exit interview, in which she stated that her writing style had been influenced by “catering to different instructors and really learning what they liked from you.” However, later moments suggest that she was doing more with writing assignments than merely catering to her instructors’ whims. When Dariella was asked what advice she would give to students about writing, she advised that they begin with overarching goals for their writing:

I always start off with—I guess it depends on the kind of paper I’m writing but you should—they should really think about the overall goal of what they’re writing when
they start. Because I think that gives you a clear sense of where you’re headed and how you’re going to get there. . . . [Instructors] give out the goal of the paper—you know what you want to get out of a research paper I guess. Who your target audience is and the best way to write to them.

Even though she was still attuned to instructors’ expectations, Dariella saw a broader purpose in writing than just the assignment and a broader audience than just the instructor, both attributes of critical engagement. She advised students to prioritize the instructor’s goal for the paper, but also to consider their own desires for their writing and their knowledge of their target audience. While there was less clear criticality in Dariella’s comments than in other students’ comments in this section, the subtle back-and-forth she expressed between instructors’ purposes and students’ purposes suggests that she has developed as a writer, in terms not only of rhetorical awareness, but of how she would likely approach the writing process and consequently engage with instructor feedback.

For some students, the shift toward critical engagement was primarily about the development of independence, as they used instructor feedback to learn strategies for evaluating their own writing. Sidney, the writing minor for whom going to office hours was initially all about “seeing what teachers wanted included,” remained open to receiving feedback during her time at the university, but developed her ability to assess and question her own writing rather than relying so heavily on her instructors to tell her what to do. In the evolution essay of her Capstone eportfolio, Sidney directly attributed her growth as a writer to her engagement with instructor feedback. She wrote:

When I came here freshman year, I would frequently receive feedback in my classes that my papers needed to be more specific. . . . Many times my [instructors] would circle a sentence and mark in the margin, “this could be its own paragraph,” or “develop this idea, what do you mean?” I was taking complex arguments or ideas and not giving them the amount of space they deserved to be explained fully. . . . It took practice and a lot of red writing in the margins, but I started to get a hang of this specificity in my academic writing. What is my argument here? Does this sentence support that argument? Is this idea fully developed for my reader? This sentence seems too off topic? Cut it. I started to have these conversations with myself as I prepared drafts and eventually I started to produce highly persuasive academic papers.

In this moment, Sidney still expressed a highly accepting disposition toward instructor feedback and a desire to implement instructors’ suggestions for her writ-
ing. But as she reflected on her development, she demonstrated that she was less dependent on feedback, less focused on figuring out what instructors wanted to see in a paper, and more focused on learning strategies that she could apply independently and transfer to new situations. She gained perspective on her writing and developed a critical awareness that enabled her to see strengths and weaknesses in her writing. In this way, Sidney directly attributed the development of self-assessment skills that could be applied across writing assignments to her engagement with instructor feedback.

For other students, accepting feedback while critically engaging with it involved using feedback as a springboard for reflection. Discussing her experience in the Capstone course, writing minor Joy described engaging in dialogic feedback with her instructor as something that helped push her writing in new directions:

Every day, [my instructor] would have a different topic that we would talk about. He would just ask questions. I can't really remember particular examples. It's just the questions he asked and follow-up questions that really make you think twice about things in general. If you thought you wanted to write something going in this direction, he might ask you questions. Then you're, like, “Oh, wait. Actually, I could see it going in this direction.” It kind of just opened up the realm to experiment more than I typically would. It was just nice with having more options to experiment with writing through those conversations.

Joy suggests that her instructor’s probing questions and discussion topics encouraged innovation and experimentation in her writing. Their conversations invited her not only to reflect productively on her writing, but to consider alternate choices and to experiment more with her writing than she typically would have on her own. Joy’s description of her instructor’s questions that caused her to “think twice about things in general” suggests that she was learning broader principles about writing that could be transferred across contexts. Feedback was not only about improving single drafts but about creating a wider space for learning about writing. Joy’s experience illustrates the critical attribute of using instructor feedback as a springboard for reflecting on her writing, and suggests that her instructor’s feedback was a catalyst for Joy’s development as a writer.

However, in her eportfolio, Joy described engaging with feedback that did not allow her the kind of innovation she wanted in her writing. The evolution essay she wrote for her minor-in-writing Capstone discussed receiving feedback on a policy brief, in which “my [instructor] noted that I ‘missed the mark’ in terms of specificity and evidence because there was too much abstraction and too many as-
sumptions being made without enough data to support the claims.” This feedback caused her to take a step back and reflect on her writing, which is a sign of critical engagement. She expressed resistance, however, to the way she was being told to write, observing that, “Though writing this policy brief provided an insightful exercise into data collection and analytical writing, I was unable to effectively mold my affinity for informality and creativity into this piece.” There is a question of whether Joy is more resistant to the feedback itself or to the expectations of the disciplinary genre. However, she acknowledged elsewhere in the evolution essay that following the forms required by genre was important, but that it need not stifle expressiveness completely. She argued that “students will inevitably still need to write in those traditional academic structures, but allowing them to put a creative spin on their assignments can help students find value and satisfaction even in those rigid academic styles.” Joy believed that individual expression was possible, but that instructors needed to allow students some freedom for creativity within the genre. She believed that the result would be that students would find more “value and satisfaction” in their writing assignments. Her thoughtful analysis of different types of feedback and her cogent argument for instructors’ encouraging students’ creativity within more rigid disciplinary genres suggest robust development as a writer.

As each of these examples demonstrates, critical engagement with instructor feedback is something that students expressed more frequently at the conclusion of the study than they did at its start. Minors and nonminors alike increased in mentions of critical engagement with instructor feedback from their entry to exit interviews, as figure 1.2 illustrates. In addition, students enrolled in the writing minor were considerably more likely to critically engage with instructor feedback than those who were not. None of the 18 nonminors who participated in entry and exit interviews described critically engaging with instructor feedback at the start of the study, but 8 described doing so by the study’s conclusion.

The writing minors, in contrast, identified moments of critical engagement with instructor feedback in both their entry and exit interviews. In their entry interviews, 4 of the 24 minors described moments where they critically engaged with instructor feedback. By their exit interviews, that number had increased to 15. Given that 6 minors did not discuss instructor feedback in their interviews at all, 83 percent of the minors who talked about feedback in their exit interviews (15 of 18) described critically engaging with that feedback. This suggests that students’ participation in the writing minor likely contributed to their efforts to critically engage with instructor feedback, something we argue also promoted their writing development.

In each of the previous examples, minors and nonminors alike describe mo-
ments where they critically engaged with their instructors’ feedback and moments where they were unable to do so. For the students who participated in this study, obstacles emerged that at times hindered their ability to critically engage with instructor feedback and consequently to develop as writers. In the final section, then, we turn to explore the obstacles that students encountered and to shed light on how—at least in some cases—students learned to overcome these obstacles to further their development as writers.

From Obstacles to Engagement: Toward a Critical Engagement with Instructor Feedback

As students described their experiences engaging with instructor feedback, they at times identified obstacles that hindered their ability to do so. These obstacles, and students’ efforts to overcome them, played a direct role in their development as writers, as students described the varying ways they learned to more critically engage with instructor feedback over time. Roughly a quarter of the students who participated in both entry and exit interviews reported encountering these obstacles. These reports, however, were considerably more common among nonminors, with 8 of the 18 nonminors (44 percent) and only 2 of the 23 minors (8 percent) describing obstacles they encountered. For the students who did encounter ob-
stacles, the difficulties they identified primarily emerged from contrasts between the feedback they received across contexts. These contrasts emerged in students’ perceptions of the types of feedback they received, the quantity of feedback they received, and even their relationships with instructors as they shifted from high school to college or from one college-level class to another.

Several students expressed the view that differences between the feedback they received in high school and college made college-level feedback difficult to engage with. As Sarah Swofford argues in chapter 9, writing development begins long before students arrive in first-year writing classes, and the experiences with feedback that the students in our study brought with them to college writing profoundly shaped how they interacted with instructor feedback. Five students, for instance, described moments where the feedback they received in college sharply contrasted with the feedback they received in high school. For Adrienne, the writing minor who chose not to pursue an English major because of her experiences with feedback, this contrast was particularly frustrating and led her to become more resistant early on, not only to engaging with her instructors’ feedback, but to engaging in the writing process at all. As she explained in her entry interview:

I have written good papers and not gotten good grades on them, well, a good grade for me, which means an A. I feel like that's kind of shaken my confidence, but it also made me realize how subjective writing is and how unlike maybe at the high school level, [instructors] aren't filling out a checklist and even if they are, that checklist, their interpretation of what makes something clear, what makes an idea important, is different. . . . I feel like having to write for [instructors], for academic settings, has made me less empowered as a writer and less—I don't know—less passionate about it because it's not really for me.

In this moment, Adrienne identified a number of obstacles that seemed to prevent her from critically engaging with her instructors’ feedback. First, she described the feedback that she received in college as subjective, an observation that she drew from contrasting college-level feedback with the presumably objective checklists her high school teachers previously offered, and from the fact that she was no longer earning As on her writing. In suggesting that instructors have varying notions of what makes writing effective, Adrienne also indicated that instructor feedback differs widely across contexts, an understanding that certainly would decrease the incentive for her to critically engage with that feedback. This contrast from high school to college not only changed Adrienne’s understanding of writing, it changed the way she felt about herself as a writer, leaving her with less confidence and less
motivation to work on her writing. Adrienne indicated that these factors directly informed her approach to writing, leading her to focus on her instructors' shifting expectations instead of her own goals as a writer, and making it less likely that she would critically engage with her instructors' feedback.

For other students, shifts in both the type and quantity of feedback received from high school to college informed their ability to critically engage with instructor feedback. As Rebecca, a nonminor, explained in her exit interview, “It’s super overwhelming when you get all red, and you’re, ‘Well, I thought it was good. I didn’t have any spelling errors.’ That’s all my high school teachers looked for.” In this moment, Rebecca indicated that the feedback she received in her college-level writing classes differed both in focus—addressing more than spelling errors—and in quantity from what she had received from instructors in high school. Because her notion of good writing had been shaped by her high school instructors’ feedback, which led her to equate good spelling with good writing, responding to the shifts in the feedback she received on entering college was likely even more challenging. Rebecca had to not only learn to process more feedback than she was accustomed to, she had to reconsider her understanding of good writing. While these differences made it more difficult for Rebecca to engage with her instructors’ feedback, for some students, the same contrasts had the opposite effect.

Some students suggested that it was actually a lack of feedback—not an abundance of feedback—that made it difficult to engage in the writing process. In these cases, students indicated that feedback itself—or a lack thereof—could be an obstacle to their engagement. Like Rebecca, Dana recalled getting very little feedback on her writing in high school. For this writing minor, however, the absence of feedback left her with a sense of insecurity about her writing. “I guess coming from high school,” she said in her entry interview, “I had no confidence with writing at all. I thought I was a terrible writer. I hated it. Yeah, I guess I just had no good experience with it, and all the feedback I would get would just be a grade. It wouldn’t be like, I guess, ways to improve. I was very, I guess, insecure about writing.” In this moment, Dana links her sense of self-efficacy to the feedback she received on her writing, suggesting that grades alone were not enough to help her understand whether and how she was making effective choices in her writing. In terms of the link between self-efficacy and feedback, Dana’s story bears a resemblance to Natalie’s, as described by Swofford (chapter 9). For both Dana and Natalie, feedback played a key role in their development as writers. Natalie needed positive feedback to develop her self-efficacy, and Dana indicated that she could not gain a sense of her own development without additional input from her instructors.

In some cases, then, contrasts in the feedback students received in different con-
texts were not obstacles, but actually increased their engagement in the writing process. Dana and one other writing minor, for instance, suggested that the increased quantities of feedback they received in their college writing courses, in contrast to high school, motivated them to become more invested in the writing process. As Dana recalled, “Then I took the intro, [first-year] writing class. I just had an amazing teacher, a great experience. I guess each assignment, I got the feedback and it gave me more confidence. By the end, I was like, ‘I guess I’m a good writer!’” This experience, Dana recalled, “made me want to do the minor or take more classes with writing.” In contrast to Rebecca, receiving more feedback on her writing was not an obstacle, but actually increased Dana’s self-efficacy and her motivation for writing.

The differences in these students’ experiences could be connected to the types of feedback they received; Dana recalled receiving positive feedback that helped her develop confidence in her writing abilities and Rebecca described receiving an overwhelming amount of red ink focused on issues in her writing. Alternatively, they could reflect differences in the students’ dispositions, with one perhaps being more accepting of and one more resistant to instructor feedback. In either case, these examples demonstrate that the obstacles that hinder students’ abilities to critically engage with instructor feedback vary from student to student. Though contrasts across contexts were not always obstacles, for a number of students, such contrasts made it difficult to critically engage with feedback or even in the writing process itself, often in ways that impaired their development as writers.

One final obstacle that emerged as significant for several students was their relationships with their college-level instructors. As Janie, a nonminor, explained, “If I’m very comfortable with the [instructor], I feel more at ease writing a paper. But, if I feel like the [instructor’s] really strict, it’s a lot more stressful to get a paper because you’re trying so hard to target it.” In this moment, Janie indicates that her perception of her instructor would likely influence the degree to which she could engage with that instructor’s feedback. Though she is not talking about her specific uses of instructor feedback here, her emphasis on targeting what her “strict” instructors want suggests that she would be much more likely to implement their feedback without critical engagement. With her “comfortable” instructors, then, the student’s more-relaxed writing process suggests that she would place less emphasis on giving those instructors what they want, opening space for her to analyze and evaluate their feedback in relation to her other goals.

The instructor-student relationship was as important to students enrolled in the writing minor as it was to nonminors. As she reflected on her experiences in the minor, Madeline expressed a desire for more of a mentoring relationship with her advisor in the program. “Had I had a good relationship,” she explained, “maybe I
would have gone in and asked for advice for different pieces I was writing on, especially during the Capstone project. If I’d had a mentor who I could have bounced ideas off of, I think I would have valued that.” Because she did not have this relationship with her advisor, however, and because she felt constrained by the grading system in her Capstone course, Madeline did not feel she had the freedom to critically engage with the feedback she received on her Capstone project. “I want to be able to write in kind of—especially with the Capstone project—kind of do what I want to do without this pressure of knowing that there’s someone grading me,” she said. “I think that actually contributed to why I didn’t like the Capstone as much. I felt like I didn’t get as much out of the project because I was forced to somewhat conform myself into what [my instructor] wanted me to do.” In these moments, Madeline clearly linked her relationship with instructors to her ability to solicit and critically engage with feedback, suggesting that she was only able to use feedback as a springboard for reflection when she had a strong relationship with that instructor. Without that relationship, her writing process was constrained, leaving her unable to even evaluate or analyze what her instructors suggested and forcing her to conform to their expectations. In this way, Madeline—like Adrienne—privileged instructor feedback over her own writing goals to ensure that she achieved the grades she desired on her writing. This difference would certainly have hindered Madeline’s writing development, because in this experience, she concluded, she was not able to learn as much from writing her Capstone project.

Though the instructor-student relationship was equally important to students whether or not they were enrolled in the writing minor, survey responses showed differences in students’ perceptions of the quality of relationships they had with their instructors. For instance, when students were asked to rate their relationships with faculty members in terms of their availability, helpfulness, and sympathy for students, 26 percent of minors reported the highest possible score (seven on a scale of one to seven), whereas only 13 percent of nonminors reported the same on their exit surveys. A considerably higher proportion of the writing minors rated their relationships with faculty members within the top two scores, with 63 percent of minors and only 42 percent of nonminors reporting a six or seven on their exit surveys. In addition, whereas minors reported a small increase in the quality of relationships they had with faculty members from the entry to the exit survey, with average scores of 5.1 and 5.7 respectively, nonminors actually reported a slight decrease in the quality of these relationships, shifting from an average of 5.2 to 5.1. These contrasting shifts occurred despite the fact that both minors and nonminors reported increases in the frequency with which they emailed their instructors and discussed ideas with them outside of class from their entry to exit surveys.
This difference could explain, at least in part, why nonminors were more likely to identify obstacles that hindered their ability to critically engage with instructor feedback. If these students have lower perceptions of their relationships with faculty members, they may feel more pressure to conform to what they believe those faculty members want them to do in their writing. Other factors also influence the differences that have emerged across these students. Students who are willing to minor in writing may have a stronger desire to develop their writing, making it more likely that they would want to critically engage with feedback and push through the obstacles that they encounter in the process. Furthermore, it seems quite likely that participating in the writing minor helped these students learn to engage with feedback in more critical—and consequently more productive—ways.

Certainly, the obstacles that students encountered did not prevent them from critically engaging with instructor feedback altogether, as students such as Adrienne still described moments where they were able to do so. These obstacles did, however, make engaging with feedback more difficult. An essential aspect of students’ development as writers, then, is learning how to seek out and critically engage with their instructors’ feedback. Although only 3 of the 70 students in our data set who discussed feedback in at least one interview actually described how they learned to solicit or engage with instructor feedback, it seems likely that this dearth reflects the fact that students were never directly asked about instructor feedback in interviews more than it reflects the number of students who actually had to work through this process.

This possibility is reinforced by the number of students who indicated via surveys that they never learned how to solicit feedback on their writing during their time in college. When asked how prepared they felt to decide where to go for help with new writing tasks, for instance, 15 percent of nonminors reported in their exit surveys that they were not at all prepared or not very prepared, suggesting that the vast majority of students felt prepared to seek out instructor feedback. Even more interesting, however, is the fact that this number represents an increase of 5 percent over what the same students reported on their entry surveys, meaning that over time, nonminors actually felt less prepared to find help with their writing. Furthermore, when asked to select all aspects of academic writing that cause students difficulty, 10 percent of nonminors identified “knowing where to get feedback” as an issue in their exit surveys, which represents an increase of 5 percent over what the same students reported in their entry surveys. Even when students were assigned academic writing by an instructor, then, nonminors reported increasing difficulty knowing where and how to get feedback on their writing over time.
In their exit surveys, every minor reported being somewhat prepared or very prepared to find help with their writing, with the majority of minors—71 percent—reporting they felt very prepared, an increase of 16 percent from their entry surveys. This suggests that participation in the writing minor helped students learn where and how to receive help with their writing. Similarly, fewer minors reported experiencing difficulty knowing where to get feedback; on the entry survey the figure was 13 percent, and on the exit survey 3 percent, a decrease of 10 percent. These shifts in the responses of writing minors indicate that nonminors would have benefited from additional support regarding where and how to seek help with their writing, something the minors, in contrast, clearly learned.

When students did get help with their writing, they still had to learn how to engage with the feedback they received, a process in which students found varying degrees of success. For Lauren, the nonminor who at the start of this study was inclined to wholeheartedly accept her instructors’ feedback, learning to engage with instructor feedback—even in uncritical ways—was not intuitive, but represented an initial step in her development as a writer. Prior to coming to college, she explained, she had gained a sense that her writing was as good as it would ever be:

I’ve always been really, really good with writing. When I had mastered—so you know, AP English scale is graded one to nine—when I’d hit my nine, I was like, “Obviously, I’m at the top.” Like, “I already have what I need to pass this test. I don’t really need to improve here.” I think that attitude carried over because towards the end of my AP English it was like, I was getting nines on everything. How else could I improve it if I was at the top? I think that carried over into college.

In this moment, Lauren indicates that the grades she earned on her writing had a direct impact on her efforts to improve her writing, because she concluded from her high scores that there was no need for her to think critically about her writing or her approach to the writing process. This belief ultimately informed her approach to the instructor feedback that she received on her writing, which, as she reported, she did not even begin reading until she reached college:

I can’t take feedback very well. When I first was in an English class like that, I used to—whenever I got my paper back—I never used to read what they wrote. And here, when I started going to college, it was like I was consistently getting the same grade on every paper, and so it was—obviously, I needed to change. I actually started to read the feedback and try to incorporate it.
In this moment, Lauren suggests that her decision to begin engaging with instructor feedback emerged from a desire to earn higher grades. In contrast to Adrienne, who expressed a resisting disposition in response to feedback that was accompanied by lower grades than she expected, Lauren’s desire to perform better actually led her to develop a more accepting disposition, as she expresses an openness toward instructor feedback and a willingness to change her writing in response. Lauren’s high grades and Adrienne’s low grades were initially obstacles to critically engaging with instructor feedback. In addition, Lauren indicated that she began to see feedback as a key factor that could promote her development, as she identified her efforts to read and incorporate this feedback as the strategy she used to change her writing.

This shift toward a more accepting disposition was a crucial step in Lauren’s development as a writer. However, she still experienced difficulty being open to the feedback she received. In reflecting on how she learned to open up to feedback, Lauren recalled, “I had [instructors] that liked mandatory meeting with them to talk about the papers. It really opened me up to more feedback.” She went on to share how she found a required full-class peer workshop to be similarly beneficial: You have to bring in ten pages and then everyone just reads it and you have to sit through an hour and a half of them telling you what’s wrong with your paper. That really helped me ease into accepting criticism. It wasn’t necessarily a reflection on my person. It was just like, “This is how we wanna help you make your product better, by pointing out to you what you could improve.”

In these instances, Lauren described moments where she was required to receive extensive feedback in person and suggested that the act of receiving feedback itself—from both her instructors and her peers—is what helped her to become more open. In part, this shift likely resulted from Lauren’s growing awareness that she had not mastered writing to the extent she initially believed. Receiving feedback that identified areas for growth—which in each of these cases she had no choice but to hear, in contrast to the written feedback she had never previously read—almost certainly contributed to the student’s new level of awareness about her writing. Lauren also suggests that she found the face-to-face feedback she received during peer workshops to be particularly beneficial, because it helped her realize that the criticism she received was not directed toward herself as a person, but toward her writing, with the ultimate goal of making her writing more effective. These experiences with feedback helped Lauren develop a new understanding not only of her writing, but of the role that feedback could play in her writing development, ultimately leading her to become more accepting of this pedagogical tool.
In learning to become more accepting of feedback, then, Lauren made an important step in her writing development. This step on its own, however, is only a starting point. She did not describe critically engaging with instructor feedback in either her entry or exit interview. When asked at the conclusion of the study what advice she would offer other students, she explained:

I would say be prepared to forget everything you think you know about writing. . . . I just think that each stage of writing you’ve ever done in your life is different. From the beginning when we were first learning to write, it was all about the five paragraph, beginning, middle, end. Then when I got to high school, my AP English teacher was like, “Throw all that out. We’re not gonna do that.” Then when I got here, it was like, “Throw all of that stuff out. We’re not gonna do that.” ’Cause each institution has a different way of doing things. I’m assuming even when I go to my career, they’re probably gonna be like, “Throw it all out. This is how we want you to write.”

Even at the conclusion of her college career, then, Lauren expressed an understanding that particular writing skills and strategies do not always transfer across contexts. This understanding would likely hinder Lauren’s ability to critically engage with instructor feedback, because that feedback would only hold value in the specific context in which she was writing. However, Lauren also indicated that she was in the process of developing a more nuanced understanding of writing, as she suggested that the contrasts she identified are not due solely to the subjective nature of writing, but instead extend from institutional differences. Consequently, it is possible that Lauren would critically engage with instructor feedback to the extent that it enabled her to transfer her learning across experiences within the same context. "If somebody would’ve told me to realize that you have to adapt your writing to the audience that you’re writing for,” Lauren said, “it probably would’ve saved me a lot of hassle with rewriting and not understanding why it was not working.” In this moment, then, Lauren shows promise that she is moving toward a more critical engagement with feedback and with her writing, as her perception is clearly beginning to shift from the notion that writing should directly follow what an instructor wants to the notion that writing is a complex task that involves adapting to the needs of various audiences.

Instructor Feedback as a Tool for Promoting Writing Development

These students’ stories create a picture of feedback that is as varied as the students who participated in this study. For some, feedback was an empowering tool that
inspired them to think about writing—both the product and the process—in new ways and that helped them make informed choices about their writing. For others, receiving differing feedback across instructors became an obstacle that caused them to view writing as subjective and arbitrary, making it more difficult for them to engage in the writing process. These dispositions not only informed how students engaged with instructor feedback, they influenced their attitudes toward writing and conceptions of audience.

Ultimately, the findings presented in this chapter suggest that moments of accepting and resisting are easy to spot, but that they are not what matters most in terms of development. Nor is implementation of instructor feedback, in and of itself, the most reliable indicator of student growth in writing. Instead, students’ movement toward more critical engagement with instructor feedback matters more than changes in affect or in action. Students who described moments of critical engagement with instructor feedback—using that feedback to develop a broader understanding of their audience or purpose, evaluating or analyzing that feedback, or using it as a springboard for reflecting on their writing—also indicated development in terms of rhetorical sophistication and agency. Students who did not critically engage with feedback, however, at times suggested they learned nothing from this pedagogical tool. Consequently, more than anything else, this chapter suggests that one powerful way to promote students’ development as writers is to teach them to seek out and critically engage with instructor feedback.

NOTES

1. In this body of literature, response is used broadly to address the following: (1) students’ perceptions of feedback, often in terms of what they find useful or not useful; (2) students’ behaviors, in terms of their decisions to take up or not take up particular comments or in terms of their affective responses; and (3) students’ writing performance, in terms of the quality of their subsequent writing.

2. Questions such as these were asked of all students who participated in this study. On the interview protocol, interviewers were instructed to ask students, “How would you describe yourself as a writer when you began here at the University of Michigan?” and then to probe students’ answers to this question by asking, “To what extent would you say you have grown as a writer? To what would you attribute this growth?”

3. Throughout this chapter, we use the term dispositions specifically to refer to the feelings of acceptance or resistance that students expressed as they described their experiences with instructor feedback. We refer to these dispositions as moments of accepting and moments of resisting in order to emphasize the temporal nature of these affective responses; many students described both accepting and resisting feelings toward the feedback they received, at times even in response to a single instructor comment. This use of the term is related to but also distinct from other uses of the term in writing studies (for example, it is distinct from Driscoll and Wells’s discussion of dispositions in terms of personal characteristics).

4. To facilitate the comparison of survey results from the start and end of the study, all of the
statistics reported here were taken from the subset of students who fully completed both their entry and exit surveys. This data set included 38 minors and 60 nonminors.

5. This contrast reflects divergences in the findings of studies that have specifically explored the relationship between grades and students’ motivation for engaging in the writing process, with some scholars arguing that grades are an important motivator for encouraging students to work on their writing (Reed and Burton) and others claiming just the opposite (Burkland and Grimm). Consequently, though grades clearly mediate students’ engagement with instructor feedback, the role they play seems to vary from student to student in complex ways.

WORKS CITED


