Commenting on Student Papers and Field Notes

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This brief note describes the benefits for both students and professors of tape-recording comments on student research papers and field notes. The idea of using a tape recorder to comment on student papers came to me by accident about 10 years ago while I was living in rural Barbados conducting an anthropology field program. I routinely used a tape recorder to dictate my own field notes. One day, while reading drafts of my students' papers—and spending much time writing comments in the margins—I noticed my tape recorder nearby. I picked it up and began speaking my comments on tape. I put my comments to each student on a separate tape and afterwards gave each of them their tape, with instructions to listen to my comments completely and then go back and write down the suggested revisions they thought useful. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Since that day in Barbados, I have routinely taped my comments on student theses, term papers and field notes.

The Technique

As I read through a student's paper, I write a letter (c, b, or e) in the margin next to the passage I want to comment on. I begin my comment on tape by stating the page number and letter, say "I.c." My comment may be brief, such as noting a problem with the coherence or organization of a paragraph, or it may be lengthy, such as discussing a problem with the student's analysis, method or organization. I require my students to turn in a blank tape with their papers or field notes, so that their convenience, I allow them to give me either a microcassette or standard cassette tape recorders are cheap and I have several of each type.

Benefits for the Student

Over the years, I have asked my students to evaluate the usefulness of the taped comments and to suggest improvements. In 10 years, only one student has ever said that he or she preferred written comments. Indeed, many students said that they found written comments unsatisfactory. "Even when you want to read them," noted one student, "the handwriting is often too difficult to make out." Another student said, "Half the time you have to guess what the professor means really." Some students contrasted the immediacy of someone speaking directly to them versus the detail handwritten note in the margins of their paper. One student wrote, "With the tapes I feel like you're talking to me, like you really care that I get it right. I don't have that feeling when professors scrawl in the margins." Other students also have referred to the tapes as more "personable." Not surprisingly, all students say they get a great deal more feedback from me through taped comments than is ever possible from written remarks.

Another benefit of taped comments is that they allow students to hear their professor analyzing and trying to make sense of their work. That is, the student gets a better idea of how an academic thinks through something and what creates the markm in their own writing. As one student wrote, "Listening to you mull over a point allows me to see how I can better make the argument." As with written comments, taped comments work best with students who are submitting a draft of a paper they must later revise. When no revisions are required, students typically disregard or give minimal attention to their instructor's critiques, whether they are spoken or written. Hence, I mostly use comments for works in progress.

Benefits for the Instructor

A major benefit for the instructor is efficiency. Speaking is quicker than writing and as a result, it's possible to communicate much more information. Indeed, my comments on a tape can cover a wide range of issues, and are often the equivalent of five pages of written or typed text. Taped comments can also reduce lengthy visits to the professor's office. With a tape in hand, the student has a record of everything, and more, that I would say in an office visit. Moreover, my comments were recorded at the peak of my familial laddiness with the paper—that is, when I was reading it, rather than days later during an office visit. The student also can replay the tape until he or she fully grasps the points. By varying the inflection to my voice, I'm able to emphasize points that I cannot do very easily in writing, other than by using the hackneyed exclamation mark. Taping also offers flexibility of venue. I can tape comments while walking, while sitting outside or while sitting at the grass.

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