RESPONDING TO STUDENTS: UPTAKE AND FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

Adviser: Sandra Silberstein

While how students take up teacher comments has been an area of interest to Composition Studies for a long time, inquiries have yet to benefit from an attention to what Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) theories of uptake have to offer. Moreover, the way in which writing theories more generally have not impacted the scholarship on teacher feedback specifically has left the field with scant theoretical understanding of the practice of providing students with feedback. This dissertation is an attempt to begin filling the gap in the research on teacher feedback by bringing RGS (and its attention to Activity Systems Theory) to bear upon the study of teacher response to students. It interrogates how teacher response "works" for students as they write and revise assignments in a first-year composition course by examining teacher response in relation to the full context of the classroom—classroom instruction, teacher-student interactions, and all written documents, as well as educational histories of participants. One instructor and three student participants were observed over the course of one academic term. Collectively, the three case studies produced the following findings and claims: (1) student and teacher predispositions, based on prior experience, will significantly impact their perceptions of writing, the course, and the teacher-student relationship, all of which impact teacher feedback and its uptake; (2) providing feedback is never an objective process but is instead "emotioned" in a variety of ways, and research on feedback needs to take this emotional dimension into account; (3) teachers and students rhetorically construct pictures and identities of/for one another through which they interpret their discursive interactions; (4) feedback is intricately tied to various parts of the activity system of which it is part, and uptake is therefore correlated to the way in which such connections are or are not made. The study suggests that teachers can compose comments in such a way that they correlate to other parts of the activity system of which they are part and that such consistency across an activity system has the potential to aid teachers in their endeavors to provide the best possible instruction to students.