

The Effects of Informal Training on Graduate Teaching Assistants' Response Beliefs

By

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### **Abstract**

As recent studies have shown (Ferris, 2014; Reid, Estrem, & Belcheir, 2012), formalized types of pedagogical instruction may be less effective on new instructors than previously thought. In new instructors continuing to form beliefs about responding to student writing through their first years of teaching and training, they may continue to rely heavily on knowledge gained from extracurricular sources and prior experiences in shaping their beliefs about feedback.

This study aims to examine these informal influences on feedback beliefs on beginning first-year writing instructors. Specifically, this study uses both surveys and interviews with teachers in their first two years of teaching at a single university in the United States to uncover influences on these individuals that result from informal training. The purpose of this study is to then examine how personal experiences, values, or beliefs based in their own experiences as students and writers may affect the beliefs with which instructors respond to their students' writing in the classroom. This study suggests that informal training is a valuable tool to new teachers in helping to both motivate them to respond and assist them in a more concrete manner than formal training, and it should be taken into account in teacher training.

Keywords: response beliefs, influences on response, teacher training, graduate teaching assistants

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## Introduction

In discussing and examining how teachers are responding to student writing, answers are commonly sought in analyzing teachers' actual comments on their students' papers (Connors & Lunsford, 1988; Ferris, 2014; Lee, 2008; Straub & Lunsford, 1995). While this particular focus on specific examples of teacher feedback is very useful in that it may answer the question of *what* teachers are doing with regards to their feedback, this focus is often limited in explaining the question of *why*. In her study examining a large number of teacher beliefs about responding to student writing, Dana Ferris (2014) found that "a sizable gap in the research base has been consultations with teachers themselves about what they do with regard to feedback and why they do it that way" (p. 7). Although direct consultations with teachers on writing feedback have not been completely ignored, the focus of these types of perception-based studies has lately centered primarily on the students in the classroom (Ädel, 2017). Perhaps, as a result of this focus in feedback studies on both the students and textual analysis, "research on the beliefs of writing teachers and the pedagogical choices that influence how they respond to student writing is much more scant" (Junqueira & Payant, 2015, p. 21). In then attempting to answer the question of *why* teachers respond to student writing in the ways that they do, it may be useful to take a teacher-centered approach in consulting with teachers directly about the ways their beliefs about response have been formed.

In investigations concerning the sources of teacher beliefs about response, pedagogical classes and other types of more formalized and institutionalized training are often considered a strong force shaping teacher beliefs about response and more; however, studies have indicated that beliefs about response may be also formed by forces outside of this professional training. As Ferris (2014) found, although in espousing their beliefs many instructors pointed to graduate

courses or teaching internships, some instructors modeled their feedback on previous teachers'/advisors' feedback, suggestions made during conversations with peers, through pure experimentation in the classroom based on seeing what worked and what didn't, and through a variety of other sources. These varied sources shaping instructors' beliefs are often wide-ranging and difficult to categorize, consisting of student experiences, family/personal experiences and are likely the result of a perceived lack of pedagogical knowledge that the new instructor pieces together in an attempt to model what a "good" classroom should look like (Reid et al., 2012, p. 454, 460). The knowledge gained by these informal sources may then transfer into teachers' (particularly newer teachers') beliefs about response and classroom practices (Dryer, 2012, p. 443); and while the full extent to which these areas outside of more formal training may be affecting response beliefs is as of yet uncertain, "if we choose to ignore the many areas of their lives and experiences that new (and continuing) instructors draw from as we teach, we're missing a large portion of the picture" (Reid et al., 2012, p. 462). Therefore, it should be of interest to those involved in the teaching of writing and the study of response to more closely examine how these many areas and individual experiences may be shaping teachers' beliefs about feedback.

The purpose of this study is to then examine how experiences with feedback outside of formal instruction and training in the act of responding to student writing may affect instructors' beliefs about responding to student writing. In then attempting to categorize and more easily refer to both these many varying "formal" and "informal" areas of training and study identified in scholarship (Ferris, 2014; Reid & Estrem, 2012; Reid et al., 2012), I will be using the two categories of *formal training* and *informal training*. In explaining the difference between these two types of training, intent is the key factor. *Formal training* refers to acts that were specifically

intended to train the individual in responding to student writing: “participating in pedagogy seminar(s), receiving training for Writing Center or teaching, or through reading [scholarly] articles” (Reid & Estrem, 2012, p. 459). In contrast, *informal training* refers to experiences that have shaped the individual’s response beliefs, despite the fact that they were not undertaken by the individual with the specific goal of training them in responding to student writing: “experiences as a student or writer ... family, [community], or personal values” (p. 454). This distinction is made in an attempt to more easily categorize specific experiences and understand why some instructors “continue to explicitly value their own lived experience more strongly than the knowledge or skills we focus on with them” (Reid et al., 2012, p. 54). Additionally, the term *training* here is used alongside the terms *formal* and *informal* as, although the initial intent behind these experiences may differ, all of these experiences have had an effect on individuals’ beliefs about response and shaped how they view the act, thus to some degree affecting them and training them to respond to student writing. While these two categories of training are limited in that not every influence can be neatly categorized into solely one of the two options, it does provide a way with which to discuss the wide-range of possible influences and extracurricular events that can have an effect on new teachers.

Investigations such as this are important in examining feedback beliefs as this informal training may be so strong as to override the formal training that teachers receive concerning response practices to student writing (Ferris, 2014; Reid et al., 2012). Because of the strong effect this informal training can have on teachers’ beliefs, particularly newer teachers like teaching assistants (Reid et al., 2012), and because of the influence that beliefs can have on classroom practices (Parker, 2010), it is necessary to more closely examine the effects specific

kinds of informal training have on what new teachers believe about practices to responding to student writing and why.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Responding to Student Writing***

As feedback on student writing is typically, “the most enduring form of communication we have with our students” (Sommers, 2013, p. xi), teachers tend to view responding to student writing with respect (and often, trepidation). Furthermore, because feedback is an issue that concerns all instructors in all fields (Stern & Solomon, 2006), various issues concerning feedback are now seeing a renewed interest as shown by the increased demand for and interest in discussions of feedback in the writing classroom (Lee, 2014, p. 1).

While what feedback in the classroom is conceptualized as can vary, feedback can generally be characterized as having the broad goal of helping student-writers move closer to intended goals and purposes for their texts (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Perhaps most importantly, it is crucial that the feedback helps the student to maintain an interest in writing (Dixon & Hawe, 2017). In attempting to then achieve these purposes, teachers have created increasingly complex feedback practices that build upon pedagogical knowledge (Christiansen & Bloch, 2016). These feedback practices tend to follow the past research of a vast and varied group of response and education scholars (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Ferris, 2007; Haswell, 1983; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984; Smith, 1997; Sommers, 1982; Straub & Lunsford, 1995), and this has resulted in numerous feedback styles and tips for attempting to help students, as students are “far too individual and idiosyncratic” (Straub, 2002) for a single style to be considered effective in all situations.



Despite discussions on the topic of feedback taking many varied directions from studying in-class responses to student papers (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Ferris, 2014), discussing online classrooms and electronic feedback (Grigoryan, 2017; Lavolette, Charlene, & Jimin, 2015), or examining feedback geared toward L2 students (Ferris, 2009; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Hyland 2010), in many studies of feedback in the composition classroom, a large focus in methodology has typically been placed on analyzing and examining examples of specific instances of feedback written by teachers in order to attempt to articulate or test a list of common practices for responding to student writing (Connors & Lunsford, 1988; Ferris, 2014; Lee, 2008; Straub & Lunsford, 1995).

These types of commentary analyses are incredibly useful to the field, although other methods for studying response have proven helpful as well. More recent feedback studies and discussions have taken a general interest towards perceptions of feedback, specifically examining student perceptions of and reactions to certain feedback practices (Christiansen & Bloch, 2016; Ekholm, Zumbrunn, & Conklin, 2015; Kang & Dykema, 2017; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Macklin, 2016; McBeth, 2015; Sommers, 2013; Zigmond, 2012; Zumbrunn, 2016). However, as of yet, despite an increased interest in perceptions of feedback, fewer recent studies exist with the specific aim of examining the teacher's attitudes or perspectives of how they develop their feedback practices (Montgomery & Baker, 2007). In then, continuing to “[build] on recent efforts to incorporate the teachers’ voices into conversations on response to student writing” (Ferris, 2014, p. 9) and seeing from where these teacher attitudes and ideas on feedback develop, it is necessary to turn our focus of teacher inquiry to teachers’ beliefs about response and what shapes those beliefs.

### *Teachers and the Power of Beliefs*

While an individual's beliefs can be challenging to uncover, beliefs can be defined here as "statements teachers make about their ideas, thoughts and knowledge that are expressed as evaluations of what 'should be done', 'should be the case' and 'is preferable'" (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004, p. 244). Although it has been shown that teacher beliefs and teacher practices do not always align in a one-to-one manner (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Lee, 2008), a pattern can usually be found between beliefs and practices (Min, 2013), with discontinuities occasionally being due to a teacher's lack of ability to put their beliefs into action (Ferris, 2014, p. 20). Therefore, while study into teacher beliefs has been noted as being challenging due to their dynamic and shifting nature (Junqueira & Payant, 2015, p. 33), studies into teacher beliefs are necessary as "beliefs play an important role in many aspects of teaching .... They are involved in ... how new information is received, and whether it is accepted or rejected" (Borg, 2001, p. 186).

Unfortunately, while the notion that beliefs impact teachers in the classroom is and has been "generally acknowledged" (Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2004, p. 245), the demand and need for scholarship on teacher beliefs, where they come from, and how they affect classroom practices is still starkly apparent. Perhaps nowhere is this need more apparent than in the field of response where recent studies have consistently pointed to this existing knowledge gap in the feedback process in discussing how and why teachers respond the way they do (Junqueira & Payant, 2015; Lee, 2008). Recently, studies have attempted to fill this gap, but often they unearth further questions and considerations. This can specifically be seen in Ferris's (2014) study that examined teacher practices and beliefs about response and partially concluded with the following statement:

A closer examination of teacher preparation practices might be appropriate. Nearly all of our participants reported having received some prior professional training in responding to student writing, and our case study participants often (*but not always*) [emphasis added] cited such training as a source of their current beliefs about response (p. 22).

So, while studies have examined and questioned the extent to which teacher beliefs about response in the classroom are shaped by formal pedagogical and response training (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Lee, 2008), this only examines one half of this complex issue that Ferris (2014) noticed in her study. Although formal pedagogical training in response is a powerful force in shaping beliefs, as Ferris mentioned, it may not be the *only* force shaping beliefs. Education scholarship has noted how experiences outside of pedagogical training can affect teacher beliefs in general and that these “experiences outside of teaching” often build into elaborate belief structures that teachers hold (Calderhead, 1996, p. 721). The influences that these experiences have on teacher beliefs about responding to student writing specifically, however, remain unexamined.

Although these experiences with response outside of formal training are challenging to study, some work specific to writing and the field of composition has been done that serves to further illustrate the need for future studies to further examine these sources of teacher beliefs. Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir’s (2012) study into the training of writing instructors used interviews and surveys to begin to uncover some of the ways that training and experiences with writing that take place in extracurricular or informal contexts, consisting of personal experiences based in their own experiences as students and writers, or their family or personal values, may be even more strongly shaping teachers beliefs in the classroom, including beliefs about feedback. They found that new instructors “often rate their previous and ongoing experiences as more valuable

than the formal learning [provided to them]” (p. 48). This training that takes place in informal and/or extracurricular environments could be just as significant to shaping these individuals’ beliefs about response as more formal methods, as Scott (2015) demonstrated that teachers and tutors alike find that utilizing their personal past experiences as students and reflecting over their own experiences helped them relate and communicate more openly with their students. In then attempting to examine all sources of teacher beliefs on response more thoroughly, it may be necessary “to probe the underlying reasons for their practices [and ask teachers directly] to explain, analyze, and unpack the issues pertaining to feedback...” (Lee, 2008, p. 19).

### ***Informal Training and New Teachers***

The concept of training in the literature on response can often refer to a variety of practices and situations varying from hands-on workshops to reading articles to discussions with peers (Ferris, 2014). In then attempting to more clearly establish what I mean by training in the context of this study and differentiate between the kinds of training whose effects have been more thoroughly studied and the kinds of more informal training that have yet to be more fully explored, I turn towards the categories of both *formal* and *informal training*: formal training is training specifically geared towards educating the individual on responding to student writing. Informal training, however, consists of experiences that have affected how the individual responds where training in response wasn’t the specific focus. While these two types of training and experiences could be of interest to study across a broad spectrum of writing instructors, it may help the purpose of this study to focus more specifically on beginning instructors.

As Min (2013) found in a study concerning feedback beliefs and instructors of EFL students, in which further inspection of beginning writing teachers’ beliefs was called for (p. 636), the effects of what can be categorized as informal training may be even more pronounced

on newer or more inexperienced instructors due to their own doubts, concerns, and inexperience (Reid et al., 2012). Inexperienced and novice instructors are often unsure of just how to respond to their students' writing (Edgington, 2016); in fact, examinations into TA preparation for writing instructors have found that when faced with all their teaching responsibilities, these new instructors feel the most "ill-prepared for grading and responding to student papers" (Taggart & Lowry, 2011, p. 97). As newer instructors are unable to rely on years of professional experience in responding to students in highly contextual situations, they may instead look towards their own, informal experiences with writing and their general beliefs on writing when in the classroom to help mitigate these issues, in what often is described by these individuals as commonsense beliefs about writing instruction (Dryer, 2012).

Perhaps further as a result of feeling ill-prepared, studies such as McMartin-Miller's (2014) into response have additionally shown the many ways that TA's inexperience affects themselves and their response beliefs, such as a focus on pragmatism and applicability at the expense of theory: "[TA's] current approach is based on what works best for her as an instructor...[and much] of [other TA's] approach to error treatment has been influenced by past and current teachers" (p. 28, 30). These feelings and beliefs are not uncommon for TA's, and in an attempt to resolve this issue of inexperience, new instructors such as TA's may reflect on their own past and ongoing training in a process known as *interteaching*, where an individual combines and tests newly gained knowledge on education with prior knowledge to see what works for them (Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999, p. 16-17). Because this process of interteaching and this period of classroom experimentation is particularly noticeable in beginning teachers (Reid et al., 2012, p. 34), it may then provide informative to examine this group that may be most heavily influenced in their response beliefs by informal training.

## **Research Questions**

This study examines whether informal training has an effect on what Graduate Teaching Assistants in their first or second-year of teaching at one university believe about responding to student writing and why. In order to attempt to answer this central question, several sub-questions must be considered:

- What are the categories of informal training?
- Which informal training methods do respondents report have had the largest effect on their response beliefs?
- How does informal training affect response beliefs?

In answering these questions, I will first explain and justify my methods for conducting this research. This will be followed by the results of my findings and a discussion of what the implications for the study of response are.

## **Methodology**

This study uses a combination of surveys and interviews with writing instructors in their first or second year of instruction at a particular university in order to uncover to what extent that teaching assistants report that informal training has influenced their beliefs about responding to student writing. Directly asking these instructors about the sources of these beliefs helps to further uncover connections between training and practice in writing feedback.

### ***Context and Participants***

This study took place at a single four-year midwestern university within the United States during the Spring and Fall semesters of 2017. The potential participants included all of the Graduate Teaching Assistants in the English department who were all in their first or second-year of teaching at this particular university. This created a pool of 38 possible participants who

were all teaching lower level writing classes such as English 101: Composition or English 102: Critical Reading and Writing at the time of the research. These participants were recruited over email by providing links to the survey as well as a note requesting that those interested in being interviewed by the researcher simply reply to the recruitment email confirming their interest in the study.

### ***Data Collection***<sup>1</sup>

The data for this study was collected in two methods and in two stages. The first stage of data collection was an anonymous survey that was sent out to all qualifying participants via email. The second stage of data collection were the one-on-one interviews with the researcher. These methods were chosen specifically as they are one of the most reliable ways to uncover an individual's beliefs (MacNealy, 1999, p. 166), and *explicit* discussions and interviews with teachers about their beliefs are necessary as researchers may not know about this “steady influence from a wide range of personal beliefs ... unless we ask [teachers] directly” (Reid, Estrem, 2012, p. 460). Furthermore, this same combination of surveys and interviews with teachers has been successfully used to investigate broader questions about influences on writing instructors (Reid et al., 2012) and general beliefs about responding to student writing (Ferris, 2014; Lee, 2009). Although the combination of these two methods may be the clearest way to uncover beliefs, it is still important to acknowledge the limitations of these methods, as all of the data collected relied on participants recalling and then self-reporting their beliefs about feedback.

### ***Anonymous Surveys***

The survey data was collected by using the online platform *Qualtrics*. All results were anonymized as well with a total of fifteen out of a possible thirty-eight respondents completing

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<sup>1</sup> Survey and interview methods received IRB approval from the university before being conducted.

the survey in its entirety. The survey consisted of ten questions containing a mixture of qualitative and quantitative questions with an eleventh question asking individuals to provide any further comments about their response beliefs if they so wished (See Appendix A). The first ten questions focused on either individuals' beliefs about responding to student writing or what they believed influenced those beliefs. The questions were a mixture of open-ended essay questions and Likert Scale questions that asked them to rate the degree of certain possible influences on their beliefs and reveal any extracurricular sources that have influenced their beliefs. The overall goal of the survey stage of data collection was to assist in answering research question one and two: what are the categories of informal training? Which informal training methods do respondents report have had the largest impact on their response beliefs?

While several anticipated instances of informal training were provided in the survey (such as receiving previous teacher's feedback as student), the option to write in additional, unique instances of an individual's informal training was also allowed and encouraged. Uncovering the multiple, possibly unique influences on individuals' beliefs was integral to the study in building a list of common instances of informal training for the second stage of the data collection.

### ***Interviews***

Part two of the data collection consisted of interviews with the participants conducted by the researcher. All individuals who responded to the recruitment email expressing interest in being interviewed for the study were selected with a total of ten individuals being interviewed. During the course of the typically 30-45 minute interviews, individuals were asked a series of six questions concerning their beliefs about feedback and possible influences on those beliefs (see Appendix B). Depending on how they responded to certain questions, specific follow-up



questions were asked. The interviews were all conducted within the same semester, and the ultimate goal of these interviews was to help, along with the survey responses, uncover answers to research question three: How does informal training impact response beliefs?

During the interviews, all conversations were recorded to ensure accuracy, allow for transcription, and complement the researcher's notes. All of the participants' identities were protected as well by assigning their interviews participant numbers to help ensure that individuals felt comfortable in revealing any possible sensitive information and to attempt to avoid the common problem in teacher-research where individuals feel pressured to provide false information so that they appear to follow departmental standards (Reid et al., 2012, p.33). These attempts at making individuals comfortable were further aided by the researcher having no official connection to the writing program or an administrative role.

#### ***Data Analysis: Surveys***

In analyzing the survey data, any instances of informal training, or experiences in writing/receiving responses to their writing outside of formal instruction in the act of response, mentioned by participants were carefully recorded. Common instances of informal training identified in several individuals' answers were then taken note of for further examination. Furthermore, in providing a simpler means of comparing the data, the quantitative data<sup>2</sup> provided by questions eight and nine on the survey asked individuals to specify the degree of how much specific instances of informal training had impacted their response beliefs and rank them as well. The information here was then used in identifying the instances of informal training that these individuals reported to have had the largest effect on them. Finally, the specific categories of

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<sup>2</sup> Too few responses were received to be able to run tests for statistical significance.

informal training written into the surveys by participants and mentioned in the qualitative data were taken note of for later use in then examining the interview transcripts.

### ***Data Analysis: Interviews***

In aiding detailed analysis, all of the interviews were transcribed in their entirety by the researcher. In examining the transcripts, the researcher identified common themes in reports about the influences of informal training in the interviews. The influences of informal training identified from the surveys were then used to examine the interviews as well. Themes separately identified in either the surveys or the interviews were then cross-referenced with the themes identified in the other method. For example, when one individual emphasized a need for pragmatic advice on response repeatedly in the transcript, the researcher then re-coded all of the transcripts in looking for how/if other individuals were mentioning the need for pragmatic response beliefs. By moving back and forth in analyzing these two sources of information, a list of common themes concerning informal training was compiled. By analyzing the results in this manner, when an additional theme was uncovered in a single participant's response, it allowed those additional themes to be used as a lens with which to analyze the other individuals' interviews and/or surveys.

## **Results**

In this section, the relevant results of both the surveys and the interviews with participants will be displayed. The data collected from these methods will be used in an attempt to answer the three sub-questions this study faced in attempting to answer what effects informal training has on these individuals' beliefs about response.

### **What are the categories of informal training?**

In the surveys sent out to the thirty-eight potential participants, of which fifteen were received back fully completed, participants were given the definition and examples of formal training and informal training which were taken from previous relevant studies (Ferris, 2014; Reid et al., 2012). After participants were given definitions and explanations of the differences between formal and informal training, they were asked to then separately rank both the formal and informal training methods using a Likert Scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal) to indicate to what degree these methods had affected their beliefs on response. Additionally, as was asked for by the questions, participants were encouraged to write in any additional instances of informal training that were not represented by the list in the survey that they believe had shaped their beliefs about response and rank them on the Likert Scale as well.

Table 1

*Informal Training Methods Identified by Survey*

Informal Training Methods Ranked by All Respondents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Previous Teachers Responding to Writing</li> <li>● Self-Reflection</li> <li>● Family Values</li> <li>● Peer Reviews Partaken In</li> <li>● Writing Groups</li> <li>● Personal Values</li> <li>● Conversations with Peers</li> </ul>
Informal Training Methods Optionally Written In by Single Respondents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Switching over from paper to online grading”</li> <li>● “Conversations with students”</li> <li>● “Feedback from students on how effective my feedback was”</li> </ul>

As shown in Table 1, the sources of informal training that participants identified as affecting their response beliefs are rather varied. Although only three of the respondents elected to write in

additional instances of informal training they believed to be affecting their beliefs, all of the provided options identified from the scholarship were confirmed by these respondents to have had an effect on their beliefs as well.

**Which informal training methods do respondents report have had the largest effect on their response beliefs?**

The second purpose of the survey was to get participants to quantitatively indicate which identified methods of informal training had the greatest effect on their response beliefs. In order to answer this question the previously mentioned Likert Scale was used as well as an additional section in which individuals had to then rank separately both the informal and formal methods of training they identified as having an effect on their beliefs from number one being the method that has had the largest effect on their beliefs to the last spot being the method they believe to have had the smallest effect on them. In using both of these methods in an attempt to answer this second research question, the researcher was able to not only see the degree to which these methods were affecting response beliefs but also compare them with one another directly in terms of the participants' self-reported experiences.

Table 2

*Formal Training Mean Likert Scores and Rankings*

Categories of Formal Training	Mean Likert from 5 a Great Deal to 1 Not at all	Mean Position Ranked from 1 Most Effect to Least Effect
Pedagogy Classes	4.000	1.500
Scholarly Articles	4.000	2.000
Teaching Workshops	3.000	2.500

Table 3

*Informal Training Mean Likert Scores and Rankings*

Categories of Informal Training	Mean Likert from 5 a Great Deal to 1 Not at all	Mean Position Ranked from 1 Most Effect to Least Effect
Previous Teachers Responding to Writing	4.333	2.333
Self-Reflection	3.733	2.800
Conversations with Peers	3.733	3.200
Personal Values	3.467	4.400
Peer Reviews You've Partaken In	3.467	4.533
Writing Groups	2.467	5.733
Family Values	2.133	6.467

The categories of informal training that were written in by several respondents (see Table 1) were not included in Table 3 as not every respondent was able to rate them on the Likert Scale or rank them on their own. However, all of the options written in by respondents (switching from paper to online grading, feedback from students, and conversations with students) were rated by the individuals who wrote them in at either a four or a five on the Likert Scale and additionally then ranked within their top four positions in the following section.

**How does informal training affect response beliefs?**

In then ascertaining exactly how the various methods of informal training affected respondents in their feedback beliefs, the surveys and, more thoroughly, the interviews explored this third question of the study. While not all respondents felt informal training affected them in exactly the same way or to the same degree, all of the individuals surveyed expressed that informal training had affected and continued to affect their beliefs about response to some

degree. In attempting to more clearly categorize and discuss in this section the various themes present in both the interviews and the surveys, the following subsections illustrate themes identified concerning how informal training was affecting these participants' beliefs about response and why.

**The relationship between formal and informal training is complex.** Unsurprisingly, both the interview and the survey data found that this clear separation between the influences of formal and informal training was challenging for both participants to make and the researcher to uncover. While this was not always the case, as many participants felt confident in identifying precisely where certain beliefs about response came from, many beliefs discussed in both the surveys and the interviews seemed to be heavily influenced by a combination of both elements. At times, participants were aware of this multiplicity of influences: "I think at this points it's kind of a combination of all of them. I can't necessarily pinpoint it." Although this finding was not surprising, it did complicate matters in then trying to find out specifically how informal training was affecting these individuals' beliefs, specifically because, as seen in the following individual, some felt as though the influences of their training were simply just, "really ingrained in [them] now," even though they "maybe forgot some of the things that [they had] ... learned."

While it was qualitatively challenging to find out exactly how informal training was affecting response beliefs, the quantitative results of the survey make it easier to compare how these individuals perceived formal and informal training as weighing on their beliefs about response. As can be seen in Table 2 and Table 3, the individuals did score their formal training (specifically scholarly articles and their pedagogy classes) as being very influential on their beliefs about response. Although only one instance of informal training scored higher than any of the instances of formal training (Previous Teachers Responding to Writing), the results on Table

3 show how highly these individuals value the variety of informal training methods in terms of their beliefs on response as well.

In then turning towards the data collected from the interviews, there is a slight shift in how participants claimed to be affected by these two kinds of training when compared to the surveys. Fewer individuals in the interviews explicitly credited their informal training when asked to directly compare to two types of training. In the interviews, five individuals primarily credited their formal training they received in pedagogy classes and teacher training as being more influential on their beliefs, three of those interviewed claimed that informal training has had a larger impact on their response beliefs than any training received in a formal setting, and two individuals felt like both methods had affected equally their beliefs on response. While many of the individuals interviewed here could find their formal training to be generally more of an influence on their beliefs, there is also the possibility that, as Connors and Lunsford (1993) found in their study of writing feedback, the teachers simply knew of the public tropes and values of the field (i.e. generalized advice on response such as don't be overly authoritative). Although then the participants were rather mixed on the degree to which they felt informal or formal training had affected their beliefs about response and distinctions between informal and formal training may not be clear-cut, it can be seen that these two types of training were clearly working together in helping to shape these individuals' beliefs.

**Informal training can help to reinforce or weaken individual's formal training in response.** In further examining the relationship between formal and informal training and the ways that these two types of training interact with one another, one interesting development that can be seen in the data collected was in how informal training could either strengthen or weaken the formal training teachers had received. Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir's (2012) study into writing

TA's found that new teachers would often use writing theory selectively to confirm previously held beliefs (p. 55). Similarly, in this study, when an individual's previously held belief matched up with their formal training it resulted in a seemingly stronger belief about response for them. As seen in one individual's response about why he viewed timeliness of feedback as being important and why he believed response should be more than just grade justification he claimed, "Those are definitely all things I agree with and I would do even if they hadn't said all of that, but I definitely try to keep it in mind even more since it seems kinda departmentally encouraged." For this individual, and others in the study, the matching up of informal and formal training served to give their informal beliefs more authority. Some individuals even seemed to be aware of how these two types of training were working together to strengthen their beliefs: "I would say for the most part informal training has just like solidified like the formal training .... I think for the most part it meshes, you know?"

However, when informal training and formal training did not match up for individuals, their formal training typically seemed to be weakened if not rejected:

"I believe it's important you don't want to overwhelm students with commands, but at the same time I really don't believe in [Haswell's] minimal marking because the way I learned how to write is when my teacher's comments give me somehow detailed comments, especially things like correcting the grammatical mistakes."

Here this individual is explaining why she disagreed with one instance of formal training she had received in a pedagogy class at the university. For this individual, her experiences as a student and in casual conversations with her peers were claimed by her to have had a large effect on how she viewed response. Other individuals echoed similar conflicts between their formal and informal training and how it affected their beliefs. For one individual her unwillingness to teach



grammar in her classroom stemmed from her life experiences with writing which had shifted her view of grammar instruction into a rather negative light. This was problematic for her when a teaching advisor reviewed the feedback she was giving her students, and he recommended she focus her comments on grammatical issues more frequently. This formal training in response provided to her by her teaching advisor seemed to conflict with her feelings on grammar that had been affected by her experiences in learning English as a second language; for her, her views on grammar instruction seemed to remain more or less the same as they were before her advisor attempted to instruct her:

Yeah [grammar is] just a lower concern for me. It's always a lower concern that comes up on the rubric, when I make the rubrics with my students. It's usually a place when my students say they're horrible writers that's what they point to, so I think there is also a degree to which, it's just de-prioritized in like [how I teach my] class.

For many of these individuals, the informal training that they had received throughout their life experiences seemed to play a major factor into how readily they accepted formal training in response. Although some individuals did seem aware of the connection between these two types of training, for many the effects of their informal training on their formal training did not seem to be immediately noticed by them.

**Although many heavily credited formal training in helping develop their beliefs, when asked to discuss beliefs more specifically, they often cited more detailed examples of informal training.** While slightly more individuals credited their formal training as having a greater influence over them when explicitly asked to compare the two types of training, when asked, "How do you believe your beliefs about response were formed?", five of the ten gave examples of informal training first, two of the ten gave a combination of the two methods, and only three credited formal training

methods first. Interestingly enough, when one of the three individuals was asked a follow-up question about the scholarly articles she claimed had influenced her beliefs greatly, she was only able to respond with vague statements: “I feel like probably some Nancy Sommers, I’m not going to be able to give you specific articles. Donald Murray, probably.” Another individual interviewed, who felt as though both types of training had an equal effect on her, responded in similarly vague statements when asked more specifically about her formal training: “I won’t underestimate the you know, the advantages of [pedagogy classes] and even other workshops in the university ... I forgot what it was about it was like learning and teaching and building designing courses and rubrics so, I would say they come first.” This is similar to what Reid & Estrem (2012) found in questioning TA’s more specifically on formal influences: “We have noticed that many respondents began by naming teaching experiences, or a personal experience, and then added phrases like ‘the readings too, but I can’t say which one’” (p. 461).

The lack of specificity present in the answers concerning their formal training contrasts sharply with the answers from the individuals who credited informal training first or who then mentioned specific instances of informal training later on. These individuals were typically able to identify a particular teacher, individual, or work experience that had helped them develop their beliefs about responding to student writing. In an example of this specificity, the statement below was from an individual who originally claimed that his beliefs were mostly just shaped by formal training like scholarly articles; he was then specifically asked where his “core belief” about response that “the best feedback you can give is when you are explaining how something is going to affect the reader” came from:

There is one main teacher that I had. So, [in this] professional and technical writing [class] that I took during my undergrad ... basically the way that the instructor of the

class approached teaching us writing was entirely like purpose, audience, like context-centric, you know rhetoric-centric, and that just made so much sense to me, and I felt like I learned so much in that class. I guess I've just adopted his way of teaching writing as my own in a large sense.

While certainly not all the examples of formal and informal training found in this study followed the patterns of the examples above, as several individuals did mention specific articles and theories, the majority of the participants did list instances of informal training when asked about particular beliefs or classroom practices in response first. Additionally, they were able to go into much greater detail about their experiences with informal training and how it was shaping their beliefs.

**Individuals with less experience in response rely more heavily on their “practical” informal training.** Perhaps one of the more interesting developments from this study was in how informal training seemed to be much more noticeably affecting the TA's with less experience in response. Although all of those surveyed and/or interviewed were within their first two years of writing instruction at this particular university, several participants' backgrounds included experiences like working at a writing center, teaching writing in other settings, and working as a tutor. These more experienced individuals seemed to value the formal training more so, as they had less of an issue contextualizing the specific pedagogical training on response. However, those with less prior experience often cited the informal training as being more helpful as they perceived it as being less abstract than the formal training:

I feel like there is a lot of common sense to [informal training] ... when you start to formalize things it starts to feel a little bit divorced from the actual person who wrote the thing. Which I understand that's what theory is, in general, taking specific examples and

zooming out to make them widely applicable, but I guess what do you do, with, you know, some of those specific instances...?

This particular teacher had admitted to great difficulties in applying response theory learned from his pedagogy classes to problems in specific students' writing. His complaints about the abstractness of formal training was echoed by several of his colleagues as well: "I just feel like [formal training] usually doesn't feel very practical"; "very often practical experience is very different than theory." This level of abstractness then seems to cause those teachers who are unable to rely on past experiences to contextualize theory to turn towards their informal training in search of more concrete answers: "[Informal training methods are] helping me to figure out how much I should be commenting on student papers quantitatively and what I should be focusing on qualitatively."

The findings here are consistent once again with previous examinations into TA preparation which demonstrated that "TAs often want to focus on the practical, sometimes at the expense of theory..." (Taggart & Lowry, 2011, p. 97). However, this lack of theory present in their beliefs about response seemed to stem not out of a lack of interest, but out of a perceived inability to apply said theory. This is a significant difference in that, for these less experienced TA's, it may simply be the presentation of the theory itself in their training that is causing the issues, not necessarily just the theory by itself. As seen in the following excerpt from one of the interviews, participants believed that theory and formal training were very useful:

I guess [informal] influences are I don't want to say that they're more influential on how I respond to writing, but they give it much more, like they make it much more specific I guess, you know? So it's one thing to read a scholarly article in which somebody was talking about responding to student writing, it's so much more applicable when you

actually talk with a student face to face, and they say I really don't understand what you mean here in this comment. So, so the informal influences are extremely important, but I wouldn't say that [they're] necessarily more so than the formal training. They just give it some kind of specific application.

Perhaps the best example in the data for this study of how formal training needs more experience to be contextualized for teachers is seen in this individual's explanation of how the formal training she received at a previous university was not helpful to her at first in her classroom:

I got almost nothing out of that pedagogy class my first year of teaching. It didn't make sense to me. I was just sort of learning it and putting it into my memory bank and going I don't know how any of this applies that much to what I'm doing. So, the second time I took the pedagogy class here, it was like oh my gosh, all of this stuff makes sense now that I've been teaching for three years. Like, I get it because I can think about how it applies to my students and what I do in the classroom.

Overall, the results of the interviews and survey seem to indicate that these individuals are looking for further assistance into how to balance theoretical and practical advice and lessons in response.

**Emotional meaning attached to informal training helps motivate instructors to respond to writing.** Despite being ranked lower in the survey (see table 3), many individuals included statements about how their personal and/or family values affect their response beliefs as seen in this individual's explanation of her beliefs: "Personal values-wise, I feel like I do students a disservice by being cagey with my meanings, so my conviction that teaching should be clear comes through in my beliefs about response." In analyzing the data collected in this study, one of the most common themes between individuals' informal training and their current

response beliefs was in how their emotional experiences as a student (both positive and negative) affected their beliefs about response. While these emotional feelings about response did come from a variety of informal training methods, the most common was in how they recall their previous teachers reacting to their writing: “When I think about my own experiences as a student, I can’t imagine being where I am [today] if I hadn’t gotten responses [as a] student.” Many individuals interviewed for this study mentioned both uplifting and deflating instances of teachers’ responses such as this individual who mentioned considering students’ feelings as being a core principle in her feedback beliefs:

It was always receiving that graded paper back from the instructor. It was always really fulfilling when those comments indicated that I was progressing in some way or doing something right. And it was always really deflating when, you know, it was largely negative or there wasn’t much said at all. So, I guess I just am thinking back to my own experiences when I grade.

This individual’s experience as a student with response seemed to affect her greatly, and, in examining the results of Table 3, it is clear that experiences with response as a student were one of the most influential instances of informal training for individuals in this study. What is perhaps more interesting, however, is how this self-reflection on past experiences as a student then helped to motivate individuals in responding to their own students as can be seen in the following statement by another teacher interviewed:

[Informal training] helps motivates me to actually give good feedback. Because you know you’re grading papers, you’re almost done, you just want to get through it, but when you remember how it felt to just get a grade on a paper you’re like, ‘no I’m not going to do an injustice to this student by doing that to them.’ ... [Informal training] sort

of motivates me to do that. I know it's important to the department and my students that I give good feedback, but at least at some level probably when I think back to feedback on my own writing and how much it helped me grow that I really spend the extra time grading.

It was an interesting combination of both positive and negative experiences resulting from informal training that then seemed to push individuals to continue to respond and to believe in the importance of response. Individuals' experiences with informal training in a variety of contexts affected their beliefs and motivation to respond out of a combination of both care for their students and fear: "It's made me anxious to be constructive in my commenting and be careful not to overwhelm students with too much disapproval and nitpicking." The motivational factor of these instances of informal training seems especially significant in that, during the course of the surveys and the interviews especially, many individuals commented on how they often had to fight off demoralizing or overwhelming feelings brought on by administrative oversight and time or workload constraints that negatively affected their ability to respond to students' writing.

In attempting to summarize these results, this study found that for a significant number of these individuals surveyed and/or interviewed here, they were both knowingly and unknowingly searching for the most immediate and applicable experiences with response in shaping their beliefs about response for their writing classrooms. This process was often messy for many of them as they participated in this process of experimentation and interteaching in their classrooms, as was clearly demonstrated by one individual: "I think [my beliefs are] still like kind of a work in progress because I keep seeing what works what doesn't work and I keep changing."

Despite the complicated nature of their beliefs, these conversations with these individuals did seem to strongly indicate their willingness to respond to their student writing and their understanding of how important this process is for their students. While not all of them found their formal or informal training to be as equally influential on their beliefs about responding to student writing, they all indicated that their beliefs were a distillation of a multiplicity of highly contextual situations that had in some way shaped how they viewed the act of response in the writing classroom. Perhaps this study further indicates why, as Ferris (2014) found in her study of teachers' response philosophies, teachers' approaches to response range so widely in the classroom despite the formal training that many individuals go through in preparing to respond to student writing.

### **Discussion**

In the results of this study, the researcher attempted to show the effect of specific types of informal training based on data collected from the participants surveyed and interviewed in this examination. It may prove to be useful to the study to see the possible connections that can be drawn between the results examined in the previous section in how informal training influences these individuals' beliefs and interacts with their formal training. These possible connections will now be examined in discussing how informal training could and should be considered in discussions with new teachers and the training of teachers in response.

Further conversations with new teachers receiving formal training in response about their prior experiences would serve to make them aware of the many valuable lessons on response they've already learned and the many possible biases they could be carrying with them into their formal training. For example, an interesting result from the interviews that seems to, perhaps, run slightly contrary the results of the survey would be the degree to which participants responded



that personal values affect their beliefs about response in the writing classroom. While it was ranked lower in the surveys, individuals in the interviews seemed to rely strongly on their personal values as a way to motivate themselves to continue to do their job in responding to student writing. This difference could perhaps be accounted for with the interviews allowing for further inquiry into individuals' informal training that the surveys didn't permit for, but what is most interesting here is in how this informal training provided these teachers with an important lesson in teaching the value of response. While scholarship on feedback emphasizes the necessity and importance of response, perhaps the most effective way to teach this lesson to individuals is by having them reflect on and explore their informal training, e.g. their experiences as writers/students and the values that they carry with them as individuals. Perhaps, in following in the footsteps of similar studies (Parker, 2010), through a genre like the literacy narrative we could more specifically encourage individuals to reflect on their personal experiences with feedback on writing. The emotional connection between teacher and student that informal training helps to facilitate as evidenced by this study could be of assistance in guiding individuals to seeing exactly how formative teacher response in the classroom is in shaping students' and individual's feelings about writing. It could be through this informal training and past experiences with response that individuals new to responding to writing as a teacher could be more concretely shown the power, potential, and responsibility they have as a writing instructor and in taking seriously the possibilities they have for helping their students by responding to their students' writing in meaningful ways.

One other immediate connection that can be noted from the results above perhaps explains why informal training was found to have such an effect on these individuals, particularly those without much prior experience in response. The concrete nature of informal

training, compared to the more abstract feel of formal training reported by these participants, helped these individuals to more easily apply informal training to their classrooms to suit their immediate, highly contextual needs. What perhaps can be taken away from this is the need for pragmatic and immediately applicable knowledge that will help serve individuals stepping into the role of a teacher for the first time. While scholarship or training that frames feedback in more theoretical or abstract ways (e.g. responding to student writing should be balanced as to not overwhelm them) was found to be useful *after* individuals had sufficient experience in response that they could rely on, for newcomers, this formal training perhaps needs to be combined with more concrete steps and discussions on response that help contextualize the process to their specific classrooms and students. Perhaps teaching advisors/mentors could help fill this temporary gap in experience by working individually with appointed TA's in helping them to contextualize their theoretical training on their specific students' writing assignments.

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, although informal training can interfere with formal training that individuals receive on feedback, it can also be viewed as a possible resource and benefit in the classroom. As mentioned in the previous section, when individuals' informal and formal training matched up, their beliefs were further solidified. By bringing discussions about individual's informal training into feedback training and looking for connections between their informal experiences with response and formal training, instructors of these new teachers can find valuable ways to further strengthen individuals' beliefs about responding to student writing by helping them to make these connections between these two types of training. Educators of writing teachers can also use these frank discussions to help avoid individuals from feeling like the formal training they are receiving is conflicting with their previously held beliefs, thus making for a more effective way of training teachers in response. As for what a training

program that considers informal training and all of its many possibilities could specifically look like, the answer is challenging. However, the alternative to what is suggested by this study would be to ignore discussions surrounding individuals' valuable experiences in training new writing teachers about the act of response which would, as this study suggests, continue to result in individuals entering the writing classroom as teachers without having a solid, concrete, and confident understanding of how to respond to student writing.

### **Conclusion**

This study has shown the possible effects of informal training on a number of first and second-year English instructors at a particular university in the midwestern United States. This examination into these instructors' beliefs about response and how these informal instances of response training have affected them has shown that instructors, particularly beginning instructors, are heavily affected by these instances of informal training when it comes to their belief system about response. These effects of informal training are often magnified by a lack of experience with response and a perceived inability to utilize the more abstract knowledge gained by more formal methods of training. While the effects of informal training can in some ways hinder an individual from developing more carefully considered beliefs about response, they can also be a benefit in that they may allow the individual to better connect with their students through their responses, empathize with their students' concerns and feelings in the writing classroom, and value the importance of response.

As with any study there are, of course, limitations that should be acknowledged. In the course of this study into beliefs about response and how informal training had affected these beliefs, there were a few particular limitations that warrant mentioning for all those who wish to extrapolate the findings of this study into broader contexts. First and foremost, the entirety of

this research took place at a single research site. Although all had varying backgrounds in response preparation before coming to this university, all of those who participated in this study went through the same formal training process at this same university. However, the commonalities in their formal training in response did lessen the variability the researcher had to account for in the formal training. Furthermore, the research methods used to uncover the effects of informal training (surveys and interviews) relied on participants self-reporting data. While this is a limitation in that participants may not recall or accurately assess all influences on their response, it is also the best and clearest way to uncover the effects of these experiences on participants' beliefs. Finally, this study only examined individuals' beliefs on response at a specific point in their teaching career. All surveys and interviews were conducted during the same semester, thereby all the collected data is only reflective of what participants believed during that specific time.

Further studies into the effects of informal training on instructors' beliefs could perhaps aim to resolve some of these limitations and further delve into how these influences are affecting beliefs and the act of response. Perhaps more longitudinal studies such as Min's (2013) could be conducted in which, throughout a semester or school year, participants record their thoughts, beliefs on response, and how they see their formal and informal training affecting those in a daily journal. Obviously, one way to further expand this study is to replicate the study at a broader number of research sites with larger pools of participants. While it is certainly impossible to uncover all of these specific influences that are affecting individual's beliefs about response, it would be useful to continue to search for common influences and themes across a variety of sites and contexts. Overall, while the precise effects of informal training on individuals' beliefs are challenging to uncover, this study has shown that these individuals were clearly affected to some

degree by these influences outside of their formal training. In attempting to educate others on the act of response in the writing classroom, the numerous influences that affect the educator cannot be dismissed and must be part of the discussion. Beginning writing teachers search for answers to highly contextual situations in their classroom when it comes to response; if these instructors' complex and varied belief systems concerning response are not acknowledged as a part of their training, then educators are shutting down an important component of the conversation on response.

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## Appendix A

### Anonymous Survey Questions

1. In your opinion, what do you believe is the main purpose of providing feedback on students' writing?
2. Describe your philosophy or beliefs about responding to student writing.
3. How often do you respond to your students' writing and at what point(s) in the writing process?
4. What do you believe your style of responding to students' writing achieves for your students?
5. What issues with the writing are your comments typically focused on?
6. How much would you say that formal training such as pedagogy classes, scholarly articles, and teaching workshops that have covered responding to student writing have impacted your beliefs about responding to student writing? Please rate the options on a scale from 1-5 (1 being not at all to 5 being a great deal) of how greatly they affected your beliefs about response.
7. Rank the categories of formal training from question 6 in order of how much they have affected your beliefs about response (1 being the category that has had the greatest effect and 3 being the least).
8. Informal experiences are experiences with writing and writing response outside of the three experiences listed in question 6 and 7. Please rate the following informal experiences in terms of how much they have affected your beliefs about how to respond and give feedback to your students' writing on a scale from 1-5. You are encouraged to write in other experiences you feel have affected your response beliefs as well.
  - Conversations with Peers
  - Writing groups
  - Previous teachers responding to your writing
  - Peer reviews you've partaken in
  - Self-reflection
  - Family Values
  - Personal Values
  - Other\_\_\_\_\_
9. Rank the categories of informal training (including the ones you may have written in the "Other" category) in order of how much they have affected your beliefs about response with number one being the category that has had the greatest effect
10. *How* have those informal experiences from question 8 affected your beliefs about responding to student writing?
11. Do you have anything to add about your beliefs about responding to student writing?

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

1. What are your beliefs about responding to student writing?
2. What would you say is believed to be 'good' feedback practices by the department or scholarly community? Do you agree? (Follow-up on disagreement: Why?)
3. How do you think your beliefs about responding to student writing were formed?
4. Outside of formal training such as pedagogy classes, teaching workshops/training, or reading scholarly texts on writing, what experiences with responding to writing have you had - either responding to others or others responding to your writing?
5. Compared to the formal training you have received such as pedagogy classes, teaching workshops, the reading of scholarly articles, do you believe informal training has affected your beliefs about responding to student writing?
  - 6A. [If yes to question 5] In what ways has these instances of informal training affected your beliefs about response practices?
  - 6B. [If yes to question 5 after 6A] Can you give me some specific examples?
  - 6C. [If no to question 5] Why not? [pause] Did these instances of informal training not have much of an impact on you? Did they have an impact but not in a way that affected your beliefs? Do you not have much experience with those informal experiences?