

Getting Them To Read Our Comments, *Pedagogy Unbound*, September 23, 2015

By David Gooblar

Most of the time we think of teaching as something that only happens within classroom walls. But in fact, most of us do our teaching in a variety of environments now. Meeting with students in our offices, exchanging emails about their work, interacting online through a learning management system or course blog — all of that is teaching. Writing comments in the margins of a student's paper is a form of teaching, too, one with great potential to spark learning. Far too often, though, that last kind of teaching can feel like a one-way conversation.

Research seems to suggest that the feedback we provide on student work has minimal effect on their future work. It's worth asking: Are our students even reading the comments we leave on their papers? And if they do read them, do they think about them long enough and deeply enough to actually learn from them?

Many instructors I know worry that their students look at returned work just long enough to find out their grades, and then shove the papers into their bags to be forgotten forever. Consequently, many of us write our comments with a grade-centered approach in mind: Our feedback is there to justify the grade in case the student complains. It's a paper trail, rather than a constructive document aimed at helping students improve.

Some have blamed that state of affairs on our tendency to correct — to focus our efforts retrospectively, on what students did wrong, rather than on how they might improve. Instead, we should recast our feedback as “feedforward,” and focus on making suggestions for future practice. That is sound advice. But perhaps as important as *what* we're writing on student work is *when* we're writing it.

The biggest reason students don't engage with the feedback we leave on their papers is that those papers are now behind them. Once we put a final grade on a paper, it is effectively dead to the student. It is no longer something the student can improve upon, and is no longer something most students will spend much time thinking about. Your students may want to do well in your course, but if your comments on their papers either (a) point out mistakes they made on a paper they've already turned in, or (b) offer lessons to be applied on some far-off-in-the-future assignment, there's not much incentive for them to pay attention now.

Last year, I wrote about one possible remedy to this problem: Richard Haswell's “minimal marking.” Knowing that students didn't make much use of his corrections, particularly of surface errors, Haswell simply stopped making those comments. Instead, he'd add a checkmark next to any line of text that contained one of those errors. Lines with two errors would get two checkmarks. Crucially, Haswell handed back the checkmarked papers without grades. Each student would then have to find, circle, and correct all of the errors before receiving her grade. By holding back student grades — and thus delaying the moment at which students stop caring about the paper — minimal marking forces students to actually engage with the instructor's remarks.

But it really only works with the most basic of writing mistakes. So how do we use assignment feedback to teach more consequential lessons?

One answer, I'd argue, is to give feedback earlier in the process, on drafts, rather than on the final product. We need to conserve our time and energy and give students comments when they might actually be useful — while the students are still working on their assignments. Of course that means that you need to build draft deadlines into your course schedule, which I know is not easy for every course. But don't worry that this approach will double your workload. If you explain that you want to give students feedback when it will most benefit them, you can then hand back their final drafts with just a grade at the bottom. Students who want more of an explanation of their grade can schedule a meeting to talk about their paper. Have students turn in a first draft at least a week before the final version is due. Leave yourself enough time so that you can return their marked-up drafts with at least three or four days still to go before the final due date. And focus your comments on what students need to do to make their drafts better. You can certainly note surface errors. But spend most of your time on the elements that you find most important in an excellent completed assignment. Teach your students how to revise their work.

Aside from its practical value — students will actually make use of feedback, rather than ignoring it — this strategy has the benefit of emphasizing the importance of the writing process to students. Where we direct our energies as teachers sends a message to students about what is significant and what is not.

We need to remember: The skills and knowledge acquired while completing an assignment are far more important than that assignment's final product. It is understandable for students to be focused on grades; we should not be. The student who wrote a C paper but learned how to write a better paper next time did better than the student who got an A but didn't learn anything going forward. Emphasize process over product and your students will, too.

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