

# PRAISEWORTHY GRADING

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It was a terrible realization.

I was sitting in my office, grading the final essays of my composition class. I had just finished evaluating the essay of my worst student. I had found a considerable number of mechanical and grammatical errors, imprecise wordings, unclear and unsubstantiated assertions, disjointed paragraphs, etc. Dutifully, I had identified and analyzed these "errors," written numerous and extensive comments in the margins, and given a thorough explanation of my evaluation. All this had taken me approximately forty-five minutes, and I was annoyed. I still had quite a few essays to grade, and I was getting tired. I despised this essay, and I hated the student for having put me through the torture of reading it. I loathed myself for not having miraculously turned this student into a better writer during the course of the semester. And I certainly did not want to read any more essays that would take forty-five minutes or more to grade. I wanted to read an essay like the one my best student had written, like the one I had graded earlier in only twenty minutes. Its minimal "errors" had required little marginal commentary and only a brief explanation of my evaluation.

It was at this point that I realized there was something terribly wrong with my grading process. I was spending considerably more time on my worst students and the worst essays than I was on my best students and the best essays. And I was not at all convinced that my giving additional time to the worst writers was either fruitful or fair. Did it genuinely help these students for me to identify the dangling modifiers or sweeping generalizations which plagued their essays? While I was turning "D" writers into "C" writers was I failing to turn "B" writers into "A" writers? Was I helping "A" writers to improve their writing as much as I was helping "F" writers to improve theirs? Was I helping either?

I realized also that I was quite likely typical of writing skills teachers in questioning the equity and efficacy of this tedious process of grading papers. Typically, the writing skills teacher focuses his or her grading on the identification, analysis, and discussion of 1) "problems" in the writing process, and 2) "errors" in the written product. The worst writers commit more "errors" and experience more "problems" than the best writers do; as a consequence, there is

simply more to say and more that needs to be said to the worst writers than to the best writers. Though the writing skills teacher also discusses the virtues of every essay, he or she is usually much more selective and much less specific when pointing things out for commendation than when singling things out for correction. This is because focusing on the positive is widely viewed only as *desirable*, as a way to avoid bruising the writer's ego; negative or corrective criticism, however, is perceived as *necessary* to the improvement of the student's writing, as the only commentary which is genuinely instructive. This essentially (though never exclusively) negative orientation to the writing of students is also the obvious effect, according to Joseph Williams, of the teacher's expectations: i.e., expecting to encounter error, the writing skills teacher focuses on finding it, fixates on finding it (159).

Given this fault-finding orientation of their writing skills teacher, students submit their essays to this merciless disciplinarian, entirely expecting their essays to be bloodied by the teacher's red pencil. Students perceive that if their teacher discovers little or nothing wrong with an essay, it will escape a verbal flogging and receive a high grade, but if the teacher finds much that is wrong with an essay, it will suffer a thorough scourging and receive a low grade. This perception of the grading process necessarily contributes to the impression that all essays start out as "A" essays and stay that way unless or until the teacher finds enough things "wrong" to justify a lower grade. Students thus perceive grading as the *depreciation* of their writing, as opposed to its *appreciation*.

This error-oriented or problematic grading is discouraging and debilitating for students. Obsessed with error, the teacher necessarily focuses the attention of his or her students on their mistakes, their failures in written communication. As positive or supportive as the teacher might be in discussing their writing, as constructively as he or she might comment on their errors, it is the errors to which attention is given. It is the errors to which students will address themselves in the revision of their essays and in the composition of subsequent essays.

This negative orientation to writing is only reinforced during a teacher's individual meetings with students to discuss their essays. Students ask "What did I do wrong?" and the teacher answers, again explaining the errors and ways to fix the errors. Again the impression is given that writing is a process of avoiding errors and evading problems; failing that, it is a process of repairing errors and solving problems.

And there is no empirical evidence that this orientation to error yields improved writing or improved writers (Knoblauch and Brannon 159). Problematic grading is thus a tedious and horrid process without clear instructive merit.

Why is this failure-fixation a failure? Donald M. Murray gives a simple answer:

The successful writer does not so much correct error as discover what is working and extend that element in the writing. The writer looks for the voice, the order, the relationship of information that is working well, and concentrates on making the entire piece of writing have the effectiveness of the successful fragment (146).

Praiseworthy grading is thus the alternative to this problematic grading. In praiseworthy grading, the writing skills teacher comments *only* on those characteristics of a student's essay which the teacher considers praiseworthy: e.g., effective organization of information, thorough explication of a complicated idea, or simply mechanical and grammatical accuracy. The more praiseworthy things discovered in a student's essay, the higher the grade that is awarded, the more marginal comments that are written, and the fuller the explanation of the evaluation that is given.

Writing skills teachers thus spend the most time grading the best papers and write the most comments for the best writers in the class--the students best able to understand and act on, independent of face-to-face interpretation, written evaluations of their writing. Conversely, writing skills teachers spend the least time grading the worst papers and write the fewest comments for the worst writers in the class--the students least able, independent of face-to-face interpretation, to understand and act on written evaluations of their writing. Praiseworthy grading thus gives the writing skills teacher a satisfaction foreign to problematic grading.

Praiseworthy grading also directs the attention of students to their communicative successes. Students perceive that their essays receive high grades only if their writing skills teacher discovers sufficient communicative successes in their essays to justify high grades; as a consequence, students consider grading as the appreciation of their writing, as opposed to its depreciation.

Praiseworthy grading, however, does not mean that the writing skills teacher simply abandons the worst writers to their own frail devices, commenting little on their essays, assigning a low grade, and doing nothing more. These students still need the teacher's aid to build on their communicative successes. Nor does praiseworthy grading mean that the writing skills teacher entirely ignores errors; it does mean that he or she stops calling the attention of students to their communicative failures.

Thus, following the praiseworthy grading of essays, the writing skills teacher gives students a listing of limited writing objectives. This appropriately individualized listing--physically separated and thus psychologically disassociated from the student's graded essay--

might comprise correctly exemplified guidance on choosing and focusing a topic, or logically organizing a paragraph, or achieving mechanical and grammatical accuracy. This listing, however, gives no mention to errors committed by the students. Focusing on failure is unlikely to nourish success, e.g., citing the absence of a transitional word or phrase and explaining the disfluency this absence causes within a paragraph is never as instructive as pointing to the presence of a transition and discussing the cohesion it gives to a paragraph.

Does giving praise yield improved writers and improved writing? According to the fragile empirical research on this issue, praise does little to improve writing. It does, however, yield improved writers: i.e., writers who exhibit improved attitudes toward writing, who write willingly, who write lengthier essays, clearly unafraid to communicate their ideas through writing.<sup>1</sup> This is no insignificant achievement, considering the genuine antipathy and anxiety which students usually bring to the toil of writing. Obviously, given the confidence to compose, a student is likelier to acquire the motivation and develop the perseverance necessary to improve his or her writing.

It is also obvious that praiseworthy teaching is necessary to reinforce praiseworthy grading. The teaching environment in which praiseworthy grading occurs ought to emphasize communicative successes and avoid the contagion of failure which typically plagues the writing skills classroom. Discussions of "errors to avoid" focus equally on 1) the error and 2) avoiding the error, thus dividing the attention of students between the communicative failure and the communicative success. Exercises which ask students to discriminate between correct and incorrect answers, or appropriate and inappropriate answers, do similar damage: the incorrect answer is as likely to be given as the correct answer.<sup>2</sup> Again, focusing on failure is unlikely to nourish success, either in the teaching or in the grading of writing.

The inequity and inefficacy of problematic grading is thus clear. In assigning the majority of a teacher's time to the worst writers and the worst writing, problematic grading yields the timid writing of inhibited students aiming only to avoid committing errors. In giving equivalent attention to the best writers and the worst writers in a class, praiseworthy grading is fair. In focusing on successes and avoiding discussion of failures, praiseworthy grading is also fruitful: it cultivates writers motivated to write.

Problematic grading, though, is still the habit of writing skills teachers. And switching to praiseworthy grading is difficult: the temptation to circle misspellings and comma splices is always a terrible temptation. The words of Paul Diederich, however, might guide us: "The art of the teacher--at its best--is the reinforcement of good things (58).

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Several inquiries yield similar findings: e.g., Winnifred F. Taylor and Kenneth C. Hoedt, "The Effect of Praise Upon the Quality of Creative Writing"; Earl Seidman, "Marking Students' Compositions: Implications for Achievement Motivation Theory"; Thomas C. Gee, "Students' Responses to Teacher Comments"; and Alberta D.J. Goodman, "Utilization of Positive Feedback in a Classroom Environment of Acceptance to Promote Enhanced Learner Self-Concept and Improved Written Performance."
- <sup>2</sup> This is the point of Thomas Friedmann's "Teaching Error, Nurturing Confusion: Grammar Texts, Tests and Teachers in the Developmental English Class." Though Friedmann limits his discussion to students in a basic writing skills class, clearly his recommendations are applicable to the multiplicity of students in all writing classes who possess frail or undeveloped skills.

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