

The Overgraded Paper: Another Case of More Is Less

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Working in a large and busy writing lab as I do, I have seen hundreds of university students react to dozens of different methods of grading. When students come in for supplementary tutorial help, they bring along papers which have been written for a variety of writing courses and which have been graded by members of a composition staff of over 150 graduate students, faculty members, and part-time lecturers. Thus I have read papers graded according to textbook correction symbols, long endnotes, marginal comments, headnotes, mimeographed grids, and interlinear corrections, as well as papers graded analytically, holistically, and minimally (i.e., the sole notation being a letter grade). I've also talked with the students to whom all this effort is addressed, and their reactions seem to verify my conclusion that the amount of useful information students derive from a graded paper, above a certain minimum level, is in inverse proportion to the amount of instructor notation on the page.

Because it is important before beginning tutorial instruction to find out if students know what they should be working on, I usually ask what I can help them with even though I have already looked at their graded papers and the referral sheets from their instructors. Some students need help in decoding correction symbols before they can answer; others focus so emphatically on comments that refer to the improved or more effective aspects of their writing that they need time to find the suggestions for correction and revision. But of all the failures of communication between teacher and student, the saddest is that which results from an overload of diverse bits of information on the graded paper. Such papers are graded so thoroughly that the evaluation must represent monumental amounts of time, effort, and good intentions on the teacher's part. The lengthy endnotes are usually perceptive, the suggestions for improvement

plentiful, and the corrections of grammatical errors thorough, but many students get almost nothing of lasting value from all this effort, except a vague sense that the instructor is either thorough or trying to be helpful.

As I watch students struggle to find the central message, or in fact any message, among such notations, I am forced to conclude that the major problem with the overgraded paper is that the instructor has lost both a sense of focus and a point of view. Like student writers without a thesis or consistent perspective, the teacher who overgrades leaps from suggestion to correction to criticism, from being an editor to a coach to a reader. In noting many things, the instructor emphasizes nothing, and many students, lost in the welter of messages, retreat. And what happens next is rather odd. Normally, we point accusing fingers at the perpetrators of unclear, overly complex, or unfocused writing. In this case, however, the receiver of this well-meaning babble is the one made to feel guilty or inadequate because he or she is unable to catch the message, while the grader, basking in a sense of martyrdom, chalks up another overworked, underpaid day.

Some students, confronted by extensive commentary, give up completely, preferring never to look at the paper again. Other students, in desperation, grab for something concrete, perhaps misspelled words or inappropriate punctuation. With an almost audible sigh of relief, they find *something* on the page that can be dealt with, changed, conquered. Another effect of the overgraded paper is that when students know that every line, every word, is going to be scrutinized, they take their writing seriously-very seriously. In one sense, such caution is admirable; in another sense it is deadly. Finger exercises, trial runs, rough drafts, experimentation-these are all part of the process of learning to write. But, unlike the athlete who is allowed to practice in order to improve skills, the writer in the over-grader's class is always playing a varsity game in the glare of the spotlight.

What then does one do when faced with the problem of wanting to talk extensively to the student, of wanting to go beyond the "nice work, shows improvement" kind of evaluation, but not so far that the student files away the graded paper with its long commentary until he or she has a free evening? A thorny question indeed, but we can work toward solving the problem by using the same checklist that we suggest student writers consider as they compose their

or mode that effectively conveys what we want to say. As in any composing situation, these considerations interact, shove up against and limit each other, enrich and reinforce each other. For the sake of simplicity, I will disentangle them here and treat them as if they were separate. The easiest to sort out is the grader's personae. We can announce this ahead of time, explaining that we will look at various drafts *only* to offer suggestions for improvement or *only* to comment on what's working effectively so far. Or we can set up different voices spatially on the page: grammatical errors circled in the text (grader as proofreader/ editor), suggestions for improvement listed at the end of the paper (grader as coach), questions relating to lack of clarity, context, etc. in the margin (grader as audience), and so on. But even here, a single message ought to predominate.

When the grader wishes to convey the message that further instruction is necessary, there is no need to write out all that must be said on paper; a more effective method exists. Borrowing from our writing lab's practice of scheduling small-group sessions on various topics, I've found that a workable, time-saving solution is to hold four or five ten- to fifteen-minute small-group sessions during the class hour in which the papers are returned. The topics for these short sessions are determined by what seem to be the students' major needs, and on their papers I invite them to attend one or at most two groups during the hour. The value of the small group meeting for the student is that it overtly labels what he or she really needs to work on. The message is clear and likely to be retained for further writing. But other messages are transmitted as well. When several people come together to discuss the need for more specific detail, or maybe for transitions between sentences, or even for correct comma usage, it is easier for them to acknowledge that they are working on a valid concern of writers and not on some peculiar personal deficiency. In addition, if students show up repeatedly in the same group, their presence is the clearest possible signal that they need the help of the writing lab. When the teacher leaves one group to move on to another, the first group can work on practice exercises or revise their papers. Such a follow-up helps to ensure a connected sequence of diagnosis, instruction, and practice, a sequence that is too often interrupted when the graded paper is received and discarded immediately. Students who are particularly adept at the writing skills to be covered in other small groups can serve as peer tutors.

Flexibility and a degree of individualization are obvious advantages of the small-group approach. Moreover, it is amazing how much ground can be

efficiently ten or fifteen minutes can be used, covered (even on a complex matter such as organization), and how the tone of the teacher's voice can defuse a message that would appear harsh in writing. But the most useful result is that the teacher has to limit the evaluation comments to one or two points that really are important. After all, we have no right to scatter a barrage of messages across the landscape of a student's paper when we're trying to teach concepts like focus and control.