Mastering Marking Madness

"Marking is soul-destroying," proclaimed a disheveled looking woman in the front row. "I'm not kidding," she insisted, "it's actually destroying my soul."

Shouts of 'amen!' came from several teachers in the crowd, and the woman with the destroyed soul leaned forward, looking eager near whatever advice the workshop leader might offer. This was not a light-hearted affair. She needed help.

I remember wondering if it was me who needed help — for pursuing a profession where my soul would be at risk of being devoured by stacks of papers. At the time I was a student teacher and carried no baggage about marking papers. But as I looked around the room, signs of anxiety and angst were obvious. A woman groaned on her already too-short nap. A man repeatedly dragged his heavy hand across his face, and everyone else clutched coffee mugs like they needed caffeine to function. Teachers are smart people, so why does marking reduce us to stressed and scourged masses? Because in our hearts we know that students don't learn from it and that private us nurses.

Teachers spend hours bent over student into the late hours of the evening. With noble hearts, we scrawl gallons of ink all over those essays, noting what works and what doesn't. Commenting on student ideas and grammar, praising and reprimanding, drooling and glowering. Then, the next day when we pass those papers back to their authors, students scan our pen's markings until they find a grade noted at the bottom, and then they casually toss those papers in the garbage. And when we teachers walk past the recycling bin and see several of those essays marked with our careful suggestions and edits, we feel tired and beaten. Our souls are being destroyed by the very thing we love teaching. Most depressing is the realization that those hours at our kitchen tables don't help students learn and that we continue to do it anyway, mired and caught in the cycle of traditional marking systems perpetuated.

Researchers like Lorna Eift and Dylan Williams have looked closely at these systems and have proven what teachers already know deep down: marking student work doesn't improve student learning. However, a new second year of teaching a senior English class realized that marking student work does help me learn about what makes good writing and doing all the learning when I've got a room full of students who should be doing that.

So I stopped giving marks and started giving feedback. Feedback eliminates the mystery, shriveling good writing the way a mark never could. Now, at the beginning of the year when I meet the parents and tell them that I will not be giving marks, I open with the question I think says it all: "If your daughter hands in an essay and gets 16/20 on it, what will you tell her to do so that she can get 17/20 next time?"

They respond by looking at me with curious expressions and shifting in their seats. It's a hard question and no one has been able to answer it yet.

"You know what?" I say, "I wouldn't even know what to suggest because numbers hold no criteria — they hold no instruction for moving forward. And that's why numbers don't work. As soon as the student sees a percentage on his or her report card, they begin thinking, "What do I do?"

In case there is any doubt, I said, "And guess what, folks? I am here to help your child learn. That's what I focus on. At this point, they really don't need one another with reality. As it turns out, most parents don't like their kids being ranked either. They want their children to learn just as much as we do.

The quest to move the focus from ranking to learning, my students and I use student-developed rubrics to provide meaningful feedback. As a member of British Columbia's Network of Performance Based Schools, I understand the power of the rubric. In order to align the rubric's power with student ownership over their learning, I have put white writing rubrics with the umbrella of performance expectations, goals, and achievements across the class, which does not meet expectations, meets expectations, exceeds expectations, and does not meet expectations.
EN BREF Les enseignants sont des gens intelligents, alors pourquoi l'attribution de notes nous réduit-elle en bouillie? Parce que, dans le fond, nous savons que les élèves n'y apprennent rien et cela nous rend fous. Des chercheurs comme Lorna Earl et Dylan Williams ont examiné de près ces systèmes et ont démontré que les enseignants savent viscéralement : noter les travaux des élèves n'améliore pas leurs apprentissages. Après ma deuxième année d'enseignement d'anglais à la fin du secondaire, j'ai réalisé que noter les travaux des élèves m'aide, moi, à comprendre ce qui constitue bien écrire et mal écrire. J'ai donc cessé d'attribuer des notes et j'ai commencé à faire des commentaires, éliminant bien mieux qu'une note le mystère entourant la façon de mieux écrire. À l'aide de plusieurs outils clés, j'ai remplacé un système de notation par un système d'apprentissage dans le cadre duquel les élèves ont pris en charge leurs progrès et je ne leur donne pas « une note ».

my colleague, Greg Elliott, and I teach all the Grade 11s, so we also amalgamated our class's rubrics to create a Grade 11 Writing rubric. The result is a student-friendly tool for measuring their writing. They own it — we don't. We use this rubric, and others like it, for providing one another with feedback. I say "one another" because I suspect one another's work just as often as I do. In addition to guarding against the self-destructing effects of marking, peer-assessment is an essential learning piece.

After either a student or I have assessed a student's work, we staple the highlighted rubric to it and return it to the author. In order to provide my students with a way of using feedback (assessment as learning), I created an Assignment Log with the following six columns: Date, Assignment, Strengths, Area of Focus, Plan for Improvement, and Resources. Each assignment may receive, students complete a row in this log. From the highlighted rubric they identify a strength (or, under the Area of Focus column, they identify one thing, and only one thing), then they want to improve. The toughest bit comes next — articulating the Plan for Improvement. If figuring out how to improve clearly was easy, everyone would write clearly. Because this step is so difficult and because it is essential to improving, I do a fair amount of teaching around various ways to improve the most common problems.

By the middle of October most students can create effective Plans for Improvement. For example, Jack wants to improve his thesis statements, so his Plan for Improvement identifies the following points: (1) talk about topics (2) answer questions beginning with "I think that", (3) write answers down and erase them. I tell them, (4) whenever making sure the thesis is sentence-long and not key words from the question. Jack's thesis statements are sure to improve if he follows this plan.

My goal is for students to learn, so while I allow them to revise their assignments in accordance with their Plan for Improvement, the main idea is for them to (pick their plan) eventually they will be able to convert that weakness to a strength and move on to another focus. In this way their improvement is visual, tangible, and purposeful. But most of all, it's empowering because they own their success.

Over the past year I've explained this process to many B.C. teachers, and at this point in the discussion they often look tentative, and someone will start suggesting all the problems that might exist with this approach. The first challenge always sounds something like, "Yeah, that's great but at the end of the year you need to give a mark." Thanking them for the perfect segue, I explain how my students turn their feedback into a mark and write their own report cards. Soul Destroyer, you're foiled again!

At the end of a term I distribute all the students' term work with feedback attached which they have been keeping in classroom bags. With their Assignment Logs in hand, they consider all of this evidence to arrive at a mark based on the most recent and most pertinent feedback. If most of the feedback falls under the Fully Meets Expectations column on the rubric, then the final mark will be in the B range. In B + , the range for a 3.0 from 73% to 85%. To account for that range, my colleagues and I identified several pegged marks because we agree that there is no meaningful difference in learning between a student who gets 80% and a student who gets 81%. Assessing for that difference qualitatively is impossible if we're looking at levels of achievement rather than ranking. As a result in our classes a student can get 73% or 80% or 85% in the B range. For example, Jack's performance in my English class is most of the criteria in the Fully Meets Expectations column of the rubric. Upon reflection, he will receive 80% as his mark because 80% reflects his degree of achievement, he did not have to improve in a few areas before he achieves this category but rather he achieved his goal. What about the student who gets 85%?

marking system, students and I would often get embroiled in negotiations because from a numbers perspective there really is no difference between 85% and 86% — except for what it does to their GPA. However, from a performance standards perspective, there is a huge difference between an 85% (Fully Meets Expectations) and 86% (Exceeding Expectations). Using the perspective virtually eliminates the grey areas because the evidence and expectations are meaningful, not arbitrary.

Once the students have identified their grades, they write short reflection in which they must demonstrate their learning by quoting their work under the following headings: My Skills at the Beginning of Term, My Skills at the End of Term, My Approach to This Course, My Overall Grade, and Where I Want to Go From Here. This reflection goes home with their report cards so that parents can see what the percentage means, read all of this, and all the evidence they have collected.

With savvy, key tests, I have moved from a ranking system to a learning system, a system where students have ownership over their progress and where we don't give a mark. Although my experience remains in the English classroom, some of my colleagues have adapted the approach for Chemistry and Social Studies to similar effect. Slowly teachers and students are freeing themselves from the tyranny of the Mark, school marks.

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