

Mastering Marking Madness

Investigating our Practice



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“Marking is soul-destroying,” proclaimed a disheveled looking woman in the front row. “I’m not kidding,” she insisted, “it is 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 to hear 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 gnawed on her already too-short nails; 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 soulless messes? Because in our hearts we know that students don’t learn from it, and that drives us nuts.

Teachers spend hours bent over student writing in the dim light of our kitchens and into the late hours of the evening. With noble hearts we scrawl gallons of

is the realization that those hours at our kitchen tables don’t help students learn and that we continue to do it anyway, crazed and caught in the cycle traditional marking systems perpetuate.

Researchers like Lorna Earl and Dylan Wiliam have looked closely at these systems and have proven what teachers already know deep down: marking student work doesn’t improve student learning.

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ink all over those essays, noting what works and what doesn’t; commenting on students’ ideas and grammar; praising and rephrasing; applauding and grimacing. 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 their papers in the garbage. And when we teachers walk past the recycling bins 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

However, after my second year of teaching senior English, I realized that marking student work *does* help *me* learn about what makes good writing and bad writing. Why, I thought, am I the one 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 shrouding 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

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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 quizzical 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 work, his learning stops because numbers inflate or deflate his ego, and neither helps his learning."

In case there is any doubt, I add, "And guess what, folks? I am here to help your child learn. That's what I focus on." At this point they usually smile at one another with relief. 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.

In the quest to move the focus from ranking to learning, my students and I use student-developed rubrics to provide comment-only feedback. As a member of British Columbia's Network of Performance Based Schools, I understand the power of the rubric. In order to blend the rubric's power with student ownership over their learning, I hand out blank writing rubrics with Meaning, Style, Form, and Conventions down the left hand side and levels of achievement across the top, which are Does Not Meet Expectations, Meets Expectations, Fully Meets Expectations, and Exceeds Expectations. My students first fill them out as best as they can individually; then, they combine their ideas with those of several other students to create a group rubric; finally, they

combine those ideas to create a class rubric. Between the two of us, my colleague, Greg Elliott, and I teach all the Grade 11s, so we also amalgamate our classes' 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 they assess one another's work just as often as I do. In addition to guarding off the soul-destroying effects of marking, peer-assessment is an essential learning piece.

After either a student or I has 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. For each assignment they receive, students complete a row in this log. From the highlighted rubric they identify a strength. Then, under the Area of Focus column, they identify one thing, and only one thing, they want to improve. The toughest bit comes next – articulating the Plan for Improvement. If figuring out how to improve clarity were 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 ideas; (2) answer prompt beginning with 'I

think that'; (3) write answer down and erase 'I think that'; (4) when revising make sure the thesis is one sentence long and has key words from the question. Jack's thesis statements are sure to improve if he follows his 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 apply their plan to the next assignment. They may keep the same Area of Focus for multiple assignments, but 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 my 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 bins. With their Assignment Logs in hand, they consider all of this evidence to arrive at a mark based on the most recent and most consistent feedback. If most of the feedback falls under the Fully Meets Expectations column on the rubrics, then the final mark will be in the B range. In B.C., the

range for a B runs 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%. Accounting 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 meets most of the criteria in the Fully Meets Expectations column and a few criteria in the Minimally Meets column. Upon reflection, he will identify 73% as his mark because 73% reflects his degree of achievement; he still has to improve in a few areas before he achieves exclusively in the Fully Meets column, at which point he will get 80%.

What about the student who gets 85% – won't she argue for the 86%, which would be an A? Not often. When I used the traditional 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% (Exceeds Expectations). Using this perspective virtually eliminates the negotiations because the evidence and expectations are meaningful, not arbitrary.

Once the students have identified their grades, they write Term Reflections 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. Best of all, everything is in the students' own words.

With several key tools, I have moved from a ranking system to a learning system, a system where students have ownership over their progress and where I don't 'give them 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, souls intact. 🌱

Works Cited

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