Speaking My Mind

“See Everything, Overlook a Great Deal, Correct a Little”: Rethinking the Role of Grammar in Writing Instruction

See everything. Overlook a great deal. Correct a little.
—Pope John XXIII

The above quote characterizes my latest resolution for changing how I work with writing errors. “See everything” means that I put the pen down and read all the way through without making any marks. “Overlook a great deal” reminds me to read past the errors on the surface without letting these stop me. Then I can look for what is working in the essay and write comments that encourage the student to go further with this. This all sounds good, right? “Correct a little” tells me to select only one or two errors and correct one instance of each. Then, I tell myself, I can add a comment indicating that the student must reread the essay, discover other errors of these two types, and correct them on his or her own. I try to imagine a calmer “me” allowing everyone to work on their own, while I make myself available to various students by walking about the room.

I Can’t Stop Correcting

Let’s face it, freshman essays can make a teacher feel overwhelmed, bewildered, and just plain crazy. Where to begin when there are so many errors in every sentence? I intellectually understand how to respond to writing errors but sometimes emotionally refuse to be guided by this understanding. As Shaughnessy points out, errors contain valuable information about a student’s writing, but I sometimes cannot wait to get rid of them. “I can’t read an essay until I straighten out the sentences,” says a colleague. Elbow tells us that editing is best done at the end of the writing process, yet I find myself correcting first drafts nevertheless. I suddenly shift into “automatic pilot” and stop thinking rationally. I am aware that it is counterproductive to rewrite a whole sentence as if the teacher, and not the student, were the author, but I sometimes do so anyway. This need for correctness is not uncommon among my colleagues, one of whom says about correcting a set of essays, “I feel like I just cleaned my apartment.” In general, I feel a sense of urgency about establishing order on the page no matter what, and it is this need that interferes with my making a change in my teaching practice. I know teaching grammar exercises separate from writing does little to develop writing skills but still find myself doing this at times. At other times, it is as if there were a voice in me saying, “I don’t care what the experts think; I want an error-free sentence, damn it,” and at such moments I can be a bit like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—well meaning, yet possessed by an uncontrollable urge. At the very worst, I am like “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Clean,” transforming into a completely different teacher, no longer the dedicated Dr. Jekyll, but the ruthless Mr. Clean, who expunges errors without regard to the effect on a student’s development as a writer.

MacGowan and Gilhooly have found that student writing is inhibited when students know it
is going to be assessed in terms of correctness, while Kasper has found that mechanical accuracy can result from working to express ideas fluently and clearly rather than from focusing on correctness. Still, I struggle at times to enact what I know is best for my students, which is not to react to writing errors, but to respond to writing in ways that help them discover and refine an idea.

The House of Correction

The institution in which we teach can also inhibit making a change in how we teach. For one thing, as Mayher says, “common sense thinking” pervades writing programs. For example, a colleague asks, “How will they know it’s wrong if we don’t correct it?” Common sense tells him to correct errors as a means of preventing their recurrence, yet anyone who has worked with student writers knows that there is little connection between teacher correction and student accuracy. I am hardly alone when it comes to having a low tolerance for errors. As Noguchi points out, many of us focus on correctness because it is what we know best. However, after years of teaching, many of us know more, which suggests we should know better. A dedicated teacher carrying a stack of handouts called out to me in the hall recently, “Today they are going to get comma splices, even if it kills us both.” This person knows full well that a “skill and drill” approach to learning how to write sentences has drawbacks, yet he resorts to handouts on sentence patterns. Clearly, there is something in many of us that does not love an error. Studies by Beason have shown that both academic and business professionals react in a highly judgmental fashion to incorrect language use, even when this does not affect meaning. In fact, a person who makes written errors risks being judged as lacking in knowledge or intelligence. Recently an experienced colleague referred a student to me saying, “He needs to repeat Freshman English.” The writing sample she attached had twenty-seven errors circled, and this was just on the first page. Like me, she had an aversion to having such a messy, “incorrect” writer in her course. However, it turned out that this student was an accomplished writer, albeit not an error-free one, who was far too skilled for my freshman writing class.

Students can also keep us in our places as much as colleagues can. When I try to move away from extensive correcting, some balk at this and request more corrections, and some even request that we do grammar exercises of the fill-in-the-blank variety. Writing a draft and learning how to improve is sometimes seen by students as “not doing real English.” Naturally, many prefer having their writing corrected—“Can you fix this paper for me?”—to learning how to identify and work with errors on their own. Who wouldn’t? However, the objective is for students to move toward relying on themselves; otherwise, as Lindley points out, we are prolonging their dependency. Even more problematic, however, is the lack of support for change we may encounter among colleagues. Writing programs can have an atmosphere of false certainty in which it is assumed that professional teachers know what they are doing. This can breed an environment in which teachers are reluctant to admit to “not knowing” something, so much so that they are loathe to engage colleagues in open dialogue about how they might further develop as teachers. Joe MacDonald has termed this a “conspiracy of certainty” that stifles dialogue among teachers in a department. Even writing this article feels dangerous; I may be seen as lacking expertise in my field. When I have admitted to struggling with making a change in how I approach writing errors, I have received two kinds of responses—practical advice: “What I do is . . .”—or reprimand: “What you are talking about is altogether too ‘touchy-feely’ and not what this department is about.” In either case, that is the end of the discussion.

Learning to Change

I am beginning to see subtle changes in myself, and these have come about by applying Pope John’s sage advice to making corrections, not only in student writing, but in my teaching as well. At another level, these three statements inform an ongoing inquiry into how to work with writing errors. “See everything” reminds me to continue to approach teaching writing as a reflective practice. “Overlook a great deal” helps me remember to be kind to myself in the process. I tell my students that it is okay to be imperfect, since becoming a writer means one is a work in progress, and perhaps the same can be true of my teaching. “Correct a little” lets me consider small changes in my teaching. It has taken me years to be able to do less correcting, and I have been able to make this change only incrementally. Lately I am noticing new signs of improvement. I no longer think the English department is “enabling” me as a
correction addict, and I can pass a sign reading “Have Nice Day” and not fantasize about returning later with a red marker to correct it. In all seriousness, it can be inspiring to approach one’s teaching practice as a series of drafts moving toward something clearer and more effective. For example, on days when I don’t set the agenda primarily in terms of correctness, I have more time to help students work on developing the ideas in their writing, and they seem a little less timid about making a mess while pursuing an idea from draft to draft.

Works Cited


CEE Award Announcements
A number of awards were presented by the Conference on English Education at the NCTE Annual Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. The 2002 *James N. Britton Award* for Inquiry within the English Language Arts was presented to John Gaughan, *Reinventing English: Teaching in the Combat Zone* (Boynton/Cook, 2001). The 2002 *Richard A. Meade Award* for Research in English Education was presented to Todd DeStigter, *Literacy, Democracy and the Forgotten Students of Addison High: Reflections of a Citizen Teacher* (NCTE, 2001) and Cathy Fleischer, *Teachers Organizing for Change: Making Literacy Learning Everybody’s Business* (NCTE, 2000). The 2002 *James Moffett Award* for Teacher Research was presented to Kim Douillard, Jan Hamilton, and Danan McNamara of Cardiff Elementary School, Cardiff, California.

*EJ 75 years ago*

The Right Kind of Grammar

“The educational world believes that the right kind of grammar, taught in the right way, builds up in the pupil power of a most desirable and essential order. That is, power to express one’s self and power to receive the expression of others—in short, power to speak, to write, to listen, and to read. Inherent in all these, of course, is power to think; none of the others is possible except in connection with that. When we English teachers are exhorted to ‘teach clear thinking,’ we may say: ‘To me this means ‘teach clear speaking, writing, listening, reading.’’ If grammar is to help us to do these noble things, it must be the right kind of grammar, taught in the right way.”


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