

Making Marking Meaningful

BY KIM MARSHALL

I've always looked at marking students' papers with ambivalence. On the one hand, marking does give us an idea of how well we are teaching, and induces us to modify our approach, reteach, and zero in on kids who need extra help. It also provides students with visible, individualized feedback on the problems they're having so they can improve their work. On the other hand, how many times have you seen students throw away meticulously marked papers after glancing quickly at the grade? How often have you seen underachieving kids grow sullen and unteachable after getting back a marked-up paper? How often have you found yourself correcting the same errors on the same students' papers week after week?

Having seen all of this in my classroom, I began searching for ways to overcome what I saw as the five major problems of marking: (1) Students don't necessarily and automatically learn from their teacher-marked papers; in fact, the errors that are so carefully corrected in red ink on their papers are rarely corrected in their heads. (2) Marking often discourages and turns off some students. (3) Teacher-marked papers tend to make students dependent on adult feedback and approval. (4) Teachers may unconsciously steer away from assignments that require heavy marking time (such as student writing) and gravitate toward work that takes less time to mark (such as multiple-choice worksheets). (5) Marking eats into precious time—time that might be better spent planning and preparing lessons and providing individualized, student-centered teaching.

The following ideas, culled from interviews with colleagues, suggest ways to make the marking of student papers a more positive and worthwhile experience—for both you and your students.

- **Classroom environment.** Perhaps the first and most important step in making marking meaningful is to create an atmosphere in your classroom in which kids are not afraid to make mistakes. This means an atmosphere in which there is not too much emphasis on grades, in which the focus is on individual students' mastery of material rather than on competition between kids, and in which you are highly mobile and available during work periods to give personal, nonjudgmental help. In such an atmosphere, kids will be less upset when their papers aren't perfect, more willing to ask for help when they're having trouble, and more likely to learn from the mistakes they do make.
- **Floating conferences.** Move around your classroom and help your kids as they're working. This allows you to quietly discuss mistakes as they are being made—a far more teachable moment than marking answers wrong that evening.
- **Partial correcting.** Have students call you over after completing several paragraphs or problems on an assignment. Look over the initial work, discuss any errors, and thereafter let students complete their papers with greater confidence and fewer additional errors.
- **Single-skill correcting.** Help kids develop checklists of those skills they're having particular trouble with. Then when you mark their compositions, zero in on just one kind of error. This method makes the feedback more manageable and effective.
- **Student tutors.** With whole-class assignments, mark first the papers of those students you expect have mastered the material. Go over any corrections with these students; then have them correct the other students' papers and act as tutors in explaining their mistakes to them.

- **Self-correcting.** You can help students take responsibility for their own errors by having them correct their own papers from time to time. There are a number of artful ways to do this: Teach them proofreading skills and have them edit their own writing assignments. Let them use calculators to correct their completed math worksheets. Use self-correcting materials in which the answer to a joke or puzzle is dependent on every problem being correct. Provide them with answer sheets to check their work. Having students correct their own papers doesn't mean you're uninvolved; on the contrary, you should be energetically engaged in giving individualized attention when and where it's needed.

- **Team correcting.** When kids finish their papers, have them pull into teams to compare answers and try to agree on one set of correct answers. The arguments and discussions such sessions evoke make for first-rate learning.

- **Team editing.** Have students work together in small groups to read, criticize and correct the first drafts of one another's writing. This procedure has several benefits: students are often less threatened by criticism from peers; correcting others' papers reinforces self-correcting skills; and it underlines the important point that no written work is ever expected to be perfect the first time around.

- **Whole-class correcting.** In situations where the entire class has worked on the same assignment, you can use two methods of class correcting to good effect: (1) Project answer sheets on overhead projectors to allow students to correct their own papers as you move around the room answering questions, explaining, observing. (2) Students check their own papers as you read the answers out loud. The key is to listen to and discuss divergent answers, and to stop to reteach those things a majority of students missed.

- **Fast feedback.** Whichever marking method you use, be sure students' papers are corrected as quickly as possible. The sooner the students know their errors, the more likely they are to learn from them.

- **Follow-up.** Establish a routine procedure for working with kids who score below mastery level on an assignment. Whether it involves tutorial sessions with you or other students during class or after school, the important thing is to see that kids learn the material before moving on to the next assignment.

- **Clear goals.** Finally, be sure to make clear to students the ultimate goals of marking. Starting in September, stress that what you're after is for them to become better at catching their own mistakes and making their own judgments about their work. Return to this theme every time you notice students becoming apathetic and looking to you for all feedback. Meaningful marking only happens when students are as much a part of the process as teachers.

Kim Marshall, a contributing editor for Learning, recently returned to the Boston public schools after a year of graduate work at Harvard University. Marshall invites readers to write to him in care of Learning with their own suggestions for making marking a meaningful part of learning.