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## The Red Pen: Self-identity through Teacher Feedback

Karina Stiles-Cox

When I was first approached to write this op-ed piece, I almost said no. The thought of writing about *my own* writing experience as a teacher in the classroom sent me into a panic. First of all, I teach about writing, but I don't actually have time to write. Beside this op-ed piece, I can't even remember the last time I had the luxury of writing something outside of the courses I teach. Secondly, and this is the part that really scared me, it would be on display for all to read. My words, my ideas would lay there exposed to judgment and scrutiny. Vulnerable. Naked. The challenge seemed overwhelming, and I realized there was something intrinsically wrong with that discovery. How could a writing teacher be scared of writing? I require that my students use personal reflection in most of their writing and encourage them to weave personal experience into their essays. It is among my highest satisfactions to see their ideas and opinions develop before me on the page. How could I be scared of practicing what I preach? Was I a fraud? As I searched for answers to these questions, it became clearer that the source of my anxiety lay in the knowledge that I would be writing, on some level, about the *real* me. As a teacher, that is a problem. You see, teachers, professors, instructors, consciously or unconsciously, work diligently at fashioning an image for our students, and we work very hard at keeping that mask polished. We have a "rep" to establish and protect, and I believe there is no greater reflection or proof of that than in the writing that we produce for our students.

In talking to a colleague about *what* teachers write to their students (emails, end notes/comments on assignments, announcements on Blackboard, etc.), I realized that it is a tricky endeavor because of the way we choose to present ourselves to our students through those forms of writing. We are crafting an identity for someone else's

viewing. For example, in grading, you need to address mistakes, ideally without breaking spirits. In responding to student emails, you may want to seem approachable and accessible but not lose authority. How you go about that is where you begin to develop your identity as a teacher. Inevitably, some thought goes into the kind of rapport professors establish with their students. Some are very conscious of their creation while others may not even be aware that they do this. Thus, looking at *what* a teacher writes to her students, for better or worse, is really a study in self-awareness.

In asking my colleagues for feedback, two areas arose that readily lent themselves to this self-analysis. The first comes from our written responses to students. The second is visible in the feedback we provide for their writing efforts.

### **The Email**

Undoubtedly, students will contact you with questions, with problems, with excuses, rarely with good news, and the most practical and efficient form of promoting this communication is through email. And when you received that very first student email, consciously or unconsciously, you used it as an opportunity to confirm the persona you presented to your students that first week of classes. You selected a standard greeting. You toyed with and eventually settled on a “sign off” or omission of one altogether. You decided how you would write your name in closing. Does it look like your business cards complete with school logo, or is it just your initials? As you create a response to the student’s email, great care is taken in establishing the tone and style that will compliment your “Classroom Version.” Perhaps you take this opportunity to emphasize a professional tone in order to encourage a laid-back student to do likewise. Perhaps you use it as a chance to discourage laziness by directing the student to the course syllabus in response to his question. Most

importantly, in a world of texting, tweeting and constant status updates, we use this forum to remind our students of the lost art of spelling out words and that a well-placed apostrophe or period can do much good.

*“hey this is my rough draft I am in ur MWF class at 11am-11:50am”*

### **The Marginalia**

As we already know, the feedback we provide to our students can have just as much of an effect on their learning, if not more, than our lectures. Students learn from our comments, lessons from the marginalia. This is not news, but what isn't considered as often is what we can learn about *ourselves* from those comments, self-awareness through marginalia. This, again, points to that persona you have been fashioning from day one. Somewhere between just a letter grade and a lengthy, detailed paragraph which includes the line “continued on the back,” what kind of teacher do your students see? Some instructors color code their comments. Some use only pencil. Some create intricate spreadsheets to help students crack the strange sometimes indecipherable markings left in the margins. Others prefer to type their comments. Some may use a rubric and avoid comments altogether, while others may feel the need to include a smiley face after a particularly harsh comment.

And how do you go about addressing mistakes without discouraging students? Some instructors limit themselves to one or two issues. Others mark everything. Some focus on grammar and punctuation and others on formatting. Some are more concerned with content. Others focus on structure and organization. Some won't grade past the first mistake, while others have to leave a compliment on every essay. Every now and then, the writing is so poor that you are at a complete loss, and you

find yourself staring at the page in disbelief. All of us have a limit to how much grading we can take on any one day.

*“What I believe is that humans turn evil instead of staying food could be if we start to talk and act like the people we interact with.”*

### **So What?**

After a class discussion of any given reading assignment, I ask my students, *So what?* In keeping with my teaching persona, I must include that same question here. I realize, of course, that I am not providing any new information through this writing exercise. We have all stopped to take a self-inventory, tweak, and recalibrate as we develop as teachers, but it is precisely because of this constant change that it doesn't hurt to be reminded that it may be time to polish our mask. We seem open to learning from student and departmental evaluations, but I don't think we give as much importance or thought to what we can learn about ourselves, as teachers, in the writing we produce for our students.

Teachers are familiar with The Grading Marathon. Throughout the semester, especially during Finals' Week, you spend hours reading and grading essay after essay, sometimes sacrificing nourishment, rest, and too often sanity to get through the stacks. You toil through each paper offering feedback, in your own unique way, in the hopes that the student's writing will visibly improve by the next assignment. And ideally, your students do learn and their writing does improve. Now I propose a new marathon. Sit down sometime with those same stacks, and read essay after essay of *your* comments or lack of. Now, there's some insight. You want to get a picture of the kind of teacher your students see? **Read your comments.** Don't just read one or two. Read a stack.

What was revealed when I dared to look at my writing? I found that I am no Grammar Nazi. I tend to be more concerned with structure, content and organization and more forgiving with minor grammatical or mechanical errors. I have to use pencil because the red pen scares me. I try to be generous in my feedback but have no patience for providing answers to questions that students can look up for themselves. I learned that, after reading six student essays in a row, I need to take a break from grading. And how do I negotiate the fine line between correcting and making students cry? I'm still working on that one.

*“Extensive mechanical and grammatical errors greatly interfere with the clarity and meaning of your thoughts. Read this aloud. Does it make any sense to you? ☺”*