NEW BOOKS ON HANDLING THE PAPER LOAD: WHEN RESEARCH CONTRADICTS PRACTICE

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BOOKS MENTIONED IN THIS ESSAY


Twenty-seven years ago the persistent problems of grading and responding to student writing spawned NCTE’s volume How to Handle the Paper Load (Stanford). Demand for the book has kept it in print ever since. The collection of essays reflected a growing professional awareness of the mind-numbing, career-threatening volume of papers that writing teachers typically graded and responded to. Despite Herculean efforts by many teachers, student writing proved resistant to correction or suggestion. Questions were raised about how and why teachers mark student papers.

When researchers examined traditional methods of providing feedback, their conclusions were disheartening. In an early review of research on written teacher commentary, published in 1981 in this journal’s predecessor Freshman English News, C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon found “scarcely a shred of empirical evidence to show that students typically even comprehend our responses to their writing, let alone use them purposefully to modify their practice” (1). Five years later, George Hillocks concluded his more comprehensive study by reporting that “teaching by written comment on compositions is generally ineffective” (167). In the subsequent two decades, researchers have refined our understanding of why feedback so often fails to work the way...
we expect it to (Cooper; Elbow and Belanoff; Freedman; Hairston; Knoblauch and Brannon; Marzano and Arthur; Shaw; Sommers; Sperling and Freedman), but their conclusions about the effectiveness of marking papers remains unchanged. As Christopher Burnham has it, “First, students generally do not comprehend written teacher responses. Second, when students do comprehend the comments, they generally do not know how to use them. And third, when students do use the comments, they do not necessarily produce more effective writing” (125). The realization that our traditional practice of marking papers was, in Ed White’s words, “uneconomical, unreliable, pedagogically uncertain or destructive, and theoretically bankrupt” (123-24), led to a flurry of innovative pedagogies and alternative means of providing feedback, including peer review, portfolios, conferencing, workshopping, and both criteria-based and holistic scoring.

While none of these innovations has solved the problem of getting students to read and consider feedback seriously, they have provided teachers with a wide range of tools to use in the writing classroom, many of which reduce the burdensome paper load. So I was surprised to find that so few of the essays included in NCTE’s recent publication, More Ways to Handle the Paper Load: On Paper and Online, demonstrated an awareness of either the research on feedback or the alternative practices that have evolved in the last quarter century. With two exceptions I will discuss in a moment, the only research on responding to student writing cited in the 23 articles in the collection were Nancy Sommers’s 1982 CCC overview of responding practices and Richard Haswell’s 1983 College English article on minimal marking. The absence of reference to more recent research is the most glaring weakness of the updated NCTE collection.

One of those exceptions, Jennifer Morrison’s well researched “‘Ungrading’ Writing to Achieve Freedom for All” narrates one teacher’s discovery of exploratory writing assignments. While Morrison makes a persuasive case for the benefits to her middle school students of writing frequently without fear of grades, nothing she describes is new to readers of this journal. Many of Morrison’s classroom techniques are covered in much greater depth in Ken Macrorie’s 1988 book, The I-Search Paper. So why publish—in a 2005 collection—techniques that have been in print for nearly twenty years? It’s not clear what audience or purposes editor Jeffrey Golub had in mind for his updated volume.

Alison Smith, in “How Sharing Evaluation in the Writing Class Can Lighten the Paper Load,” is the only other author in the collection who seems aware of the research on responding to and evaluating student writing. Smith credits Erika Lindemann’s A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers with helping liberate her from the self-imposed obligation to mark every paper. The question
her article raises, and an important issue for our profession, is how to secure a similar revelation for other writing teachers. Golub’s disjointed collection and the cafeteria-approach to pedagogy it offers won’t make much of a contribution to that cause. In this collection, you can hear teachers all across the country yearning to shrug off the yoke of marking and grading papers, but fearful to do so, making the best of a bad situation, unaware of the research that might illuminate alternatives. More Ways to Handle the Paper Load needs more authors like Smith, liberated by her encounter with the research in the field and trying, in turn, to liberate others.

Golub seems to have had such liberation in mind when, in his introduction, he identifies reading and grading every written assignment as “one of teachers’ most stubbornly held beliefs” (xi). Teachers, he says, “are getting over the idea that they are the only ones who can provide helpful, pertinent, valuable feedback” (xi). Combined with the admission that teachers, as Golub puts it, “cannot serve as an authentic audience for students’ writing” (x), these ideas could transform the response strategies and feedback pedagogies of the teachers Golub aims to help. But most of the articles in the book are untouched by such ideas. Many seem completely unaware of the research that precedes them; one was so retro that it advocated teachers correcting errors in student papers as a way to reduce time spent marking papers!

Many of the authors described ingenious methods for reducing the amount of time teachers spend on each paper, but it was still teachers who were doing most, if not all, of the responding. For example, in “Handling the Paper Load: Three Strategies,” Barbara Mezeske suggests engaging students in dialog, reading papers selectively, and staggering due dates as means of reducing the workload (4-5). Clearly helpful, reasonable strategies, yet none provides student writers with sources of feedback other than the teacher. Only a third of the articles provide alternatives to teacher feedback, and most of those suggest some version of peer review in which the teacher remains the central respondent. Even in the section devoted to peer review, two of the five articles advocated transforming peer groups into teacher-led discussions to ensure higher quality feedback. While such activities are common, they’re not peer review. Some sort of backlash against student-centered pedagogy must be at work when two-thirds of the articles in this collection advocate teacher-centered strategies and two-fifths in the section on peer review reject outright the notion that students can provide useful feedback. I can’t help but wonder what’s going on in our profession.

Maybe I’m making too much of a curious coincidence in Golub’s collection. Perhaps I should take heart from the contributions of Patricia Williams (“Mountains into Molehills: Coping with Essay Overload”) and Hillory Oakes (“Everything Looks Great!” Revitalizing Peer Response by Taking It
Out of the Class”), both of whom offer original, student-centered techniques to improve the quality of peer response. Williams and Oakes share with the other authors in this section the sense that peer reviews often produce less than helpful feedback. Williams overcomes this by assigning short in-class assignments and then training her high school students to use AP examiner rubrics to critique their classmates’ essays. Through this practice students “share a much clearer understanding of how to write effectively” (73). Oakes, on the other hand, suggests that the classroom itself is the reason peer review techniques often generate mediocre feedback: “The in-class peer-response model is not conducive to learning or discussion revision,” she argues, because such feedback “is often . . . scribbled in response to a few teacher-prescribed questions” (45-46). She assigns her students to take their peers’ essays home, write letters of response, and hold mini-conferences with their peers during the next class. Both authors offer student-centered strategies consistent with research.

In the final article in the peer review section, “Using Peer Review for Improving Writing without Increasing Teachers’ Workloads,” six faculty from Arizona State University describe how they use role-playing techniques in peer review groups to improve the quality of student feedback, claiming that “students gain more agency over their comments and critical exploration through role-playing” (75). As a student in each group presents a paper, others take on the roles of “believers” encouraging the writer, “doubters” asking critical questions, and “identifiers” speaking for the author, who “remains silent, taking notes on the discussion” (75-6). As in Williams’s article, the six co-authors reiterate the importance of training students to give quality feedback. The objections to peer review voiced by several of the other authors in the collection might be answered by recognizing the importance of training students to provide feedback. Most faculty have received some such training or been exposed to exemplary methods and models of effective feedback; few writing centers permit students to tutor other students without some sort of training. So it should be no surprise that students in our classes require training, models, and practice in order to produce effective feedback.

The peer review section of More Ways to Handle the Paper Load raises important questions but provides a limited number of answers. And while more could be provided for readers, none of the other sections of the book rise to this level, neither in range of techniques nor critique of standard practices. The first section, entitled “Ideas for Classroom Practices, Procedures, and Portfolios,” is a parade of worn-out, teacher-centered strategies. And in the section “Ideas for Evaluating Students’ Writing,” only Allison Smith alludes to any of the literature on alternative methods of grading written work. The fourth and final section, “Ideas for Handling the Electronic Paper Load,”
is schizophrenic in what it offers. Half of the eight articles replicate common classroom practices, but in the digital realm. One article reads like a digital version of Worst Practices: in “Internet Grading: Following the Online (Paper) Trail,” Helene Krathamer champions using Blackboard and Microsoft Word to “copy and paste lengthy comments . . . for each error as it occurs” (125), contradicting both Golub’s sense that writing teachers are “getting over” the burdensome obsession with being the only source of feedback for their students as well as decades of research demonstrating the ineffectiveness of correcting student errors. How does the mere inclusion of new technology justify a return to practices condemned by our profession decades ago?

The remaining articles offer new ideas or strategies developed specifically for or significantly enhanced by electronic media, including Richard Johnson’s “First There Is a Mountain: On Getting Out of the Way of My Students’ Learning” which offers a fresh approach made possible by digital technology. Rather than write for their teacher, Johnson’s students publish their essays online, in an electronic classroom magazine. “Online publishing,” he claims, “costs me nothing” because Johnson neither grades nor marks their essays (151). Instead, students have to “write and revise their papers to suit the quality demands of their classmates.” Not only does Johnson use technology to provide students with an audience to write for—each other—but he teaches them to develop criteria which identify papers ready for publication, and to write to meet those criteria—all without marking any papers. Johnson’s article exemplifies the potential of a volume like More Ways to Handle the Paper Load. There are too few like it in the book.

After reading the collection, I couldn’t help but conclude, despite what Golub says in his introduction, that teachers are still hampered by the notion they are the only ones who can provide effective feedback. Several authors say just that. In “Conference Class Sessions: Reducing Paper Load While Supporting Student Revision through Effective In-Class Response,” Karen D’Agostino says she cannot “in good conscience, assign an essay, a journal, a draft, or a revision, and not read it and provide some sort of response” (63). Ned Williams is on target in “When Will You Stop Correcting Student Writing If You Don’t Stop Now?” when he describes correcting student papers as “the most powerful human desire known to most writing teachers” (22). Still, Williams gives in to the temptation, suggesting teachers who feel “guilty” about not marking every paper might compromise by marking errors on just the first page of each student’s paper.

Where does such guilt come from? Why is correcting another writer’s lapses in conventional punctuation or spelling such a powerful urge? And what can we, as a profession, do to reduce both the guilt and the urge? I used to think the answer lay in publishing more research and pedagogical articles
supporting and explaining alternative methods of feedback. But it’s been 27 years since the first NCTE volume, *Handling the Paper Load*. We’ve published a boatload of studies revealing the inherent weaknesses of teacher-generated written feedback, and still the perceived expectation that teachers mark every paper threatens to drown us in pointless paperwork. Have we learned nothing? Is the message not getting through, or do we have a built-in resistance to it?

To help answer those questions, let’s look at a second book published last year that deals with the paper load. Carol Jago’s *Papers, Papers, Papers: An English Teacher’s Survival Guide* is intended for much the same audience as Golub’s collection. Jago’s extensive experience teaching high school students makes her suggestions particularly apt for other high school teachers, but her critique of current practices and her knowledge of recent research make her book useful to all writing teachers, no matter the institution or grade level. She and Golub share the goal of helping teachers manage the paper load. Jago even includes a final chapter on the importance of balancing a career with family life and personal health.

Jago offers detailed advice on a variety of teaching strategies, including how to comment on student papers, use scoring guides, share grading with colleagues, generate effective peer reviews and self-assessments, and design alternative kinds of writing assignments. Yet, in spite of her concern that the unmanageable paper load may prevent any but “teachers without families or a life outside the classroom” from sustaining a career in teaching (x), she suggests both grading and commenting in detail on every paper and, early in her book, defends the practice of marking student errors because “we are obliged to help [students] write with correct spelling, usage, and grammar” (4). This, she says, obligates her to return papers with “errors clearly identified. The paper should bleed.” However, in a later chapter she reverses her position. Summarizing the 2002 research of Joe Belanger and Phillip V. Allingham, Jago warns her readers that the results “will depress you” (87). Belanger and Allingham conclude, as previous researchers have, that students generally ignored teacher comments, didn’t understand corrections of their errors, and “frequently dismissed the errors . . . as matters of the teachers’ stylistic preferences” (88). At this point, Jago says quite clearly “there is no evidence that more red marks are equal to improved student writing” (88), contradicting her advice earlier in the book.

Jago’s book, like Golub’s collection, reveals an unresolved contradiction within our profession. How can a writing teacher defend the importance of correcting errors at the same time she professes the futility of doing so? Jennifer Morrison, in her contribution to *More Ways to Handle the Paper Load*, confesses she “spent a long time believing everything had to be graded” and still hasn’t entirely liberated herself from the mistaken notion that teachers are “responsible for evaluating all student work” (7, 11). Patricia Williams, in the
same collection, operates out of a “conscientious belief” that good teachers should read and comment on every draft students write (71). Many writing teachers informed about the research on feedback persist in pointless practices. Why? Jago says, “It allows us to feel virtuous about a job well done” (9).

How does spending hours writing comments your students won’t read or understand or apply create a sense of “a job well done”? That makes no sense unless the teacher perceives her colleagues, not her students, as the final judge of what constitutes a “job well done.” So we should ask ourselves, who are we really thinking of when we lug those stacks of papers home—our students or our colleagues? To continue to believe that a demonstrably ineffective pedagogy will somehow magically become effective through our wishing it so is crazy. But to persist in a behavior, however ineffective, in order to appear to be busy and responsible is understandable, if misguided.

We need a major paradigm shift in our profession, not just in our thinking but in our practice. We need to eradicate the pernicious notion that teachers must respond to every draft. Students deserve effective pedagogies, and writing teachers deserve to be liberated from the pointless burden of overwhelming paper loads. How do we do that? First, we can expect our professional organizations, like NCTE, to not publish collections that perpetuate a mistaken sense of “a job well done.” Second, we can demand that editors of promising books, like Carol Jago’s, work more closely with the authors to bring those works into line with published research. And, finally, we can help young teachers establish pedagogically effective practices early in their careers.

Imagine a generation of composition teachers who feel no obligation to lug home a stack of papers every week! Imagine a profession whose practices reflect its research. What a brave, new world that would be.

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WORKS CITED


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