Changing the Focus for Grading Final Papers

Why do you grade student papers?
- To justify the grade?
- To show students their mistakes?
- To help students improve this particular paper?
- To help students improve their writing?

Does your current grading process truly benefit students?

What do scholars say about grading student writing?

- "Grading poor student work takes a long time. It's also painful and unrewarding . . . students won't seriously consider your feedback and improve their work" (Darby & Lang, 2019, p. 29).

- Warner (2018) tells of his frustration with grading: He spent hours grading, but students would "flip to the end, look at the grade, and promptly move on" (p. 170). "I assumed that my students would transfer what they'd learned from one assignment to another, but this clearly wasn't happening. Identical errors would show up time and time again . . . even after I'd marked the error dozens of times over the course of the semester" (pp. 170-171).

- Warner (2018) also says that like his students he typically referred to the grade first and mostly ignored all of the comments [me, too!]. As a result, he took another look at his comments on student papers, asking himself about the value of the comments: "the comments were not particularly worth reading, as they focused almost entirely on all the things students did wrong. . . . I'd been assuming students would pick up on the need to transfer what they'd learned from their mistakes simply because I told them they'd made mistakes. Not helpful" (p. 171).

Consider changing your focus from improving a student paper to guiding students to better writing!

Instead of making detailed comments on a student's paper, consider creating a thoughtful paragraph to guide the student in future writing tasks. Emphasize what the student is doing well + what the next steps might be. This paragraph could be posted in Learning Suite or Canvas without a copy of a marked-up student paper.

What if I am not ready to make such a drastic change in grading student papers?

Alternate methods for helping students, while also reducing the grading burden:

- One of the most shocking, yet sensible, grading methods that I encountered as a student was the option of two due dates: the first due date (perhaps the last day of class) and a second due date (perhaps during the final exam).
    - If students submit their completed papers on the first due date, you can provide thoughtful comments & perhaps a completed rubric with their grade.
    - If students submit completed papers on the second due date, you simply post a grade – no comments & no rubric. If students choose this date, they can NOT visit you with questions about their grade.

- Consider using a pass/fail grading system or a string such as "not meeting standards for the genre/meeting standards for the genre/ excelling in the use of standards for the genre" (Nilson, 2013, p. 98). Limit comments or use a rubric.

- Do NOT waste your time marking student grammar or punctuation errors!! Students do not learn using this method!! You can still have a level of correctness that you require – simply deduct the points without marking each error.

Remember – spending an hour grading a student paper does NOT increase the likelihood that students will review your comments and even less likely that they will implement the changes you recommend!!

References

Darby, F., & Lang, J. M. (2019). *Small teaching online: Applying learning science in online classes*. Jossey-Bass.

Warner, J. (2018). *Why they* can't *write: Killing the five-paragraph essay and other necessities.* John Hopkins Univ. Press.

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