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**Why “Editing” Doesn’t Promote Revision**

Editing and correcting is not the way to promote real revision. In a study done at the University of Texas at Austin, Gary Dohrer examined what students view as the **purpose** behind faculty comments on drafts and the relationship between the comments and the students’ responses.

* First, he found that despite overt claims about wanting to promote revision, 52-80% of the comments on the drafts were on surface-level features. Not surprisingly, this corresponds to the types of changes most often made by students (59-90%): “students . . . had consciously decided that revision was predominantly an exercise in correcting errors to get a higher grade” (4).
* In doing their “revision,” most students did not re-read their paper, but only skimmed through the comments to correct the errors that were noted. They were not re-considering their text in a global way; they were not re-thinking the purpose or effectiveness of their writing. They were not, in other words, engaged in true revision. Rather, faculty “took on the role of evaluators, and students became correctors” (7).

Pointing to the work of Nancy Sommers from the 1980’s, Dohrer affirms that **feedback that is primarily about error finding results in students relinquishing “ownership and authorship” since they attend to the faculty member’s concerns not their own purposes in writing** (5). This, too, further eliminates the possibility for real revision.

In his review of the scholarship on responding to student writing, Rich Haswell comes to the same conclusion: students “assiduously follow the teacher’s surface emendations and disregard the deeper suggestions regarding content and argumentation” (11).

Extensively marking grammar mistakes on early drafts—even with a concise system in which mistakes are numbered and refer to a master list—ultimately sends the wrong message and is counter-productive.

First, it sends the message that **we’re all about searching for errors as opposed to listening to what students have to say** and helping them communicate more effectively. Of course good usage DOES help writers communicate more effectively, so patterns of improper usage should be brought to students’ attention, but in a way that is manageable. The way we bring it to their attention should allow them to understand the pattern and then learn to correct it on their own.

Second, it can simply result in students tuning out. Studies have found that “students attend to nothing at all when paper corrections are overwhelming” (McAllister 61).

Third, it sends the concrete message that revision means correcting grammar mistakes. Thus, as MacAllister concludes: “Beyond fostering deafness and defensiveness in students, grammar-centered responses can also promote unproductive revision behaviors. Current research in this area indicates that one important distinction between poor and proficient writers is that poor writers restrict revision to changes in words and sentences, while proficient writers rewrite whole sections to clarify meaning for the reader” (60).

As Alfie Guy, Director of Writing at Yale, puts it:

*“It is entirely appropriate to give comments on sentence-level issues, but proofreading or copyediting every error is worse than a waste of time—it is generally detrimental to learning. If a student needs help with diction, syntax, or correctness, you should select a pattern to focus on and mark only instances of that particular problem. . . . Students will not internalize more than 1 or 2 new rules during a given revision. Calling attention to more than this just generates noise.”*