

FORUM

“NOW PASS YOUR PAPER TO YOUR NEIGHBOR...”: A DISRESPECTED, UNDER-UTILIZED AND HIGHLY EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGY

Abstract: Having students grade one another's papers after a quiz is often looked on as pedagogical slumming and a sign of the instructor's laziness. I argue that there are reasons for using the practice independent of wanting more time for research.

This paper champions an activity largely spurned within higher education: having students grade one another's tests and quizzes in class, the time-honored “pass your paper to your neighbor” method. Like many of its other, often secretive, practitioners, I hit upon this method during graduate school in an effort to reduce my grading obligations, and (even more shamefully) to fill up class hours in order to reduce prep time. But as growing wisdom and experience alleviated the need for such crutches, I still clung to the tactic. Why? Because I hate grading. Everyone does. So even after getting a tenure-track job and beginning to feel that it was time to grow up and do my own dirty work, I have refused to let go of my secret weakness.

At first I was ashamed of myself for having students do their own correcting, but by my second semester of college teaching I began to see the situation differently, as newfound confidence made me more dispassionate about my performance in the classroom. I discovered that there were better reasons to continue the practice than my previous selfish ones, and began to try to come out of the closet. I remember suggesting the strategy to over-worked colleagues during a pedagogy discussion in our year-long new faculty orientation program, and being treated as if I had confessed that I make my students use crayons or take naps on little mats. But not even that was enough to make me start grading my students' work myself, and after a great deal of soul-searching I concluded that my colleagues' scorn was unwarranted.

Different disciplines require different tactics, but many years of using the practice in three ancient languages (Greek, Sanskrit, Latin) have led me to conclude that having students grade one another's papers is not only a vastly underrated pedagogical strategy, but an integral part of creating the classroom dynamic I prefer in my language classes. On those occasions when misguided altruism prompted me *not* to require my students to correct each other's

papers, I was surprised to notice that their grasp of the material actually seemed weaker than it usually was in the days following a quiz. I was also surprised to discover that students quickly became attached to the practice, and that the same ones who groaned in dismay at the first “pass your paper to your neighbor” announcement were later groaning even more loudly on days when I collected work un-marked. When I realized that eliminating peer correcting actually seemed to have negative consequences, and did not provide much benefit in the form of additional classroom time, I began to look at my secret vice differently. I therefore stand before you today prepared to defend the maneuver on pedagogical grounds, and even to indulge in a bit of evangelizing.

- *All reinforcement is beneficial.* Too often, students come to class on quiz day with brains overflowing with all-too-recently-acquired declensions, conjugations and vocabulary words, but with no long-term strategy for retaining the material. They tip their heads over their papers; the forms spill out; and thus disburdened, they sigh in relief, lean back in their chairs and think about something else. If I collect the papers at that point and grade them myself at home, the crucial moment has passed. The students may diligently relearn the material again for the next quiz (or promise themselves that they will), but they will be starting a second time from scratch. The extra review that peer-correcting represents can be invaluable, even when the correctors have got the material correct. And when they have done poorly...
- *Immediate awareness of mistakes is critical.* Review is wonderful when students have managed to regurgitate their forms and vocabulary correctly, but peer grading is even more important when they have made serious errors. No teaching strategy can guarantee the most important part of the learning equation (namely, the student’s receptivity to the information presented), but correcting another student’s work comes close. There is no better time to catch a mistake and root out ignorance than the moments directly after someone has been frantically deliberating whether or not there really is a *-bu-* in the ending of the dative and ablative plurals of the Latin third declension. Immediately after a test, with the task of grading looming ahead and the evidence of ignorance there in black-and-white, mind-share is guaranteed as at no other time. Students have several times told me that errors caught fresh while grading another’s paper finally sorted out topics that had long confused them. Grading is also a wonderful time to remind students of useful mnemonics or ask them to recite grammatical rules.

- *Immediate gratification is good, too.* Students love to know immediately how well they did on a quiz. This increases the positive reinforcement for those who have done well, and gives an equal dose of negative reinforcement to those who would rather put the whole business out of their heads.
- *Peer grading puts the fear of shame on the right side of the equation.* Language teachers constantly struggle against students' fears of being shamed in front of the class; this fear keeps students from speaking up or asking questions, from coming to class when they have failed to do their homework and from coming to the instructor to discuss points they do not understand. Knowing that a classmate will see their work gives students an extra impetus to study on occasions when other, more honorable motives have failed.
- *Getting things out in the open can neutralize fears.* Language classes require a willingness to reveal one's vulnerabilities like no other subject. If a classroom environment is intimidating or moves too fast, weaker students become progressively more terrified. In-class correcting by going around the room and having students give the answers is an excellent opportunity to make them speak up at a time when they can be relatively sure of themselves—after all, they have just studied for the test, and have someone else's answers in front of them for backup. Even students who hate to be called on can often handle this. My sense is also that routinely seeing one another's work fosters openness and reduces nervousness generally. Students begin to feel they have nothing to hide (or at least nothing left to hide), and their performance improves with their comfort level.
- *Peer correcting allows students to see things from the teacher's perspective.* In the peer-correction process, students see other people's mistakes, and see them with their minds still in focus from dealing with the problem themselves. This level of understanding-the-problem-backwards-and-forwards usually does not come to language-learners until they become teachers themselves, and is of considerable value. It is one thing for a student to be able to put a word into the correct case on a quiz. But seeing that someone else has used the accusative when the grader knows perfectly well that a dative is required can be a powerful moment of mastery. The reverse is true as well; the student who mistakenly chose the accusative realizes that the reasoning required to pick the dative was perhaps not as complex or obscure as it seemed.

- *It makes you look tough.* In contrast to the widespread feeling among faculty that having students grade their own papers represents a sign of weakness on the teacher's part, students, oddly, regard grading one another's papers as a sign of the teacher's cruelty and ferocious intellectual rigor. Students taking a classical language are always in some measure lured by the ancient languages' reputation for difficulty. Though they may fear or resent the hard work, they are proud of the undertaking they have chosen.

Having students correct each other's work will never be a part of everyone's teaching method. We all try various schemes: some work and some do not. Even worse, some work splendidly with one or two classes, but fail abysmally with another. My experience, however, suggests that letting students share the grading burden produces unexpected rewards—and not just in the form of more free time for the instructor.

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