

Marking for Confidence

A student brings you a piece of writing and as you glance at it, you notice that he has problems with periods—many are missing, and a few are out of place.

You are moving around the room as students work on a math assignment and as you sit down beside one student, you see that she has done some of the problems correctly. When you look a little closer at the ones she got wrong, you see that she has made the same common error time after time.

A student hands an assignment in and you see right away that he has missed the point entirely—he might have been on a different planet when you were teaching the material, because he has done everything wrong, and you don't know where to begin correcting the assignment.

School teachers have passed down the method for handling these situations for centuries—mark the papers, pointing out the errors, and ask the student to correct the errors. The teacher may look at the mistakes with the student and review the proper procedure, or may ask the student to refer to the textbook to find out how to do the work. **In my experience, this approach works only with students who have got nearly all the answers right.**

When I was a student in high school the teachers used to go over their exams, question by question, on the day when they handed them back to us. I got straight A's, and I was riveted by this process—for me, it was a half hour of most intense concentration. If I got 92% on the test, or 97%, I wanted badly to discover where I had lost those precious few marks, so I paid very close attention as the teacher went over the questions I had not done perfectly. In addition, I paid close attention as she went over all the questions I got full marks on, basking in the pride of achievement, and ticking off the points on my paper as she explained them to us all.

When I became a middle school teacher, I carried on this time-honoured tradition, but I noticed that people who got C's and D's on the test, and especially people who got an F, were not interested in going over their papers. At first I was surprised—after all, didn't they have the most to learn from their mistakes? And wasn't I doing this whole thing for their benefit? Yet they sat with eyes glazed over, or talking to their neighbours, or fiddling with their pencils.

I was at a loss to explain this behaviour until, as an adult, I had an experience of academic failure, and felt the shame, disappointment and hopelessness that came over me when the instructor handed me back a failing paper. I had a lot of time to reflect since it happened every Wednesday at 11:00 a.m. for at least six weeks! And I noticed that I did not want to even touch that paper, or look at it. I wanted to flee from the evidence of my failure.

Why use marking for confidence?

When I started teaching adult literacy and adult basic education, I soon realized that the adult students in my classes were by and large the same ones who had got F's and D's and the occasional C in middle school and I began to see the uselessness of the kind of marking I had been taught to do. Gradually I developed a strategy that I came to call "Marking for Confidence," a strategy that succeeds because it allows every student to:

- bask in the pride of achievement
- articulate what they know about how to solve the problem at hand
- repeat this articulation as many times as necessary, each time getting more precise in what they say
- feel in control of their work
- finish with a sense of confidence that they can tackle new problems, because they have been successful today.

The strategy benefits me because it lets me:

- turn marking time into teaching time
- waste less time on useless marking
- create a "teachable moment" to work in.

How do I mark for confidence?

Whenever possible, I move around the room, responding as the students work, rather than waiting for the student to finish before I start marking. My job is to point out explicitly what the student has done correctly, and what evidence I see of good thinking and of learning. My job is also to give the student a chance to articulate what she is doing, which will help her remember and let her take control of the process.

When I look at a page with the student, I take a quick, silent glance at the paper to see if there are a few mistakes, or many. I look at the errors to see if I can get a sense of what the problem is; often I can tell immediately where the student has gone off the rails, because really, year after year, students make the same kind of mistakes in the same places. I say nothing about the errors, however, and comment that the student got some/many correct.

I use marking for confidence no matter what kind of work I am marking—worksheets of practice exercises on any topic, reading comprehension questions, or helping students edit or proofread their writing, depending on what stage the writing is at. For simplicity's sake, I will assume it is a worksheet in the following paragraphs that outline the technique. In addition, there are two videos that give more detail:

Marking for Confidence: Communications.

http://www.ns.literacy.ca/ttvideo_mccom.htm

Marking for Confidence: Math. http://www.ns.literacy.ca/ttvideo_mcmath.htm

When there are only a few mistakes...

I start with the first question that is correct. I mark it right with a big check mark. Then I ask the student to tell me how she found the answer, so she has a chance to “rehearse” the procedure and articulate it clearly. I ask questions to get a fuller answer, and I emphasize the parts that I know she’ll need most when we come to look at the ones she got wrong. I repeat with the next correct one, marking it right and asking for an explanation of what she did and why she did it, and on to the next, until she can easily articulate the procedure, and begins to be exasperated with my repeated asking of the same question.

Then I move to the first mistake, and again ask the student to explain what she did. Because she has the correct reasoning fresh in her mind, she will usually find her mistake and correct it on her own. I mark it right, and acknowledge that she was able to find her own error without me pointing it out. I continue with the next error, and ask her to look at it again. When she has corrected it, I mark it right. At some point, I can mark all the remaining correct ones with a checkmark, and ask her to independently correct all the ones that don’t have a checkmark beside them.

If there are many mistakes...

Again, I find the first one that is right, mark it right, and ask the student if I can guess what he did. I go over the question, teaching and dialoguing with the student about the question. I notice his thought process to find any clues about why he made the errors he did make. I then present a new question and ask him to do it while I watch and coach. Then another. When I am sure the student has the process in mind, I offer a clean copy of the worksheet to do, or a new worksheet with similar problems.

Share the responsibility for student mistakes

When a student makes many errors, I take my share of the responsibility for asking the student to do something she was not prepared for, so she knows that her mistakes were part of a complex process that involves my explanations, her ability to attend to them, time pressures, her previous knowledge, my knowledge of her skills, and emotional factors. I might say—“I made a mistake here—I’m sorry I asked you to do this right away. I didn’t know you weren’t clear on how to do it.” Or “I forgot you missed yesterday’s class.”

Then she gets a chance to be generous with me. Maybe she’ll say, “That’s all right, Kate. Everybody makes mistakes sometimes.” Talk about role reversal! That is a great position for her to be in.

Maybe she’ll say, “I guess I should have asked more questions when you were explaining it before.” Again, that is a step forward in her taking control of her work, as she recognizes her responsibility to get clear explanations, and articulates one strategy for doing so.

More than encouragement...

Marking for confidence is not the same as just being encouraging. If I say to a learner, "I'm sure you'll be able to do these questions," the student only knows that I have confidence in him. He may or may not agree with me. He may not have confidence in himself.

Marking for confidence is not just empty praise. If I say to a learner, "Great work!" he may believe that he did great work, but he doesn't necessarily know what he did that made it great work, or how to do it again. Marking for confidence gives him a chance to see, articulate, and remember the details that make it "great work." The teacher must be specific about exactly what the learner has done successfully and why, so as to encourage the student to do it again. It is also important to help the student articulate the strategy or skill being used. The practitioner needs to cultivate the habit of cutting the work into small pieces, so that the parts learners do correctly can shine out and the practitioner can acknowledge them.

More teaching than marking...

I call it marking for confidence because it looks like marking, and because marking is something the student expects the teacher to do. But in reality, I turn the marking process into an opportunity for teaching. By focusing on the skills and knowledge the learner has, I create a situation in which we are both interested in working on the material at hand. Out of such situations come the teachable moments.

But we learn from our mistakes...

People say, "But don't you think that it's good for people to see what they did wrong? They learn from their mistakes. We're not doing them any good by being positive all the time!"

I say that students are sometimes in a frame of mind to learn from their mistakes, and sometimes not. So if a student asks me how to do something, or asks if something is right or wrong, I tell him. For example, if he says, "I'm not sure if I've got this right here. Is this the way you do it?" I can tell by the question that the learner wants to know if he's right or wrong, and I can say, "No, you've got that part wrong. Let me show you..." and I do.

But if a learner just hands something in without saying anything, or says, "I'm finished. Can you mark this?" I'm not sure what her frame of mind is. Maybe she thinks it's all right! Maybe she knows it's all wrong and she just wants to be done with it. There is no indication that she's in a frame of mind to learn from her mistakes. And if I initiate the encounter by sitting down beside her and asking to see her work, I definitely have no idea if she's interested in learning from her mistakes. But I guess she'll be interested in finding out that I'm interested in the ones she got right.

The critical eye

As teachers, we often have the mindset to see where students have gone wrong, to find the errors. This critical eye is useful to us—it helps us to figure out what to review, to notice how one way of explaining is more useful than another, to notice patterns of errors, and so on—but it is not useful to the learner. The critical eye improves teaching and learning when I keep the information to myself. When I say it out loud, it decreases confidence in learners who hear it.

Of course, when you help students see and articulate what they do know, they may notice areas where they have trouble. For example, someone may say, “I make most of my mistakes when the denominators are different,” or “I get mixed up because I don’t know when to double the letter if I’m adding ‘ing.’” When a student notices where he makes errors, that is a big step, but quite different from you telling him where he needs help. When he analyzes his work and notices the patterns of errors he makes, it is a sign that he is fully engaged in the process, and has taken control of his learning. When you analyze his work and point out the pattern of his errors to him, it is a sign that you are fully engaged in the process, but he may or may not be paying attention.

The importance of confidence

It is confidence that allows learners to make decisions, to tackle a problem, to believe they can solve a problem. If they have no confidence, they won’t take risks. If they believe they have failed at similar tasks in the past, they are unlikely to believe they can be successful with a new assignment. If they believe they are going to fail, they won’t fully engage in the new task.

Confidence comes, not from simple praise or a high mark, but from the student’s internal awareness that he had the skills and information necessary to solve a problem today. Marking for confidence builds that internal awareness, and hence develops the student’s confidence.