Assessing Writing 19 (2014) 36–50

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Assessing Writing

"Get it off my stack": Teachers' tools for grading papers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 5 December 2013

Keywords:
Writing assessment
Activity theory
Paper grading
Teacher workload
Teacher feedback
Writing productivity

ABSTRACT

Using activity theory to contextualize paper responding and grading processes, this qualitative case study uses interviews and artifacts of three first-year composition instructors to identify ways they cope with the tedious and copious work. Data reveal that teachers practice previously—discovered writing habits of successful writers. Those habits, among others, include creating self-imposed goals, dividing work into manageable chunks, using physical and psychological tools such as information charts and rewards, managing criticism from their paper-grading communities, and sharing work. In light of the results, the researcher calls for administrators' increased attention to recognition and rewards and decreased criticism in the writing assessment world. Results also indicate a need for greater contextual analyses of teachers' behavior, tool use, and community interactions. Attention to the social and cultural construction of the paper-grading process will help teachers with the real jobs they have before them that may not conform to the snapshots of isolated actions sometimes presented in writing assessment research.

1. Introduction

Even those outside the teaching profession know writing teachers have tedious, repetitive, and time-consuming processes to complete each time they collect a set of papers. How often have we received sympathetic responses, as if we've reported the death of a pet, from those who ask what we teach? Authors of journal articles have long been trying to help with this problem. In 1980, over

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2013.11.005

30 years ago, for example, Williams attempted to reduce teacher workload in secondary schools, noting that the most effective teaching techniques required large amounts of time and smaller teacher-to-student ratios. He instructed teachers to order a kit from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) that included information for teachers, unions, legislators, and the public about why English/language arts teachers needed smaller workloads. Instead of seeing improvement for secondary schools 17 years later, Clark (1997) noted the spread of the workload problem into post-secondary institutions: "Excessive teaching loads apparently are now becoming a source of academic burnout, importing into higher education the teacher burnout long noted as a problem in the K-12 system," he observed (p. 33).

Empirical researchers have also studied the negative effects of excessive workload. Easthope and Easthope (2000), through interviews and focus groups of college and high school teachers, explored the implications of increased student numbers per teacher as well as increased duties outside of class. This intensification, according to the teachers, reduced the time they could spend on classroom preparation and individual student attention. As a result, teachers had to forego their commitment to the extra care they previously gave to preparation and feedback. These attempts to inform educational institutions have caused little change. NCTE's official stance for secondary English/language arts teachers (1990) is that class sizes should be limited to 20, and the total number of students teachers should teach in a week should not exceed 80. However, neither I nor any of the secondary teachers I know or worked with in the last 10 years had class sizes consistently that small or a total load that low. As for university classes, NCTE (1987) recommends writing classes have between 15 and 20 students, with student totals per instructor not to exceed 60. Full-time composition instructors at my current university can have as many as 125 students per term with a class cap of 25 students. Ritter's (2012) documentation of the history of these problems attest—nothing has fixed the problem. Given the persistence of larger class sizes for whatever reasons, the issue is evidently here to stay.

When our hard work causes students to learn and improve their writing, the rewards can sustain us through the next paper stack, but students do not always appreciate our efforts. As we persistently deal with the large grading load and the sometimes unrewarding job, authors continue to publish books that give us more ideas for instruction and assessment (e.g., White, 2007) and advice about managing the load (e.g., Golub, 2005). Although clarifying in many respects, some of the response studies conducted by compositionists conflict with our experiential knowledge about how our own students learn and respond to teaching and writing feedback. These articles can also conflict with the realities of a full work load, instructor training, or staff development resources. Sometimes these conflicts exist because the publications ignore context or local issues in their studies or sometimes because they fail to consider the motivational toll of grading. New feedback studies can keep us from reverting to rules-based grading, but instructors need to know that the authors of articles consider their realistic situations. Specifically, writing teachers need help coping with the large and emotionally-draining paper-grading workload without compromising their students' writing needs.

To fill the contextual gaps currently existing in the assessment literature, the study reported in this article aims to answer the following research questions:

(1) What aspects of paper grading do writing instructors report struggling with the most?
(2) What tools do writing teachers say they use to cope with the challenges of grading papers?

To answer these questions, I review relevant literature on grading papers. Next, I describe activity theory and explain how its use in this present study reveals formerly unexplored aspects of grading papers. Because these aspects deal with productivity, I describe literature pertaining to the completion of other writing tasks that applies to grading papers as well. Methods of data collection and coding procedures precede a description of the situatedness of the three first-year composition instructors who participated in the study. I present the results in the framework of activity theory and work published by productivity scholars, finishing with a discussion of the implications