Use Modeling to Reduce the Paper Load

There are many reasons we may feel we are drowning in an ocean of student papers: classes of 50 to 100 students, our valiant attempts to incorporate writing into our core classes, heavy teaching loads. And when we assign writing, often we want and need to give our students feedback on what they've done—what worked and what didn't—as well as suggestions for doing better with the next assignment. All this adds to the sensation of drowning. There are, however, some coping strategies you can try before going down for the third time. One such technique is *modeling*.

How Does Modeling Work?

In the modeling approach the instructor selects from the entire stack of student papers a few samples as models of what good (or potentially good) papers do. These three or four papers receive detailed commentary and are shared perhaps on overhead with students, while the remainder of the papers simply receive grades (perhaps with minimal commentary).

Modeling works because students learn from seeing examples written by other students of successful (or even partly successful) pieces. The learning is focused when the instructor points out what makes a certain piece good—concepts and ideas in it, its organizational approach, its use of support, its adherence to assigned format, etc. In a weaker paper, the instructor points out where the potential for a good paper is and how the author might have strengthened the piece.

Important tip: Never use a failing piece of writing as a model—it neither provides a useful model nor helps the humiliated author.

Fitting the Technique to Your Class

The actual mechanics for using modeling can be adjusted to fit class size, time, and teaching style. Three possibilities:

> No class time: Return each student's graded paper with Xeroxed copies of two or three graded sample papers with your detailed commentary explaining strengths and weaknesses in each sample. Or place models on file in the classroom, writing lab, library, etc., for students to analyze outside of class.
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> Five to fifteen minutes of class time: Using overhead transparencies of the sample papers, lead a discussion of each paper's merits and demerits, with suggestions for improvement.
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> Fifteen to thirty minutes of class time: Put the students into groups and give each group unmarked copies of papers to critique. The groups can then report to the whole class, and, if necessary, you can guide discussion to key points in each paper. Another option is for you to collect the written evaluations (one from each group) and respond to them on the spot or at the next class period.

Building in Student Involvement

To help students get the most out of modeling, the instructor can ask that each student evaluate (in class or out) strengths and weaknesses in his/her own graded paper, based upon what the samples demonstrate. Skimming through these student evaluations can give the instructor a quick overview of which students do understand enough to improve the next time around and which may need a conference. In this way, each assignment—paper or exam—can serve not only to evaluate what the students have learned but also to teach them how to display their knowledge to its best advantage at their next opportunity.

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