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Introduction

There's an afternoon about a decade ago that stands out in my mind. I sat at my desk and stared at the stacks of paper amassing on it. There must have been at least six inches of slightly crumpled student essays clasped together with oversized clips, all waiting for response. I thought through the familiar checklist for how I would handle the load: Brew some extra coffee and grade late into the night most evenings for the next couple weeks. Sneak some essays into the stands to grade during my wife's hockey game. Grade a few more in the waiting room as my car gets an oil change. Trade lunch breaks for wolfing down a soup or sandwich with one hand while the other works through a couple more papers. Probably burn a personal day plodding through the rest at a coffee shop before the quarter grades are due.

Sound familiar?

I was in my third year of teaching. This wasn't my first time staring down a stack of writing that size, but for some reason this pile of papers came with a sudden realization: I couldn't live like this much longer. While I deeply loved being a teacher, the seemingly never-ending papers in need of comments and grades acted as a great many straws about to break this camel's back. I was already overloaded with planning, teaching, meetings, data collection, email, and the myriad other tasks that a teacher must do. I knew I couldn't sustain this paper load and continue to be an effective teacher, let alone a decent partner, friend, parent, and human.

If I couldn't find a way to spend less time with papers to make room for spending more time on family, friends, and my physical and mental health, I likely wouldn't make it to a 4th year of teaching. Instead I would become a part of the nearly 50% of educators who leave the classroom in their first 5 years (Will, 2018).

Thus began the journey in search of efficient, effective ways to respond to student writing that has culminated in this book.

The first step in this journey was to assess the extent of the problem, so for several months I tracked the number of hours I spent hunched over student writing. I eventually came to an average of 10 hours per week, which falls in the middle of the range provided by the only research I know on the subject,

a nearly 55-year-old study of high school English teachers who reported that they spend between 9 hours and 12 hours per week on average responding to student writing (Applebee, 1966).

While on the surface 10 hours might not seem overly oppressive, it is important to remember that those hours come *on top of everything else*. A study of 10,000 teachers by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Scholastic (2012) found that teachers work an average of 53 hours per week (p. 13). It is important to remember that 53 hours is the average, meaning many teachers work more than that. It is also important to note that the same study gets to 53 hours by allocating less than 2 hours per week to grading and responding to work, meaning many of those above the 53-hour mark are likely writing teachers who must shoulder the same demands that other teachers do *and* those extra hours with student writing. It's safe to assume that many of the teachers in this study even work well above the 60+-hours-per-week threshold where work becomes classified as a serious mental and physical health risk (Popomaronis, 2016). I know that at my 3-year mark, I certainly did.

Did You Know?

Did you know that regularly working 60+ hours comes with the following risks?

- A threefold increase in relationship problems
- A nearly 60% increase in cardiovascular issues
- Significantly higher rates of obesity, substance abuse, depression, and "all-around mortality"
- Reduced productivity (Popomaronis, 2016)

The amount of time I spent with papers was clearly a problem, but unfortunately the answer was not simply to assign less writing. My students—like most American students—were already struggling with writing far more and showing growth far slower than I'd like, and I had a suspicion that doing less writing wasn't going to help this. This left me with a really hard question: How could I help my students make significant progress in their writing—without burning myself out in the process? Or, in other words, how could I become more efficient *and* more effective in my writing instruction?

When I first really dug into these questions, the answers I came upon didn't make me feel any better either. So many of the *time-saving* techniques I encountered felt like the kinds of ineffective silver bullets that education is filled with—quick fixes that ultimately don't deliver on their lofty promises and hype. Further, many of the well-supported articles I read confirmed that the key to reversing the dismal long-standing student writing trends is that we need to do *more*—assign more writing, give more feedback, have more conferences . . . at this point the options in front of me were dismal and my hope started to flicker.

A Flash of Hope

As I continued to dig deeper, I did start to find some good news among this sea of scary statistics and troubling questions. Although we do need to do more in some respects of our writing instruction and can neither manufacture more hours in the day nor school budgets that will significantly lower our class sizes, there also exists a long history of amazing research-based practices that really can increase our effectiveness as writing instructors *while* decreasing the hours we work.

The key behind nearly all these is feedback—or the information that we provide to students concerning their work—and how, when, and how often we provide it. Feedback is the most time-consuming part of reading and responding to student papers. Most of us can read a paper in a couple minutes and give it a grade or assessment in a matter of seconds. It is our feedback that pushes the time needed to respond to a single paper to 10, 15, 20, or more minutes, and there are ways, grounded in research and already employed in real classrooms across the world, to provide strong feedback to our students throughout their writing process in a comparative flash.

Those practices are what this book is about. Over these five chapters, I hope to show you that it is possible to get out from under the mountains of papers while becoming a better writing teacher in the process.

Each chapter provides a different piece of the puzzle concerning how we can be better responders to student work in less time. The first two chapters focus on how we can work smarter, not harder, with the feedback we give. Chapter 1 dives deeply into efficiencies in an effort to divide the true gold—time-saving practices that really work—from the rampant and glittery fool's gold of quick fixes. Chapter 2 takes a close look at what makes feedback effective or ineffective, in the hopes that doing so will provide a path for which practices to jettison and that should be invested in.

The middle chapters detail what I call the multipliers, which are practices that dramatically increase the impact our feedback has on our students' writing. The goal with these is to enable writing teachers to give less feedback (thus saving time) yet have even more effect on how students learn, retain, and grow in

The Historic Struggle With Writing

To understand the extent that American students struggle with writing, it is worth looking at The Nation's Report Card on Writing (https://www.nationsreportcard.gov//), which has shown the same problem since the 1980s: Despite all the time we spend responding to writing, roughly three quarters of students leave 8th grade and 12th grade *without* being proficient in writing.

their writing. In Chapter 3 we look at how following a clear and consistent feedback cycle can encourage students to remember and adopt our feedback as their own; the ultimate goal of this is to get students revisiting each piece of feedback multiple times so that they squeeze every ounce of meaning from each word. Chapter 4 begins with an often overlooked fact: Feedback in a great many classrooms is the most consistent contact point between teachers and students and the source from which many students build their academic identities as writers, readers, thinkers, and students. This chapter examines how feedback can be used to build relationships and student academic identities without adding time to our responses, and how those relationships and identities can dramatically improve the efficacy of our feedback.

The final chapter provides a close examination of two often misunderstood education concepts: peer review and metacognition. The goal of this chapter is to understand how, by carefully scaffolding our students in peer review, we can increase the amount of meaningful feedback in our classes exponentially. Further, with training and practice in self-review, we can grow students' metacognition and refine their understanding of both their writing and our responses.

When one is offered more for less, it is wise to be wary. Likewise, faster is not always better. However, the right innovations can increase speed and allow us to do more with less. In 100 years Ford has gone from making a Model T every 2.5 minutes to making a cheaper and far superior new car every 4 seconds. Yet when it comes to giving feedback on student writing, the practices used today look an awful lot like they did when the first Model T rolled off the assembly line. For the sake of both our students and ourselves, it is past time for us to update how we respond to student work. And luckily for us, in those hundred years, amazing teachers and researchers have, often quietly, given us a blueprint for exactly how to do that. It is possible to respond to student writing effectively, efficiently, and memorably—in less time. Here's how.