

How correct is our correction?

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Checking students' work is an integral part of a teacher's duties. Stories, conversations, and media are replete with pictures of an overloaded and exhausted teacher wielding a red-ink pen, bending over a pile of notebooks in dim light and working into the wee hours of the morning. Such stereotyping has reduced an otherwise energizing and productive exercise to the drudgery of daily routine. An activity that does more damage than good.

So, why do we check students' work? And what do we look for?

A vast majority of answers to these questions hover around the idea of checking for completion of work, ensuring correctness of notes, and of-course picking errors in syntax or lexicon.

I am yet to come across a student who is happy to see his work streaked with red lines and circles or make attempts to figure out the error and rectify it. Unless, of course, it is to check if the teacher has made an error and by pointing it out, the student could add to his marks or redeem his self-esteem. The outcome of such a corrective exercise more often than not is unpleasantness, disappointment, shame, guilt, resentment, anger, jealousy – a mixed bag of emotions that no one would choose to carry.

This necessitates that we ask some very pertinent questions about the purpose of this age-old, time-consuming, and back-breaking practice of correcting student work. Do we intend to penalize students for not knowing? How does generating such emotions that harm the students' self-belief impact student's socio-emotional well-being and affect class dynamics? Do we believe that shaming the students will help them learn and improve?

We tend to think our core responsibility as teachers is to teach. However, this perception of our role is fundamentally skewed and has thrown us off balance. Our job as teachers is not to teach, but to help children learn (equally applicable to adults!). If we look at our work, including the task of notebook correction, through this new lens, we will want to do a lot of things very differently – so differently that it will transform the very ecosystem we work in today.

Marking errors in red or circling them tells students they are wrong, without telling them why or how they can rectify those errors. This type of correction does not help students learn, rather it leads them to think of the teacher as the 'fault finder' who punishes him with poor marks that diminish him among peers and family. So how can we make checking notebooks a fruitful exercise that supports student learning and builds trust and creates positive classroom dynamics?

Students have an innate capacity to learn. They also have the motivation to do so. They learn from teachers, from peers, from the environment, and by reflecting on their own work. When as teachers we acknowledge these attributes of the learner, we realize that we do not have to carry the herculean task of 'educating' them on our weak shoulders. The responsibility to learn lies with the students while our responsibility is to support them and enable them to take responsibility for their own learning. So, we don't tell the students what is wrong but help them to figure it out on their own. We do not 'correct' their mistakes, but we help the students to find ways to rectify them.

Let's approach checking of notebooks with this change of perspective by answering these questions:

How can we help students identify the errors they make?

How can we tell them how these can be rectified?



A good start that works for the teacher beginning to make this shift is to have a list of correction symbols, co-developed with the students and posted preferably in the class where they are visible and offer a ready reference for everyone. While at it, we also provide them opportunities to deeply *explore* the subject, *analyze* content, *predict* the kind of mistakes they might make, *select* or *create* appropriate symbols, *collaborate* with one another to develop the list, *respecting* and

appreciating the opinion of everyone in the group. Once the list is ready, teachers can begin to use it consistently and regularly till it gets embedded in their practice. To manage time spent on scrutiny, teacher may:

- Address common errors in whole class feedback instead of writing in individual notebooks.
- Prioritize and inform students of any one area for correction. In an English class, for example, you may decide to focus on the use of tenses or organization of paragraphs. Similarly, in science or math focus on key concepts and not language errors.
- Provide detailed criteria of work, so students self-check before submitting – leaving very few errors in their work for you to check.

When you have created a classroom where corrections are seen as opportunities to learn, then you are ready for the next leap: getting students to correct their own work and that of their peers. With this changed perspective, issues of integrity and dishonesty seldom arise.

Peer and self-checking

By explicitly stating criteria for a task, or even sharing an example of task showcasing the standards you expect your students to meet, you provide opportunity for students to develop self-awareness, reflect on their work critically and take responsibility for improving their work- all at the same time!

Peer editing

This is a more advanced form of peer correction where students edit their work based on feedback received from peers. This also helps build students' competence in collaboration, communication, critical and reflective thinking, informed decision making and managing emotions and relationships.

High quality teacher feedback

While self and peer correction help in making students independent learners, detailed feedback from the teacher periodically is indispensable to ensuring student progress. Having sessions either one on one or in small groups, provides learners with much needed guidance especially when it is:

- Personalized. Provides specific, concrete, and realistic suggestions to help the learner.
- Sensitive to self-esteem needs. Hit the ball not the player. When discussing errors, focus on the error and not who made it to save the student from shame/guilt.
- Comprehensible to the learner. Show and not tell the learner what to do and how.
- Given immediately so students relate to it, and it gets fixed quickly.

Once the students get into the habit of critiquing their own work, they will have enough impetus to pursue excellence. Our responsibility shifts then to ensuring the momentum is sustained. Of the many creative and myriad ways, the teaching community can come up with, one strategy that works well in any context is to celebrate students work through displays. It helps create a self-reliant and happy learning environment, makes learners productive and engaged and boosts their self-confidence. Assign a display space for students to showcase their work, use it as teaching tool, whenever opportunity presents itself. Just make sure that everyone has a designated space, and no one makes mean or hurtful comments on anyone's work.

One stumbling block for practitioners making their classrooms active and energized spaces for learners is facing criticism from supervisors, colleagues, and parents. There may be talk of too much noise, lack of 'teaching' and 'discipline' (read passive, disengaged learners) or teachers making students do their work!!

It is human nature to resist change and the best way to manage this change is to have everyone on board. Talk to the students and involve them in making rules for interactions and group work. Share with colleagues, supervisors, and parents what you plan to do,

why you wish to do it and what it will look like in action. Ask for their help and support (people also love to be the giving-hand!!); they may not buy into your idea at once, but there will certainly be less resistance.

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