



The TEACHER Who MISTOOK HER STUDENT for a SPLIT INFINITIVE

How do teachers achieve consistency in grading?
Asks Mark Feder

In the title piece of his collection of case studies entitled *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, neurologist and author Oliver Sacks (*Awakenings*) describes the strange case of Dr P., a distinguished music teacher with an implausible ailment. Impressed by Dr P.'s charm and intellect, Sacks nonetheless recognized something was seriously amiss when, at the end of the examination, the patient stretched out his hand, grabbed his wife's head and attempted to place it upon his own.

Dr. P.'s erratic behavior, ranging from a total inability to distinguish between the faces of his pupils to random attempts at conversation with water hydrants, parking meters and assorted pieces of furniture, did not prevent him from carrying on a routine if somewhat eccentric existence. Sacks discovered that Dr P. was capable of describing objects with great precision, but failed to recognize what those objects were. For example, he described a glove as a "continuous surface infolded on itself" and a rose as a "convoluted red form with a linear green attachment," without recognizing the former as a glove or the latter a flower.

Sacks recognized that Dr P. was fully able to discern the discrete parts of an object without being able to fathom the nature of the aggregate of the parts. Dr P.'s "eyes would dart from one thing to another, picking up tiny features, individual features... A striking brightness, a colour, a shape would arrest his attention... but in no case did he get the scene-as-a-whole. He failed to see the whole, seeing only details, which he spotted like blips on a radar screen." Dr P.'s inability to recognize faces and common objects was due to his failure to see the relationship of details to one another and to see how they formed a whole.

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As I read about Dr P.'s peculiar malady, it called to mind something far from rare in my own professional experience as a teacher of English. Specifically, Dr P.'s inability to see the forest for the trees, his focus on discrete details and lack of awareness of the object as

a whole bore a disquieting resemblance to the way teachers sometimes view the essays and other writings of students. Caught up in our endeavor to find and correct errors, to make sure our students are using the structures and following the rules of rhetoric we have taught them, we sometimes get lost in the details and fail to see the composition itself.

It may seem an exaggeration to compare Dr P.'s extreme agnosia to the focused reading of teachers for the purposes of correction and assessment, but the cases may not be that dissimilar. When we are primed to look for certain elements in writing,

be they topic sentences, proper citations, specific syntactic or lexical items, spelling errors, or the unpardonable use of such structures as split infinitives or sentences ending in a preposition, we limit our ability to see and react to the whole composition. »



“We want to avoid individual judgment and anything that smacks of subjectivity when we issue grades, but ironically judgment cannot be avoided because it is the very core of evaluation and the necessary ingredient for comprehending the whole and not just the details...”

Not long ago I participated in an interesting calibration exercise. To make sure faculty members were assessing placement essays in approximately the same way, we made copies of a number of essays. Each teacher read every essay, assigned a numerical grade to each and jotted down some brief comments explaining the rationale or criteria for the grade. The discrepancies in scores were interesting, but the reasons given for the grades were truly enlightening. One teacher tended to grade all essays containing clearly identifiable topic sentences higher and those lacking such sentences lower, regardless of other aspects of the writing. Some teachers placed a high value on organization while for others, mechanics trumped all. In one especially telling comment, a teacher noted that an essay lost points because the past tense was not used -- even though the essay was about the student's plans for the future. In short, each teacher went into the grading process all set to look for the presence or absence of certain elements and graded accordingly. To the extent that the features different teachers looked for varied, the grades they assigned differed, since it was the details and not the composition as a whole that was being evaluated. Perception of the whole was obscured, as it was for Dr P., by absorption in the details.

Interestingly, the rubric, a mechanism devised to assure consistency in grading, is itself responsible for a great deal of the focus on detail rather than the whole. Rubrics are intended to make the grading of writing more objective and transparent by specifying how many points are assigned to particular elements of the writing. Because rubrics are impressively effective in achieving consistency in scoring, they are deemed valid assessment mechanisms. The insidious thing about rubrics is that they flourish because we tend to equate consistent scores with valid results when, in fact, all we have done is agree to limit our judgment in precisely the same way -- and so we come up with


similar grades. If a group of people agree in advance about what features to look for and encode those ideas in a rubric, they may achieve consistency in grading, but in the process move farther away from rather than closer to a sensible form of assessment. Instead of individual eccentricities determining grades in different ways, a collective set of eccentricities assures that all teachers grade the same way while still considering the parts rather than the whole.

It may be objected that there are good rubrics and bad rubrics and that the good ones focus on the most important elements of writing. While it is true that some are better than others, rubrics, by their very nature, break down a piece of writing into discrete components that are viewed in isolation. It is this very deconstruction that is the fatal flaw of the rubric and the factor that negates its value in assessment. By deconstructing writing into constituent elements, rubrics attempt to replace the faculty of judgment with a more mechanical process, and it is that reductionism which disqualifies rubrics as valid assessment tools. For it is judgment, finally, that is necessary for assessment. We naturally crave a formula for or system of assessment that is thoroughly objective and concrete, which we can point to when our decisions are questioned and thereby remain secure in our accountability. We want to avoid individual judgment and anything that smacks of subjectivity when we issue grades, but ironically judgment cannot be avoided because it is the very core of evaluation and the necessary ingredient for comprehending the whole and not just the details.

Oliver Sacks asserts “our mental processes, which constitute our being and life, are not just abstract and mechanical, but personal as well -- and, as such, involve not just classifying and categorizing, but continual judging and feeling also. If this is missing, we become computer-like, as Dr P. was... [and] reduce our apprehension of the concrete and real.” In a sense, Dr P.'s pathology is what we embrace when we adopt mechanical means rather than employing judgment, subjective as it may be, in the evaluation of student work.

Dr P, in Sack's words, “functioned precisely as a machine functions... [and] construed the world as a computer construes it, by means of key features and schematic relationships. The scheme might be identified... without the reality being grasped at all.” To the extent that we strive for computer-like accuracy and consistency in grading, we move father from grasping the reality before us.

Ultimately, renunciation of personal judgment in favor of a computational, mechanized system of assessment results in an anti-humanistic process of evaluation and education. Dr P. failed to recognize the individual faces of his pupils not only because he couldn't make cognitive judgments but because he was unable to see the personal in their expressions. He could not discern what was unique in them and consequently could not differentiate between them. As assessment becomes less personalized and more abstract, we not only lose sight of reality as we become enmeshed in details and computations, but we dehumanize the educational process itself and the consequences of that go far beyond the issue of assessment.

There is one main difference between Dr P.'s malady and that of the English teacher who loses sight of the human being behind the mangled syntax of an assigned essay, and that is that the former's psychosis was the result of a brain tumor or other degenerative condition while the latter is self-induced and stems from an unwillingness to make personal judgments. If we wish to avoid the absurdities occasioned by Dr P.'s pathological inability to recognize what was in front of him, we must turn to a more humanistic, holistic process of evaluation that does not spurn but rather embraces personal judgment and authentic reaction to the work we are attempting to assess. 

1 Sacks, Oliver W. (1985) *The man who mistook his wife for a hat and other clinical tales*, New York: Summit Books

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