Towards a Theory of Error
William Robinson

It's the nature of being a student, after all, to be "wrong."
—David Denby

Invariably, at some point in one of our graduate courses in the teaching of writing, when we come across an instance of mangled freshman syntax, a student will ask, "What do you <u>do</u> with a sentence like this?" There are ready answers: perhaps, "Rewrite it to show the student where her problems are" or "Call her in for a conference" or even "Assign her exercises in basic grammar." My answer usually begins, "It all depends . . ." and often ends with "and so I wouldn't do anything at all."

The empirical evidence we have so far on the effectiveness of teacher comment on papers is, to put it mildly, discouraging. George Hillocks examined fourteen carefully constructed studies of such comment, ranging over a number of grades, and found that "all these studies strongly suggest that teacher comment has little impact on student writing. None of the studies of teacher comment ... show statistically significant differences in the quality of writing between experimental and control groups." Hillocks suggests, however, that the fault may be in the nature of the comments, which he finds "diffuse," not "focused or concentrated on one or two key aspects of writing" (165).

In attending to issues of sentence error, it is crucial to distinguish between what can be productively marked and how it should be marked and what should be left alone. Every error does not call for an equivalent teacher response. We should see errors, I believe, not so much as intrusions on or obstacles to ideal texts, though they are that, but as inextricable components of the learning process arising from several different sources. And we should see their eradication not as a paper-to-paper issue but as part of a semester-long plan, part of which may be to leave some errors for work in future classes and to let other errors take care of themselves.

Error-Driven Teaching

It is not a new idea that errors should be treated as a developmental problem and that instructors should exercise patience in dealing with them. Mina Shaughnessy advised against evaluating writing "by absolute rather than developmental standards," cautioned that "it is not unusual for people acquiring a skill to get 'worse' before they get better and for writers to err more as they venture more" (119), and observed that some errors may stay with some students beyond college (123). The existence of "cases where regression in performance reflects a transitional phase in the progressive development of [a] skill" (Lucas, 50) is established.

Yet to the reader, and especially to the teacher-reader striving for improvement, errors intrude, and errors in the papers written by basic writers intrude a lot. It is almost inevitable then that the teacher's felt duty is to do something about them. Before getting into the area of what can, in fact, be done about them, let us look at some of the consequences of taking the elimination of error as a, or even the, central concern of the basic writing course.

At its most extreme, an over concern with error results in basic writing programs built upon "bottom-up" principles—that is, programs in which students must pass courses in sentence grammar and usage before they can move on. In these programs, theoretically, students are given the tools not to make mistakes in writing either sentences or paragraphs so that when they come to write actual papers, they will be able to put all of their knowledge of correctness to work

There are variations of this approach in which students do write essays. In one variation, they write successive drafts until they finally produce "perfect" —that is, error-free-papers. In another, they are taught the five-paragraph theme and given assignments in which they essentially fill in the blanks of this formula. In another, they write simple narratives, descriptions, and other formulaic paragraphs and short papers.

What these variations have in common seems, on the face of it, sensible. Students are given assignments with so little cognitive weight that they will be free to concentrate on their errors. A struggle with recalcitrant content, everyone knows, is likely to produce many sentence errors and lots of organizational problems. So if students can be given practice in writing correctly and in organizing along very simple lines, shouldn't they then benefit when they move on to more advanced work?

No. As Mike Rose has pointed out, "We have evidence to suggest that while a writer might eventually produce grammatically correct prose for one kind of assignment, that correctness might not hold when she faces other kinds of tasks. Brooke Nielson, for example, found that when her sample of

traditional writers shifted registers from the informal (writing to peers) to the formal (writing to an academic audience), their proficiency fell apart" (Remedial, 108). Possibly the most dramatic evidence of the failure of this approach comes from a study by Finlay McQuade of a high school course he taught in "Editorial Skills." This course, which focused on all the standard grammar and mechanics usually taught, was an elective that drew praise from the students taking it. They felt that they had learned a great deal. They were grateful for the course and believed that they had benefited on their college entrance exams. McQuade's study, however, revealed that the course had made no difference on these exams, had not reduced the students' errors, and had in fact produced post-test essays that were much worse than the pre-test papers (in Weaver, 8 1; see also 22-23).

We know also that rhetorically simple tasks, like writing descriptions and narrations, produce much simpler syntax than do arguments and expositions (Hillocks, 69-70) and that more complex cognitive tasks will defeat the immature skills learned doing immature work. And the little repertoire of grammar and usage exercises in even the most comprehensive textbook doesn't come close to covering the difficulties students have with language.

In addition to these problems, the corollary results will not be good—namely, that the kinds of texts students learn to compose in dumbed-down basic writing classes will be of no use to them elsewhere, and they will have come to learn not that writing is an act of finding and creating meaning but that it is an act of following rigid and arbitrary forms and/or of attending to cosmetic niceties.

Error through the Years

Yet we must attend to error. Error analysis, particularly with reference to the problems of basic writers, has received sporadic attention at least since the first appearance of the Journal of Basic Writing in 1975. The rationale usually adduced is essentially that errors represent inescapable stages in language growth, that they are the product of intelligent choices by the writer, and that they are "potentially useful indicators of what processes the student is using" (Kroll and Schafer, 244). Most of the forays into error analysis have, however, been either limited or unconvincing. Scholars have looked at small groups of syntactic errors (Krishna, Carkeet, Kagan, Daiute, Freeman) morphological errors (Laurence) or usage errors (Kroll and Schafer). Bruffee has argued for employing a non-linear approach to error and Hull ("Constructing") for basing a taxonomy of error on reader responses. Shaughnessy has made the most ambitious attempt to classify errors, in chapters three and four of Errors and Expectations.

The most traditional assumption about error is that errors are the result of a failure to understand rules. Every handbook, from Harbrace to the most current, operates on this assumption. The ancient idea that when a student makes a mistake the teacher can mark it in such a way that the student can look it up in a book and be edified says that all errors are knowledge problems, that error is the product of ignorance. Despite the popularity of this assumption in our textbooks—and in many programs—I have found only two articles subscribing to it, Chaika's "Who Can Be Taught?" and Kagan's "Run-on and Fragment Sentences: An Error Analysis." Chaika argues that many basic writers "actually do not know the syntax of the written language" (576). If this were true, they would be able neither to communicate through speech nor to write intelligible clauses. Every native speaker of English has learned its grammar by age four (Pinker, 266-73). Kagan's basic mistake, one English teachers often make, is that she studies not errors students have made but their ability to recognize ones she has created—that is, not their ability to produce language but their ability to analyze it. All of us have internalized the grammar of English, but that doesn't mean we have the ability to perform accurate grammatical analyses of English sentences.

Error Re-Viewed

The problem in tackling error productively is to establish a pedagogically useful taxonomy. Shaughnessy and others, as well as all handbooks, present us with taxonomies of error that are unhelpful because they are based on grammatical categories. But grammatical analysis tells us what an error is, not how it came to be committed, and how it came to be committed is what we as teachers need to understand.

There have been some very interesting attempts to get at the provenance of error. Bartholomae (1980) argues that, aside from dialect intrusions, the texts of basic writers are characterized by two kinds of error: "errors that are evidence of an intermediate system" that falls short of "conventional fluency" and "slips of the pen as a writer's mind rushes ahead faster than his hand" (257). Later he elaborates: "Errors in writing may be caused by interference from the act of writing itself ... or from the difficulty of recalling and producing the conventions that are necessary for producing print rather than speech ... (259).

In another article, Hull ("Current Views") proposes a taxonomy of sources of error that, she writes, she and Bartholomae created. In this later view, errors fall into five categories: production errors, rhetorical errors ("errors arising from the requirements of producing a discourse rather than a sentence"), accidental errors, interference errors ("errors caused by interference from a second register, dialect, or language"), and systematic errors ("errors signifying an idiosyncratic or unstable rule system") (57).

This approach, viewing errors as it does from their sources rather than from their characteristics, advances the discussion in very much the right direction, but there are, I think, three weaknesses in this taxonomy, which I shall examine shortly. I am, therefore, going to propose a modification of it that I believe will prove more helpful to teachers, and I will suggest some broad-brush applications to the problems of teaching basic writers.

I agree with Bartholomae and Hull that some errors are production errors. That is, the cognitive demands of the writing process itself will cause the writer to make mistakes. Every writer, no matter how experienced or expert, has written ungrammatical sentences and made errors in simple usage. It is odd, however, that Hull then makes a separate category of "accidental" errors. It seems to me that accidental and production errors are the same—errors in things that one knows caused by the cognitive demands of the writing process. I will call these process errors.

Hull's rhetorical errors are real ones, but I am not going to include them, as such, in my own taxonomy. It is true that a rhetorical task with which a student is not familiar will produce a large number of errors, but if the student is properly prepared for the task, this number will be insignificant. Rhetorical errors appear when the student is thrown into a rhetorical situation for which he or she has not been prepared. For instance, if a student has been trained to write only five-paragraph essays and then is faced with a writing problem for which that format will not work, one can expect errors of all kinds to proliferate. A rhetorical error is an error precipitated by an inept teacher, not by the student writer.

Hull's "interference" errors are ones in which either the rules of speech or the rules of another, first, language (or both) intrude upon writing. If we leave aside ESL considerations, these are a combination of dialect/speech-influenced errors. I will leave discussion of these until later.

Finally, the category of "systematic" errors is again a function of dialect or ESL characteristics, speech rules or idiosyncratic interlanguage "rules"—that is, incorrect rules the learner has formulated before mastering the target language. In learning a new language or, to a lesser extent, a new dialect, it is common and normal for learners to make two mistakes—to produce hypercorrections and to make incorrect extrapolations. In the first instance, a learner may begin adding -s endings to verbs other than the first-person singular present tense or put -ed endings on infinitives if the sentence is in the past tense. In the second, a learner may extrapolate incorrectly from a common pattern. For instance, Asian students will write, "I suggest them to do it," extrapolating from the more common, "I ask (or want) them to do it." This is presumably what Bartholomae is talking about when he talks about an "intermediate system." Hull's "interference" errors and "systematic" errors are the same.

Four Sources of Error

For Hull's taxonomy, then, I would substitute four sources or kinds of errors: knowledge errors, dialect errors, process errors and developmental errors. As in the case of some of Hull's categories, there is some overlapping in my own.

Knowledge errors. Curiously, neither Bartholomae nor Hull acknowledge that often students make mistakes simply because they don't know a rule—say, the rule for possessive apostrophes or the rules for -ed endings of verbs. The most common knowledge errors are those involving usages peculiar to writing. In speech, obviously, we do not worry about spelling, punctuation, apostrophes, and the like, and so students who are inexperienced writers are likely to make mistakes in matters like these. Knowledge errors are, theoretically, easy to address; one simply learns the rule of usage one doesn't know. But it isn't necessarily as simple as that. Before taking up the reason it isn't, we should look briefly at dialect errors since they are also knowledge problems.

Dialect errors. Everyone speaks a dialect, but not all dialects impact on writing in equally severe ways. Some of our spoken dialects are more distant from the written dialect than others, with usages that are very obtrusive in writing—for instance, the pattern in Black Vernacular English of regularizing third person singular present tense verbs or Asian dialects' pluralizing noncount nouns. In all American dialects, we either do not pronounce the final -ed on some verbs or pronounce them only as a slight t sound—as in, for example, the verb walk (say aloud in your normal way, "She walked to school."). When these spoken forms appear in writing, they may be knowledge problems.

Process (or Production) errors. I used the verb "may be" in the preceding sentence because even when a student knows a particular rule of written usage—say the rule for subject -verb agreement in the present tense or the rule for -ed endings on past tense verbs and past participles—he or she may still make mistakes in those usages. These mistakes can derive from either of two sources. One source is the writing process itself. Inexpert writers will make many more mistakes than experienced writers because they are less able to monitor their writing as they go along. The cognitive demands imposed by their struggles with content prevent them from applying everything they know. (For a dramatic example of this, see Shaughnessy pp. 7-8).

The second source of incorrect forms when the writer knows the correct ones is the normal lag time between, on the one hand, knowing a rule so that one can do exercises correctly, and, on the other, being able to get it right in the context of an essay. The fact that a student makes four or five subject-verb agreement errors in a short paper doesn't mean that the student doesn't know the rule. It may mean that the student hasn't yet internalized it to the degree necessary for consistent correctness. Unfortunately, doing more exercises won't take care of this problem. Only writing and making the mistake and having to find and correct it will.

Developmental errors. When very weak students begin to write papers that are academic or quasi-academic in nature, they quickly begin to demonstrate their sophistication as linguists. Tacitly recognizing the phenomenon of discourse communities, they start trying in their writing to join this new community that they find themselves in. That's good. But it can lead to some pretty tortured sentences. In short, when they start stretching their minds and their abilities, they start trying to do things on paper that may be a little beyond their capacities, begin making errors that they never made before. Some developmental errors are process errors and some are knowledge errors, but none would have arisen had not the student writer tried to do something more ambitious than he or she had ever previously done. Mike Rose has remarked on this phenomenon. Speaking of today's underprepared students, he writes, "They are ... trying to move into the unfamiliar, to approximate a kind of writing they can't yet command ... As writers move further away from familiar ways of expressing themselves, the strains on their cognitive and linguistic resources increase, and the number of mechanical and grammatical errors they make shoots up. Before we shake our heads at these errors, we should also consider the possibility that many such linguistic bungles are signs of growth . . ." (Lives, 188).

Dealing with Error

Paradoxically, there is an easy way to deal with error and a hard way, but the hard way is easy and the easy way is hard. The easy way is to design a program in which students work on mechanics but do not write papers. In this way, they can concentrate their entire attention upon one kind of error after another. The teacher, then, has nothing to do but correct exercises. What makes this easy way so hard is that the students learn nothing from it. Each rule is forgotten as the next one is being learned, and the first time they have to do any actual writing, the cognitive demands of composing will drive from their minds what little they have retained. Students who have done countless exercises in basic mechanics in junior high and high school come to college still without having mastered them. This system just doesn't work. For the teacher, that's hard.

The hard way is to have the students doing real writing assignments from the beginning. Although they will do them poorly at first, assignments can be structured in such a way that they gradually learn to do them well. Then errors can be dealt with in context, and what the students learn they retain, since they practice it with every assignment. This is, finally, a lot easier for the teacher and more motivating for the student.

Within that context, there are seven things we can do to tackle the problem of error and at the same time make our paper grading easier and less time consuming. Three involve improving the quality of the writing our students do, since, of course, the better it is, the easier it is to deal with. First is to base our writing assignments on accessible academic or quasi-academic reading, using the selections not merely as a jumping-off place for the writing but as material for the students to use in their essays. Most of the writing our students will have to do in college will be of precisely this kind, and, presumably, we should be preparing them to do it. Teaching prepackaged and artificial paragraph and essay formulas does not do this; working with and thus being exposed to real writing does. This procedure helps them learn such basic text schemata as, in Shaughnessy's words, "the convention of ranging widely but in fairly predictable patterns between concrete and abstract statements, between cases and generalizations" (240)—or, in more concrete terms, between topics and the development of topics. 119n, not analyzing, reading as the basis for their writing reinforces for students the lessons we try to teach them about organization. When they have to dig out and separate the general from the specific points, they start to see

the way writers construct their articles and paragraphs. It is a potent teaching tool for mastering the text (and reducing errors) because it reinforces, in the writing process itself, our classroom lessons.

The second way we can improve our students' writing is to build into our classes the writing process we want our students to follow, so that they are not turning in what in effect are rough drafts written at the last minute. If the class requires that the students read and take notes for class discussion, then work out rough outlines for class examination, then bring in rough drafts for peer editing, the written product will be immeasurably superior to the one produced in splendid isolation at home the night before it's due.

A corollary of this second method is the third ' which is not to precipitate what Hull called "rhetorical" errors. If we prepare our students for each new assignment so that they have the best possible chance of doing it well, the number of sentence-level errors they produce will be reduced. This does not, of course, mean drilling them in text patterns that do not exist in the real world of writing, patterns such as the five-paragraph essay or the cause-effect essay or the problem-solution essay (Robinson).

In addition to these aids to improve student writing, there are four things we can do to simplify and reduce our paper-marking jobs. One is not to mark every error we find. If we overwhelm our students with our marking, we simply condemn them to frustration and failure. As Shaughnessy has written, "Taking all errors to be the province of remedial English, [teachers] doom their students and themselves to a sense of failure . . ." and she questions how realistic it is "to expect beginning writers to learn what many English teachers want them to learn in the time allotted to them . . ." (119) We must mark, and grade, according to developmental rather than absolute standards, calling our students' attention only to those matters that they can realistically be expected to attend to in their next papers. Anything else is counterproductive—and time consuming.

By the same token, when we read our students' papers, we must be careful not to invent errors. While this point may seem obvious, and even insulting, there is evidence to indicate that the practice is widespread both in our profession and in the wider community of writers and editors. Using the error typology in a major handbook, Gary Sloan counted the errors in equal amounts of freshman and professional writing and found that, in total, they came out about the same. Spelling errors aside, the students actually made fewer errors than the professionals. Sloan's conclusion is that "the explanation for the high frequency of errors in both groups lies in the role of the handbook ... Handbooks ... are not necessarily reliable guides to the practices of skilled contemporary writers. . ." (305). He further writes, "A number of the errors I marked are perhaps better viewed as manifestations of rhetorical choice from among equally legitimate alternatives. I refer not only to stylistic features like triteness, verbiage, and 'dangling' word groups, but to such commonly deprecated forms as loose ('broad') reference of 'it' and 'this,' plural pronouns with 'singular' antecedents (e.g. 'everyone' and 'anybody'), many fragments, and various wayward uses of the comma.... Such 'errors,' one suspects, bother only those who are trained or paid to regard them as mistakes" (306).

Similarly, Joseph Williams has noted that supposed experts on error not only disagree on the nature and severity of a great many errors (154-5 5) but even inveigh against particular errors that they themselves make, sometimes even on the same page as the injunction against the error (156-59). Williams argues that if we read for content, as we do normally, we will not notice many "errors" that we find when we read to find errors. We may be able to cut our workload significantly by trying to read our students' papers a little more as we read books and articles, taking as errors only the most blatant and obvious mistakes.

We can achieve another economy in dealing with simple usage errors if we individualize our marking and our instruction. If, through a simple home-made quiz, we find out at the beginning of the term which usage matters each of our students knows and doesn't know, we can hold them responsible for only those they know. We can assign them lessons, individually and gradually, in the issues they are ignorant of and hold them responsible for those only after they've mastered them. We will not embark on the surely pointless exercise of marking errors that our students do not yet understand.

Since, as I noted above, there is a lag time between learning a new form and being able to use it in context, particularly when dialect features are involved, the teacher must be willing to make proofreading a staged rather than an all-or-nothing process. That is, when a paper appears with errors in matters a student has worked on, the teacher must not mark those errors but instead return the paper to the student with some indication that the errors are there and require the student to find and fix them. At an early stage in this process, the teacher can put a checkmark in the margin of a line to indicate the presence of an error. At a later stage, the teacher may indicate in a note that there are, say, two errors in the second paragraph

and another one in the fourth. Having to find the errors themselves dramatically improves students' abilities to master them.

Finally, we can distinguish between knowledge errors and developmental errors and simply ignore the latter. When developmental errors occur in matters one does not plan to cover in the course, they should be ignored. For example, parallelism errors, dangling verbals, and misconstructed adjective clauses should not be addressed in basic writing classes because BW students do not yet command enough conscious knowledge (as opposed to the unconscious knowledge of all native speakers) of grammatical forms to be successful at dealing with them.

When developmental errors are unique instances of tangled syntax, they should, again, be ignored. Here are two examples:

> My research showed that 79% of the commercials featured white characters, 53% of the commercials broken down to white boys, 26% of the commercials broken down to white girls, and 21 % of the commercials animation. Furthermore, non-white presence exceeds non-white proportion with 33% of the characters in the population of television characters.

Since there was nothing for this student to learn from my marking these mistakes—nothing he could apply to future papers—there was no point in my marking them. These are not signs of ignorance of English syntax, as Chaika believed, but simply problems that inexperienced writers will inevitably encounter when they are trying to deal with ideas just beyond the frontier of their writing ability. The only cure for this difficulty is greater experience as a writer. Here is the introductory paragraph to the same student's last paper of the semester:

> Ever since the 19th century the United States has had the reputation as a country built upon guns, but this reputation has been backed up by the fact that today's society is more heavily armed and one in which more murders are committed and accidental homicides take place. The article "Handgun Regulations, Crime, Assaults, And Homicide: A Tale Of Two Cities," by Dr. J.H. Sloan et al. states that approximately 20,000 persons are murdered in the United States each year, making homicide the 11th leading cause of death and the 6th leading cause of the loss of potential years of life before age 65. Although many people favor outlawing handguns since they are used only for the purpose of killing human beings and feel that it is unwise and immoral to own them, others wish to license them on a national basis because they feel that with handguns in the hands of criminals, it makes no sense for law-abiding citizens not to be armed.

I don't know what corrections of his earlier sentences I could have made that would have improved his writing more. Overmarking presents a danger too in teaching students not to be ambitious, not to try too much.

Each paper written by a student represents a matrix of characteristics: meaning, organization, development, sentence structure, usage, vocabulary, errors. Together they tell a story about the student's past as a writer and how he or she is progressing. All of these characteristics influence each other. But the higher order issues influence the lower order ones the most. A struggle with meaning will degrade everything else. An inability to find a workable organization will poison the rest of the well. And so the first key to getting rid of errors is not workbook exercises but effective assignments and effective prewriting work. After that, the teacher must distinguish carefully among the various error issues that turn up rather than simply red-penciling everything indiscriminately.

Surely there can be nothing more disheartening for a teacher than to spend half an hour or more conscientiously marking up a paper riddled with errors. Surely there can be nothing more discouraging for a student than to receive back a paper covered in annotations by the teacher. If the teacher accurately distinguishes among errors that will take care of themselves eventually, errors that should be dealt with at a higher level or later in the term, errors that the student, not the instructor, must learn to deal with, and errors that the teacher really can profitably mark, both teacher and student will suffer a lot less, and the main enterprise, improvement in the student's writing, will go forward much more effectively.

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