When Correcting Errors is a Mistake

by Adair Lara

Dear English Teachers:

So often, when we had you back in high school, you were inspirational. You were like Michael James, the Englishman who taught my humanities class in my senior year at Drake High School and told a fellow student that her prose was like clear spring water, or like Mardys Whiteman, who had so much confidence in me that she let me grade multiple-choice quizzes. You were like the teacher at Lowell who read my son Patrick’s paper on Holden Caulfield last year, underlined the statements he liked and wrote “Nice!” in the margin. Sometimes, after we’d spent time in your classroom, we left with a sense of having found out what we could do, not what we could not do.

Some of you, though, hardworking and well-intentioned as you are, still regard it as your main job to find and correct errors. You circle the word “this” and write “ambiguous” in the margin. You circle spelling errors, call attention to faulty logic, mark run-on sentences.

And you do this in red ink. Red ink directs the student’s attention to what he’s doing wrong. When he sees all the mistakes he has made, he crumples up the paper in embarrassment and slouches lower in his seat. You’ve seen him; most of us have been him.

Yet if we uncrumple that paper, the one with all the spelling errors and run-on sentences, what do we see? A boy writing about a fishing trip with his dad, his language so vivid we can see the two of them out on the lake, the trout flashing in the sunlight, the boy leaning forward earnestly as his father talks.

I had a teacher who used to highlight in yellow those passages in each paper that he found felicitous. When the papers were turned back, each of us had something—a paragraph or two—bathed in yellow, something we would read aloud in thickly embarrassed, pleased voices. He read our papers searching not for mistakes but for passages that pleased him. Because he looked for them, he found them.

I do a little teaching now, and I have found that even adults, long past adolescent sensibilities, become more excited about writing when a teacher shows them what they are already doing well.

Of course you can’t send students into the world not knowing how to use a comma before a conjunction in a compound sentence, or how to spell “ingenious.” Correctness in language is like table manners in that all sorts of importance gets attached to whether you use the right salad fork or whether you say “take” when you mean “bring.” Neglect that, and future bosses will look up from your student’s error-strewn resume and sneer, “Who was your English teacher, anyway?”

So you make it separate. You respond to the writing without regard to the errors, then, in a separate process, show them the mistakes in grammar. I blush to remember my own years as a teaching assistant at College of Marin. I marked my first set of papers with a red pen. My ex-husband Jim, then my master teacher, said nothing; he just noted to the class, “The essays marked in red ink were done by Adair.” And I got it, about the red ink.

I stopped using it, but I went on marking errors. I’d tell a student that his construction wasn’t parallel, that he said “that” when he meant “who.” I wish I could go back in time and mark, in broad yellow slashes, the parts of those papers that I particularly liked.

Kids come to high school English teachers when they are in the throes of putting together a self, when they are making up their minds what to think of themselves and their abilities. Being teenagers, they want to think the worst.

It’s just not a good time of life for people to have their errors circled in red.