

George Otte

## COMPUTER-ADJUSTED ERRORS AND EXPECTATIONS

*ABSTRACT: Since no reliable accounting of general attitudes toward errors exists, this article necessarily represents an attempt to define the seriousness of errors by other means (computerized tabulation) and in a limited context. Computerized error analysis, strikingly successful in terms of instructional results, nevertheless had the effect of foregrounding the fuzzy but compelling issue of attitudes toward errors in classwide instruction. It also underscored the importance of individualized instruction in usage conventions—and the labor-intensive nature of developmental instruction generally.*

Errors are hard to talk about. The very word “errors” is suspect, as is the inclination to use it. What are errors anyway? Slips of the pen? Verbal fumbles? Departures from the norm? Finding in his study of student and professional errors that “the freshmen and the professionals are almost equally prone to commit errors,” Gary Sloan suggests that “if ‘error’ is defined as deviation from the linguistic practices of skilled writers, one might wish to reexamine the definition” (302–03). But it’s worth noting that Sloan’s sense of what constitutes an error is cued by the handbook component of *Writing with a Purpose*, where errors are construed so as to include such stylistic features as verbiage and triteness.

Most of us teaching basic writing take a less expansive view of what error amounts to, one rather less prescriptive and proscriptive. The party line goes something like this: errors are violations of the

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conventions of Standard English. Since that is by no means a uniformly codified body of conventions (as Cresswell and Williams have demonstrated), we allow that some violations are more irksome than others. We tell our students that errors “distract” us, but it might be more honest to use the locutions Maxine Hairston used in her famous survey: they bother us a little or they bother us a lot. As teachers we are of course quick to add that they bother us because they bother other people, especially denizens of the so-called real world. We might even go so far as to suggest that, if making errors is a little like breaking laws, then we’re all scofflaws to some extent, particularly in conversation.

But this enlightened relativism does not begin to describe what errors are and what they do. We may be scofflaws when it comes to the conventions of Standard English, but most of our basic writing students have been branded outlaws—and without quite understanding how or why. How much do *we* really understand when it comes right down to it? Some of the best work in basic writing has had the effect of telling us errors amount to a bigger problem for us and our students than we would like to admit. Making a point Sondra Perl would later confirm, Mina Shaughnessy pointed out that errors trouble the production as well as the reception of writing; that basic writers, “inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin, crossing out one try after another until the sentence is hopelessly tangled” (7). Mike Rose has documented the affective dimension of errors for students who come to us trailing behind them “their dismal history of red-pencilled failure” (*Lives*, 141). David Bartholomae has shown that errors need sensitive interpretation and contextualization, stressing that “an error can only be understood as evidence of an intention” (255). And Joseph Williams has demonstrated that we are likely to find errors where we look for them, that our reading of professional prose is happily oblivious to error whereas the reading of our students’ prose is hard-nosed and scrutinizing; Shaughnessy’s basic writer is apparently right to think her writing passes “into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer’s eyes, searching for flaws” (7). Even and especially because perceptions vary according to what he calls “the phenomenology of error,” Williams has challenged us “to determine in some unobtrusive way which rules the significant majority of careful readers notice and which they do not” (168).

There have been attempts to do just that (Hairston’s survey, for instance), but none so ambitious as the study done recently by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors, a “major nationwide analysis of actual college essays” designed to determine just how many

errors could be found—and had been found—in the writing of college students. Lunsford and Connors oversaw the tabulations of errors—and of errors marked—in a stratified sample taken from 20,000 solicited college papers. But precisely because of the scope of their study, Lunsford and Connors may raise as many questions as they answer.

When three of the five most common errors (besides spelling, which they sort out of the survey) boil down to the lack of a comma (after an introductory element, in a compound sentence, and before and after a nonrestrictive element), what are we to conclude? When the most frequent error—“no comma after an introductory element”—is also the second most frequently marked, do our questions about the importance of this error get answered with any more certainty? Lunsford and Connors themselves admit that “teachers’ ideas about what constitutes a serious markable error vary widely. . . . Teachers’ reasons for marking specific errors and patterns of error in their students’ papers are complex, and in many cases they are no doubt guided by the perceived needs of the student writing the paper and by the stage of the composing process the paper has achieved” (402). (They are perhaps being kind. Greenbaum and Taylor’s 1981 study suggests that teachers may often be unable to identify errors in the first place.) Moreover, “. . . the reasons teachers mark any given error seem to result from a complex formula that takes into account at least two factors: how serious or annoying the error is perceived to be at a given time for both teacher and students, and how difficult it is to mark or explain” (404). This means that neither the frequency of an error nor the frequency with which it is marked necessarily reflects the seriousness of an error in a “phenomenological” sense.

Lunsford and Connors’ study, like Hairston’s, proved fine grist to the mill of handbook publication, but it told me little about what I should tell my error-afflicted students. The fact is that no reliable, genuinely and generally useful study of attitudes regarding error exists. The problem is really not that surveys like Hairston’s of professionals or Hewett’s of English teachers-to-be seem too limited in sample or scope. Nor, for that matter, is it that a survey like Lunsford and Connors’ casts its net so wide that important distinctions (levels and kinds of instruction, pedagogical differences, etc.) are lost or blurred. The real problem is that our thinking about usage is so muddled that any survey of attitudes would leave a host of questions unanswered. As Greenbaum’s 1975 study “Language Variation and Acceptability” shows, we may well say one thing about usage and do another. And, of course, Williams’ “phenomenological” reading of our way of reading errors

demonstrates that what we see or do about errors varies enormously according to the context—and in ways we don't always acknowledge.

With bilingualism and bidialectalism in colleges and universities very much on the rise, clarifying attitudes toward the related issues of usage, error, and acceptability is something the profession is increasingly duty-bound and increasingly reluctant to do. (In Jenefer Giannasi's 1987 bibliographic essay "Language Varieties and Composition," pieces treating these issues published between 1965 and 1975 outnumber those published in the subsequent decade by three to one.) Just how do we define errors and their seriousness? Until that grail is found—and, again, it is scarcely quested after in earnest at present—there remains an alternative approach to determining the seriousness of errors, the one championed by Mina Shaughnessy (and done so partly to clarify our attitudes toward errors): seeking out patterns of error in the work of individual basic writing students. I decided to do just that. And I proposed to establish patterns by using computers to do the kind of tabulating and quantifying I could never manage to do without such means.

My study was an intensive look at a limited but specific sample: one class of upper-level developmental students (19 all told), each of whom had received a score of 6 on The City University of New York Writing Assessment Test (WAT), the score just below that which defines "minimum competency" according to standards shared throughout CUNY. Here's what two trained and normed scorers had to agree was true of each of their writing samples:

The essay provides a response to the topic but generally has no overall pattern of organization. Ideas are often repeated or undeveloped, although occasionally a paragraph within the essay does have some structure. The writer uses informal language occasionally and records conversational speech when appropriate written prose is needed. Vocabulary is often limited. The writer generally does not signal relationships within and between paragraphs. Syntax is often rudimentary and lacking in variety. The essay has recurrent grammatical problems, or, because of an extremely narrow range of syntactical choices, only occasional grammatical problems appear. The writer does not demonstrate a firm understanding of the boundaries of the sentence. The writer occasionally misspells common words of the language.

And here's what two scorers would have to find descriptive of any essay whose author could be set free from remedial instruction:

The essay shows a basic understanding of the demands of essay organization, although there might be occasional digressions. The development of ideas is sometimes incomplete or rudimentary, but a basic logical structure can be discerned. Vocabulary generally is appropriate for the essay topic but at times is oversimplified. Sentences reflect a sufficient command of standard written English to ensure reasonable clarity of expression. Common forms of agreement and grammatical inflection are usually, though not always, correct. The writer generally demonstrates through punctuation an understanding of the boundaries of the sentence. The writer spells common words, except perhaps so-called “demons,” with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

Now it's clear from the above that errors are not the be-all and end-all when it comes to passing (or failing) the WAT, but it's equally clear that they loom large, particularly when the WAT is retaken as an exit examination. By that time, almost any student who earned a “high-fail” has learned the rudiments of essay organization, at least in formulaic form. Besides, thinks the student, ineffective expression is a matter of opinion; it's incorrect expression that they nail you for. WAT scorers, in their own way, agree. Failing a student on the retest means giving someone who's had fourteen weeks of remediation another fourteen weeks; a controlling idea insufficiently in control can be tolerated, chalked up to the topic. Give the kids a break unless they overwhelm you with errors. Fail WATs with a low incidence of errors, and you'll be awash in appeals. Pass WATs with a high incidence of errors, and you'll have those WATs thrown down before you like gauntlets by the instructors who get the students in the next term.

I note the WAT scorers are people too, not just because I've been one for years, but also because “the phenomenology of error” gets focused in a context like the WAT-as-retest. I had a special context- and purpose-driven sense that errors matter, and I had to pass that sense on to my select group of students. Still, I was also a writing teacher enacting the role of so many writing teachers: I was a teacher on the lookout for what other teachers were on the lookout for, what other readers would react to. “From such a vantage point,” Shaughnessy wrote, “one feels the deep conserving pull of language, . . . and one knows that errors matter, knows further that a teacher who would work with B[asic] W[riting] students might well begin by trying to understand the logic of their mistakes . . .” (13).

The logical place to begin was with the WATs that got my

students placed in my remedial course. I created a word-processed version of each one, and then, using a method developed during previous work in error analysis, I created a second version, one coded for errors so that a program called Error Extractor (developed by my colleague Gerard Dalgish) could tabulate them. On the class's first day in the computer lab—which was also the second meeting of the term—each student found her WAT waiting for her on one of the terminals. After introducing the students to the word-processing program we were using, I gave each a full hour to edit her text for errors, stressing that editing was all that was called for. (One of the virtues of word-processing, of course, is that it facilitates copy editing still more than revision—and helps to keep the two distinct.) All but two students felt they had done all they could well before the hour was up (and those two were given extra time). Just how little they had done became apparent when I ran coded versions of the original and corrected versions through Error Extractor and used another program to do word counts. The bottom line in such analyses is the error-to-word ratio (simply the number of errors divided into the number of words): with the exception of three students (who improved their error-to-word ratios from 1/11.5 to 1/15, from 1/11 to 1/13, and from 1/6.5 to 1/8 respectively), no one improved the error-to-word ratio by a factor of more than one. Two students had higher incidences of errors on their corrected versions because of hypercorrection.

This first discovery still seems the most significant. We are inclined to suppose that the incidence of errors in student writing—particularly off-the-top-of-the-head, under-the-gun writing such as the WAT elicits—is attributable to nothing so much as sloppiness, haste, or inadequate proofreading. The problem in this group, however, was error recognition plain and simple: the students just did not see the errors they made. The use of word processors may be regarded as a nuisance variable, but, particularly in light of the hour allotted to editing a text averaging just over 250 words, I am convinced that this failure to see errors is a verified fact, at least for this group.

Where to go from there? First came a two-page handout that explained my error codes and the errors themselves, in each instance giving an illustration culled from the students' WATs. A few examples will suffice to show that my categories for errors are not identical to everyone else's:

#### SP

**indicated a spelling error.** The most common misspellings result from confusions of **homophones**—sound-alikes like

*there, their, and they're*. Problems with **apostrophes** (confusions of *it's* and *its*, spelling *parents' advice* as *parents advice*) are really spelling problems of this kind and are so indicated.

### GS

**indicates garbled syntax:** the syntax of sentences that begin one way and end another or get lost somewhere in between. The most common instance of this confusion of alternate constructions occurs when part of an introductory phrase gets picked up as the sentence's subject—e.g., “By exercising regularly can help you keep fit.”

And there were other things some might think idiosyncratic. What most people call incomplete sentences or fragments I called incomplete constructions. I distinguished between **WW** (for **wrong word**) and **WC** (for **word choice**). The former code indicated clearly wrong alternatives (e.g., *affect* for *effect* or *easy understand* for *easily understand*), the latter, instances of wording problems where the appropriate choice wasn't entirely clear (as when a linking verb is made to do the work of a transitive verb). Surely other lists of errors might include things I omitted and vice versa—doing it all over again, I think I would create a special category for apostrophes—but at least I could try to be clear to my students and consistent with myself. The list of eighteen types of error I began with turned out to cover a multitude of sins. I was given no reason to add to it, so my students and I shared a fairly short and increasingly familiar set of terms.

For each piece they wrote, then, students were responsible for doing a word-processed version I could check against the original and code for errors. An error analysis was done for each and given to the student, together with a printout of the coded version, which indicated, at the beginning of each sentence, the number and kind of errors contained therein. When the student corrected that flagged version, she received an error analysis for that. With the proviso that no example can be deemed representative of the entire group, here two such analyses, a “before” and an “after” appear in the Table below.

As you can gather from the figures, the procedure resulted first and foremost in a clear pinpointing of each student's predominant pattern(s) of error. The error analysis program tabulated not just numbers and kinds of errors, but also the percentage any one kind of error represented in terms of the total number of errors. Typically, a single error pattern accounted for about a quarter of all the errors made by that student; in some cases a single pattern accounted for more than half. In addition, the error analysis allowed me to

WAT2		
Type	Number	Percentage
# (Number)	2	7%
<b>SP</b> elling	7	25% *
<b>S</b> ubject- <b>V</b> erb Agreement	1	3%
<b>A</b> rticle	1	3%
<b>I</b> diom	1	3%
<b>G</b> arbled <b>S</b> yntax	3	11% *
<b>PUN</b> Ctuation	4	14% *
<b>R</b> edundancy	4	14% *
<b>R</b> un- <b>O</b> n	1	3%
<b>C</b> omma <b>S</b> plice	2	7%
<b>?</b> (Omission)	1	3%
11	27	100%

WAT2-C		
Type	Number	Percentage
<b>#</b>	1	14%
<b>S-V</b>	1	14%
<b>I</b> ncomplete <b>C</b> onstruction	1	14%
<b>GS</b>	1	14%
<b>R</b>	1	14%
<b>CS</b>	1	14%
<b>?</b>	1	14%
7	7	100%

Note: the Error Extractor program rounds off percentages so their total is not always exactly 100.

determine patterns of what, for want of a better word, I'll call correctability. Unlike Lunsford and Connors, then, I did have a fairly stable, measurable way of determining the seriousness of an error, one not subject to the vagaries of varying perceptions of its seriousness. A serious error was one that loomed large in proportion to errors overall and/or proved stubborn, resistant to recognition and correction.

Still, inescapably, I had to consider that other kind of seriousness, the seriousness that lies in the eyes of the beholder, the "phenomenological" seriousness Williams discussed, the offensiveness of errors Hairston sought to determine. There was, moreover, the question of why errors happened in the first place. Concerns about the causes and perceptions of errors as well as their frequency made me do most instruction on errors in individual conferences, where I could tell students things the error analyses could not and ask questions those analyses left unanswered. Take a single error as an instance: *becuase* for *because*. How important was it? Scoring standards for the WAT underscored the importance of spelling at least common words correctly, so *becuase* was effectively defined as



a more serious error than, say, *psychological*. On the other hand, it wouldn't confuse the reader the way spelling *tow* for *two* might. How much of this did the student actually need to be told? And why had the misspelling occurred? Was the student at least consistent in writing *becuase*? Did this participate in a larger pattern of letter transpositions? How important were misspellings for this student generally?

Individual conferences were indispensable in addressing such questions, so I had a minimum of four (or about one conference for every two formal compositions) with each student. Taking my cue from Bartholomae's "Study of Error," I had students read their texts aloud, noting the errors they corrected or stumbled over as well as those they didn't seem to notice. I asked them why they thought errors, especially recurrent errors, were made. (Teachers would be terrified by the number of times I learned an "always" from them had been misheard as a "never"—or vice versa. One student never capitalized *I* as the first person singular pronoun for this reason—and stood uncorrected by a legion of teachers tolerant of this presumed idiosyncrasy.) I asked students to wonder with me why they failed to spot certain errors, especially errors I had flagged, and thereby uncovered assumptions I should have been shrewd enough to suspect. For instance, students automatically assumed that **SP**, the code for a misspelling, meant a problem with a big word and not something like *to* for *too*, though the latter sort of misspelling was much more common.

Clearly, the consequential revelations, not least of all for me, occurred in those one-on-one conferences, but that doesn't mean the class as a whole didn't evince patterns of error (and error recognition) edifying (or at least suggestive) enough to pass on. Before I get on to that, though, I need to acknowledge one last revelation from the conferences: writing done outside of class gave me unreliable data because the time spent on such assignments varied enormously. (In-conference confessions taught me that.) Differences between in-class and out-of-class writing were instructive in specific cases, especially when students let me know enough to see the differences could be chalked up to such things as trying to do an assignment on the subway ride to class, but I learned to be wary of drawing conclusions from writing done in circumstances beyond my control or observation. Error analyses of timed in-class writing done in response to prompts designed to be commensurate (i.e., WAT prompts) were a different matter, and those are the results I want to share.

First, a synchronic view. Here are the figures for the class's performance on the original WAT:

<b>ERROR</b>	<b># BEFORE</b>	<b>% OF TOTAL</b>	<b># AFTER</b>	<b>% CORRECTED</b>
<b>SP</b> elling	163	25%	86	47%
<b>PUN</b> Ctuation	85	13%	63	26%
<b>Garbled Syntax</b>	68	10%	44	35%
<b>Capitalization</b>	43	6.4%	11	74%
<b>Idiom</b>	42	6.3%	32	24%
<b>? (Omission)</b>	40	6%	20	50%
<b>Verb Tense</b>	40	6%	29	28%
<b># (Number)</b>	32	4.8%	25	22%
<b>Pronoun Reference</b>	31	4.7%	22	39%
<b>Subject-Verb Agreement</b>	29	4.4%	17	41%
<b>Incomplete Construction</b>	20	3%	15	25%
<b>Run-On</b>	14	2%	2	86%
<b>Comma Splice</b>	10	1.5%	4	60%
<b>Sentence boundary errors</b>	44	6.5%	21	52%
<b>Wrong Word</b>	24	3.6%	10	58%
<b>Article</b>	13	1.95%	7	46%
<b>Word Choice</b>	11	1.65%	9	18%
<b>Redundancy</b>	9	1.35%	7	22%
<b>Double Negative</b>	1	.1%	0	100%
<b>TOTALS</b>	665	100%	403	39%
<b>TOTAL WORDS:</b>	5112	<b>AVERAGE TOTAL:</b>	269	

**AVERAGE ERROR/WORD RATIO: 1/7.7**

Spelling, as you can see, was the single most common problem—and also one of the most correctable. Errors in punctuation were only about half as frequent but nearly twice as difficult to spot and correct. And so on down the scale to errors of relative infrequency, like the one double negative in this batch of nineteen WATs. But frequency will only tell of half of what error counting is capable of revealing. For the other half, we need to see how stubborn certain types of errors proved in the long run.

So let's move to the diachronic perspective. The Table below shows a distillation of error analyses run on a practice WAT administered two and one-half months after the term began—the last such exercise all 19 of my students were there for.

Students at this point in the course—less than a month before reconfronting the WAT—were making about half as many errors. And the hierarchy-by-frequency had to be reconfigured: spelling, punctuation, and garbled syntax remained high on the list, but certain formerly frequent errors like number and capitalization had

<b>ERROR</b>	<b># BEFORE</b>	<b>% OF TOTAL</b>	<b># AFTER</b>	<b>% CORRECTED</b>
<b>SP</b> elling	93	24%	37	60%
<b>PUN</b> ctuation	67	17%	25	63%
<b>Garbled Syntax</b>	35	9%	25	29%
<b>Verb Tense</b>	30	8%	16	47%
<b>Pronoun Reference</b>	23	6%	14	39%
<b>Subject-Verb</b>				
Agreement	21 <sup>12</sup>	5.4%	10 <sup>4</sup>	52% <sup>86%</sup>
Idiom	19 <sup>10</sup>	4.9%	14 <sup>7</sup>	26% <sup>30%</sup>
<b>Wrong Word</b>	19 <sup>14</sup>	4.9%	11 <sup>6</sup>	42% <sup>57%</sup>
<b>? (Omission)</b>	18	4.6%	6	67%
<b>Incomplete</b>				
Construction	20	5.1%	9	55%
<b>Run-On</b>	3	.8%	0	100%
<b>Comma Splice</b>	19 <sup>14</sup>	4.9%	11 <sup>6</sup>	42% <sup>57%</sup>
<b>Sentence boundary errors</b>	42	11.2%	20	52%
<b># (Number)</b>	8	2%	3	63%
<b>Capitalization</b>	6 <sup>3</sup>	1.5%	2 <sup>0</sup>	67% <sup>100%</sup>
<b>Word Choice</b>	4	1%	2	50%
<b>Redundancy</b>	2	.5%	0	100%
<b>Article</b>	2	.5%	1	50%
<b>Double Negative</b>	0	0%	0	—
<b>TOTALS</b>	389	100%	186	52%
<b>TOTAL WORDS:</b>	5046	<b>AVERAGE TOTAL:</b>	266	

**AVERAGE ERROR/WORD RATIO: 1/13**

dropped significantly. And while the incidence of error was down, the rate of correctability was up—students did better than twice as well at spotting and correcting punctuation errors, for instance. Some patterns of error became so localized that I felt the need to factor out the one student responsible for most of the errors and put the more representative numbers in superscribed notations just to the right (so that, for instance, with the one student who made four out of the six capitalization errors factored out, there was a correctability rate of 100%).

This urge to factor out extremes in the latter classwide sample returns me to the difficulties of generalizing from individual cases—disappointing difficulties since I had hoped to be blessed with any number of general revelations. The ones I had visited upon me only made me that much more uneasy about making easy extrapolations. For instance, I had three native speakers of Chinese and supposed that I would discover interesting, even profound similarities within this subpopulation. What I found were three very different cases: one of my most longwinded students together with one of my tersest, one student with a severe idiom problem and

another who was not just idiomatic but downright slangy. I also learned that there were patterns of error within patterns of error, that homophones were indeed responsible for the majority of misspellings while punctuation errors were almost evenly divided among omissions, unnecessary inclusions, and the use of one sort of mark where another was called for. What's more, changes in the writing were accompanied by changes in the error patterns. Despite their unreliability as sources of data on errors, out-of-class assignments consistently proved distinctive in some respects; they were, for example, likely to have fewer omissions but a higher incidence of punctuation errors. And I'm convinced that an increasing sophistication in the students' syntax accounts for similar totals in sentence boundary errors over time. Uncovering the whys and wherefores of these variations would have required not just a more sophisticated and rigorous research design but a capacity to interrogate and tabulate that would have pushed me, at least, past the limits of possibility.

My biggest disappointment was the limited bearing all my error counting had on in-class instruction. I had supposed classwide patterns would emerge that would pinpoint the sort of help I should give the class as a whole. It's true enough that I gave spelling lessons à la Shaughnessy (and had plenty of justification for doing so), true enough that students obligingly supplied me with enough examples of garbled syntax or sentence boundary problems so that class time going over typed-up collections was clearly class time well-spent. But it only took a few minutes' work with incomplete constructions or instances of garbled syntax to uncover at least half-a-dozen reasons why such errors occurred. Repeatedly, I had the discomfiting point driven home to me that the more carefully I scrutinized and analyzed error patterns, the more generally applicable and uninvolved solutions eluded me, the more I knew I needed to work with the students individually. I suppose I should have known better. In addition to Bartholomae's similar conclusions drawn from error analysis, I had Rose's and Hartwell's cases against formal grammar instruction to wean me away from the idea that going after errors with teacherly generalizations of any kind was anything but a doomed enterprise—another quixotic attempt to write the Key to All Mythologies, this time with the help of computers. James R. Squire—it's worth noting that he's speaking as the Senior Vice-President of the publishing house Ginn and Company—has argued that:

. . . we suffer from a serious misinterpretation of the substantial body of research in English grammar that has

demonstrated conclusively and correctly the lack of relationship between the study of grammar and improvement in the ability to compose. What we have failed to see clearly during these many years is that the very knowledge of the structure of English that contributes little to the improvement of writing is essential to the improvement of editing skills. (35)

I'm not so sure. I am convinced that what any one of my students needed in order to develop the requisite editing skills was something at once considerably more focused and considerably more complex than anything I could find in any textbook—and, believe me, I looked. The students' patterns of error and blindspots in error recognition had a kind of individually circumscribed specificity and at the same time a causal intricacy that made going after them with any of the available textbooks like going after shrimp with a tuna net. Even class time spent with the students' own writing was best spent as general, limited preparation for more individualized and intensive work in one-on-one conferences.

Ironically, most of the class time spent on errors—perhaps as much as a third of the class time overall—was spent on the murky matter of how they are perceived. Without ever telling my students that they might, as Robert Pattison fears, be thought “uncivilized, unreflecting cretins who offend against a culture merely by opening their mouths or applying pen to paper” (200), I did want them to know that unreflecting cretins might well make mistaken assumptions about their intelligence on the basis of their ability to communicate in Standard English.

Nothing was more helpful in driving this point home than Hairston's survey, which I spent some time going over with the students. Hairston herself is quick to note the survey's limitations in terms of design as well as the range of respondents, but it seems wonderfully rich when it comes to the sensitive issues that need to be brought out into the open. For instance, the seven most “bothersome” errors (out of slightly more than sixty) are all dialectical variations, with the most offensive of them all being the use of *brung*. Such errors have their own indisputable logic—“*Ring, rang, rung*: why not *bring, brang, brung*?” I asked, and I noted my three-year-old's entirely intelligent attempt to make English make sense by saying things like *caught* for *caught*. What's more, they often have prestigious precedents: aristocrats used to say “He don't” (back before it was one of these especially obnoxious solecisms, of course), and Chaucer was a master of the double negative (which shows up twice among the seven most bothersome errors), occasionally even managing triple negatives.

That sort of thing was the easy part. Chaucer's English is obviously not today's Standard, and so the present points of contrast are dialects like Black English Vernacular, the language of the dazzling verbal display and rhetorical facility that rap represents but also the butt of considerable linguistic prejudice. "The nettle of error in writing and, of course, in speech as well," Glynda Hull has observed, "is that it points away from itself towards social issues" (166). My students needed to know that many of their errors, particularly the most stigmatizing, betrayed not a lack of intelligence but a kind of outsiderhood, nonmembership in the class of the educated, moneyed elite. And so I supplemented my individualized instruction in errors with classwide instruction in the sociopolitics of language use. It was rudimentary instruction, to be sure—none of it amounting to anything my present audience doesn't already know—but it did mean I generalized most in class about what I find either just useless or too difficult to generalize about here: attitudes toward errors. And, again, this was partly instruction by default. My error counts consistently forestalled generalizations and returned me to individuals.

Still, I think some general conclusions from my admittedly limited, quite possibly overdetermined, sampling are warranted. My study convinced me, at least, of four things. First, we need to be wary of supposing that students can recognize their own errors, even if these are pointed out to them; error recognition tends to be lower than we might think or hope, particularly (as we might expect) for students for whom "correct" usage does not come easily. Second, the most remediable error patterns for the generality of basic writing students tend to be those that are most clearly written conventions: capitalization, spelling, punctuation. Third, as a kind of corollary, those patterns that seem most stubborn are "translations" from the students' spoken competence, especially as dialectical forms retained in the attempt to produce Standard Written English, with the chief among these being verb inflection and idiom. Finally, a little error recognition can go a long way. All of the students began the class by failing to meet the CUNY definition of minimum competency. At the end of a fourteen-week term, most of the students could satisfy that definition.

Invoking the CUNY WAT and the standards by which it is scored reminds me that, though my sample is small, it is specific. The students placed into my class by generating texts that, taken together, represent a fair sample of what, almost but not quite, minimal competency is, according to carefully audited standards applied throughout the nation's third largest university system. The errors such students make are important for reasons Mina

Shaughnessy took pains to enumerate back in the early days of CUNY's Open Admissions policy:

First, there is the reality of academia, the fact that most college teachers have little tolerance for the kinds of error B[asic] W[riting] students make, that they perceive certain types of errors as indicators of ineducability, and that they have the power of the F. Second, there is the urgency of the students to meet their teachers' criteria, even to request more of the prescriptive teaching they have had before in the hope that this time it might "take." Third, there is the awareness of the teacher and administrator that remedial programs are likely to be evaluated (and budgeted) according to the speed with which they produce correct writers, correctness being a highly measurable feature of acceptable writing. (8-9)

Lunsford and Connors' sweeping study found that the average student makes 2.26 errors per 100 words—an error-to-word ratio of 1/44. Without at all wishing to impugn that figure—again, I'm dealing with a much more specific and homogeneous population—I've sampled for you two slices of time during which my students went all the way from an average error-to-word ratio of 1/7.7 to one of 1/13. Less than a month after the compositions distilled to that latter figure, all nineteen students took the WAT. Fifteen passed, for a pass rate of 79% (the universitywide average is 50%). The four who did not pass were all chronic absentees, each with at least three weeks' worth of absences. The students who did come regularly and did do the work all managed to satisfy the sense of minimum competency held by normed readers who did not know my students or my methods. When all is said and done and tabulated, those are the results I care about.

Still, like all teachers, I move on to other courses, other terms, other students. I have not yet taught another group of "high-fails," and when I do it won't be this success rate that will be uppermost in my mind. Two other things will be. One is that image of all those students looking long and hard at their failing writing samples—texts they assured me would have passed if they'd only had more time to "clean them up"—and finding nothing wrong. The other is that endless succession of individual conferences my computerized error counting had seemed to press on me and my students. Even after technology had done with errors all I knew how to ask it to do, I found no easier, softer way, no quick fix. Alas.

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