

Breaking Down Classroom Writing Assessment: Ideas & Approaches

Assessing

Refers to looking at a student text to see what's working or not independently of giving grades or testing. Assessing student writing focuses on the writing itself rather than the student. Being able to assess writing well is an important part of being able to write well. Making assessment a part of the writing process for a student reduces the anxiety and aversion students often have to evaluation. To assess a student's writing we must look at what linguistic and rhetorical targets the student has set for herself and how close the student has come to satisfying those goals. This type of assessment is *formative*, since it occurs while the student is still working on a piece of writing and can use the assessment to improve the writing itself. Involving the student in your assessment of her writing is an important step in helping the student to learn how to assess her own writing. Assessment that focuses on the student's writing can be an important way to teach, since good writers have a well developed sense of being able to evaluate how well their writing has achieved certain goals. When we focus assessment on a student text and involve the student in that evaluation we can also help the student learn to evaluate her own writing and as such help her as a writer. Learning to assess others' writing is helpful for students learning to assess their own writing.

Responding

Responding to student writing can include description, evaluation or even grades. Because writing in a formal sense involves an audience, learning to write involves learning to think about who the audience is for a specific piece and what that person(s) needs in order to make sense of what it is we're writing. Effective response needs to be more than just an analysis or annotation of a student's writing. Crafting a helpful response to a student writer requires that we think through what the writer is trying to do at a particular moment in a text and in the process of writing and deciding what kind of response will be most helpful for that individual at that time. Response to a student writer is also a form of communication. Research on responding to student writing has told us that often students do not understand what it is teachers are trying to tell them about their writing, so it is crucial that we make what we are trying to communicate as clear as possible to the students we respond to. This requires that we heed our own teacherly advice about the importance of considering our audience. We need to ask ourselves questions like what is it this student-writer needs to learn how to make this writing better?

Grading/Testing

Grading or testing is sort of like the flip side of assessing because when we test or grade, we move away from the text that a student has produced, and we infer from that text the ability of a student. This type of reading is *summative* because it occurs after a student has completed a piece of writing. For most of us who teach, testing and grading are facts of life over which we have no control. However, limiting the amount of testing or grading we do can allow us to focus more of our attention on other ways to read and respond to our students' writing, and this might give the student more instruction that will actually allow her to improve her writing. For example, more than one research study has shown that when teachers mark up a student's writing for the purpose of grading it, around sixty percent of all commentary on the paper is directed toward justifying the grade.

Response for Revision and Editing

One way to make decisions about the type of response to give a particular piece of writing is to determine what stage of the writing process a writer is going through. It does little good, for example, to mark errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation on a rough draft, when a writer plans on make substantial revisions anyway. It is impossible for you as a teacher and reader or your student as a writer to see and attend to everything at once. Knowing where a writer is within the writing process helps to determine what to comment about. For example, very rough drafts often get quite a bit better if the student concentrates on maintaining a consistent focus. Elements involved in focusing a piece of writing also tend to affect organization, support and transitions. Mechanical correctness is often best attended to after a student has rewritten in response to concerns about unity, development and organization. It is often helpful to convert concerns about error into instruction on editing and proofreading. Why waste time polishing prose you may eventually revise out of your writing?

Conferences

Conferencing involves a one to one meeting between the student and teacher. Since conferences replace the traditional method of grading stacks of papers, a decision regarding conferencing doesn't necessarily mean spending more time but rather involves how an instructor wishes to spend the time needed to respond to student writing. *Good conferences are conversations where the student does most of the talking.* It is important, then, to involve the student as fully as possible. This can be accomplished by requiring the student to show up for conferences with a written agenda for the meeting. This agenda can include class materials as well as specific questions about the writing to be discussed. Successful conferencing techniques include questioning the student about her writing, and resisting the urge to tell the student exactly what to do in a mini-lecture. Conferences can be conducted for any purpose, including the communication of grades, or direction on rough drafts, and can even occur within a workshop classroom where students are meeting groups and working on their writing within the classroom context.

Focus Check

This type of response is most useful for early drafts. Without letting the student look at the paper, ask him or her what the main point of the paper is. After the student has told you what the paper is about, have him or her show you where in the paper he or she talks about the main point. More times than not, there will be a difference between what the student thinks the paper is about and what the paper is really about. Having the student check and refocus the paper often leads to a vastly improved draft. How well can a paper be organized or supported when the writer is not writing about what she thinks she's writing about? Can be done in groups but works better with a teacher student conference which can take five minutes or less.

Portfolios

Portfolios consist of viewing student writing as a body of work produced over time. Some portfolio systems structure no grading until the end of the semester. Portfolios can also involve students choosing a smaller sample of their written word for formal evaluation. Usually, portfolios include a reflective or analytic piece along with multiple assignments from throughout the course. Having students write a memo or letter detailing how they revised their papers in response to peer or teacher feedback is a good way to help student-writers learn how to revise beyond just correcting a first draft. Portfolios allow students to produce multiple drafts without the constant pressure of grading.

Peer

Peer response can be a valuable part of teaching assessing student writing. Peer response usually means that students meet together in a group and respond to each other's writing. It can also involve just two students or an entire class talking about a particular piece of writing. It can also be used, like the focus check, to help students complete a specific, important part of the writing process. Many teachers use peer groups to help students with proofreading and editing. Some have even created editorial boards in their classrooms that often consist of students who really know language conventions and those that do not who work together to help students in the class proofread and edit their work. Peer response groups can be longstanding over an entire school year or writing project or they can be convened for specific purposes like focus checks, editing and proofreading or looking at rough drafts. While relatively easy to structure and use, peer writing groups are not always so easy to conduct well. Like all new or innovative practices in a classroom, students need to be taught how to use peer groups effectively. Aids like peer response sheets that focus students on to a particular task or modeling activities like the "fish bowl" in which teachers show students how to read and respond to each others' writing is often necessary in order to get peer writing groups to work as well as they can. Peer groups are a good way to use assessment to teach, since class-made rubrics can be used in peer review sessions. When functioning well, peer response can have many positive benefits. They allow students to get real feedback for their writing in a timely fashion and free up some of the teacher's time. They also teach students how to respond to other's writing which in turn allows them to be better responders to their own writing. Students often report that they learned much about their own writing by being in a position to respond to the writing of others. Peer response groups also allow the promotion of a lively, interactive classroom in which students learn by doing, since they are encouraged to work with each other as they learn to write and respond to writing.

Ranking

Ranking student writing involves comparing students to each other. Often teachers have some ideal or fixed, standard notion of what a student or group of students should be able to do at a specific moment. This kind of evaluation is often tacit, since we might not consciously admit to ourselves that we are comparing one student to another. Avoiding the ranking of students and their writing is an important step if we are to truly value individual students who bring their own strengths and weaknesses and who learn in their own ways.

Managing The Paper Load

All of the methods for responding to student writing help to make the paper load more manageable in teaching writing. If grades are not assigned to every piece of writing an instructor reads, then the task of reading is easier and less time consuming. Focusing on what a writer is trying to accomplish at a specific place in the writing process alleviates the pressure an instructor might feel in having to comment on everything at once. As well, viewing a paper more than once makes each reading a little easier. Peer review and conferences are a way for instructors to break the cycle of grading incessant stacks of student papers. The trick is to provide useful feedback for your students., and *this does not always mean you have to read, mark and grade everything*. Responding rather than grading shifts your role from gatekeeper to teacher, where your response is your instruction. Portfolios limit the number of times you have to grade or test your students as well as giving students input on what and when they will be evaluated.

Straub, R. (2000). The student, the text and the classroom context: A case study of teacher response. *Assessing Writing*, 7, 23-56.

- (1) Turn your comments into a conversation.
- (2) Create a dialogue with students on the page.
- (3) Do not take control over the text: instead of projecting your agenda on student writing and being directive, be facilitative and help students realize their own purposes.
- (4) Limit the scope of your comments.
- (5) Limit the number of comments you present.
- (6) Give priority to global concerns of content, context, and organization before getting (overly) involved with style and correctness.
- (7) Focus your comments according to the stage of drafting and the relative maturity of the text.
- (8) Gear your comments to the individual student behind the text.
- (9) Make frequent use of praise.
- (10) Tie your response to the larger classroom conversation. (p. 23-24)

Sommers, N. (1982). Responding to student writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 33(2), 148-156.

Purpose of responding to student writing is to “demonstrate the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because ultimately, we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing” (p. 148)