

17 Unlocking Outcome-Based Education through the Writing Process

Rick Pribyl

Blue Valley Northwest High School, Overland Park, Kansas

Rick Pribyl is currently English department chair at Blue Valley Northwest High School in Overland Park, Kansas, and is finishing his doctoral program from Walden University, conducting research in alternative assessment methods and critical thinking through writing.

... and you're going to do it over and over and over again until you get it right!

Thus concludes the punch line of a well-worn joke about a teacher and the persistence of repetition in education. We all laugh at this image, and even Hollywood films depict the stereotypical teacher as the strict Pavlovian disciplinarian, tapping his or her wooden pointer on the desk, reciting rules of learning over and over.

As I entered my senior "Modern Literature" class the past few years, armed with the latest tools from the National Writing Project, I was challenged with how to break away from some of these traditional stereotypes that have hindered progress in education. I discovered that perhaps not all the traditional ways had to be thrown out. In fact, the idea of "doing it over and over again" provided the necessary step in my classroom to tie the writing process to the concept of "Outcome-Based Education" (OBE), the function of which aims to provide all students with the necessary tools for future success (see "NCTE Supports").

In 1991, I was introduced to the concept of outcome-based education, and I remember that as we sat in the audience, my colleagues

and I had more questions than the presenters could answer. Basically, we were told that OBE was based upon the notion that “success breeds success” and that students should be given every chance possible to learn and progress (Nelson). Accomplishing goals and absorbing knowledge take precedence over grades. We all learned that OBE presented a positive approach and promised results that all of us were searching for in education. What was lacking at that time was the actual “nuts and bolts” for the classroom implementation. I still remember walking away thinking that OBE was a target for the long-distant future. Little did I know that soon trial and error and a little luck would bring OBE into my own classroom.

From my previous years with seniors in modern literature, I knew that a multitude of problems and solutions stood before me. First, and most important, being a proponent of the writing process, I had to come up with a way of evaluating papers that did not just stamp a grade on a paper. Next, I needed a method of testing that not only reflected acquisition of the material, but also ensured that all students had completed the required work. In addition, I needed to establish a way to force all seniors, especially the “at-risk” students (Morris), to finish the work necessary to complete the high school English requirements. The majority of these same students would be attending various colleges, while a small percentage would be entering the local job market. As if these were not steep enough goals, I had one last piece of personal baggage to rid myself of—eliminating the pressure of grades, one of a teacher’s basic tools for motivation, and replacing that pressure with a thirst for individual success. My destination was set, but I had not yet decided upon my basic mode of transportation and delivery.

Writing Process: Accept/Revise Evaluation

For years, as a student, I had pondered the question “What is the difference between a B+ paper and an A- paper?” Of course, I was trying to find out because I seemed to be constantly receiving that B+ on my own papers. Just where was that fine line in subjective evaluation between a minus and a plus? In fact, in one of my own college classes, one of my English teachers gave percentage points as a grade on a subjective essay. It made me wonder if percentage points had been deducted because of poor voice, grammar, or theme statement. As I recall, no one in that class ever received 100 percent, proof positive that no paper was perfect.

This point bothered me throughout my schooling and into the eighth year of my teaching career, as now I had become the grade giver instead of the receiver. Certainly, I had my scoring rubric and constantly shared it with students, but the gray area of swaying to the minus or the plus side constantly plagued me. I truly enjoyed teaching each day, but putting on my grader's hat almost ruined teaching for me. It was not until I started to follow the implications of the writing process in my grading that I was able to overcome this obstacle.

The writing process, as articulated by the National Writing Project, emphasizes responses in the form of praising and questioning. Among the biggest bonuses that I found from this approach to writing was the positive psychological impact it had on the individual student. The strokes from peers and teachers, plus the freedom, enabled the student to feel a strong degree of success. That is, until a final grade was marked on the paper.

Then we were back to what every English teacher has experienced. The hypothetical, typical English teacher takes home the papers to evaluate over the weekend. Each paper is read once, twice, and sometimes three times, the teacher making as many corrections as deemed necessary along with praise and suggestions for improvement. Some papers may take as long as fifteen to twenty minutes to go through. Finally finished, they are handed back to the pupils on Monday, and the teacher stands back and watches. To his or her dismay, the students immediately turn to the last page, look at the grade, and put the paper away, never giving the comments a glance. As a result, the same mistakes that were noted on that piece of writing will undoubtedly appear in the following papers.

The writing process had produced positive self-esteem and optimism, but the grade, whether it be by letter or number, renewed the traditional feeling of either success or failure. By using a traditional grading method, I had further fed the notion that the grade was far more important than the paper or the author's growth in the writing of that paper.

In attempting to correct this notion, I stumbled upon another system in a Greater Kansas City Writing Project class that has produced some remarkable results. The facilitator, Dick Luckert, who teaches at nearby Olathe East High School, introduced the concept, and I eventually called it *accept/revise* grading. Essentially, after the students work through the process of possibly three or four drafts, including numerous revisions and editorial opportunities, they turn in all drafts and prewriting along with their final copies. I read through

the material very carefully, making comments, asking questions, and suggesting corrections. At the end of the paper, I write a general comment to the student and then write one of three words:

- *Accepted:* If the paper is what I believe is the best product possible for this individual student and has no glaring errors, then it is accepted, and the student is finished with the paper. The student will receive all points possible (e.g., 100 points out of 100) in the grade book.
- *Revise:* If the paper is below average for this individual student, if it has numerous mistakes, or if a recurring problem from previous writings has not been resolved, then the student is asked to revise the paper and correct whatever is necessary as stated in the comments. The student will receive a deduction of 10 percent of the total points possible for each time he or she has to revise. Thus, it is very possible to be asked to revise a paper, get 90 out of 100 points (90 percent), and still receive an A. This is a positive outcome for those parents and students who are still motivated by a grade. Also, it tells the poorer writer that he or she can attain success both by comment and by a letter grade. [Note: Some teachers using this procedure choose not to lower points for each revision, giving 100 percent for all "accepted" papers, whether accepted on the first or fifth submission.]
- *Reject:* If the student has failed to follow the correct assignment or not completed certain required parts, then the paper is rejected, and the entire project, from prewriting to final draft, must be redone. This is rarely needed due to the continuous process of writing being performed in the classroom, but periodically, it is necessary to bring the student back on track. A rejection does not mean failure, but simply: "Let's do this one over and get it right." After a 10 percent reduction in the total points possible, the student's paper is now treated again to the same accept/revise process.

The results of doing this for the past two years have been outstanding in both the quality of work and the positive self-confidence that students exhibit in their writing. The responsibility for a grade has been partially transferred from the teacher to the student, while the teacher still holds considerable control within the classroom. In incorporating this method, the teacher can influence the individual student at all the various levels of her writing. The poorer writers can be brought along at their own rates; the strong writers can be further stretched and challenged; the recurring problems can be eliminated; and all students learn that they can write and fix their own miscues without penalties.

In addition, the grade-conscious pupils discover that they can make mistakes and still receive A's. Meanwhile, the less gifted or motivated students can also achieve a high grade. The feeling of success in student writing produces, in general, a very positive atmosphere within the classroom.

Normally, I allow three days for a student to return a revision. As a result, due to all the constant writing in the class, some students find themselves working on several writing projects simultaneously. It does not take very long for many of the writers to learn to produce a good product on the first final draft, so as not to be overly burdened with work.

I have found that the quality of writing in content and grammar has far exceeded my expectations. In fact, it has become invigorating for me. I have the renewed confidence to attempt all types of writing within the classroom because through this process, the students have developed confidence in their work and in themselves. One last benefit has been that the parents are totally in support of this because they realize where the responsibility for student writing success lies. Also, they see positive rewards for effort and work as their children become better writers.

Testing—Accept/Revise Style

Once my students and I were comfortable with the accept/revise process with papers, I focused in on testing of the material we covered. From my reading of various researchers in the area of human development, I uncovered one basic agreement. Except for innate and inherited functions, humans have to be exposed to an environment or stimulus to learn. Talking about how to swim or the pain of being burned does not teach a human to swim or to fear burns. People must be exposed to water and feel the heat of the flame before they can truly claim to have at least partial knowledge of the topic.

My problem in class mirrored that of almost every classroom since Plato hung out his school placard. Students cannot fully grasp material unless they have read, discussed, or experienced it. This might be in the form of homework, self-study, or classwork. In most cases, when it comes time to prove achievement or demonstrate a level of familiarity with the subject matter, students take tests. The preconceived notion that a high score means acquisition of knowledge and a low score means ignorance is usually the norm, but is not necessarily accurate. But many teachers would agree that low-score cases mean

that the high school students either didn't read or study the material. Consequently, the student receives the low grade; the teacher then begins the next book or unit; and the same student will never go back to learn the missed material. Hence, both the student and the teacher accept the loss of information or performance.

Just as students are mainly concerned with their grades at the end of papers, so it is with tests. The average student would prefer just to get the low grade and proceed with the new material rather than to try to absorb and comprehend the old material. The blame frequently falls on the teacher for not reviewing well enough. The teacher must decide whether to reteach the material to a handful of unwilling students or to proceed and accept the losses. The student never experiences the nature of the material, and the teacher must fall back to the security of the low grade for punishment. Neither the student nor teacher has succeeded.

Also, I have become extremely frustrated with the failure of a few seniors in my classes to completely read the short stories or novels. They've guessed their way through verification exams and insightful essays. Obviously, in general they were satisfied with just receiving passing grades. The knowledge missed in no way bothered them, and they considered "getting by" as totally acceptable. The lesson they learned was that little or no effort in life is enough to survive. At the same time, I, as the teacher, became frustrated with the belief that these individuals were not reaching their full potential. Neither the teacher nor the student won.

One of the most striking aspects of OBE is that essentially it should reflect in certain respects "the real world." In the workplace, if an employee writes a bad report for any reason, it will usually be sent back to him to redo or else he'll be fired. The company wants the report done properly, and the last thing an employer would do would be to put a grade on it.

Fueled by these notions, I decided to attack my own testing procedures. I came up with a solution that seemed to complement what we had been doing with the accept/revise procedure with papers. In essence, all examinations became accept/revise tests, much like a pass/fail system. The difference centered on the fact that our school district system required a grade. To cover both grading and pass/fail standards, I initiated a system whereby all tests and quizzes must reach a score of 75 percent or better to be accepted. If the test is not accepted, a student must retest over the material until the score

reaches above 75 percent. The highest score recorded on any of the tests would become the grade recorded in the grade book.

Of course, such action was certain to be protested by some students. In anticipation of cries of "unfair!" from the students who made excellent grades on the first try, I put certain requirements on retakes. First, before a test could be retaken, a "ticket" which proved that the student had restudied the material had to be completed before the retest could begin. This ticket could be in the form of a paper, a journal, a related project, or an oral report. In addition, no exam could be taken during class time. As in business, the pupils had to sign up for appointments with me before or after school or during lunch or planning periods. I shifted all responsibility for completion onto them.

At first, I found that I had to have two or three sets of exams available for retesting. Eventually, in the case of tests over novels, I started using the same tests, but made them open-book tests requiring the page numbers where the answers could be found. I discovered this to be most beneficial in allowing "at-risk" students who possessed little retention to prove that they had at least read parts of the book. Although open-book tests can be extremely difficult, they can serve as educational tools as well.

To date, the results have all been positive. I perceive fewer and fewer seniors failing exams because they do not want to retake the tests. The previously labeled "low achievers" are suddenly discovering success in the classroom and are more engaged in discussion. As the instructor, I can now emphasize many more important parts of the lesson being covered because all the students have reached a basic level with the material. And finally, there manifests in the room a feeling that the students and I are truly encountering academe on a positive note.

The Incomplete Grade

At Indiana University in June of 1992, George Gustafson spoke to Walden University doctoral candidates about his school district in Chicago, Illinois, and the trend toward OBE. To paraphrase one of his statements, "Students do not fail because of intelligence. They fail because of not doing the work."

Putting that statement into perspective—and into my classroom in particular—proved to be the necessary link in tying the accept/revise notion with papers and exams to OBE. In the past, when tallying up scores for semester grades, with some students I would come

across quite a few empty spaces in the grade book. Normally, I would count these spaces as zeros. In fact, almost every student somewhere in the semester had not turned in an assignment or finished a revision. When I sat back and studied these missed assignments, I could not help but think about the lack of learning or writing that had taken place. Meanwhile, because of a lack of points, some seniors failed the modern literature course and ultimately did not graduate with their class, not because of ignorance, but because they had failed to do their work.

In 1992, I received permission to pilot a program at Blue Valley North High School (and the following year at Blue Valley Northwest High School) that allowed me to give an "Incomplete" (I) to any senior who did not turn in all assignments. The students were allowed to turn in assignments late with a percentage reduction penalty, but in all cases, no questions were asked as to why the delay. Any I not rectified within two weeks after issuing grades would turn into a "Failure" (F).

Letters and contracts about the program were shared with the students and parents, and I waited with anticipation of what would happen the few weeks before the end of the semester. As expected, the responsibility for learning and completion of work shifted from me to the students. Suddenly, the at-risk students were at my desk inquiring about which assignments were still needed. Even the better students were anxious to finish all of their work. I received papers from some seniors, almost a month late, that had needed revision work, as well as makeup exams for a novel we had completed five weeks earlier.

Out of eighty-three seniors and forty-seven juniors, I gave six incomplete grades, and within a week, only one senior had not finished his work. It was a remarkable achievement for the seniors who traditionally would have produced approximately a 5 to 8 percent failure rate. With this system, the low achievers and at-risk students did not see F's on their report cards—which reflected failure and closure—but instead saw I's—which presented hope and an opportunity for improvement. The program had acted as a deterrent, not as a punishment. As the teacher, I ended the semester with the feeling that, for the first time, all of my students had engaged in learning and had learned about life itself.

As far as the range of grades after using this process, I've found that the vast majority of the semester grades I've given have been A's and B's, with relatively few C's or D's, and an occasional F. At first I was concerned that the perception to an outsider might be that the class was easy and that everyone would automatically receive a high

grade. But in their written responses, students have said that they were challenged more than they ever had been, that their writing and study habits had improved dramatically, and that they had left the class feeling confident that they could tackle writing and reading at the next level. The parents overwhelmingly approved because they personally experienced their sons and daughters not only improving their writing, but also working on their own to achieve success. Perhaps, the true bonus has been the success that the at-risk students have had as a result of this process. For many, this method has enabled them to believe that by taking responsibility for their own work, they can succeed. In many cases, they have proved even to their peers that their writing is as good and sometimes even better.

I did not seek out OBE—it just found me in my classroom. It was disguised in its philosophies and theories, and it repelled teachers with the fear of instructing without using grades as a lever. OBE has made me shed quite a lot of heavy, traditional educational baggage, while at the same time allowing me to retain some of the basics. But in my classroom—with the freedom of the writing process, the accept/revise concept, and the allowance of the “Incomplete” grade as a backup—OBE has come to life. Sometimes, “doing it over and over and over again” does foster success.

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Interlude

I was thinking about the way journalists like to use metaphors of grading for schools, as in "schools don't make the grade" or "local schools get failing grades from parents, graduates." It happens so often that it really is a journalistic cliché. I wonder if those journalists are doing it to get back at teachers who graded them down? Certainly, it has to give us teachers a sense of how kids feel when all their work and effort is reduced to a single grade: C-, C+, B+. Anything less than an A hurts your feelings, and even an A (whether applied to schools or kids) doesn't really tell you much. A what?

--Will Heller
Internet communication
