

Authoring Assessment: Lessons From My Classroom

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When I began teaching more than twenty years ago, I don't think the term "authentic assessment" was even part of my vocabulary. I dutifully passed out tests, usually multiple choice and usually from the Teacher's Manual, to my students, who completed them and returned them to me. I graded each one using an answer key and put a letter or numerical indicator on the top of each page. This grade was then transferred neatly into my "rank" book to ensure future ease of averaging a final grade. I felt I knew each and every one of my students, but what, exactly, was it that I knew?

As I taught longer and learned more from my students, I also wanted to know more; more about what they really understood, more than a standardized test could tell me. I began to use writing as a means of assessing and found it to be a most valuable tool in many ways. At the college level, writing continues to allow me to more fully understand and guide the students in my classes. The following are three of the ways in which I use writing as a means of assessment in the class RL306: Reading and Writing in the Elementary School, K-8.

This course prepares future teachers to plan, develop and assess literacy instruction. Throughout the semester, the students explore various theories of teaching reading, become familiar with instructional strategies, and learn to make accommodations for diverse learners. Multiple choice tests and short answer essays let me know the degree to which they can articulate pertinent definitions and literacy concepts; however, in addition to knowing the content of the course, I also want my students to be able to formulate a vision of their own future reading classrooms.

For that reason, I designed a final take-home exam which required them to synthesize their semester's work. I asked the students to envision themselves part way through their first year of teaching. I was coming in to observe them for a 90-minute block of reading/language arts instruction. What would I see? Students would first describe the grade level, student population of their class, classroom layout and then in their own way fully describe what would be happening in the classroom. This type of assessment allows me to see how well students can synthesize theories and philosophies of reading and writing and put them into a cogent framework for instruction. Choosing a grade level, identifying students who may have disabilities, accounting for differences in learning styles and rates, and choosing an approach to teaching literacy require an understanding of concepts rather than just a passing acquaintance with definitions. Students must be able to draw from texts, class discussions, and their own values and beliefs about how children learn in order to effectively frame an actual classroom learning sequence.

This type of assignment requires higher level thinking. Students cannot rely on memorizing definitions; they must be able to put theory into practice. During the two to three weeks that they have to work on this project, students develop their own interpretation of a literacy classroom.

The following excerpt, taken from one student's writing, demonstrates how she chose to address a portion of this task:

You will observe the whole class introduction of a biography entitled *Sir Francis Drake: His Daring Deeds* by Roy Gerard, which the students will all be reading. This literature piece comes near the end of the Explorers theme I will begin today's ninety minute period with a brief introduction to Sir Francis Drake, including salient facts about his background and adventures. I will read part of the biography aloud, emphasizing the rhyming patterns and discussing pertinent vocabulary words (circumnavigated, etc.). Students will read the remainder of the biography with their reading partners.

From this brief passage, I learn many things about this student's beliefs about literacy and teaching. First, I see that she values various forms of grouping in her classroom. She uses "whole group" instruction for the introduction so that all students will have a common framework, yet students are also paired to read together later in the lesson. The fact that she has chosen paired reading instead of the more traditional "round robin" reading lets me know that she believes children working in pairs to create meaning from text is preferable to students sitting in a circle and taking turns reading passages from a book. Subjects are integrated, not taught in isolation. Reading and writing occur in the context of a study of explorers; specifically, Sir Francis Drake. Content is stressed by sharing "salient" facts prior to reading a biography. Students in this class are exposed to various genres of literature, and social studies is taught, not just from a textbook, but with a biography which helps portray Sir Francis Drake as more than a name associated with a date of exploration. In this class, vocabulary is taught within the context of the text and not with isolated drills and worksheets. Phonics (rhyming patterns) is also taught in context, which indicates this student prefers a "top-down" method of teaching reading where students are introduced to a text and then skills and vocabulary are taught meaningfully in context. In each of these components, the student

has made a conscious choice about instructional strategies in her literacy classroom. How much of this information could I have gathered about my student through more traditional testing methods? I believe the answer is “not much.” Writing helps me to more fully know my students, and in this case to get a glimpse of their ability to document classroom practices, which, in turn, are influenced by their beliefs and values about how children learn.

Another student chose to write his exam as though he were a newspaper reporter observing a literacy class.

Mr. G. then says the class will be continuing its talk about Native American literature. He explains why he is dressed casually today (jeans, sweater, old sneakers). The clothes he has on are hand-down clothes and he explains that his clothes are similar to the way that Native Americans learned stories, through something called “oral tradition.”

This brief passage allows me to understand important details about this student’s vision of literacy. First, he clearly sees a need for connections and context. Students are not merely told that legends were passed through oral tradition; they are shown. His “handed-down” clothing is representative of stories that were passed from generation to generation. By writing his exam as a reporter and going outside the parameters of the assignment, he is demonstrating his ability to think for himself, to assess a given task and formulate it to fit his style. Isn’t this what we hope from all of our students? That they can make informed instructional decisions based on theory and knowledge of how children learn? How could I ever know this about a student from correcting his marked boxes of multiple-choice answers?

A third student wrote, “The ninety-minute period addresses a variety of learning styles, with visual clues, auditory work and hands-on experience with the material.” From this brief sentence, I am aware that this student understands the need for differentiated cur-

riculum, that he knows students will come to him with various styles of learning that must be accommodated in the classroom. This writer also values “hands-on” learning to engage students rather than expecting them to passively sit and absorb information.

I could never have predicted the richly detailed accounts of my students’ future literacy classrooms. They wrote in depth about strategies and materials, basals and trade books, styles of learners, and how to meet the diversity of individual needs in the classroom. Most considered ways to integrate curriculum effectively and how to manage cooperative groups. This endeavor took a great deal of time to “correct” or evaluate, but I know the rewards were more than worth it for both my students and me. My students felt empowered through writing about their future classrooms in a way that stretched them to place theory into a conceptual framework of practice.

A second way I use writing as assessment is to have students compose reading autobiographies. Through reflection and self-assessment, they explore their own literacy backgrounds in order to better understand themselves as readers. I ask them to think carefully about their early reading experiences, both at home and in a school setting. Students are then asked to connect these images with feelings about reading, and, ultimately, with perceptions of themselves as readers. Their reflection spans a continuum from the early years to their present attitudes and practices towards reading. These are the only guidelines that I give for this exercise. Students choose the format and length depending on personal preferences.

Many students don’t recall their early years.. As one student wrote, “It was very difficult for me to remember how I learned to read. Therefore, I had to do a little research. I decided to ask my parents. After all, who would know better?” This excerpt shows first, that this student was invested in her assignment. Rather than inventing her early reading behaviors for the purpose of receiving a grade, she chose to call her parents, taking the time and interest to explore her own early literacy. I believe that students show us their “best” when we create learning situations in which we challenge them to do so. She was also able to share these recollections with

her parents as she reconstructed a crucial time in her development.

Not all memories are as positive, however. One student wrote of a very different scenario: “After two weeks of first grade, I was put into readiness because I couldn’t keep up with the work. All through elementary school I was put in the lowest reading groups. As a result, I decided that I couldn’t read well, and no matter what, reading would always be more of a chore than a pleasure.” By identifying instructional practices that caused her to stop feeling successful at a very early age, this student will be able to prevent students in her own future classes from having the same experience. Through her new understanding of child development, hopefully, this student will realize school “failure” is often, at least in part, a result of poor practices and not just perceived inadequacies. When I learn, through this student’s insightful narrative, that as early as first grade she was categorized and made to feel a sense of failure as a reader, I am able to conference individually with her and encourage her to reexamine her beliefs about herself in light of her current, not past, experiences.

Often, students’ feelings about reading emerge from their autobiographies. Here is an example: “I still have that insatiable hunger to read. I read with a passion, a desire to learn, with an interest so strong that the story comes alive in me. I read because literature forces me to test the boundaries of my imagination.” Giving students the opportunity to express themselves through writing on a very personal level allows me to glimpse their inner world of thoughts and perceptions and work more effectively with them, making us both the “learner” and the “teacher.”

This type of assessment gives me insight into my students’ successes, failures, strengths and fears. These narratives are often laden with images of classrooms where teachers used practices which either motivated students to read or forever squelched their desire to pick up a book. By revisiting these former experiences, my students make decisions about their own future classroom practices. Students begin to understand the power they will have as teachers, as well as how their own decisions regarding instruction will impact

future students throughout their entire lives.

Assessment is not just for the students; it is also for me as I plan my own classroom experiences. In addition to the required end-of-semester evaluation, I have my students frequently evaluate their experiences in my classes through writing. Several times each semester, I ask my students to write a short, anonymous narrative of their assessment of the class. I ask that they write about what they think is going well thus far, addressing specific practices and strategies. I also ask them to give suggestions for changes that could benefit the class and make it more effective. Students feel empowered when they know their input is valuable, and I benefit from knowing, as the class progresses, what my students perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of my teaching and class structure. An excellent example of this is when in my reading course at the beginning of the semester several students wrote in their class assessments that having to copy notes from the overhead was cumbersome and detracted from their understanding of the material. I was able to address this concern immediately by photocopying my overhead outlines and handing them out before a discussion. This allowed the students to concentrate more fully on the discussion rather than on frantically copying down notes. Without their input, I probably would not have made this change, at least not in such a timely manner.

I have days, when faced with a mound of written narratives, that I fondly remember the ease with which I used to correct those multiple choice tests. Using writing to assess students' progress and understanding is certainly more time consuming; however, the knowledge that I gain from my students' writing allows me to know them and help them in ways I had never previously imagined. I believe if we want to prepare students to become passionate teachers of reading and writing, we need to give them opportunities to progress as readers and writers themselves. Each group of students with whom I work teaches me more about myself as a reader, a writer, a learner and a teacher. I can only hope I influence them in the same way.