Collaborative Analysis of Student Work

Improving Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

Amazing things happen when teachers analyze a student's learning over a period of months. Here is a comment from Matt, a high school senior who benefited from his teacher's use of Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning:

> My attitude about English has changed. Over the Christmas holidays I considered dropping out of school because I didn't think I would pass the senior research paper. When the year started, everything that I turned in came back to me with so many red marks that I didn't know what to do or where to start. The zeros and statements from the teacher like, "I can't read this!" made me feel terrible. Now I have in my hand my final paper. I made a B. I am really proud of what I have done. Mr. P really helped me figure this out. I'm going to make it!

Matt was one of Jerry Patton's focus students during the Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning (CASL) process from November 1997 through May 1998. As Patton, a veteran high school English teacher, was challenged to examine his beliefs about Matt's learning, he experimented with new approaches that ultimately helped Matt succeed. The following entries from Patton's portfolio illustrate this journey of growth.

> November Portfolio Entry
> Matt is an eighteen-year-old white male. His 9th-grade achievement test in language arts placed him at the 28.2 percentile. He was placed in remedial programs; however, his test scores did not improve. He attended summer school to make up English III and is failing English IV. He is an underachiever and is classified as a discipline problem by most of his former teachers, who say he is a "goof-off." His attendance is amazingly good. He has no plans to fur-

> ther his education other than possible vocational training. He does the bare minimum to get by. He is very lax about completing and turning in assignments that require study and preparation outside of class. His work demonstrates a lack of attention to details such as neatness and precision. He has poor spelling and punctuation skills and lacks proofreading skills. This semester he understands that he must produce a research paper that is above passing standards, or he will not graduate. My goal for him is to complete each phase of this assignment on time and correctly.

Patton had labeled this student a troublemaker. He assumed that Matt's failure was due to a lack of effort. His other comments indicated that Patton felt that his job was to present the information and the rest was up to the student.

> May Portfolio Entry
> Before this project, I was really frustrated. As a high school English teacher, [I have a policy that] my students don't graduate if they don't successfully complete the research paper to pass my class. Since some administrators have questioned this policy, I was torn between my responsibility to uphold what I saw as high academic standards and the need for students to graduate. I had become sensitive about my teaching. I was not going to lower my standards because someone told me too many students were failing my class.
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> At first, I resisted the idea that the analysis of Matt's work could help me; however, through the discussions I realized that I had made some inaccurate assumptions about Matt. One assumption was that his poor writing was because he was lazy. I thought his handwriting was sloppy because he did not care. (I discovered later that he was very bothered by his lack of ability in this area.) One day I was talking about this in my study group and the business teacher asked how I felt about allowing my students to use a word processor. I had been opposed to using computers because I felt students should write it out first; but I agreed to try it.
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> So I asked Matt to type his next piece on the computer in business class (the business teacher helped him). When I collected Matt's next work sample, the high quality surprised me. I had never considered the impact of computers on student writing; I had always thought of computers as a publishing tool, not a teaching one.
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> When I provided access to the computers, I had no idea their usage would change my thinking. This came from the fact that the newer word processing programs provide automatic proofreading for spelling and grammar. The student is forced to see his mistakes and

> to work at them until he gets them right. The impact of this immediate feedback is significant. The use of such programs also gives the student confidence because his errors are not exposed to the world or, worse yet, to his teacher. The red wavy lines on the computer screen are not nearly as intimidating as my red marks. Once the writing is free of many errors, the student can focus on other aspects of his written expression.
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> The pride that I saw on Matt's face when the paper had that polished, professional appearance was enough to convince me. That pride is now evident very positively in his other work. He is conscious now of details that were not important to him before.

Interestingly, Patton came to the first CASL session with a resistant attitude; he sat with a red face and crossed arms at the back of the room. Yet, Patton clearly grew in his ability to "read" a student and provide appropriate help. In 1999, Patton gained the prestigious National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification.

What kind of professional development experience resulted in such a transformation over a period of months? This book will help you understand the development of the Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning (CASL) system, the reasons behind it, specific steps for trying it out, and how to support it.

What Is CASL?

Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning (CASL) is a teacher development system that helps educators develop a culture for collaborative inquiry and gain a deeper understanding of the link between their instruction and their students' learning around a standards-based target learning area.

Specifically, CASL

- Focuses on student work samples relative to a particular content standard,
- Engages teachers in the study of selected students' learning over time,
- Follows a systematic analysis cycle,
- Occurs within a collaborative culture for inquiry, and

• Provides written documentation of teacher and student learning.

The chapters in this book explain how the features of CASL are woven together into the system. In this system, student work is defined as any data or evidence teachers collect that reveals information about student learning (e.g., standardized test data, classroom assessments, writing samples, projects, oral reports, videotapes, pictures, or student observation data).

To begin the process, teachers develop group norms and practice productive collaborative skills. Then they define a standards-based student learning area they want all students to achieve. Next, they gather recent classroom assessments in that area (e.g., a writing assignment) and analyze each student's work. After determining patterns of strengths and weaknesses, they select two students who represent different ways students are struggling with the learning. Every few weeks, teachers bring work samples from these two students to their study group.

In the study group, one teacher begins by reviewing the learning goal for the student and presents the work. Next, the group members ask questions that prompt analysis of the various factors related to the student's progress. After deciding what may be getting in the way of student learning, the group brainstorms and evaluates various teaching strategies that may help the student. Finally, the teacher leaves the study group with a clear goal for the student, strategies to try, and a plan to gather more student work to bring to the next meeting. Periodically, participants seek information or experts to gain understanding or skills to assist students' learning. After a period of months in the study group, the teacher again assesses the entire class to gauge learning progress. Then he examines all the information collected, and writes reflections about his learning and that of the students.

CASL helps teachers see that a student's class work is not just something to be entered in the grade book; rather, it is an indicator of what a student understands about a particular skill or concept and how the student learns. Teachers use this work to inquire into and discover the factors that contribute to a student's understanding (or lack of it). Given these insights, they can decide what would