

Examining Student Work

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Examining Student Work

Every day teachers examine student work. They give quizzes and grade them; they assign and evaluate essays; they ask students to produce projects of various kinds and they score them using rubrics. The process of developing, assigning, collecting, and evaluating student work is traditionally a solitary activity, limited to the confines of the classroom. However, educators are now using student work as a vehicle to reflect in groups upon their own teaching practices and to change or develop new teaching strategies to help all students learn. This video series examines this process and several specific methods of how educators critically review student work and assignments in collaborative teams. These methods are the Tuning Protocol, the Education Trust’s Standards in Practice method, and the Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning.

Individual needs or preferences of educators and schools often dictate which method is used. The reasons for examining student work can vary from the need to gather more information about student learning to ensuring that assignments are aligned with standards or agreed upon goals for excellence. Examining student work in collaborative teams also provides an opportunity for professional development among educators. The data collected from a critical review of student work can demonstrate student progress to stakeholders and identify where additional attention or change—in the classroom, within the school, or at the district level—is needed.

Accountability

Educators expect and want to be accountable for student learning, but they also need more information about student learning than what they get from test scores. Testing is just one way of holding teachers accountable, and it may have reached a point of saturation. With states, districts, and schools administering tests—not to mention classroom tests—students are being tested more than ever, and preparation for testing can take considerable time away from the regular curriculum.

How else can teachers be accountable? One avenue is collectively examining student work—apart from the individual evaluation of student work teachers do in the classroom. If done well, examination of student work yields results that are useful for accountability purposes, especially if performed as part of a repertoire of assessment methods. What educators learn from directly examining student work is different from what they learn through other assessment techniques. Taken together, several sources of data can build a far richer picture of student learning than any one method alone can.

In an individual school, for example, norm-referenced test scores tell educators, parents, the community, and the students themselves how they compare to other students on the same test. Criterion-referenced test scores tell the same stakeholders how students perform on the state, district, or school standards. Classroom assessments of various kinds (including performance assessments) tell the teacher how well students have learned what has been taught. Collaborative examination of student work provides information beyond all these other sources. It allows educators to examine evidence of learning, something they usually can't identify from most test scores (or even by looking at students' actual tests, since these are usually multiple choice and may or may not represent real knowledge or skill). Second, it allows educators to calibrate their understanding of what quality looks like. Even though they examine the evidence of learning individually in their classrooms, for example, many teachers wonder if their evaluations are on target. They wonder if their expectations and ideas about quality are too high or too low. The methods of looking at student work that are presented in this video series are excellent ways educators can be accountable, especially if they are used with other methods of accountability for student learning.

Informed Decision Making

Examining student work lends itself to instructional decision making more than any test score can. Test scores do not enable informed decisions about what to teach and how to change instruction to help students learn. If teachers do an item analysis (a process in which teachers examine students' wrong answers, looking for patterns), for example, they may find themselves teaching students minutiae. They may also find themselves trying to figure out what the distracters (the incorrect options on a multiple-choice test) in a question signal in terms of how students should be able to think about a concept or skill. Test scores are of limited use in terms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Working collaboratively to examine student work, educators can learn not only what their students know and are able to do but also how to help them move forward through improved classroom instruction.

Professional Development

Educators also desire and need quality professional development experiences that reduce the isolation they often feel, experiences that allow them to have meaningful conversations about the complex issues of teaching and learning. Outside experts—speakers, presenters, and

workshop leaders—offer expertise, wisdom, and inspiration, but their messages, by themselves, seldom result in substantive change. A superb speaker at the beginning of the year can inspire, but inspiration can be short-lived in the face of classroom realities.

Embedded professional development can be more effective in bringing about substantive change in the classroom. It arises from the classroom, when educators contribute their personal teaching experiences to professional development discussions with their colleagues, and it returns there as educators begin to make changes with their colleagues' support. Examining student work fits perfectly within this type of professional development.

Characteristics of embedded professional development include the following:

- It is rooted in classroom and school realities, and is, therefore, tailored to the needs of those environments.
- It is content rich and based on real data—student work and teacher practice.
- It establishes the school as a learning community, promoting inquiry and reflective practice.
- It establishes a culture of quality.
- It honors the professionalism, expertise, experiences, and skills of educators.
- It involves participants in the design of the experience, creating more ownership than externally planned professional development.
- Because those who participate choose what they themselves will work on—something that is relevant to their school and that they care about—some level of application is ensured.
- It is much less expensive than hiring an educational consultant or other type of imported expertise to lecture, when that “expert” may have little knowledge of what specific professional development activities would most benefit the school.

There are many types of embedded professional development that have these characteristics. Among them:

- Action research.
- Peer coaching.

- Study groups.
- Networking.
- Development of teacher or administrator portfolios.
- Teaming.
- Use of case studies.
- Curriculum design and course development.
- Mentoring.
- Needs assessment and follow-up.
- Data collection, analysis, dissemination.
- Critical friends groups.

Many of these methods may already exist among your educators, schools, and district. This video series will help focus the discussions among participants who use one or more of the above methods.

What Examining Student Work Looks Like

Examining student work has several key components:

- It involves a group of educators committed to improving their practice and improving curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the learning environment for students.
- It requires regular, protected time dedicated to the work of the group.
- It requires bringing real student work to the group to be examined.
- It uses a formal process for examining that work.
- It requires follow-up after student work is examined so that the resulting knowledge is not lost.

Looking collectively at student work is not a new enterprise in education. One long-running example is the practice of British university students taking their oral exams in front of an examining panel—this high-stakes performance assessment is scored collectively and results either in a degree or the denial of one. In the United States, the move in the 1960s towards evaluation of English skills directly through collaborative assessment of writing samples gained more credibility than the previous method of indirect assessment through multiple-choice tests. Direct writing assessment led to use of a similar process to assess other products in

other subjects. Types of scoring were developed: holistic, primary trait, analytic trait, and others. “Rubric” became a word as well known, at least in educational circles, as “Rubik’s cube” was known by the general public. Direct assessment of student work became known as “authentic” assessment.

Teachers began to adapt the processes of authentic assessment to use in their own classrooms with their own students. The collaborative processes continue to be used, mostly for writing assessment. The videos in this series present several new processes to use with direct assessment of many kinds of student work.

As with any assessment process, questions of reliability and validity arise. An assessment is valid if it measures what is supposed to have been learned. Most tests can only approximate the learning. For example, when a test question asks a student to choose the right answer, it cannot assess the student’s actual ability to perform the process that leads to the right answer.

By looking directly at student work, on the other hand, educators can engage in a more valid assessment. By virtue of affording a look at what students really can do, this kind of assessment is more valid than most tests.

Reliability essentially ensures that, no matter who assesses the student work, the evaluation will be the same. In typical writing assessment processes, reliability exists because the scorers work together to calibrate their scoring on anchor or sample papers before beginning the process with new papers. On a six-point scale, a difference of one score point either way is often reliable enough for assessment purposes. Score differences of more than one point usually mean that the paper needs to be read by one or more additional readers.

The methods of looking at student work that are presented in this video series demonstrate reliability through a process of reaching consensus. Consensus building is modeled through informal conversations, rather than through a formal method. As participants start to understand the student work they are reviewing, they will naturally begin to talk with each other about how they see that work and come to a mutual understanding of that work—thereby developing reliability.

The first approach to examining student work presented in this video series is called the **Tuning Protocol**. It is a collaborative process that helps participants “fine tune” their instruction (which will lead to more “tuned” student work) using a definite process (or “protocol”).