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# Handwriting Moments in Teaching

## What to Do with Student Writing

Grading papers or giving feedback: by any name, it's often a time-consuming, thankless task with no guarantees. At last count, there were some 13 million entries on Google to the search words "grading made easy." No doubt the bulk of these entries will waver from the topic (and we didn't follow the trail for more than a page or two), but the point is this: It takes enormous effort to respond to student work. Whether or not that effort will move students ahead is anyone's guess. So the search is always on for some kind of invention that might make the process more effective and less maddening.

When it comes to writing, giving feedback gets really complicated. Writing is not just one thing. It's seemingly infinite in purposes and audiences, and in the digital age, in its forms. It's developmental. No student enters the ring with the same experiences, opportunities, abilities, or more often these days, with the same native languages. And if that weren't enough to compound the problem, writing is one of those curricular items that enjoys sporadic attention from policymakers. Sometimes they deem it essential, and other times they overlook it entirely (Murphy & Smith, in press).

The result is whiplash—for both teachers and students. One minute, writing is in the backseat. The next minute, it is surging forward. As a result, not every teacher has experience with a writing program. But whether teachers fall in the novice or veteran categories, they still face inevitable and sometimes daunting questions about the writing they've assigned to their students. What to do with the results? How to help students improve? What to look for in a piece of writing and what to do next?

If it were easy to deal with student writing—if, for example, a checklist would suffice—teachers might be searching out the nearest coffee shop where they could order a mocha latte, relax for a moment, and run down the list. But as any teacher will undoubtedly agree, there is no checklist or calculator or smartphone app or any other magic that can account for all the bits that make up a piece of writing.

The truth is that assessing student writing can feel completely random, not to mention stupefying. Randy Koch (2004) confesses that grading college essays counts as a Sisyphean chore:

I've nodded off more than once at my dining room table while grading essays, pen in my hand, chin on my chest, and the night outside our patio door swirling with bugs, headlights, and the occasional siren. I've resorted to bribing myself, vowing that once I sit down at the table with a stack of papers, I'll grade three complete essays before I get up again. Then I can have a snack, watch fifteen minutes of the Cowboys football game, or do something physical, like vacuum or take out the trash (both of which are deliciously tempting when I have essays to grade). (para 10)

And if it weren't enough that some teachers have to make deals with themselves to get through a stack of papers, for others, responding and grading brings on a kind of delirium:

When you're two-thirds of the way through 35 essays on why the Supreme Court's decision in the case of *McCulloch v. Maryland* is important for an understanding of the development of American federalism, it takes a strong spirit not to want to poke your eyes out with a steak knife rather than read one more. I have lots of friends who are teachers and professors. Their tweets and Facebook status updates when they're in the midst of grading provide glimpses into minds on the edge of the abyss—and, in some cases, already deranged. (Tierney, 2013, para 5)

So enough is enough. Someone, sometime has to invent a better way. After all, K–12 teachers and their university colleagues have invented solutions to classroom conundrums throughout the ages, including the hall pass, the seating chart, the reading corner, the author's chair, the whole array of stickers and happy notes, and not to be forgotten, the student of the day (week, month, or year). Why not come up with a way to work more effectively with student writing?

### **THE ANALYTIC WRITING CONTINUUM (AWC)**

In this book, we introduce an invention in the writing world that has brought some sanity back to the grading/commenting/responding process. At the start, this invention—a scoring guide with a system for using the guide—addressed an immediate need to assess student writing at a National Writing Project (NWP) scoring event. However, once teachers discovered the Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC), it took off into classrooms for an extended stay where it could benefit student writers.

Our goal now is to put the AWC in the hands of teachers who are interested and ready for something new. We invite our readers to look critically at the AWC as a tool to support student writing achievement in an era when writing is a central means of communication. But because we think teachers

should flee from any teaching idea that can't be reinvented for a particular situation with a particular group of students, our invitation comes with this caveat: The AWC is not cast in stone with a single set of directions for how to use it. The best thing to do is to make it your own.

Many teachers are already familiar with scoring guides or rubrics and regularly use them to spell out expectations for an assignment or project. Rubrics also describe what those expectations or criteria look like in varying degrees: from an outstanding paper to one that is not so good. Our rubric serves a similar purpose. It describes varying levels of accomplishment in writing and delineates the attributes of good writing—content, structure, stance, sentence fluency, diction, and conventions—at each level.

Rubrics like the AWC can also do a more important duty. At their best, they can help students identify what it takes to improve their writing. Imagine the breakthroughs in learning when both teachers and students know the meaning of a phrase like “outstanding control and development of ideas and content.”

But even with a shared understanding of such attributes, the teaching and learning of writing is a moveable feast with infinite combinations of writers and writing. A distinguishing feature of the AWC is that it has adapted—in both national assessment and in local classroom situations—to a myriad of variations:

- writing of different kinds
- writing in different contexts
- writing at different grade levels
- writing from writers who are at different levels of development with different backgrounds and abilities

In other words, the AWC is a flexible tool that works in multiple capacities—as an assessment tool and as a teaching/learning tool that accommodates diversity of all kinds.

The idea that teaching and assessing writing go hand-in-hand is not new. Typically, however, assessment experts in a large-scale scoring of papers and individual teachers in classrooms live on different planets. For starters, on the lucky occasions when actual student writing is the focus of an assessment, the measurements and outcomes too often fail to have much relevance in a classroom setting. They miss the mark when it comes to daily work with developing writers. One reason is that teachers seldom have a say in how their students' writing is sliced and diced in any kind of outside evaluation. This was not the case with the AWC. Teachers created the framework for its development, and then they created and tested ways to use it in the classroom, giving the AWC credibility among their colleagues. In fact, teachers were central to the entire process.

### **THE AWC STORY: A COLLABORATION OF TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS**

When National Writing Project leaders needed a scoring system for a national scoring of student papers, they turned to some great minds in education: researchers, experts in assessment, and teachers. The choice to include teachers makes perfect sense in light of the NWP mission. The National Writing Project is a network of university-based sites that work to improve writing “across disciplines and at all levels, early childhood through university” (NWP, 2010). At each site, NWP teacher consultants—exemplary teachers who participated in NWP institutes and other leadership workshops—provide professional development, conduct classroom research, publish articles, and develop curriculum and other resources. NWP’s core belief is that experienced teachers are the key to reform in education, and that writing is a critical skill that must be part of every student’s education.

So it is no surprise that writing project teachers were at the table when the NWP convened this group of experts to launch a new assessment system that would account for the diversity of student writing across the country. The task was to set the parameters for what would become a technically sound, rigorous writing assessment. But clearly the teachers were already thinking about classroom uses when they emphasized their classroom-based concerns: “The substance of the writing must outweigh emphasis on conventions.” “The focus must be on defining the quality of writing.” “We need to be able to accommodate the grade levels and prompts. . . .” “We need to be able to see growth where there is growth” (Swain & LeMahieu, 2012, p. 47–48).

Another job for the teachers and their university counterparts was to study existing rubrics in light of NWP beliefs and values. Would any of the available rubrics be a candidate for the national scoring? Here again, teachers brought their expertise to the conversation about what misfired in many of the possible rubrics:

- the language was negative, leading to a negative view of student writing
- the criteria favored “sophisticated vocabulary” over natural, honest word choices
- the criteria privileged long sentences as somehow superior to other sentence structures
- the rubric in some way invited a pre-imposed or formulaic structure
- conversely, the rubric was vague, with no clear direction about the features of good writing

Ultimately, there was one rubric that stood out from the others. The 6+1 Trait Writing Model, developed by the Northwest Lab, had the advantage

of being familiar and credible to many teachers across the country (Swain & LeMahieu, 2012, p. 45). A national panel of assessment experts<sup>1</sup> on student writing, along with senior NWP researchers, confirmed the choice of the 6+1 Trait Writing Model as the starting point for the new system. With permission and encouragement from the originators of the 6+1 Trait Writing Model, the panel modified this rubric to create the NWP Analytic Writing Continuum Assessment System.

The AWC debuted in 2005 at the first NWP National Scoring Conference. To date, eight national scoring conferences, with the Analytic Writing Continuum as the centerpiece, have produced student outcome data for numerous local and national studies, spanning grades 3–12. By the end of 2013, 724 teachers from 41 states had served as scorers at one or more national scoring conferences, scoring 48,475 student papers (National Writing Project, 2015).

Standing the test of time is one measure of an assessment system. But in the case of the AWC, which was designed for scoring all types of writing, every year brought another test as new kinds of writing showed up at national scorings, including narrative, informational, and argumentative texts—the big three in the Common Core State Standards. What’s more, the papers were not sorted into piles by type or by geographical origin. They were randomly mixed and scorers simply pulled from the stack. At the end of the day, every scoring session produced high reliabilities (see the Appendix). In other words, regardless of location, demographics, writing assignment, or any other mark of diversity, the AWC proved to be a flexible tool.

## **SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE AWC**

### **Focuses on the Writing**

The AWC spotlights the writing, not the writer—one of modifications made to the 6+1 Trait rubric. Why does this shift from writer to writing make a difference? Isn’t it helpful to know something about a student when reading his or her writing?

It’s certainly true that teachers know their students, their unique voices, their special interests, and sometimes their life stories. However, this invaluable knowledge can cause some mischief when it comes to looking at a piece of writing. Which one of us has not transported our love for a student straight to that student’s paper? Our thinking process may go something like this: “This is not Sam’s best work, but he’s really trying” or “I think I know what Sam wanted to say here.” We let our empathy for Sam color the way we view his writing, and on occasion, we even fill in the blanks for him.

Obviously, classroom teachers are not going to have amnesia when it comes to the writers behind the writing. But treating the writing as an ar-