Growing Beyond Grades

Once students are empowered to measure their own writing progress, they begin striving for great prose instead of great grades.

Natalia Perchemlides and Carolyn Coutant

We recently asked a group of middle school and high school English teachers how they determined their own success as writers. After freewriting in response, the teachers shared their answers.

"I usually like to receive feedback from readers," one teacher answered.

"If the piece is better than what I’ve done in the past, then I know I’m improving. Also, when I’ve been published, I’ve felt proud," another said.

We then asked, "How do your students define their value as writers?"

The response was instantaneous and unanimous: "Grades!"

Adult writers tend to evaluate their success on several meaningful measures, yet most students rely on grades given by teachers to assess their writing abilities. We are not claiming that students' writing shouldn't be assessed. But we question whether a letter or percentage grade given by a teacher is the most valid form of evaluation. If we want our students to become adult writers, don't we have the responsibility to show them how adult writing is judged?

We believe that writing should not be measured with a single grade. Instead, teachers should use the following four practices to teach students to independently evaluate their own writing progress.

Create a Grade-Free Zone

Letter grades are inappropriate in writing because writing development is a nonlinear process that can't be quantified by looking at any isolated piece of writing. Since the 1970s, writing researchers like Donald Graves and Janet Emig have shown that writing is a process in which students' initial ideas are often rambling and disorganized (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). The writer transforms such inchoate and vaguely defined thinking into a more coherent and polished presentation of ideas. Moving through important phases—planning, drafting, revising, editing—writers develop loosely organized thoughts and words into conventional compositions (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003).
Teachers often assign a piece of writing without allowing students the time to experience the writing process. This situation can lead to students caring more about the final grade than about the writing itself. When asked about her writing, one 6th grade girl recently remarked that

The whole time I'm writing, I'm not thinking about what I'm saying or how I'm saying it. I'm worried about what grade the teacher will give me, even if she's handed out a rubric. I'm more focused on being correct than on being honest in my writing.

An overemphasis on correctness can be especially damaging to young writers who are trying to discover their voice. Placing a grade on a student's paper often emphasizes isolated achievements—such as spelling words properly, keeping one-inch margins, or constructing the piece into five paragraphs—because, after all, style and voice can only be judged subjectively. And what exactly are grades telling students? According to researcher Lynn Holaday,

Assigning an A+ to a good paper says it's good. It also says it can't get better. . . . A grade of a D says a paper isn't good, but it also doesn't say how it could be improved. It doesn't tell the student the one thing he or she needs to know: how to become a competent writer. (1997)

Instead of giving students the message that they will have one chance at creating a perfect piece of writing, teachers need to give students the conditions necessary to work through a piece of writing from the idea stage to the polished piece, getting feedback at points along the way. The well-known instructional model for these steps is the writing workshop espoused by such teacher-researchers as Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, and Ralph Fletcher.

While students are knee-deep in the process of composing, they need feedback from both teachers and peers. Writing is never finished, but by placing a final grade on a piece of writing, teachers essentially send the message to students that their poems, essays, or stories are finished and there is no point in revising. If we want our students to grow into lifelong writers, educators must empower them to assess their own progress.

**Let Students Set Writing Goals**

Our students are the most reliable assessors of their work, and when presented with the opportunity to evaluate their writing, they are usually more aware of their strengths and struggles than their teachers are. Linda Rief, a middle school teacher in Durham, New Hampshire, writes about her experience empowering students:

I have discovered that the students know themselves as learners better than anyone else. They set goals for themselves and judge how well they reach these goals. They thoughtfully and honestly evaluate their own learning with far more detail and introspection than I thought possible. (1991, p. 135)

We have found goal setting the most effective practice to help students assess their writing growth. This approach enhances students' metacognition and makes them accountable for their
work. Each quarter, we ask our students to set writing goals that they will work toward achieving. Student writers set both product goals—aimed at completing a particular finished piece of writing—and process goals—aimed at improving various skills that are part of the writing process.

Product goals drive the process goals. If a student sets a product goal of writing a newspaper article, the process goals could be to work on such skills as punctuating dialogue or writing a news lead. In addition to identifying specific objectives, the students explain why they chose each goal. Here's a sample process goal from a 6th grader who had already set a product goal to write a short story:

Goal: To emphasize feelings in my characters.

Why: I tend to say, "She was so sad that she couldn't speak." I think I have to work on getting into my characters' shoes, feeling what they feel. I need to write, "Her mouth hung open in disbelief, tears rolling down her cheeks, as she struggled for the right words to say." I need to catch the reader's attention.

Throughout the quarter, we require students to revisit their goals and revise them as their writing work changes. At the end of the marking period, we ask students to evaluate their progress using examples from their writing. We also ask them to reflect on what they did well as writers, what tasks they had problems with, and what helped them the most with their writing. Students then assign themselves a writing grade on the basis of the progress they made toward their writing goals.

Relinquishing grading control to students is scary because, as teachers, we worry that our students won't be honest and will instead use the opportunity to elevate their grades. Our experience, however, has shown that most students are honest in their self-assessments. If anything, some are too hard on themselves. Ultimately, students who have the capability to assess themselves grow into self-directed writers and thinkers.

Provide a Common Language: The Six Traits Model

A common understanding of terms used to describe elements of writing is necessary for teachers to teach and for students to truthfully evaluate their own writing. Lack of a common language can slow writers' progress. Too often, weeks after the new school year begins on a note of hope, a frustrated teacher stands before her students and realizes that they do not understand her lessons. This realization may usher in several weeks to an entire semester of reteaching. Sometimes this reteaching is redundant: Students do understand the concept being taught but seem ignorant because they are unfamiliar with the terms that their teacher uses.

For example, a teacher who had been trying to introduce journalistic writing to her 10th graders had been using the term lead. She took for granted that her class knew what a lead was. She soon saw, however, that many of her students' leads resembled the beginnings of short stories but then broke off abruptly into factual reporting. After reteaching the concept for a week, she realized that confusion about terms was still a problem when a student raised her hand and said, "So what you want is a hook?" The students could grasp the difference between
the kinds of openings appropriate for fiction and for news articles but misunderstood what to call various types of openers.

We have yet to find a teaching approach that addresses the need for a common language about quality writing better than the Six Traits of Writing model. A group of teachers who believed in giving students an active role in assessing their own writing developed the Six Traits model in the 1980s (Jarmer, Kozol, Nelson, & Salsberry, 2000). These instructors intensively analyzed hundreds of student writing samples from all grade levels and generated a list of elements common to all the pieces they considered excellent:

- Ideas (details, development, focus);
- Organization (internal structure);
- Voice (tone and attention to audience);
- Word choice (precise language and phrasing);
- Sentence fluency (correctness, rhythm, and cadence); and
- Conventions (mechanical correctness).

In classes using the Six Traits approach, students learn to recognize these traits in strong writing before they consciously use them in a piece of their own. Teachers and students at Jennie Wilson Elementary School in Garden City, Kansas, which participated in a study on the effectiveness of the six traits, discovered the power of this common language. Jarmer and other researchers who conducted the study noted that

"Using the language of the traits, beginning in kindergarten [and building on each trait throughout the next five years], gave students the opportunity to "talk" about writing. This talk was extremely important and eventually became a part of their writing vocabulary, just like hypothesis and data were important words in a science experiment. (Jarmer et al., 2000, p. 3)"

The Six Traits method recommends that teachers or students judge each element of a piece of writing as the writing progresses rather than give one overall grade on a finished piece. This approach shows students that all writing, even a finished draft, remains in progress, and that a piece may be excellent in one area but need significant work in another. Teachers at Jennie Wilson gave students the responsibility of evaluating their own work. They asked students to defend their scores by showing how specific qualities in their writing reflected each trait. This requirement forced students to scrutinize their writing and helped them build on strengths and learn from shortcomings more than a straight letter grade ever would have.

**Provide Evaluative and Instructional Models**

Student writers need a standard to work toward. In a class in which students evaluate themselves, *evaluative models* provide a standard of quality. An evaluative model is any exemplary piece of writing that students can look to for comparison when writing their own pieces. Teachers should collect evaluative models in genres that reflect the type of writing they assign. Providing many evaluative models makes it less likely that students will model
themselves after any one author's style. Students can score these models to practice using the Six Traits evaluation process.

An instructional model is a visual map that breaks down a piece of writing to show how the parts are organized. Some educators consider instructional models restrictive and formulaic. But failing to show young writers how to organize their writing practically ensures that those writers will never be heard.

Two good sources of evaluative and instructional models for students are Step Up to Writing, developed by Auman (2003), and the Inspiration software program, developed by Inspiration Software (1988). Step Up to Writing provides developmentally appropriate, student-friendly guides full of evaluative and instructional models organized by genre and process. The guides present a visual color-coding method that primary students can use to organize their writing and ways to modify this process for students with special needs and English language learners.

The Inspiration writing software aligns directly with Auman's methods. The software guides students in mapping out and color-coding their prewriting ideas, using such graphic organizers as webs. Once students have typed out their ideas, the software gives them the capability to switch those ideas from a planning web format to a formal outline just by pressing a few keys.

Replace Fear with Excitement

The four practices outlined here provide student writers with tools to both recognize their strengths and weaknesses and set goals for improvement—tools that conventional methods of grading don't offer. When we give students freedom to take risks, a stake in their own progress, and the language to understand the writing process, their fear of writing will turn to true excitement.

References


Natalia Perchemlides (mnperch@theliteracyacademy.com) is Lead Instructor and Carolyn Coutant (ccoutant@theliteracyacademy.com) is Secondary School Specialist at the Literacy Academy, 5 Brook St., Darien, CT 06820; 203-656-3932.

Copyright © 2004 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development