



Assessing Writing

CONTENTS

The Practice of Teaching

- 3 ♦ "A Rationale for Portfolio Assessment" by Donna Miller
- 5 ♦ "Assessing Writing by Genre" by Dave Christensen
- 10 ♦ "A Different Means of Assessing Knowledge" by Dave Christensen
- 11 ♦ "Reflections on Jacob" by Kathryn Reed
- 13 ♦ "Developing a Passion for Curiosity" by Donna Miller
- 14 ♦ On Assessment, a bibliography of resources

Teachers as Writers

- 8 ♦ "Take a Line for a Walk" by Heather Bruce
- 9 ♦ "Another Invitation to Stop Defying the Research" by Donna Miller
- 10 ♦ "Mutual Assessment" by Christa Umphrey
- 12 ♦ "Dick and Jane Redux Revolution" by Heather Bruce

Announcements & Updates

- 2 ♦ Call for Submissions
- 15 ♦ Join the Montana Writing Project Curriculum Group

of the
JOURNAL
of the
Montana
Writing
Project

Spoken Word and/or Slam Poetry

Submission Deadline: June 1

Publication Date: July 1

Performance poetry can be a radically different way to experience a very traditional genre. From the auditory skill involved in polished spoken word to the high-energy, competitive nature of some poetry slams, performance poetry has the power to pull in students who aren't often interested in traditional poetry. Though slams are thriving in most major cities across the country and now you can even watch spoken word performances on cable, performance poetry doesn't yet have a large presence in Montana. Still, a few teachers are getting their students involved and the potential for spreading it further is exciting. Share your ideas. How do you incorporate performance poetry into your classroom? How do you tie this genre to improving skill and interest in writing? What resources have you found useful? How do you deal with the sometimes controversial subject matter and language in much of the most powerful spoken word work? Why do you choose to include it in your curriculum? What hurdles have you encountered and how have you got over them? What ideas and strategies would you recommend to teachers thinking about jumping in? The following categories are possible ways to share your ideas:

The Practice of Teaching: As you work to teach writing, what methods get results? You might build an article from a demonstration lesson or a successful classroom unit. Reflect on what pedagogical practices have proven effective and share some ideas or strategies we can put into play in our own classrooms. The length of the submissions for this section could vary wildly. They might be brief pieces of no more a paragraph or two that outline a successful lesson but might also materialize as lengthier pieces that explain a whole unit and give some theoretical background or support for your work.

Fresh Insight: What is happening in education that you feel you must say something about? Use this as a forum to share your views on writing education. There are many things going on at the classroom level up to the national level that we as teachers are thinking about, wanting to change, or are hopeful or angry about. This is a platform to expand and articulate some of those ideas. What important issues are those around us (or are we ourselves) not thinking enough about?

Teachers as Writers: Amid the daily chaos of teaching, what personal writing have you been able to do? What are you ready to publish? What better way to encourage all of us to continue to be writers than to offer one another some of the work we are doing. Submissions of any genre are welcome.

Book reviews: What titles have you found useful when working on writing? Consider reviewing one of your favorite texts to give others an idea of the content and approach they can expect from the author. We'd be especially interested in fairly new releases that others may not yet be familiar with.

Original Photography: Share images from your classroom, professional development, or photos that complement any of your writing submissions. Images should be sent as 300 dpi image files. Anyone who appears in the photo should be identified, along with any other relevant caption information such as a brief explanation of what is depicted, the photographer's name and an approximate date the photo was taken.

Announcements/Upcoming Events: Please pass on any information about upcoming events or opportunities or any other information that would be of interest and use to the Montana Writing Project Community.

And of course there is always be room for quality work that doesn't fit the categories above or the current thematic issue. Please consider sharing your ideas, experience, and expertise.

Upcoming issues:

Multimodal Literacy

Submission Deadline: September 1

Publication Date: October 1

Multigenre Writing

Submission Deadline: December 1

Publication Date: January 1

Submission Guidelines:

Send any submissions to montana.writing.project@gmail.com.

- Manuscripts are only accepted in digital form, saved as an RTF or Microsoft Word file.
- In general, manuscripts shouldn't exceed 2,500 words.
- Please list your name, address, academic affiliation, and e-mail address on your manuscript.

A Rationale for Portfolio Assessment

by Donna L. Miller

Although portfolio interest continues to grow in the educational community, portfolios are not a new innovation. They have been around for a long time in one form or another in the business arena; artists, models architects, interior decorators, photographers, and countless other professionals use portfolios to provide a visual representation of who they are as creative personalities. Likewise, writers can showcase their talents through this venue.

The first syllable of the word portfolio comes from the Latin root port, meaning to move. The second syllable, folio, means papers or artifacts. So, a portfolio is a portable, purposeful collection of work, papers, and/or artifacts to demonstrate efforts, progress, and achievements.

Because they align so well with the business community, portfolios are a natural in the school-to-work curriculum. A portfolio possesses the power to transform the murky exchange of business communication into a focused conversation supported by concrete examples. One outstanding work sample is worth a thousand résumé words. Thus, through a portfolio, an employer can come to know what is real in a world full of hype and hyperbole.

Because concrete examples are the most specific way to prove ability or an accomplishment, portfolios provide a powerful form of performance assessment. Furthermore, they complement the processes we now know facilitate effective student writing—time on task, active collaboration, a focus on process as well as on products, goal setting, active and rigorous revision, and reflection or self-evaluation. These same behaviors are necessary to ensure successful business practices.

I foster all of these characteristics when I utilize portfolios in both the Junior and Senior English classrooms. The juniors complete a Literacy Portfolio, usually due mid-March; and the seniors complete a Professional Portfolio, generally due in late October.

Key concepts in the Literacy Portfolio are range (genre diversity and evidence of growth), depth (meaningful representation, original approaches, experimentation), and signature (a unique and personal style, risk-taking and ownership).

“You get to look back on all the work you created and realize how much you have achieved as a writer. It teaches you to spend time correcting your papers thoroughly instead of gazing quickly through them. If you keep the portfolio, you can use it later on maybe in college as a reference to help you write persuasive essays, satirical essays, and many more.”

~ Student Katey Barber, on the beneficial aspects of creating a portfolio



Above, D.J. Stuker, who captured Best of Show honors for his portfolio, poses next to Colton Davies, the runner-up and winner of the Best Thematic Unity People's Choice Award.

With the Literacy Portfolios, students also write reflections in which they elaborate on how they learned or used certain writing techniques and strategies. It is essential after talking about strategies and practicing strategies, that students have opportunities to think about them in a conditional way, to articulate their awareness and understanding of the processes in learning to write. Research validates the value of such metacognition in developing writing skill.

Besides those central ideas, the criteria for assessment here include clear organization of contents, attention to detail, multidimensional self evaluations, strong commitment to improvement, control of the writing process (evidence of prewriting, revision, and editing), complexity of ideas and topics, overall aesthetics, and writing across the curriculum.

On the other hand, the Professional Portfolio features a Personal Profile, Cover Letter, Résumé, Complaint Letter, Job, Scholarship, and College Applications; an Academic Integrity Essay, a Turning Point Paper, a Significant Person or Character Trait Essay, a Quote Essay revealing personal



Portfolios paraded the hallways for parental perusal during spring Parent-Teacher conferences.

philosophy, a sample of the writer's best analytical, creative, technical, descriptive or persuasive writing; writing from one's career area of interest, and ten additional artifacts to reflect a well-rounded, multi-talented individual.

Once assembled with contents, division pages, and an appendix, these collections are scored on clear organization, attention to detail, strong commitment to improvement and revision, evidence of career preparation, motivation and planning; quality and appearance of professional document, quality of supporting documents, suitability of artifacts, and overall aesthetics.

Portfolios have been successful classroom practices because they provide such a valuable resource for future reference. When the student goes on to pursue post-secondary work or enters the world of work, he or she will access these collections to complete countless tasks. In this way, the portfolio acts as a kind of reference book from which to extract pieces of information for reuse.

Furthermore, the process of creating these large, on-going projects requires the vital life skills of time management, self-discipline, and responsibility.

Essentially, portfolios offer the opportunity to showcase abilities, to present, "This is who I am and here's what I can do." Consequently, these projects normally generate pride and build self-confidence.

"Don't always take the easy route. Portfolios should reveal personal aspects, because that's what you're trying to showcase. Flaunt what makes you unique!"

~Student Jaque McMaster, on the advice he would offer for creating a portfolio

MORE STUDENT THOUGHTS ON PORTFOLIOS:

What was the hardest part of the portfolio process?

"Reflections. In many cases the reflections were just as time consuming as writing the pieces they were reflecting. It was hard to reflect on papers that I had written months before. I also thought it was hard to tie a theme into my portfolio, and use it throughout, but reflections were the main difficulty."

~ Cody Broadhead

What was the best part of the portfolio process?

"The best part, for me, was the designing and decorating of my layout. I had fun with the stitches and making my cover."

~ DJ Stuker

What was your favorite section to create in the portfolio?

"I enjoyed the outside writing section the most. Not only did it exemplify my joy for writing outside the classroom, I was able to write a heart-felt reflection on the topic. They were my original creations rather than an assignment."

~ Colton Davies



Promising Practices: Assessing Writing by Genre

Dave Christensen

At the beginning of the school year I introduce my fifth-grade students to writing workshop with a variety of personal narrative forms, because by the very nature of “being personal”, students have a stake in selecting the audience and purpose and topic. One of our early personal narrative pieces evolved from picking a passion or event and telling that story in the form of an ode. Before beginning to write however, I selected odes to read for pleasure and then to reread with a writer’s eyes.

Choosing mentor texts or touchstone texts to use as exemplar models of writing within a genre, especially when written by favorite authors, provides the fodder for building one method of assessing growth. However, more importantly, doing so allows students to identify “a knowledge base of crafting techniques (moves) writers use to write well,” (Ray 2002, p. 98), ultimately strengthening their writing while providing the materials necessary to build the assessment.

Katie Wood Ray fine-tuned a process of learning to read text differently – reading like a writer – that helps my students find those tools used by authors to create good pieces of writing. I use this process to help students study a genre of writing or type of writing within genre to help them learn crafting techniques. Together we assemble a knowledge base of crafting techniques and use those techniques as a basis for assessing growth in writing within that genre.

Following Ray’s five steps of reading like a writer, we:

- Notice something about the text;
- Talk about it and make a theory about why the writer might have crafted it this way;
- Name what it is, exactly, the writer is doing in the text;
- Connect it, if we can, to another

text we know in which a writer is doing the same thing; and

- Envision ourselves making this same craft move in our writing. (p. 99)

To begin understanding the craft of writing an Ode we first read “Ode to Tomatoes” and “Ode to Conger Chowder” by Pablo Neruda, rich in imagery and word choice, both written with similar form and crafting techniques. Subsequently, we read additional odes written by authors such as Keats and Horace as well as a variety of Neighborhood Odes written by Gary Soto who captures important moments from the neighborhood of his early life, all read for noticing ode crafting techniques. I will use “Ode to Tomatoes” as an illustration of identified crafting techniques used to form the basis of assessment.

Ode to Tomatoes (translated by Margaret Sayers Peden)

The street
filled with tomatoes
midday,
summer,
light is
halved
like
a
tomato,
its juice
runs
through the streets.
In December,
unabated,
the tomato
invades
the kitchen,
it enters at lunchtime,
takes
its ease
on countertops,
among glasses,
butter dishes,
blue saltcellars.
It sheds
its own light,
benign majesty.
Unfortunately, we must
murder it:
the knife
sinks
into living flesh,
red
viscera,
a cool
sun,
profound,
inexhaustible,
populates the salads
of Chile,
happily, it is wed
to the clear onion,

and to celebrate the union
we
pour
oil,
essential
child of the olive,
onto its halved hemispheres,
pepper
adds
its fragrance,
salt, its magnetism;
it is the wedding
of the day,
parsley
hoists
its flag,
potatoes
bubble vigorously,
the aroma
of the roast
knocks at the door,
it’s time!
come on!
and, on
the table, at the midpoint
of summer,
the tomato,
star of earth,
recurrent
and fertile
star,
displays
its convolutions,
its canals,
its remarkable amplitude
and abundance,
no pit,
no husk,
no leaves or thorns,
the tomato offers
its gift
of fiery color
and cool completeness.

After first modeling the process of noticing, making a theory, naming and connecting to other odes, students worked in teams reading various odes and working through the same process. Together, we developed a graphic organizer to assemble and collect our thoughts.

What do you notice about the craft of "Ode" writing.	Make a theory about why a writer might use this craft.	Give the craft a name.

As a whole class we brought together all we had uncovered about crafting odes, connecting the texts to one another, wondering how these techniques would play out in our own ode writing and covering an entire wall with charts like the one above.

The essential noticings that emerged from our work were given names by the students in groups, but if it had a different way of being known, I brought that out and we used the vocabulary familiar to teachers. For example, students noticed that the authors used a great number of words that "popped out" as being particularly descriptive. They had forgotten the reference words for basic parts of speech such as noun, verb and adjective. The students were unfamiliar with personification and metaphor (most recalled simile from 4th grade) so that terminology was introduced to make explicit the sense of good word choice and description.

For "Ode to Tomatoes" the following noticings were used as crafting techniques that students envisioned and were expected to "try on" in their own pieces:

- Uses "Eye Catching Words" that give more vivid images in the mind
- Uses personification to give human qualities to nonhuman objects
- Uses metaphor to compare two seemingly unrelated things
- Uses sentences and phrases to create pictures in the mind
- Brings it to life – like personification but only bigger
- Uses simile to compare two unlike things
- A lot of thought put in about how you really need to make it
- Few sentences – long ones with commas
- Used periods and commas
- Told a story
- Lined out the writing – skinny – it didn't go across – few words per line, like a poem that doesn't rhyme
- Has a title
- Sequenced events
- Like an interview in the head
- Used lots of specific words – adjectives, nouns, and verbs

From this list of noticings I selected those I wanted to use to develop specific focus lessons during the two weeks of ode writing so that I could deepen student understanding of those techniques as well as meet the instructional needs outlined in the school curriculum. These techniques were expected to be evidenced in the final draft of odes. Specifically, we worked on using participle phrases, metaphor,

lining out the words for effect, use of commas and periods for effect, capitalizing poetry, and word choice – use of vivid verbs, specific nouns and specific adjectives.

When Mackenzie wrote her first draft of "Ode to Pizza" she mimicked the form and style of Neruda's Odes. She also clearly chose to line out her poem in Neruda's style, (see diagram at right) purposefully choosing specific words for each line to achieve the flow desired. Ralph Fletcher (2001) says that "We want students to evaluate their work as well. This keeps them growing as writers," (p. 105). Mackenzie went back through her drafts and identified the metaphors, purposefully placed commas, specific words used for effect, participles and capitalized the ode following Neruda's lead. Mackenzie clearly played with the language, taking what she had first written and "trying on" some of the noticings from "Ode to Tomatoes".

These same expected techniques (using participle phrases, metaphor, lining out the words for effect, use of commas and periods for effect, capitalizing poetry, and word choice – use of vivid verbs, specific nouns and specific adjectives) formed the assessment for this first ode. Students went through their work draft by draft to show evidence of using the techniques. I used a checklist to write anecdotal notes about each student's level of understanding as I conferenced with them during the writing process. I then looked at their work draft to draft to see the progression of techniques evidenced or "tried on" within the pieces and noted what I saw. Truly, the proof or lack thereof as the case may be for using the techniques showed clearly in their odes.

I use that information to form the traditional letter grade. This is the part that gets sticky. Rick Wormeli, a middle school teacher who conducts workshops on differentiated instruction made the statement something to this effect: "Not everything that is fair is

equal.” I believe that applies to student writing assessment in that inexperienced writers or struggling writers should not be held to the exact same standards of performance as others. Yes, I have high expectations for all students’ growth, and yes, I can create a rubric that looks at only the writing and use that to assign a grade; however, I am growing writers and growth takes time. What is fair and right for one student is not for another. Thus, a student with little or no skills who works hard and grows, or gives it a good go and does not grow as much but has evidenced that work and growth through process and product is deserving of a high mark just as someone with more skills who does the same deserves a high mark. These students are merely playing on unlevel fields.

Draft 1	Draft 5
A messy slice of heaven, Running Like goo, The pizza Sauce Trickles down the Oh, so cold throat. White Crust with Creamy sauce, Cheese with porky circles, Topping It all off With an olive or two. You add ham, A Frisbee of delight, Melting into the freshly hredded cheese Wich soakes into the tomatoe. Then, you slowy rase This gloriose Bit of food, Vigorously Chomping, Your mouth has Stopped watering, And this concoction, Tumbling, Bubbles in your glove, Deciding for you that A Meatlovers Pizza is just for you.	A messy slice of heaven, running like a river, floods the white, blank and bare land as intently as a bear chases a fox. There’s the white crust with creamy sauce, cheese with porky circles. You add ham, a Frisbee of delight, with sausage that shall soon be murdered, both melting into the freshly shredded cheese which soaks into the burgundy blood of a great fox. And to top it all off, you add an olive or two. Then, you slowly raise this glorious bit of food, sauce falling from blackened and dead vines which thrashes against the pale rock wall. Vigorously chomping, your mouth has stopped watering, and this concoction, tumbling, bubbles inside your globe, deciding for you that a meatlovers pizza’s just for you.

Now back to that sticky part. The grade a student receives is based on evidencing growth over the entire quarter for all of the different pieces written. Truthfully, writing one ode and having participated in a series of focus lessons to foster growth and skill acquisition is not enough to sufficiently understand and apply skills in a range of writing situations. The techniques taught need to be supported and enriched during subsequent writing experiences and added to other techniques

to build a more solid base of writing development. Hence, every piece does not get a grade, rather at the end of the quarter, all of the evidence, piece by piece is used to negotiate a grade based on use of the growing set of crafting techniques, completing the required pieces, and trying on those techniques noticed as exemplar techniques for writing within a particular form. Students and I set goals for continued learning the next marking period.

In my classroom this process of assessing writing supports my rationale for teaching writing with promising, emerging and effective practices. I believe that the theory behind differentiated instruction where the teacher gears the content and or process to meet individual needs of students in the classroom, laying the “one-size-fits all” factory model of teaching to rest also applies to assessing writing. Differentiating writing assessment by genre and even type within genre allows the teacher to assess specifically targeted curriculum supported writing skills over time within a specific arena of writing. By narrowing the scope of what we assess to those skills previously acquired and newly acquired, teachers can better target student needs and foster the kind of growth and development each student needs.

References

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Take a Line for a Walk: a prompt for writing and thoughts about assessment Heather Bruce

Artist Paul Klee said that drawing is like “taking a line for a walk.” His reference explains his aesthetic dictum - his use of geometric lines to shape space and color.

Take a Line for a Walk, an art activity from Linda Woods

Alone or with a partner. Make a line that curves, zigs and zags, has corners, etc. all around the paper. Turn the paper around until you see something that you can develop. Begin adding pattern, turn something into an elaborate eye, add more facial detail, add more pattern, keep going until the page is filled with pattern, thickened lines (from your original lines) to add emphasis, etc. Use for value studies or coloring if time permits.

Take a Line for a Walk, a writing activity

Journal writing can be hard. The blank page sits ready, teasing you and your pen. A million and one thoughts swirl around and you can't settle on just one. And as soon as the best idea one does float into your mind, you start to worry about whether or not you can get it down and how that will all look on the finished page of your journal. Or perhaps maybe you never get an idea at all, so your page sits blank once more, awaiting the muse. Sometimes it's easier to not write than it is to write at all with all this pressure.

Fortunately, for those times when you feel the pressure, or can't think of a single thing to write about there are prompts. These small snippets of thoughts or questions or pictures help assist you in getting out of the writer's funk and into the writing process. One is to “Take a line for a walk...” modeled after Klee's ideas about drawing.

Read a passage, find an idea, word, phrase, line that strikes you for one reason or another. Copy it out and take it on in your own words.

I read the following by Alice Walker, with the attendant reference from Rilke:

Reassurance
By Alice Walker

I must love the questions
themselves
as Rilke said
like locked rooms
full of treasure
to which my blind
and groping key
does not yet fit.

and await the answers
as unsealed
letters
mailed with dubious intent
and written in a very foreign tongue.

and in the hourly making of myself
no thought of Time
to force, to squeeze
the space
I grow into.

- from *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*

[and here is Rilke's advice to which Walker alludes...]

uncertainty

“...be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms
and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.
Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you
because you would not be able to live them. And the point
is, to live everything. Live the questions now.”

Taking a line for a walk, I wrote:

I must love the questions themselves... As we proceed as educators, as learners, it always seems we get caught up in the trajectory toward outcomes, measurable achievement, end goals, end games, end runs around the learning process, which should otherwise be steeped in the unfamiliar, the unknown, the beauty and thrill of uncharted territory rather than the anxiety of heading to some level of measured progress that has been arbitrarily determined as the right level of attainment for this or that.

Teachers ought to know better.

Yet, we get hung up on institutional protocol and obligation and seduced into believing that this test or that exam or those test scores tell us all we need to know about this or that kid – or colleague – or whomever.

To love the questions themselves, if that were really our aim, would take us to places we've never considered going... would help us discover that learning is so much more than getting the right answer. To love the questions themselves, we would need to be much more patient with the learning process. We would bear witness to a parade of celebration for the spaces we might grow into...

Another Invitation to Stop Defying the Research

by Donna L. Miller

Early in her new book, *The Grammar Plan Book: A Guide to Smart Teaching* (Heinemann, 2007), Constance Weaver offers old news: "If improving writing is our primary goal, it is time for a major change in how we teach grammar (4). Research and educators have wrestled with that issue for decades, but I'm finally realizing why teachers are such slow learners, why many have defied the research for so long.

Teachers are overworked, and systematic, one-size-fits-most instruction with subjects like grammar offers a lighter work load: the lessons are governed by rules, so the paper grading, all objective, can often occur with some speed; thus saving precious time, red pens from early extinction, and teachers from premature burn-out.

Besides, stepping out of one's comfort zone and taking risks isn't easy for many teachers who may not even have the proper professional development or training to effectively teach writing. And unless teachers are reading the research and professional publications on the topic, they may not even realize the extent of the problem: Doing grammar lessons will not improve writing, so valuable teaching time is spent on a subject showing no results. However, using grammatical resources will produce more interesting prose.

If these facts resonate with you, Weaver's book provides the solution, what she calls the "training wheels for the smart teacher" (7). To this end, Weaver offers ten principles to guide the smart teaching of grammar for writing (7-8) and provides a wealth of resources for expert as well as novice teachers. "Instead of trying to 'cover' one thing after another, rapidly and superficially" (16), Weaver encourages teaching grammatical constructions during the writing process; she even provides a framework (23) and, for those who like them, a scope and sequence model (142-145).

However, as they shift their teaching paradigms, teachers can't expect immediate results and instant writing transformation; research also suggests "children [require] eight to ten repetitions of a concept before it [is] learned" (22). On this learning journey, teachers need to unlearn their red pen and error hunting mentalities and instead monitor how writers create meaning, shape prose, and clarify points.

To achieve this goal, Weaver advocates using models, since students "learn from studying powerful examples from books they like: imitating, trying, playing with . . . the most important concepts" (28). After all, "visuals and examples are more powerful teachers than rules" (30), and "student writers don't have to remember grammatical terms to comprehend, appreciate, and imitate effective examples of language use" (35).

Yet, Weaver does agree that we all need some basic terms, a common vocabulary, to talk about effective language use, and for that, a background in grammar helps; just not the "traditional grammar fraught with contradictions and unnecessary distinctions" (35). For educators feeling inadequate in this arena, Weaver supplies a primer in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four elaborates on those basics and advocates for sentence imitation, sentence combining, and sentence expansion with participial and absolute phrases. As teachers present their mini-lessons, Weaver reminds them at every turn, not to criticize writers for creating "wrong" constructions. These are not failures but essential trial and error steps toward mastery. Furthermore, with experimentation we should anticipate some errors, and if we keep in mind our over all purpose: to help students generate more effective sentences, we will notice progress where it counts—in the production of more pleasant prose.

In response to current social trends towards test addiction, Weaver also includes a chapter addressing test preparation. Again, she encourages learning the demands and expectations of the test, using models, and teaching students to "code switch" for this new genre.

Part Two of *The Grammar Plan Book* provided no novel information for me, a confident grammarian who has already read and incorporated many of Harry Noden's notions from *Image Grammar* (Heinemann 1999) into my teaching. Instead, Weaver designed this section of her book to help those

who have little or no background in English grammar or to demonstrate to traditionalists how grammar is still at the core of writing, just not in the spotlight. Her objective is to replace the grammar books with their answer keys, to convert those who currently rely on this method, or to assist those who need resources in answering student questions or assistance in planning grammar lessons directly relating to writing.

With this section's first three parts, a teacher receives self-guided professional development without the cost of college credits; this is an on-line course without the computer. While Weaver is thorough in her lessons, she also prioritizes so that teachers themselves can learn and then adapt those lessons as plans for teaching grammar an "inch wide and a mile deep" (73) by putting it in the context of writing instruction. In Part D, Weaver presents some more advanced ideas on style, rhetoric, and conventions with periodic sentences, inversions, and other syntactical shifts. I especially like the "Rules That Don't Rule" section (136-141) where Weaver discusses several "nonrules."

From Weaver's valuable resource, the lessons I plan to immediately implement are the prequel/sequel idea that accompanies *The Paper Bag Princess*, a children's book by R. N. Munsch (17-22); an adaptation of the "I Am" poetry format for teaching absolutes, appositives, and participles (44, 49-52); and for lessons on parallel structure and the implementation of adverbial clauses, the use of David Bouchard's picture book *If You're Not from the Prairie* (24-26) and Cynthia Rylant's *When I Was Young in the Mountains* as models (45-46).

Essentially, with her book Weaver shows teachers how to make experimentation with the grammar-writing connection creative and rewarding for both teachers and students as education pushes for positive, measurable results in enriching and enhancing writing. Weaver's rationale for embracing change makes sense, and after reading this text, you will discover that some of the old excuses for defying the research will no longer apply.



Dave Christensen teaches fifth-grade at Lolo Middle School in Lolo, Montana. Literacies, both textual, non-textual as well as the ways in which they intersect in the digital arena, have become significant inquiry sources for Dave, providing countless hours of pondering, wondering, and research into emerging and promising literacy practices.

Student Reflection Survey: A Different Means of Assessing Knowledge

Dave Christensen

A fairly quick and easy method of gathering information about student growth is to have students complete a writing survey at the beginning of the year and at the end of each quarter. I begin to see in a different way how my fifth-grade students view themselves as writers and as acquirers of skills and strategies. In fact the types of techniques students acquire show up in responses, but even more importantly, as a teacher of writing, I get reflective glimpses into how students conceptualize what I am teaching.

I pose the same seven questions each time so that I can directly compare the responses with one another and track the development of their thoughts about writing over the course of the year. Collecting and sifting through the responses takes little time and laying them next to the previous responses goes rather quickly as well.

Students are prompted to answer the questions as well as they can with as much detail and evidence from their writing lives as possible. The questions were drawn from a number of sources and modified over time to fit my needs. The questions are as follows:

- How does a person become a good writer?
- What do you have to know and be able to do to become a good writer?
- What skills and abilities do you know how to do and use well in your writing?
- What skills and abilities do you not know how to do and use well in your writing?
- How good of a writer are you?
- How do you know you are that kind of writer (the answer given in question 5)?
- What skills and abilities do you need to learn how to use so that you can become a better writer?

To give you an idea of the type of information I get from fifth-grade students, I have included a few responses from the survey administered the first day of school and at the end of the first quarter.

Brenna in her Beginning of the Year Survey (BYS) describes the skills and abilities she knows how to do well in this way, "In my writing I know how to use descriptive words." Her End of First Quarter (EFQ) response indicated some of the techniques used and concepts emphasized during writing workshop that first quarter, "I know how to make a few words into a participle and absolutes. The skills I use well in my writing are detail and bringing something short and making it long. I took the three seconds of passing by a meadow and made it into one page."

Mitch in his BYS response to how a person becomes a good writer wrote, "Reading books." His EFQ response was "They read books, try different strategies, combine strategies, learn unusual words, add humor, learn description and everything else." I take credit for teaching him "everything else" as well, I think!

These examples provide only brief glimpses into the type of information you might learn about your students as writers that does evidence itself in written work. It helps me plan instruction and set goals with and for my students. By the end of the year, I have five of these surveys to lie side by side. My students analyze them as well to see their own progression as reflective writers and as writers knowledgeable about what they know and are able to do.

Mutual Assessment

Teacher, please remember
I'm a person
not a problem to be solved,
not a situation to control.
When you are desperately
trying to teach,
certain I'm not listening
to anything you say,
know I am
paying very close attention,
not just to what you say
but how.
Understand I'm deciding
if you are up to your job.

If you figure out
what music makes me smile,
I may consider
the texts you think
will make me think.
If you take the time
to understand what I do well,
I may consider
the risk of something new.

But when I don't work,
it's your first test.
Think before you act.
If you fail,
So do I.

Christa Umphrey

Reflections on Jacob

By Kathryn H. Reed

Throughout my experience at the Montana Writing Project Summer Institute, I was asked to consider my current teaching practices and who these practices were reaching and who they were not. Then I was asked to inquire how I could become a more effective teacher.

I am a nurturer, and my goal is to positively influence all of my students in one way or another. However, I have come to realize, though rather unhappily, that my teaching does not reach all of the students in my classes. Some of my students get left behind.

Who gets left behind in my classroom? I think I lose those students who have lower skills, because I rush through subject matter. There is so much to cover that I race through things, forcing my slower-moving students to pick up the pace or fall behind. I offer help to these students during study hall, but often they have so much work to do that they do not have time for specific English help. Further, I do not think that I reach the ones that “don’t care,” because I do not understand this philosophy; as a result, I do not know how to connect with students that really do not care or students that act as if they do not care. Finally, I do not seem to reach the kids without parental support the way I reach the kids who do have support.

As I thought about my practices, who in my classroom might feel left behind, and who might feel or be marginalized, I kept coming back to one student. In many ways, I think I failed him as his teacher last year, but I tried every intervention I could think of with him. Each one proved unsuccessful. I tried kindness, structure, rewards, and extra support, and none of these worked. I tried tough love and punishment, and neither of these worked. I consulted my colleagues with more experience than I have, but nothing we tried worked with this student.

Jacob is a cute, funny, vibrant young man. Early in the school year I knew that he would be one of my EGRs (Extra Grace Required). He was often late to class, disorganized, and flighty, but he worked hard and turned most of his work in. Soon it became obvious that he was below grade level in reading and writing and that he would need extra help in these areas. Our team decided to move him into my Advisor class, so that I could help him with his work. At Parent-Teacher conferences, his mom seemed very supportive of him and us.

Then semester two came, and everything fell apart. I would talk to him in order to find out what was going on. I think I listened, but he never said much. He stopped doing his homework and class work so the ability to know if he understood the content was gone. His mother, at first, talked a good line, but soon she was simply unavailable. As a team, we put him on a contract, which his mother said she supported, but when he failed to meet his goals, she did not reinforce the consequences she had agreed to. No matter the reward or punishment, he would not work in class or at home. It did not matter the class or topic; nothing motivated him. At one point he had a 0% in my class. What does a teacher do with the kid who refuses to be helped? How do you assess a student who never gives you anything to assess?

By the end of the year, Jacob had not turned in any of the poems we had been working on in English (or most of the assignments for his other classes), and he would not do them in class or during Advisor. We told



Kathryn H. Reed teaches 6th grade English at C.R. Anderson Middle School in Helena, Montana.

him that he would not get to go on the field trip to the water park if he did not get his work done for English and that he had all day to finish it. He sat and sat and sat.

Finally his friend Tucker sat down next to him and encouraged him to get to work. Tucker pulled out a piece of paper and began asking Jacob questions.

“What does your painting remind you of?” Tucker asked Jacob.

“My grandparent’s pond,” Jacob responded.

“Good; write about that,” Tucker said, and miracle upon miracle, Jacob began to write. Soon, Jacob handed his paper to Tucker to review. After reading it, Tucker said, “Good job. I like it a lot, but if it were me, I’d look at the last line again.”

Jacob did and made some alterations and turned it in! The

same process continued as Tucker worked with Jacob. They were on a roll, and Jacob was writing! I conferred with my fellow teachers, and then I told Jacob that if he finished the other three poems that he could go on the field trip. Jacob's face lit up. He quickly grabbed another piece of paper, and then another. Soon he caught up, and he was going swimming. Later my fellow teachers told me that Jacob had told them about his success. They said that he was pretty cool. He said, "Yea," and touched his finger to his tongue, then his butt, and said, "Stzzz!"

What was it about Tucker's intervention that worked when all of our interventions had not worked? We had tried exactly the same methods without success. Tucker tried it, and both Jacob and he were successful. At this point, I do not have the answer to this question, but I know that I will continue to ponder this situation. I will also be more aware of the marginalized students in my classes and how I can better support them and their learning. I believe that I can set up my classes differently so that next summer I can say that I met more of the needs of all of my students. I intend to consider my classroom community and instruction in new ways so that my students can be more successful.

**The names of the students have been changed to protect their privacy.*

Author's note: Since writing this reflection last summer I have worked to make my classroom more inclusive of my marginalized students. I think I have made progress, but now I fear that I am moving too slowly for my gifted students. I suppose balance will come one day, as long as I continue to reflect on my current practices, but sometimes the "wobble" can be quite a challenge.

Dick and Jane Redux Revolution

I'm mad?
I'm sad.
I'm bad!
Be glad...

Help, help!
I'm trapped in this
choke hold
of yearning to know.
Let me out.
Let me breathe.

Sounds like I've slipped
into a vortex of stilted lines
crayoned into empty pages
of controlled vocabulary.
Look and say... they
dare.

I cannot be your Maria Montessori
your John Dewey...
don't scour me there. Freire
teaches that you must generate
your own learning... live to read
the word, the world. Teach
as if you were in it. Literacy, that is,
for freedom. Pedagogy
of the oppressed.
Of them, not *for* them.

Will you leap or scorn?
Look and do.

Heather E. Bruce
July 7, 2005; July 4, 2006

(Thanks to Ashley Gallagher for helping with this.)

Developing a Passion for Curiosity

by Donna L. Miller

Upon first glance, Deborah Dean's book *Strategic Writing: The Writing Process and Beyond in the Secondary English Classroom* looks a bit too strategic; it resembles text-intensive research more than a user-friendly how-to-book for writers. However, reading the book reversed my perception. This text offers some important reminders as well as multiple writing strategies.

Many of Dean's ideas are not new: metaphors as a way to extend thinking; the reading writing connection and annotating text for meaning; student talk as an inquiry strategy, writing to learn, inquiry as essential to good writing, using models, and the writing process.

What makes Dean's work unique is her argument that "being strategic with regard to process doesn't necessarily mean stopping what we've done before. Instead, it means being more thoughtful about what we've done before and taking a different perspective on it. The processes that help us narrow or focus a topic or come up with a question we want to research—these must be considered as strategies, as tools" (7). In this way, we invite our students into the inquiry process to discover what brainstorming really does for a writer, to determine when it might be an effective tool or when another tool might be a better strategy to accomplish the writer's goals. These practices, Dean argues, are necessary for both teacher and student engagement in order to become strategic about the writing process. With multiple strategies, with the skill to be strategic and to develop solutions to writing problems, students can surmount writing challenges and accomplish their writing goals.

To reinforce this concept, Dean presents levels of knowledge:

Levels of knowledge are an important aspect of being strategic, of gaining control over writing. Declarative knowledge is knowledge about something. . . . Procedural knowledge is knowledge of how to do something. . . . And conditional knowledge is knowledge about when to employ a certain strategy (5).

From being strategic, we realize what writers do, what works, and why it works. Dean's book is worthwhile for these nineteen Strategy Practice boxes alone. They are inquiry-based miniature writing lessons.

Dean also shares complete lesson plans for projects like I-Search a Word (41-51), How-To Writing (71-81), Reversal Papers (98-110), Brochures as an alternative to the traditional research paper (135-146), and Writing about a Person (169-175).

I immediately pirated and implemented in my classroom, her Writer's Log (17-18) as a literary response design to further encourage students to read like writers and offered the How-To genre as an option to make social commentary and to create humor in our satire writing unit.

I also found certain techniques like Fat Drafting (166-167) intriguing as an idea development strategy used during the revision process and her Says-Does (65) questioning strategy for investigating text a companion to Katie Wood Ray's Reading Like a Writer protocols.

Another perk of the book, the resource titles referenced by Dean throughout, provide writing ideas and models for use in demonstration lessons for helping students build texts. For example, Dean cites Leigh Ann Tyson's article in *National Geographic* (2003) "An Interview with Harry the Tarantula" as "a good model for students who are practicing the interview genre" (62) and offers *One Leaf Rides the Wind* (Viking, 2002) by Celeste Mannis as an "informative picture book that combines short prose paragraphs with haiku poetry to provide information (and a feeling) about Japanese gardens. . . . The book is a good model of how writers can write to inform (as a purpose) in an interesting way" (133). In addition, *The Secret Knowledge of Grown-Ups* (HarperCollins, 2001) by David Wisniewski exemplifies the rhetorical devices of satire.

About using models, Dean cautions: "Instead of using models as formulas, I want my students to think of them as presenting options

that are available to them as writers (65), . . . not . . . as forms that must be followed strictly. . . . In discovering what a text does, students are also discovering how it does it, how language and sentence fluency help to create the effects they feel" (67).

Besides these benefits, Dean's book offers an argument about the much contested five-paragraph essay, a formula she refers to as a "default strategy, one to use if you have no other viable options" (17). While the five-paragraph model provides a scaffold, a structure on which to hang ideas, other organization strategies exist; teachers need to offer these to students since the "five-paragraph form [reduces] writing to a kind of fill-in-the-blank simplicity" (124).

Dean goes on to explain the principles and history behind the five-paragraph genre, "a genre meant to help overburdened teachers read lots of papers quickly" (124). Ideas occur in key positions so readers can find them easily; the skeleton frame guides busy readers (124). "After students have a chance to practice some of the aspects of the five-paragraph form, they should both talk and write about the conditions under which the form would be useful, when it would not, and why. In this manner, they can begin to develop their own rationale for its appropriateness at the same time as they develop an understanding of how wiring for different purposes shapes how we write" (124-125).

Dean further argues that students can learn some of the principles of the five-paragraph essay without actually writing one. Thus, she offers samples and alternatives for practicing the same set of skills without the rigidity of formulaic writing, without encouraging empty development.

By the time I had finished reading this book that invites active engagement with its strong verbs: Inquire, Investigate, Consider, Respond, Rethink, I celebrated Dean's book for its strategies, for its inquiry-based approach that encourages teachers to foster a passion for curiosity.

On Assessment

A bibliography of resources related to assessing writing from
Montana Writing Project teacher consultants

Cooper, Charles R. and Lee Odell, Ed. *Evaluating Writing: The Role of Teachers' Knowledge about Text, Learning and Culture*. Urbana: NCTE, 1999.

This is an anthology of essays on assessment by a diverse group of teachers of writing. It acknowledges the various controversies surrounding assessment and presents possible solutions. All of the essays make the following assumptions: that writing teachers need to: 1) differentiate between grading and evaluating, 2) develop our ability and language to talk about student writing, 3) make clear connections between teaching and evaluating and 4) frequently reflect on the assumptions and practices that instruct assessment of student writing. The collection covers many assessment issues: from portfolios to being a reflective reader of student texts to assessing students whose first language is not English.

Graves, Donald Graves. *Testing is not Teaching*. Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2002.

Testing Is Not Teaching is a thin little volume, just over 100 pages. In it, Graves doesn't share techniques for assessing writing, but he shares his philosophy about some of ways our educational community is addressing writing these days. It's possibly his most political book yet, and Graves takes on some of today's big issues surrounding education and assessment. The book is really a collection of 22 mini-essays that will probably resonate with teachers who have liked the other work Graves has done. The format also makes it easy to fit in time to read one of his short arguments when you need to remember not everyone agrees with the popular current ways of assessing our students.

Hout, Brian. *Rearticulating Assessment: Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2002.

This book helps writing teachers design site-based, locally controlled writing assessment procedures that concentrate on helping student writers assess their own writing effectiveness thus becoming better writers. Huot helps teachers to understand the differences between assessment and evaluation practices. This book also helps its readers be able to articulate why local practices for assessment are better means than unnecessary, standardized or large-scale (expensive) assessments for making links between pedagogy and evaluation. A must-read for college level writing teachers/administrators; valuable insights into assessment for anyone who teaches writing.

Mahoney, Jim. *Power and Portfolios: Best Practices for High School Classrooms*. Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2002.

Jim Mahoney's *Power and Portfolios* was a great help to me as I was rethinking was to assess writing. And while I don't use those exact methods now, the strategies I gained from his book started me on a completely new path with regard to assessment. I even had an email correspondence with Jim Mahoney for a while as I was trying out some of the ideas in his book.

***More Ways to Handle the Paper Load: On Paper and Online*. Ed. Jeffrey Golub. Urbana: NCTE, 2005.**

Though the title sounds like this book might just offer tips on time management or a few ideas on structuring assignments to lighten your work load, it also really offers a lot of insight on various approaches to assessment. This is an updated version of the popular 1979 NCTE text that now takes into account the new options opened by technology. The contributions from 23 different authors and author teams are divided into four chapters: Ideas for Classroom Practices, Procedures, and Portfolios; Ideas for Engaging Students in Peer Review; Ideas for Evaluating Students' Writing; and Ideas for Handling the Electronic Paper Load. Nearly every piece at least touches on areas of assessment.

***The Portfolio Standard: How Students Can Show Us What They Know and are Able to Do*. Ed. Bonnie S. Sunstein and Jonathan H. Lovell. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000.**

This is a handy book for those who think they might want to implement portfolio assessment, but want some ideas about how to begin. The collection is made up of essays from sixteen different authors (among them Jeffrey Wilhelm, Linda Rief, and Deborah Appleman) who give advice and share ideas about how they use portfolios in their classrooms. The authors have a range of backgrounds and teaching experiences and come from various parts of the country. By reading through their experiences you get a good idea of some of the important questions in portfolio assessment.

Strickland, Kathleen and James. *Reflections on Assessment: Its Purposes, Methods and Effects on Learning*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998.

This book provides an overall snapshot of assessment issues and topics. The authors discuss assessment's influence on instruction and the uses and constraints of testing, rubrics, portfolios and letter grades. It does provide some suggestions for authentic assessment and various rubric models, but it is primarily an overview of assessment-related issues.

Tchudi, Stephen. *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing*. Urbana: NCTE, 1997.

Tchudi's book does just what the title promises to do: it examines various alternatives to the traditional letter grade for assessing writing. It does not, however, profess to have found the perfect system. The book is a compilation of a group of essays pulled together by members of a NCTE committee on Alternatives to Grading. The essays cover background

theory, what kinds of responses help make good writers, and finally, suggestions for alternative assessment systems (contracts, portfolios, holistic grading, assessing with parents, etc).

Tobin, Lad. *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants.* Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers (Heinemann), 2004.

Tobin's book reads like a personal essay full of assessment theory and humor. (Did you ever think those two concepts would be side by side?) He is the director of Composition at Boston College and reflects on questions about both reading and responding to student writing. What should we do with our personal reactions to student essays? What about the personal, potentially sensitive nature of those essays? How can teachers of writing stave off boredom and burnout? He addresses these and several other vital questions for teachers of writing at all levels.

Wiggins, Grant and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design.* Columbus: Prentice Hall, 2005.

The philosophy that drives much of the text is their backward design concept, where you begin with the final evaluation and the assessments you'll do along the way and then plan your activities and curriculum work from there—starting with the end in mind. This concept is much more mainstream than when their first edition came out nearly a decade ago, but they still offer solid advice and take into consideration the current testing emphasis and teachers decreased control over creating their curriculum. They discuss the difference between covering the material, and using questions to 'uncover' the material and use first hand examples of practices and texts to show what they mean. Some of the text is a bit repetitive but

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State Officers

Heather E. Bruce, Director

Department of English, University of Montana
heather.bruce@umontana.edu

Donna L. Miller, Co-Director

English Instructor, Chinook High School
Millerd@chinookschools.org

Dave Christensen, Co-Director

5th Grade Teacher, Lolo School
christensens@montana.com

Staff :

Caroline Simms

Program Coordinator
caroline.simms@umontana.edu

Christa Umphrey

Technology Liason & Publication Editor
christabel.umphrey@umontana.edu
montana.writing.project@gmail.com

Montana Writing Project
University of Montana, LA 133
Missoula, MT 59812