

**When the Writing Isn't Right:  
Collecting Student Work for Assessment & Instruction**

**Rationale**

I was sitting at my desk last June working on an end-of the year professional development plan when I was summoned to the principal's office for a meeting. I walked to the office nervously thinking, "This must be something big; he never pages me over the intercom." He informed me that all seventh students who were at risk of failing to meet the promotional requirements would have to submit a portfolio of their work in English Language Arts (ELA) to the regional superintendent. A benchmark had been created to make promotional decisions since the complete ELA test scores from January 2006 had not been released by the New York State Department of Education. All students who fell below this benchmark and/or were failing English would have to attend summer school if they did not produce work in reading and writing that demonstrated grade-level proficiency. Thus, I was told to collect work from the past year from all of the students on the list, re-assess their work and bring it back to the principal for review. But there were two problems: neither of the two teachers who taught these students had kept their work and I had less than two weeks to assemble portfolios for over thirty students.

I could not do anything about the fact that the teachers had not kept students' work except be disappointed. One teacher was a five-year veteran who did not agree with the balanced literacy curriculum and he had struggled throughout the year the school year with his students, his peers and the administration. The other teacher was a first year alternatively certified teacher

who was still learning to manage a class full of rambunctious pre-teens. Innocently, he had not realized that keeping student work was important for making instructional decisions.

Nonetheless, as the literacy coach, it was my role to rectify the situation and quickly prepare accurate portfolios.

### **Context**

My role primarily involves supporting my colleagues' professional growth in teaching ELA. My work with eight new and veteran teachers consists of demonstrating teaching strategies, planning curricular calendars, writing and modeling lessons and reviewing assessment data. I also work informally with students throughout the school by conferring with them about reading and their books, getting new books from the supply room and helping them with their writing assignments in the classroom.

I work at Juan Morel Campos Secondary School (JMC) located in Williamsburg, New York. JMC is a Title 1 school in which 71% of the students are Hispanic and 23% of African-American. In New York City, when at least 90% of the student body population comes from low-income households, a school is eligible for a Title 1 grant funding from the United States Department of Education. This grant affords our school money for my position, extensive classroom libraries and additional professional development support from Teachers College Reading and Writing Project.

As a School in its third year of SINI (school in need of improvement) status, Juan Morel Campos has not met Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) on the accountability measure for the past two years despite receiving Title 1 funds. The student body population and the subgroups (ethnic groups, students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency) have not met a

minimum target score on the New York State English Language Arts test for two years in a row. Students are measured from levels one through four. The pressure to move our students from level two to level three is intense. For me, the creation of this portfolio to justify our students' ELA skill level despite their poor standardized test scores was the manifestation of this pressure.

I was angry and frustrated at the unreasonable expectation that I produce these portfolios on such short notice. I wondered, "If teachers and literacy coaches had been removed from their regular assignments in January and February to score the ELA test, why, in June, were the scores not available?" I also thought, "When did the Regions make this decision and why am I finding out so late?" I realized that the job would have been much easier had the student work already been available. Since the New York City Department of Education created an assessment package with writing assignments, reading and editing passages, the decision makers must have expected that many schools would need a system to meet this mandate. But I felt that requiring schools to turn around these portfolios in such short notice was unrealistic and overwhelming. In her article, "Can High Stakes Writing Assessment Support High-Quality Professional Development, Susan Callahan discusses how the initial stages of implementing a portfolio system in Kentucky public schools were a source of tension and difficulty for school staff. Callahan writes, "The first problem occurred in response to the speed with which the assessment was implemented. Consequently, the first few years of the portfolio assessment was chaotic. Teachers and administrators were overwhelmed by feelings of loss, anxiety and struggle (339). Like the staff members in Kentucky, I was frustrated by the requirement to create portfolios. This task negatively impacted my work with teachers because I was required to meet a deadline that conflicted with my professional development plans for the following year.

During the summer of 2006, I reflected critically on my school and my work as literacy coach in the context of this experience. I felt this intense pressure to make positive improvement happen quickly given our school's SINI status. However, my previous action research suggested that school reform is an incremental process whereby teacher collaboration prevails over a top-down, micro-managerial approach. I wondered how I could help my school be more prepared for last minute assessment policies, show that our students were making progress and support my colleagues' professional growth. Since JMC did not have an official policy around maintaining and reviewing student work across the school year, I thought that if I helped teachers create a system to collect, assess and review their students' work, we could design data driven instructional plans that more accurately addressed our students' weaknesses. In September 2006, I began the process of implementing a portfolio system with three of my colleagues.

### **Action Research Question**

What happens when I help teachers develop a portfolio system for collecting and assessing student writing?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Portfolios**

Much has been written about portfolio-based assessment. Some articles explain why portfolios are an important classroom tool. In "Keeping Writing Portfolios" Maryann and Gary Manning suggest that portfolios help teachers collect a range of data about their students that is appropriate for evaluation. Other researchers document their experience in implementing portfolio-based assessment within their school or district. Susan Mandel Glazer, Katrin-Kajoa

Rooman and Kristine Luberto detail their journey to develop portfolios in a New Jersey school in “User Friendly Portfolios: The Search Goes On.” They contend that establishing a clear purpose, utilizing flexible measurement tools and focusing on moving portfolios beyond collections of student work helped them move on the right path towards success with using portfolios in their classrooms. Combining both approaches to looking at portfolios, Susan Callahan and Elizabeth Spalding defend the validity of portfolios, discuss the implementation process within Kentucky schools and examine its impact on professional development.

### **Rubrics to assess writing**

The research supports many different positions regarding the use of rubrics to assess writing. Some advocate rubrics to help teachers objectively and honestly review a piece of writing and to help students see what makes writing work. Vicki Spandel explores the criticism of rubrics but maintains that they are useful instructional tools for grading students’ work.

### **Writing & At-Risk Students of Color**

In “Poetic Expressions: Students of Color Express Resiliency Through Metaphors and Similes” Horace Hall documents his experience working with adolescent African American and Latino male students in an after-school writing program. The author maintains that there is a dearth of research that discusses how these marginalized groups experience academic success. His study demonstrates the academic potential of male students of color. Hall recounts how he created a safe space within which the students felt free to discuss their shared realities which in turn enabled the students to engage in creative writing expression that exemplified self-awareness and cultural pride.

## **Initial Steps**

### **Portfolio Crates**

My principal approved my order of crates and hanging folders in early September. The pupil personnel secretary printed out labels for each student and with the help of two former students, Isaiah and Tevion, I created portfolio crates for each class. I stacked the crates in my office in order to have a central location for all the portfolios. I also created data sheets for each class (Appendix A). I filled in each student's current reading level and previous year's ELA test score on the data sheets. I also left additional space to enter the grades for future writing projects and assessments.

## **Tools**

### **Weekly Journal Notes**

- Reflections on my thoughts and concerns
- Quotes of poignant teacher comments from informal discussions

### **Meeting Notes**

- Agendas from weekly departmental meetings with teachers
- Collaborative ideas on techniques and instructional plans from my work with teachers

### **Student Work**

- Completed monthly writing assignments from students from three ELA classes
- Two narrative essays, one personal essay and one realistic fiction story

### **A Series of Actions**

Whereas other action research studies explain how a teacher examines a problem using a set of tools, examines that data and makes changes in their classroom in response to that data, this action research study exemplifies a series of actions in response to the data over the course of four months. This study looks at the process of implementation whereby a series of small interventions together, made something bigger possible. This type of experience is well documented in the literature on action research. Christine Miller and Lorraine Cross report in Project Watch 1999-2000 that their experience as action researchers in A.D. Henderson University School exemplified a “movement through phases of inquiry” (7). They write, “Faculty members choose a focus area, collect and analyze data, study professional literature and best practices, and take action. The researcher completes the cycle over and over until changes in student learning become realized or questions within the focus area are exhausted” (7). I found that the best way to represent this process was through a chart that displays the tools, the time period, the analysis and the action as each phase of my research became the catalyst for the next phase. A more detailed analysis of the data follows the chart.

**DATA-ANALYSIS-ACTION**

<b>TOOLS</b>	<b>TIME PERIOD</b>	<b>ANALYSIS</b>	<b>ACTION</b>	<b>TIME PERIOD</b>
Weekly Journal Notes	Early September	-personal feelings of excitement about study	-maintained writing in journal everyday -collected & filed student work	Late September
Meeting notes	September	-3 out of 7 teachers participated in discussions on writing	-decided to focus study on collaboration with 3 willing teacher colleagues	September-October
First Monthly Writing Project	October	-no grading criteria across 3 classes -35% of 260 7 <sup>th</sup> & 8 <sup>th</sup> graders did not complete narrative essay	-modeled creation of rubrics with colleagues -discussed setting up writing routines & teaching strategies to support students in completing assignments	October-November
Meeting notes	October-November	-rubrics used incorrectly and/or inconsistently	-discussed perceptions on grading & problems with rubrics with colleagues -developed second rubric with colleagues	October-November
Second Monthly Writing Project	November	-rubrics being used more consistently -38% of 260 7 <sup>th</sup> & 8 <sup>th</sup> graders failed to complete narrative essay	-held holistic grading sessions to troubleshoot problems with rubrics -continued discussion about setting up writing routines	November
Weekly Journal Notes	November -December	-feelings of frustration about problems with rubrics & increasing number of incomplete assignments	-consensus building amongst colleagues around rubrics -began conversations with individual students about their writing	Early December

<b>TOOLS</b>	<b>TIME PERIOD</b>	<b>ANALYSIS</b>	<b>ACTION</b>	<b>TIME PERIOD</b>
Third Monthly Project	Early December	-rubrics being used consistently & correctly -38% of 260 7 <sup>th</sup> & 8 <sup>th</sup> graders did not complete personal essay	-continued holistic grading sessions -began discussion about dealing with student apathy & supporting all learners	Early December
Meeting Notes	Late December - January	-ELA test prep dominates conversation in terms of reading instruction & test-taking strategies	-had to suspend professional development around rubrics & completing assignments to support ELA test prep	December-January
Third Monthly Project	February	-no data: pulled out of the building to score ELA test then winter break began		February
Weekly Journal Notes	February-March	-feelings of relief after ELA test was over -excitement about returning to focus on writing	-created classroom posters reminding students of their class' progress in the writing process -displayed wall of fame, wall of shame	March
Meeting Notes	March	-70% of 260 7 <sup>th</sup> & 8 <sup>th</sup> graders were on track to complete realistic fiction stories -30% of students who were not on track had previously missed 1 or more assignments -those students also mostly male, African-American & Latino	-provided after school sessions for students who were not on track to complete their work on time	March
Fourth Monthly Project	March	-72% of 260 7 <sup>th</sup> & 8 <sup>th</sup> graders completed realistic fiction stories	-displayed posters celebrating those students who had completed their stories -guidance counselor	March-April

### **Data-Analysis-Action: Explanation**

Significant data emerged from each tool at different intervals that required immediate decision making in order to move forward with implementing the portfolios. At the onset of the study, I did not foresee that these topics would present themselves and become the focal points of my study. The three major topics that I repeatedly wrote about in my journal notes and discussed in my meetings with colleagues included rubrics, completion rates and at-risk writers.

Initially, the lack of rubrics became an impediment to looking at student work and making plans for instruction. Because we lacked criteria for assessing writers, each student's grade was subjectively determined. We needed a systematic, organized approach to assess our students based on three aspects of writing: grammar, organization and development. In order to measure how our students applied our teaching of conventions, essay format and revision techniques, we needed to employ an objective lens – we needed rubrics.

The process of helping my colleagues develop and utilize rubrics was documented in both my meeting and journal notes. When I first realized we lacked grading criteria in October, I was excited about the prospect of utilizing rubrics to standardize our assessments across the three classes in the study. I assumed that if I provided rubrics and modeled how to create them, my colleagues would utilize this tool in their classrooms. I became frustrated when I was filing student work in the portfolio crates in November and I noticed that many students received a high mark of three (out of four) for their personal narrative essays and they wrote pieces that featured space aliens and Scarface-like gangsters - clearly works of fiction. Although the students may have demonstrated proficiency in their ability to write articulately and elaborately, they failed to utilize the conventions of the particular genre that we were studying. Furthermore, I questioned the efficacy of rewarding their work with a high mark when clearly they did not

fulfill the requirements of the task that we had been teaching them for an entire month. I then decided to engage in further discussion with my colleagues about the rubrics during our meeting times. I found out that one colleague was miscalculating the scores on the rubric and neglected to assign the appropriate weight to each category. In another conversation, another colleague disclosed that he just wanted to encourage his reluctant writers to keep writing and he did not want to penalize his students for fictionalizing their essays. The miscalculation was a small oversight but the idea of subjective grading led to a deeper conversation about fairness and grading ethics. This experience was consistent with the Spandel's research on rubrics. She states, "They [rubrics] cause us to go deep inside performance and questions our traditional beliefs about what we define as proficient. They keep us honest, for when we put our thinking on paper, there is no place to hide" (19). This difficult but honest conversation about grading and our holistic grading sessions in November enabled us to come to a consensus about rubrics by the end of the month. By December, the rubrics were being used correctly and consistently and I thought we would then be able to collaborate on instructional plans by creating school-based writing standards for the seventh and eighth grade. When I looked at the data sheets carefully, however, I noticed that many seventh and eighth grade students had not completed the first two narrative essays. Missing work became the next theme that emerged out of the process of implementing portfolios in my school.

In both October, approximately 35% of 260 seventh and eighth graders failed to complete and submit their narrative essays. I talked to my colleagues about these students and in many cases, the student had been working on the piece at the beginning of the unit but became confused and unorganized throughout the month and ended up losing drafts. We then discussed some ways to help students stay on track as they progressed through the writing process over the

course of a unit. We brainstormed a list of routines and teaching strategies that we could employ to remind our students of where we were in the process and encourage them to complete each phase in a timely manner. They included:

- posting a large calendar in the room at the beginning of the unit and writing in “pre-writing” “drafting” “revising” “editing” on the appropriate days so that students can reference what they are currently working on and what they will do next
- checking homework at the beginning of class and checking class work at the end of class to reinforce the expectation that students complete work during the allotted time.

I hoped that these teaching moves would make a significant impact on the completion rates in these classes. Unfortunately, in November, 38% of the students did not submit their narrative essay. I was really confused about this situation and I wrote about my frustration in my journal a lot. I decided to continue discussing completion rates in subsequent meetings so that we could further collaborate on some ways to attack what I began to see as student apathy. During our December meetings, my colleagues and I devised a more targeted strategy to support learners who seemed disengaged and very unorganized. We decided to hold small group discussions with those students who consistently forget their notebooks to help them set up personal reminder systems. We also planned to hold small groups with students who misused the writing time in class to encourage them to stay on task. We wanted to help students become more responsible and more focused so they do not fall so far behind. I was excited about the prospect of making positive change in our school and I looked forward to the opportunity to work with students myself. I began to see our lack of rubrics and all the missing work not as obstacles to implementing the portfolio system but rather opportunities for professional growth. In many ways, my experience exemplified the research on implementing portfolio systems. I felt

the initial tension and pressure to make something work in my school (Calahhan et al., 339) but I also recognized that the purpose was in the process.

Callahan and Spalding write, “The real potential of a portfolio system does not lie in its ability to generate accountability data, but in its ability to stimulate teachers to reflect individually and collaboratively on their practice to make changes that benefit students (342). Even though our completion rates stayed the same in December and ELA test prep interrupted our discussions on the matter, I remained confident that our planning and targeted classroom work would eventually make an impact on our students’ academic success.

In January and February, my work in my school centered on either preparing for the ELA test, administering the ELA test or scoring the ELA test. For the first two weeks of February I worked in another building scoring the test with other coaches and teachers from our region. When I returned after the winter break, I worked diligently to pick up where I had left off before the test. I decided that rather than wait until the unit was over and review a set of disappointing data, I would take action throughout the unit to help prevent our students from falling behind. In our meetings, my colleagues and I talked about pacing so that we could figure out where each class should be in the writing process. We then reviewed each student’s draft to assess his/her progress. Based on this information, I created posters for every class congratulating each student who was on task and on schedule to complete their realistic fiction story on time. I also created reminder posters for those students who were missing work thus far. The posters became a tool of positive reinforcement because students wanted to get their names on the “congratulations” list. In one class, I observed how the teacher actively used the posters by crossing out names from the missing work list and adding them to the other poster.

In mid-March, 70% of seventh and eighth graders were on track to complete their stories. During our meetings we devised a plan to help the other 30% catch up and submit their stories on time. We offered after-school study sessions three days a week from 3:30 until 5:00 p.m. for two weeks in order to help any student who had fallen behind. Students could come to just have a quiet space to write or work with one of us on their drafts. We called the parents of all of the at-risk students, informed them of their child's academic standing in ELA and explained that we were offering extra help after-school. I also sent letters and permissions slips home to each family.

From five to fifteen students showed up each day during the two-week period. I worked with several students who needed additional instruction in drafting and revising. In my conferences with students I noticed that many of them perceived writing as a quick, one-time event rather than a process of developing ideas that you grow, refine and change. My colleagues related similar experiences and they were surprised that even after teaching the writing process over the course of several months, some students were still confused. We realized that through more one-on-one conferences we could have uncovered some of this misunderstanding and done small group work with those students earlier in the school year.

At the end of the unit, 72% of the seventh and eighth graders in the study completed their realistic fiction stories on time. We made substantial gains relative to the beginning of the school year as an additional 14% of our students successfully progressed through the writing process and submitted their assignments. I was excited that we had finally made a positive impact on our students' writing lives and my colleagues were elated that their hard work finally paid off.

But what about the students who, despite all of our efforts, still failed to complete their writing assignment? When I reviewed the data sheets in April, I recognized that many of these

students had several factors in common. They had repeatedly missed writing assignments, they were reading far below grade level, they were frequently suspended from school and they were mostly African-American and Latino males. Only ten of the ninety-eight students were female.

At the onset of this study, I never expected that issues of race, gender and academic performance would intersect in such a way. Furthermore, the study was coming to an end and I was left with an unresolved question. I looked to the relevant research for guidance on how we could best support our young male students of color. Hall suggests, “When educators provide time and space for youth to examine and articulate their lives, social and intellectual climates form that can enrich and enliven their educational process” (217). Perhaps a topic for further study includes examining ways to design an after school program for this sub-group of students that provides this safe space.

Reconsidering my initial question, when I help teachers develop a portfolio system for assessing and collecting student writing:

- we discover the need to create grade-level rubrics to objectively assess student writing
- we discover the need to help students become organized and adhere to deadlines
- we discover the need to for small groups to support students in moving through the writing process
- we discover the need for further study around supporting African-American and Latino males in literacy.

### **Policy Recommendations**

With continued administrative funding to support the implementation of the portfolios, our school could make significant gains in academic achievement in ELA. By budgeting

\$10,000.00 across the year for portfolio materials, professional texts and an after-school study group, the ELA department could build upon the foundation created by my colleagues this year and make a more substantial impact on our students' performance. Manning and Manning's research supports this contention. They state, "Portfolios enable teachers to use developmentally appropriate assessment techniques and to evaluate students' growth and development as writers" (132). With sustained professional development around portfolios, I can:

- hold bi-monthly one-hour after school sessions to review progress and make sure that students are not falling behind
- hold monthly scoring sessions to assess student writing
- provide bi-monthly after-school support for students who fall behind
- create an inquiry group of teachers for further action research around race, gender and literacy.

If we are committed to improving the quality of student writing at JMC and helping students get the writing right, I highly recommend that we adopt the aforementioned school-based policy recommendations.

## Works Cited

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