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Writing Is a Process, Not a Product: Encouraging Student Engagement Through Self-Assessment

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Teaching writing to students is challenging. The qualities of good writing can be subjective for teachers and students, which may leave both asking: What really is good writing?

A Pulitzer-prize winning journalist, Donald Murray, once said of the art of teaching writing, “Instead of teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness.” While teachers typically value the final product most, we need to take a step back and contemplate how we can help students “glory in the unfinishedness” of their writing. Let’s face it. No piece of writing is truly ever finished. So why do teachers place so much emphasis on the final piece if the piece, ultimately, will never truly be final? In addition, not every student product will be the same. What is good for one, might not be good for another. To help students define good writing for themselves, let’s turn our attention to the writing process, wherein students and teachers can address the question: What really is good writing?

To allow for both teachers and students to understand what good writing really is, both need to play active roles within the learning environment. To meet students where they are and help them arrive at where they want to be, teachers must engage in mutual decisions with their students. Teachers need to decide how to allow freedom within the writing process, and students need to decide how to execute their own learning goals. It is within this mutual understanding that both students and teachers can define what good writing is.

In this theoretical essay, we—two high school English teachers¹—present theories on student-regulated learning (SRL), formative assessment (FA), and, ultimately, self-assessment (SA). Then, we share how these theories inform our writing instruction. In our classes, we found that these practices have helped us reconsider our role in writing instruction and renewed our students’ interest in their writing process, as opposed to a “finished” essay or the teacher’s final grade.

Theory

Our writing instruction is guided by theories such as SRL, FA, and SA. Below, we will provide a brief overview of these theories.

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)

Students’ SRL happens when they set their own goals and then purposefully work to achieve them (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020; Zimmerman, 2000), and, therefore, SRL may impact student success within a classroom (Dignath & Buttner, 2008; Panadero et al., 2018). This occurs through “cognitive, affective, and behavioral practices” that move students closer to goals; however, these practices are not linear, but, instead, occur in a cyclical or iterative fashion (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020). Students’ SRL may be bolstered by FA practices that involve constructive feedback, as this feedback allows for students to make informed future

¹ Since writing this piece, Erin Riley-Lepo has changed careers and is now a teacher educator at The College of New Jersey.

instructional decisions (Hattie & Timperely, 2007).

Formative Assessment (FA)

In the late 1990s, Black and Wiliam (1998) acknowledged a shift away from summative assessment, increasing focus on the importance of FA. Formative assessment occurs when teachers assign, assess, and provide feedback on student work as they are learning, which may increase student motivation and achievement (McMillian & Hearn, 2009).

The benefits of FA are myriad. It helps students better understand what they are learning, determines how they will know if they are learning, and aids them in determining the next steps in their learning (Panadero et al., 2018). One effective way for students to assess their own learning and progress is through peer and SA (Lee et al., 2020; Noonan & Duncan, 2005).

Self-Assessment (SA)

Self-assessment is the ability of students to seek feedback, reflect on said feedback, and then make judgments about their own learning (Noonan & Duncan, 2005; Yan & Carless, 2022). The benefits of SA are reportedly multiple; it can help students develop self-regulation skills (Shepard et al., 2020), identify and articulate learning targets, and provide feedback, which can prompt revision of work and facilitate learning (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020).

The theories of student self-regulation and the FA practices described above inform our interactive, unfinished writing practices. We enacted these practices in our English classrooms with the intention of helping our students set their own writing goals and make strides to achieve them.

Practices

Utilizing research-based practices focused on FA, particularly SA, we embrace a new writing pedagogy. Below are practices

that we use within our classroom to help students recognize the benefits of becoming their own evaluator.

Teacher Feedback

The self in SA might mislead some to think that this practice happens in isolation. In truth, other relevant people providing feedback (e.g., teachers, peers) aids in students' SA capabilities (Yan & Carless, 2022). Therefore, particularly at the opening of the school year, we model what productive writing feedback should look like. Some examples of the way we give feedback as students are writing are through whole group debriefs and individual conferences on writing assignments. After we return papers with feedback on them, we create a Cheat Sheet of common writing errors we see throughout the class' writing. Students take this Cheat Sheet with them to use on revisions to their current writing assignment and on their upcoming writing assignments (see fig. 1). The Cheat Sheet in Figure 1 was provided to students during a whole class debrief. The feedback was for a rhetorical analysis essay; the common errors are divided into grammar and usage concerns and content and style concerns.

We also make a point to conference with each student individually. Although we acknowledge that individual conferences are time consuming, we want to emphasize that SA and peer-assessment are not inherent skills; they must be taught. Individual conferences are a time to model how to provide feedback about writing using rubrics, checklists, and domain-specific language. Students report that they feel more comfortable self-assessing later in the year because of the scaffolded lessons on giving and receiving feedback.

We would also like to note that this process is iterative, as writing is never truly finished. Often, students are provided with a

chance to rewrite their work after our whole group and individual conferences.

<p>Analysis Essay Cheat Sheet</p> <p>Grammar and Usage Common Concerns</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Passive Voice No - This effect <i>is accomplished</i> by Chavez when he.... Yes - Chavez <i>accomplishes</i> this by...2. Correlative conjunction When you use “Not only,” you must also use “but also.” Ex. <i>Not only</i> does Chavez use emotionally-charged words, <i>but</i> he <i>also</i> uses allusions to well-known nonviolent leaders.3. Pronoun clarity No - Chavez references King’s accomplishments by saying that <i>he</i> was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement. Yes - Chavez references King’s accomplishments by saying that <i>King</i> was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement. <p>Content and Style Concerns</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The audience was farm workers (unionized ones, specifically). Many missed the opportunity to address this audience or misidentified the audience.2. Many addressed the Rhetorical Situation in their openings, but did not revisit it in their closings. Although formulaic, please do so.

Fig. 1. Analysis essay cheat sheet

Checklist Reflection

Self-created checklists and rubrics allow students to establish their own expectations throughout the writing process (see fig. 2). The Evaluative Checklist in Figure 2 was created as a whole class to evaluate an author’s purpose in literature. Students were struggling with how to evaluate the quality of how an author establishes a purpose in a text, so together they created this checklist to aid them as a step-by-step guide to reference while writing. While this checklist was more beneficial to create as a class, checklists can certainly be individualized to meet each student’s progress. It is unrealistic to think that all students are always at the same point in their writing journey. To embrace SA during the writing process, encouraging students to acknowledge their

progress not only allows them to self-regulate, but also puts them in the position to evaluate their current progress and establish expectations of where they would like to be at their next checkpoint.

Research indicates that SA is defined in part by having students “identify strategies that improve their understanding and skills” (McMillan & Hearn, 2009). Students can do this through creating their own checklists and rubrics at various points during the writing process. Given that most students are new to this style of learning, we initially provide particular criteria (aligned with standards) for students to choose from to add to their own checklists. Students have the opportunity to make their own decisions about which criteria to use as they evaluate their current progress and set expectations

for further improvement within their writing.

By individualizing the writing process for each student, they are able to work through the process at their own pace. This

provides students with a sense of agency and control over their unique writing process, allowing them to glory in the unfinished work as they progress to their own understanding of good writing.

The Pact: Author's Purpose: Evaluative Checklist

- **State a claim about the Author's Purpose**
 - Describe, Explain, Express, Persuade, Inform, Entertain
- **Support claim with textual evidence**
 - Provide **textual evidence**
 - **Explain** the **connection** between the **textual evidence** and **Author's Purpose**
- **State a claim about whether or not the authors conveyed their purpose effectively/ineffectively**
- **Support claim with textual evidence**
 - Example techniques: Good word choice, connections, repetition, theme, specific topic/main idea, summarizing
 - Example techniques in *The Pact*: How did the authors convey their purpose to you? Details about life, personal experiences (struggles), diction (word choice), showed faults/strengths
 - Provide **textual evidence**
 - **Explain** the **connection** between the **textual evidence** and their **effectiveness/ineffectiveness**
- **Make a concluding statement to explain overall how and why** the authors were able to establish their purpose
 - **Writer**: All points connect and relate back to purpose, have a solid idea or prior knowledge of what to convey, instill emotions in your readers, being clear
 - **Reader**: Be able to make inferences, think like the author (put yourself in author's shoes), details to visualize, context clues

Fig. 2. Class-created author's purpose evaluative paragraph checklist

Deadlines

The dreaded word: deadline. Every student's worst nightmare. However, with SA, it does not have to be. Students' SRL happens when they set their own goals and then purposefully work to achieve them (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020; Zimmerman, 2000). The use of flexible deadlines allows for students to evaluate when they are ready to turn in the writing that they have deemed good.

At the beginning of an assignment with students, we work through how to establish learning goals within a fixed time frame. Students have the freedom to evaluate their own progress with flexible deadlines, but we also are realistic and set final deadlines where all students are finished with an assignment. While a final deadline does signal the end of a writing piece, students have the time before that final deadline to work at their own pace. However, through the flexibility of being able to turn in work

when ready, students regulate their performance through evaluation, which can activate students' cognitive and motivational capacities ("Using Formative Assessment to Influence Self- and Co-regulated Learning" 4).

Being able to think about their thinking offers students the opportunity to try what works best for them and learn from their mistakes and successes. In this self-regulated environment, students can explore their own strengths and weaknesses in order to produce their best writing prior to a final deadline. In spite of the final deadline, students feel more autonomy to work at their own pace if the deadlines are flexible.

Peer Feedback

Although the focus in our classrooms has been on developing students' ability to self-assess, it is important to also acknowledge the role of peer assessment to aid students in continuing learning and strengthening their ability to self-assess. In our classes, students engage in co-regulated learning (Panadero et al., 2016), in which they give suggestions on each other's writing with the goal of providing formative feedback for them to consider. However, it is important to note that this type of peer assessment is dependent on the quality of the feedback students are providing (Panadero et al., 2016), which is why we begin the year engaging in individual teacher and student conferences to model how to provide useful feedback. Students

also use both the assignment rubrics and their checklists as the basis of their feedback. While these practices do not guarantee high-quality peer feedback, we found that students provided more meaningful and specific feedback for their peers that they can use as a sounding board to self-assess their own work.

Additionally, we encourage students to ask their peers for feedback on specific portions of their writing (e.g., thesis statement, quote integration, transitions), which aids students in achieving their specific writing goals, as opposed to the more general goals identified in the checklists and rubrics. We call these Conversation Starters (see figs. 3 and 4). The examples in figures 3 and 4 were oriented to a specific part of the writing process. Prior to having students engage in peer review, students were surveyed about what they felt they were struggling with during writing sessions based on the writing piece's rubric. Using that feedback, these teacher-designed sentence stems were created to engage students in meaningful peer feedback by providing them with specific areas of focus in which to receive help on improving. Not only do we see students receiving the feedback and reflecting and revising their work, but we also feel that the students providing the feedback understand the requirements of each writing assignment more clearly and are, therefore, better able to self-assess when the time comes.

Start the conversation by asking your peer to focus on a specific aspect of your content that you would like feedback on. If you cannot think of one, then try using one of these these sentence stems to help you:

- I am concerned about my introduction because...can you look at...
- I am worried that my argument in body paragraph 1 is unclear...can you look at...
- I don't think my topic sentences are connected to my thesis...can you look at...
- I don't think I organize my conclusions well...can you look at...
- I am uncertain if my transitions are effective...can you make sure that there is a flow to my essay?
- I am not sure my voice is clear...can you please look at...

Fig. 3. Peer feedback: Conversation starters - content

Start the conversation by asking your peer to focus on a specific aspect of your grammar that you would like feedback on. If you cannot think of one, then try using one of these these sentence stems to help you:

- I am concerned about my spelling...please focus on...
- I am worried about my sentence structure...I think I use too many simple sentences...please look at...
- I forget to capitalize proper nouns...please focus on where I need to...
- I don't think I stay in the same tense while writing...please focus on...
- I do not always add commas where they belong...please look at...

Figure 4. Peer Feedback: Conversation Starters - Grammar

Conclusion

To empower our students to set their own writing goals and work towards them in our classrooms, we, as teachers, need to ask ourselves: Do the decisions we make enable our students to make decisions without us?" (Kittle & Gallagher, 2021). While grades may be what students value most, they also need to embrace the reality of their current performance where good writing lives. But how do we do this? We go beyond providing students with agency by letting them write in their authentic voice and by allowing them to choose their own topics by utilizing student SA within the writing process, reinvigorating our writing teaching experiences and opening new doors for students to be engaged within writing instruction. We can, in addition, provide more authentic agency to our students,

making our instruction of writing unique to every individual student through the use of SA.

While the art of teaching writing is challenging, we want to reiterate the importance of peer and SA as an attainable FA practice. By having students engage in SA through the writing process, not only are they able to make their own decisions, but they are also able to assess and evaluate their progress and growth through their own expectations, and that is what makes for good writing. We need to allow students to "glory in its unfinishedness."

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