

SDPD Reflective Essay: *Formative Assessment*
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I. In today's world of education, data is becoming extremely important. Standardized testing, curriculum mapping, prescribed curriculum, all of these will demand that teachers examine the evidence that teachers can glean from their teaching. Not only is it imperative to gather data, but also to analyze it to understand the trends of what's happening in the classroom. My Self-directed professional development began there- to analyze the assessments that I give to students. I focused specifically on how my formative assessments can inform my teaching, and therefore inform my students. I think that one of the most essential modes of communication is not spoken, it's written. Students encounter the dialog of our communication in our responses to their writing, to their effort, and to their contributions in class. I wanted to focus my efforts to give as much information in those exchanges as possible, to not only justify "a grade" or instructional move on my part, but to also empower students in their own learning. I wanted to increase the partnership that takes place between teachers and students, so that I don't need to lean so heavily on the authoritarian aspect of the role of teacher. I shouldn't be the person solely concerned for a child's success, nor should I be keeping the secrets to success away from that student. My objectives for this assignment were to engage students in curriculum as well as their own growth, to foster the independence and responsibility of the self-directed learner. I also wanted to learn how to be meaningful with my assessments- that I am actually assessing students' needs AND reacting to that need with changes if need be.

In order to gain the wisdom and insight necessary to a project such as this, I considered many resources. In addition to a district wide Professional Development provided for by Holt Junior High, and personal resources like my mentor, field instructors, principal, and colleagues, I have also rediscovered some old texts from earlier classes that I revisited with new eyes. I began with the list below.

Seven Strategies of Assessment FOR Learning by Jan Chappuis

Teaching English by Design by Peter Smagorinsky

English Teacher's Companion by Jim Burke

When Kids Can't Read What Teachers Can Do by Kyleene Beers (Assessment of Literacy and reading objectives)

However, along the way, I found that some were less useful than others. There were four texts that were primarily helpful;

Seven Strategies of Assessment FOR Learning by Jan Chappuis,

Teaching English by Design by Peter Smagorinsky,

Beyond the Red Pen by Bryan Bardine,

Responding to Student Writing by Nancy Sommers.

The last two were new additions that I felt were necessary as I continued my study. Each of them focused on the structures that are necessary to gauge students learning.

II. With these goals, and resources, in mind I expanded my study into three different subgroups; rubrics and responding to student writing, backwards planning and how summative assessments guide the formative, and lastly how overt targets and student goals can be implemented with “I Can” statements.

Our poetry unit fed a lot of what I did for my SDPD. I incorporated the ideas of Smagorinsky in developing the backwards design of my unit. I used standards and objectives to create a culminating project- our Poetry Anthologies, and then created two additional summative assessments to feed directly into our anthologies; a prezi about a poet, and an oral recitation that also asked students to analyze a poem. As we built our understanding of poetry, students crafted their anthology step by step, with daily lessons ready to prepare them for this final assessment. In one of my log posts I spoke of how I budgeted my time, regrettably giving more to the comprehension and use of poetic devices than analyzing poetry, which they struggled with more. I staggered the 8 analyses that they were required to include in their anthologies- they turned in 4 analyses two at a time to receive feedback for next time. It was here that I was able to formatively assess- they weren't getting it- and then make provisions and changes that supplemented any deficiencies. I also made sure that I offered after school time, time at lunch, and my services in the Writing Center which I support every Tuesday and Thursday. By focusing the unit on an end product, composed by the student, they were able to take their learning into their own hands and synthesize it for this project. It was neat to be able to cater individually to students, when they could say, “No, I understand the devices, but I really don't understand analyzing...” or something similar.

I also crafted several rubrics to help with the composition of the actual project. I made rubrics for the analyses, and the anthology itself, asking students to use them much like a checklist to self-assess their progress in the assignment. We asked them to be the teacher, using highlighters to gauge their own work. I also crafted rubrics to help with the composition of their introductions- void of any point values, where instead I placed the words, “Excellent, Strong, Almost there, and Not yet”. As Sommers and Bardine suggested, students are very unlikely to take into consideration any feedback with a grade on it- and they often don't understand the correlation between point values and mastery of skills. With this in mind, I tried to offer as many opportunities as possible to give feedback without a number value. In fact, I had a rare opportunity to do this best during several snow days.

We were in the peak of our Prezi unit during a large snowstorm, and suspecting that much of our library time would be eaten by snow days, I emphasized how important working at home would be, how delighted I would be to review any student work if they used my email address to ask me, etc. I received a great response from students, and was able to take the rubric for Prezi, wiped of points, and pretend to “grade it”. Then I wrote them a letter, showing

them the areas that they succeeded, and the areas that could still use some work. I actually incorporated one such example into an entire lesson to show students not only how I would assess their final product, but also how they could self-assess their work.

Not only did this help me as the teacher to assess the needs of students and the unit in general, it also helped me with my objectives for partnering with students in their learning and success at school. We were able to unite over a common goal and do what it takes to support that goal to completion.

Goal setting was another important role in this project. The other resource that I used, *Seven Strategies of Assessment FOR Learning*, was extremely influential. The book focused on helping teachers and students create targets to strive for in learning. It teaches students how to self-assess using language very similar to rubrics in English, and in turn teaches teachers how to use the same process to communicate to students their growth. I was observed by my principal one week who, in line with the philosophy of the book, challenged me about a quiz that I was giving at the conclusion of the week. He said, and I agree, that teachers should never give grades until they are absolutely sure that students are ready to prove that they have mastered the objectives. So in turn, I expanded the original lesson which he observed, and re-taught it twice more that week. I gave example sentences to practice the piece of grammar we were using and asked students to include these sentences on an exit slip that they must complete before exiting the room. The exit slips included “I Can” statements that recapped my objectives in kid-friendly language so that we could, as a classroom community, see the grammar not just as a specific topic to be mastered, but also as target SKILLS to be mastered. The statements provided me with quantitative data that allowed me to render in pie charts and bar graphs their learning according to them. They were fascinated by the charts, the visual representation of their self-assessment. It was an unexpected bonus for me to see how that data could in turn be very much a motivator for kids to work. This was the end goal- that students would master the skills necessary to succeed, self-assess how to make that happen, and provide me with the data necessary in my assessments to give them the opportunity to exercise the skill.

Now, it’s possible that all of the above is happening as a result of outside elements that I have not considered. What I have the pleasure of experiencing with student writing is the changes in maturity that take place as their narratives change. There is a point, I think, where students naturally begin to mature and develop their own learning as a response to this maturity. They learn to advocate more as they continue in their classes. I would like to suppose that it’s my responsibility to nurture this process, but I can’t take credit for it. That’s the goal, I suppose- that I can’t take credit for the learning that takes place because they are the self-directed learners who are engaged.

III. There were so many opportunities in this assignment. I was able to practice gathering data and reacting to the information to make my teaching more effective. I think that there must be an evolutionary quality to teaching because each student is unique with individual needs. I have to conform my teaching to those needs, with accuracy—not the reverse. Next time, I would

expand my backwards planning to the entire year, and include my “I Can” statements directly on the rubrics and project descriptions. I think that this can be woven seamlessly into the curriculum and allow me to use it in my daily procedures and expectations. This may be a characteristic of middle school, but I find myself teaching more of how to be a successful human being, and less of the English “stuff”. Not to degrade the English curriculum- which feeds directly into the literacy of students, and therefore into the success of an individual- but to “upgrade” the importance of holding students accountable in a way that invests in their responsibility more than mine.