WHAT STUDENT WRITING CAN TEACH US ABOUT TEACHING

By Nikki Holland, Ginney P. Wright, and Christian Z. Goering

To most English teachers, the paper load is the bane of one's existence. Unfortunately, this is true both for those who teach writing and other disciplines as well. In many cases, teachers shy away from including much writing because of the many hours it requires to read and provide substantial feedback on such papers. Yet writing is widely understood as critically important to learning (Applebee & Langer, 2013; Mayher, 1983; Zinsser, 1989).

Initially, it might seem like professional suicide for a learning leader to begin each session by assembling teachers into groups to assess student writing, but that's exactly what we do in the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project's College-Ready Writers Program. The program, part of a National Writing Project grant, aims to improve the teaching of academic writing with a focus on argument and, in doing so, increase student writing achievement.

Participants in our local iteration of the program are 6th- through 12th-grade English language arts teachers in a small rural district in Northwest Arkansas. Each month, par-

ticipating teachers and Northwest Arkansas Writing Project staff meet to examine student work together and plan our next instructional steps, providing a focus to the day's work based on the successes and areas of further development identified by the teachers in constructive conversations.

In this article, we describe three specific practices we use to examine student writing — constructivist coding, calibrating with anchor papers, and affinity mapping — that would transfer easily to any professional learning community.

As a part of the grant, participating teachers step away from their classrooms for one day each month to come together with colleagues to take a closer and deeper look at student writing. After coffee and catching up, teachers find their places, sign in to our shared Google document, and begin writing into the day.

Early in the fall, we begin with more straightforward prompts. By the spring, we are ready to tackle higher-level concerns, and we begin our day writing and thinking together about how to move our teaching and our students' writing forward.

Our shared goal for these sessions is to ground our observations about student writing in the reality of their texts and to make instructional plans that respond directly to the strengths and struggles we identify. To promote a safe space where teachers feel comfortable discussing their students' work, we keep all student writing samples and teacher writing anonymous. In doing so, we are able to shift our focus from teacher to student, an important shift that helps teachers to interpret our meetings as collaborative rather than evaluative.

CONSTRUCTIVIST CODING

Before the session, teachers engage students in a four-day series of activities during which students read and annotate texts to arrive at a claim with supporting evidence. During the session, teachers refer to five student samples (about one paragraph each) to inform their responses to the day's activities.

First, we ask teachers to write about the work they had done with their students. One teacher wrote, "My students tackled this activity with trepidation but forged ahead and worked very hard. I reiterated many times that the students should not be afraid to do something wrong, but that I wanted them to generate ideas and writing. I also feel that my students have not been writers in the past."

Next, teachers respond to student writing samples. They articulate the moves and patterns they noticed in student writing. Many teachers read each student's work several times to search for emerging patterns using a constructivist lens — based on Vygotsky's notion that "cultural develop-

ment appears twice: first, on the social level and, later on, on the individual level" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57).

They record the patterns using Toulmin's Model for Argumentation (i.e. claim, evidence, counterclaim, and warrant) for categorizing codes (Toulmin, 2003). Most teachers look specifically at claim and evidence because this was the first activity with argumentation for the school year. For example, one teacher wrote:

- "Student A: Makes a claim but the writing focused on the opinion rather than the argument. Writing skills are low.
- "Student B: Does a good job of making a claim & addressing the opposite side of the argument.
- "Student C: Good at identifying evidence. Addresses both sides of argument & makes a claim."

After teachers read and respond to the samples, we ask them to return to their original writing to add to their initial reflections. Our goal is to collaborate to discover what students were already doing with developing and supporting claims as well as help teachers ground resulting instructional moves in the reality of where students are in the process. One teacher wrote, "I need to now go deeper into claims and use different resources to help teach claim. I also need to do more on claim versus opinion. Visual aids and cartoon strips would be really good to use."

A few teachers noticed that their students couldn't distinguish an argument from opinion, and the opportunity to see this gap provides a clear and focused direction for their next steps when returning to the classroom. We begin to see the implications of this activity in a very explicit way when we engage in a calibration activity later in the day. The results from the work done in this activity pull the teachers through the other experiences with a clear sense of the work that needs to be done.

CALIBRATING WITH ANCHOR PAPERS

To articulate and align our expectations for student writing, we frequently begin sessions by reading a set of papers together to calibrate our responses. In a recent session, we pulled two examples — one 6th grade and one 9th grade — that we felt represented average student responses to the task at hand.

After reading the pieces, we asked teachers to consider the moves the student writers made. Once we discussed those moves as a group, we invited teachers to return to their writing into the day to respond to two questions: What does the student writing tell me about my next instructional steps? What does the student writing tell me about the students' next steps as writers?

This practice accomplishes several goals. First, in exposing teachers to the work being done by students at different

QUALITIES OF CLAIMS IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS		
A developing claim ...	**A competent claim ...**	**An effective claim ...**
• Might not be based in the sources. • Might explain what the writer is claiming but not why. • Is broad, not focused. • Uses language that is general rather than specific. • Sounds more like a personal opinion than a claim.	• Emerges from the sources. • Provides reasons to answer why the writer is making the claim. • Is narrow and focused. • Uses language that is correct, detailed, and more exact. • Is debatable and may recognize other sides of the argument.	• Synthesizes source material. • Uses qualifiers to signal a willingness to consider other perspectives. • Takes an angle. • Uses language that is precise and suitable for audience and purpose. • Recognizes the controversy and may propose solutions.

grade levels, it begins a conversation about what we expect from students as they progress from grade to grade. The last several times that we've done this work, we've had excellent 6th-grade writing. The message we hope this sends to teachers at higher grades is: If 6th-grade students can already do this, then my students can do even more.

In this way, looking at anchor papers fulfills a major goal that teachers themselves often bring to professional development: vertical alignment. As we consider what students are already doing, we inform the conversation regarding how the work changes from grade to grade.

Even though the Common Core State Standards provide guidance about what is taught at each grade level, the nuance is up to teachers to parse out. For example, the first writing standard from grades 9-12 is the same: Students should "write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010).

By examining student work together to calibrate expectations for each grade level, teachers can make informed decisions on how to approach this skill in a way that engages students in increasingly challenging experiences.

AFFINITY MAPPING

According to the National School Reform Faculty, affinity mapping is a learning protocol that begins by asking an open-ended analytic question that asks for defining elements of something and moves through a process that engages participants in generating and organizing ideas into categories in order to detect emerging themes in the data (Peterson-Veatch, 2006).

To teach students how to write effective claims, teachers need a clear understanding of the defining elements that make claims effective and how those elements evolve as students move from grade to grade. To clarify and calibrate our expectations for students' claims, we begin by asking: What makes a claim effective? How can we help students write effective claims? Next, we present teachers with a curated set of claims, retrieved from students' writing, and ask them to organize the claims into categories.

Once teachers have organized their claims into categories,

we ask them to look at trends: What makes one group different from another group? What are the qualities that define the claims that have been categorized within the same group? Teachers discuss these questions in small groups, then we open the conversation to the whole group.

After coming to a consensus on the categories, we write the name of each category on chart paper and generate lists of qualities that each category shares. The chart above shows an example of the qualities that emerged from a group discussion with teachers participating in this activity.

From this point, the discussion can go in one of several directions. We frequently turn next to the research. While we find it critical to connect teachers to what others have said about the topics we cover in professional development, we purposefully begin by engaging teachers in constructing the knowledge for themselves, thus enacting our social constructivist epistemology.

To close the affinity mapping activity, we encourage teachers to think about our second question — *How can we teach our students to write effective claims?* — and talk about how affinity mapping could be used with students. See the sample lesson plan on p. 43.

The benefits of this activity are multiple: Teachers come away from the session with a concrete understanding of a complex term and specific strategies to help students construct effective claims. Affinity mapping can be used in professional development, but it is also a generative learning protocol for students. The process values participants' knowledge and supports their grappling with a complex concept. By grounding the conversation about how to improve students' writing of claims in the student writing itself, we discourage deficit thinking and help teachers collaborate to make instructional moves that will support students' growth as writers.

We regularly hear from teachers who see improved writing performance from their students. For example, in March, one teacher remarked, "Students are doing a better job with taking a position. Overall, most students seem to have taken a position, and many of them have composed nuanced claims that are fair."

While writing into the day during our April session, another teacher reflected, "They have become better writers that can voice

SAMPLE LESSON PLAN

What makes a claim effective, and how can I write an effective claim?

1. Tell students the essential questions of the day: What makes a claim effective? How can I write an effective claim?

2. Divide students into small groups (3-4), and give each group an envelope with example claims. Note: It's important to cut these so that students can manipulate them.

3. Ask students to rank the claims using these categories: developing, competent, effective. Note: This language is higher level than high/mid/low, but it's important for students — and for us — to remember that this is hard work and that we're all moving toward stronger writing.

4. Once students have spent at least 10 minutes reading and organizing claims, ask them to think about what makes the groups different. Here are some questions you might ask:
   a. Look at your pile of developing claims. What do those writers need to do to get them to the competent claims pile?
   b. Reread the claims in your competent pile. What qualities do they share?
   c. What makes a claim effective? What's the difference between a claim that is competent and one that is effective?

5. Once small groups have a chance to talk about those questions, engage the large group in a discussion. On the board or on a piece of chart paper, record qualities for each of the levels.

6. Extension: Consider giving students a developing claim and asking them to revise it to make it competent and then effective. Whole-class discussion to follow.

their claims and support them with others' words (evidence)."

Assessment data also reflect significant growth. For example, when using the Using Sources Tool, a formative assessment tool for evaluating students' use of source material provided by the National Writing Project, we have seen significant growth in writing, even over short time spans. For example, from November to January, we saw a 9.9% improvement in students' integration of source material to support their claims. Additionally, while teachers in November only identified 2.9% of student writers as having effectively distinguished between their own ideas and the source material, that number jumped to 21.7% by January.

SENSE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Myriad forms of teacher assessment and evaluation exist in our schools today, with some more helpful than others. While evaluation isn't the purpose or focus of our work, we learn more about individual teachers by examining their students' writing than any form of accountability could ever hope to do.

Teachers are expected to arrive with student work in hand at each session and know they'll be discussing samples from their classes with their colleagues and us. Because of this, student work informs professional development, and a sense of social responsibility develops that we haven't seen in other forms of professional development.

While each aspect of collaboration and formative assessment outlined in this article contribute to meaningful professional development, the larger goal is for educators to enact appropriate and meaningful instructional moves with students. The centrality of collaboration and formative assessment in our interactions creates critical spaces for teachers to feel confident and supported while evaluating, reflecting, and planning for the implementation of argumentative writing in their classroom.

It is in these critical spaces that teachers learn more about their students, more about themselves, and more about how to effectively connect their students with learning.

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