

ASSESSING WITH HEART

**Commentary that is honest
and passionate helps student
writers develop**

BY VICKI SPANDEL



Ours is a nation obsessed with assessment. We assess our students continuously, and while it is a very good thing to establish accountability and to see how things are going, constant assessment also carries with it a heavy price, a price that is dramatically inflated when assessment is not all that it could be.

Good assessment does not come about by accident. It is the result of clear vision and thoughtful planning. Here are some features that define quality writing assessment at the large-scale (state or district), classroom, and individual levels, features to help ensure that assessment and instruction work in harmony.

LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT

Large-scale writing assessment is most often an attempt to measure whether and to what extent students are meeting writing standards set by the state. This is a worthy goal on the face of it, especially if the standards reflect what is truly important in good writing: e.g. thoughtful development of ideas, organizational structure that guides the reader through a discussion, individual voice that moves us as readers, skillfully used conventions that enhance both voice and meaning. When such assessment is designed with care and implemented with sensitivity, it can have immeasurable impact on the shape and force of writing instruction.

A case in point is the assessment conducted by the state of Kentucky, which has shifted, just since 1990, from an emphasis on the “expedient five-paragraph theme” (Starr,

in National Writing Project, 2003, p. 83) to a combination of on-demand and portfolio writing that spans genres, themes, and purposes, and includes writing produced for classes other than English. Kentucky's assessment allows students extended time to think about and plan their writing, and gives them a sense of ownership because they select the writing for the portfolio and also prepare a letter to reviewers reflecting on their work and explaining their development as writers (NWP, 2003, p. 83).

We need to acknowledge that we use the snapshot approach to save ourselves time, trouble, and money, and not because it is a good (or even adequate) way to assess writing.

Unfortunately, not every state is — as yet — following Kentucky's lead. George Hillocks' research (2002) suggests that in some states, on-demand writing assessment provides students with as little as 40 minutes of response time, allows no interaction among students, and in general bears minimal resemblance to the process-based approach of the classroom (p. 189). This has three implications.

First, it makes the assessment process unfamiliar and uncomfortable to students, who wonder why they are assessed in a way so markedly different from the way in which writing is taught. Second, it forces us to question whether the writing produced under such conditions represents or even approaches students' best efforts. Third — and this is the real danger — because assessment has such an impact upon instruction, it may persuade some educators to spend less time on complex writing tasks such as self-selection of topics, research, portfolio creation, or in-depth revision,

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“The trouble with moral statistics is that every generation concentrates on measuring what it is most afraid of. But because it is impossible to measure what is most important — you can't measure love, morals, or health — they have to make do with what is easiest to measure. So [the British civil servant] Chadwick and his fellow early statisticians used to measure . . . the spirituality of children by how many hymns they could recite by heart. Not the same thing at all.”

— David Boyle and Anita Roddick, *Numbers* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004, p. 24)

and more time training students to be comfortable with the quick-write formulaic response they are likely to see on the assessment. “Teachers teach what is on the test and ignore what is not,” Hillocks cautions (p. 204). “We should be very, very careful what we assess, for in the end, what we assess is what we will get.”

Unfortunately, many states currently send writing assessment samples out of state to testing companies, where they are read by teams of readers, not all of whom may be teachers — or writers. What a lost professional development opportunity for teachers. The opportunity to work with colleagues and to read hundreds (sometimes thousands) of student samples can show teachers in a way nothing else can just where students are succeeding and where they are struggling. This information is invaluable in designing instruction.

CLASSROOM LEVEL

Many features that define quality assessment at the state or district level are important at the classroom level,

too. The difference is that the teacher has far more control over how writing is assessed in his or her classroom, where the components of assessment are an extension of the teacher's instructional style.

More teachers than ever before are sharing criteria openly with students — or even working with students to define together what it means to write well. I am, of course, closely associated with the six-trait model of writing, but I am not talking here about using that model specifically. I am simply talking about clarifying what it is we value by putting it in writing and letting students and parents know how writing will be assessed. This is a must. When we think we can keep sound criteria in our heads and apply them consistently over time and across performances, we are kidding ourselves. We need them in writing so that we can look at them and say, “This is what I believe.” As our thinking changes and we gain new insights about what makes writing work, we can revise our rubrics to reflect that thinking.

Countless rubrics and checklists for writing (and other areas of curriculum) are available now. But the best way to come up with a truly useful instructional rubric is to create it in partnership with students. The greatest value of a rubric or checklist lies not in the document itself, but in its development. Coming to grips with what we value in writing (or reading, math, or science) teaches us to understand the content area we are exploring, and challenges our accepted beliefs.

I have worked with rubrics for years now, but have had remarkably little success encouraging teachers to develop their own versions. It is so much handier to take someone else's

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rubric off the shelf, especially if you like the way it's worded. I understand this. When you're tired or busy, the prepackaged dinner can look pretty good. But rubric (or checklist) development demands that we figure it out for ourselves, not take someone else's word for what works. (See box on p. 17.)

Checklists and rubrics are not complete until they are backed by samples of writing. Students have a right to see samples of what we want from them as writers. If we cannot produce them, we ought to take another look at our criteria to see if what we are asking of our students is realistic.

Assessors at the classroom level must be readers, too. It's the only way to develop an ear for what's good, what's musical, what's right. A practiced reader can spot good writing even when it's buried under messy handwriting or sloppy presentation. Her ear cuts right through all that. By reading, we teach ourselves to listen for the layers of sound within each text.

We are very accustomed to conveying our responses to writing in the form of grades or numbers. But these things are not what writers need. They need our voices, our hearts. They need to know their writing has touched us in some way.

This brings me to a second point about good commentary. It's not only passionate, but compassionate as well. Anyone can be a critic. Good teachers do something much harder: They look for the precise moment at which a writer stumbles onto her true topic. They listen for that first whisper of the writer's voice, no matter how faint. They listen for the word or phrase too good to replace, for the rhythm of sentences that fall just right on the ear. Teachers hear the deer in the forest.

We should remind ourselves of the very real possibility that no matter how certain we feel about our

QUALITY ASSESSMENT IS ...

1. Perceptive.

The perceptive response is not the same as the right response — not exactly. Some questions have a right answer: What is the capital of Venezuela? What is the speed of light? But there are no right answers to the question: What are the strengths and weaknesses of this piece of writing? Perceptive assessment demands careful, reflective reading of a piece, together with a writer's perspective acquired through years of reading and writing. Good assessors sense the heartbeat behind the words.

2. Compassionate.

By that I mean that it seeks not to find fault, but to uplift — to genuinely help writers. So much of assessment is about identifying problems. But courage is what writers need most. Therefore, encouragement, or the bolstering of that courage, is what we as teachers and writing coaches ought to provide. If I am trying to push a large rock up a hill, the last thing I need is for someone to tell me I probably won't make it — or by how many feet I will miss the mark. For many student writers, the hill feels steep, and the rock is growing heavier by the minute. In that situation, courage is all that stands between that student and giving up.

3. Useful.

I do not mean useful to data gatherers eager to report on perceived growth, decline, or stagnation. Rather, I am talking about its usefulness to the people assessment should be designed to serve first and foremost: student writers. In this spirit, we must ensure that assessment at every level helps students to identify not only the needs to be addressed but, even more important, strengths to build upon.

responses, another evaluator might feel quite differently looking at the same piece of writing. No single assessment can ever be regarded as "the truth." Assessment at its best offers support and insight, not judgment.

PERSONAL ASSESSMENT

Student writers have a right to good personal assessment, too — self-assessment. Whereas we assess to grade and to coach, they assess to understand and to revise. Our job is to help them do this well: to use sound criteria that they have helped develop, and to give each piece the interpretive reading it deserves, a reading designed to bring out each nuance of voice and fluency. They

will be skilled assessors if, like us, they are avid readers and practiced listeners. They will be skilled assessors if, like us, they write every day so that thinking like a writer becomes a habit. They will be skilled assessors if, like us, they continually think about what it is they value in writing.

Teachers can do many things to help students become more skilled at self-assessment:

- Create checklists (with students) and revise them when necessary.
- Talk about literature not only as a body of ideas but as the work of writers. Each book, article, story, or essay has a lesson (or lessons) to teach us about writing well. Treat every piece of problematic writing as a lesson specially pack-

MEETING CHARLIE THE DOG

Let's say you want your students to write strong descriptions. You might begin with a not-so-strong sample and ask them to identify what doesn't work.

Charlie was an old dog with a difficult personality. He was sort of a dark color, and small as well. He didn't seem to like people. Charlie could not walk especially well and had trouble in cold weather. He had a very loud bark and a deep growl.

You might ask your students to respond to this piece, and to identify the salient features:

- **Vague words:** old, dark, small, sort of, well, loud.
- **Lack of detail:** Charlie "had trouble." What sort of trouble?
- **Undeveloped thoughts:** Charlie had a "difficult personality." How so?
- **Missing information:** What breed of dog? How old exactly?
- **Lack of support:** "He didn't seem to like people." How do we know this?

Now you (or your students) could use this list of features (the features of problematic description) to revise the original piece and create something stronger.

Charlie was an 11-year-old black miniature schnauzer. He had a perpetually frowning face, thick, bushy eyebrows tinged with gray, and a thickly muscled body shaved so close he always got the shivers in cold weather. He was blind in one eye, and perhaps that is what made him distrustful of almost everyone. Though his owner, Roberta, kept him on a fairly short leash, Charlie was stocky and powerful for a dog only a foot high at the shoulder, and he would lunge for bikers' feet or ankles — even growling low in his throat as he slowly circled small children in their strollers. Arthritis in all four legs did little to improve Charlie's disposition. Though he would sink his few remaining teeth into any leg he could reach, it was hard not to feel sorry for him as he fought his way through snow or limped over the ice in cold weather.

In creating and reviewing this revision, you could identify, together with your students, the features (call them traits or qualities if you like) of strong description.

- **Specifics:** 11 years old, arthritis in four legs.
- **Easy-to-picture-details:** black, bushy gray eyebrows, blind in one eye, foot high at the shoulder.
- **Shows rather than tells:** Instead of "Charlie didn't seem to like people," we get "Charlie would lunge for bikers' ankles."
- **Information woven throughout the piece:** In the last line, we learn about the "few remaining teeth."
- **Sensory details that go beyond the visual:** We hear Charlie growl, feel the cold of the snow and ice.

Having agreed on what's important, you could turn this list of features for good descriptive writing into a checklist. And you could do the same for any genre. Best of all, it would have come from you, not from any outside source.

aged just for you and your students, asking them, "If this were your piece, what would you do to make it stronger?"

- Encourage students to revise their work by reading what they write aloud — more than once, if possible. Encourage them to think like readers, asking, "Does this make sense? Is this text pulling me in or pushing me away?" Such reading is essential to good self-assessment.

Writer Susan Orlean emphasizes the importance of hearing her own text and imagining how a reader might respond:

"I read my pieces out loud when I'm writing, and if something doesn't

sound like a natural sentence, I take it out. If something's too boring for me to read out loud, I take it out. If you find it too boring to read, just think how boring the reader's going to find it" (in Yagoda, 2004, p. 176).

Writers hit a higher level of skill once they realize that revision is generative; revision takes us ever closer to our real meaning.

WRITING IS MORE THAN NUMBERS

The most important things to know about writing cannot be represented by numbers. If you have ever caught your breath as you were reading, or closed your eyes to better envi-

sion the moment a writer was creating for you, or said to a friend, "Listen to this ..." then you know what I mean. Yet numbers have such power over us. We want to know the current GDP, the Dow average, the likelihood of rain, the average current lifespan, the number of carbs in an apple, a book's rank on the New York Times best-seller list, the number of steps we must walk each day to be deemed fit.

We are obsessed with numbers, and in many cases, we attribute far too much importance to statistical information and not enough to the reality behind the numbers. We trust our calculators more than we trust our hearts. Albert Einstein once said

TUNE UP THE HEARTSTRINGS

Here's a little activity to help you see just how fine-tuned your own assessment skills are.

- Look at the pieces of writing at right and below, one a poem by a 7th-grade writer, one a short story from a 2nd grader.
- In each case, imagine yourself sitting down for a chat with the writer.
- In each case, ask yourself, "What do I hear in this piece?" Listen for the layers of sound.
- Give yourself permission to respond with both compassion and passion.

The Andersons

By Rachel Jordan Woods
Grade 2

Once there was a family. It was a nice family. The mother was Linda. The father was Bob. The boy was Jon. The girl was Marry Jo, and the baby was Laura.

They lived in a small apartment. One day, they decided to move. They packed their belongings. "Dad, where are we going to move?" asked Jon.

"To a farm."

"What is a farm?" asked Marry Jo.

"I don't know," said Dad.

One day, the Dad said, "I will go put the cow in the chicken coop and get some eggs."

Jon said, "I will go milk the pigs."

Marry Jo said, "I think I will go put the chickens in the pond."

Jon said, "I will go put the ducks in the pig pen."

Well, you know you can't do that, so they had a hard life.

Ode to Horses

By Laura Schweigert
Grade 7

I see you flash by
Wisps of
Cloud,
Earth and
Sky
Collide,
To make you,
My graceful friend.

On wobbly legs you stand,
Taking your first uneasy S

T
E
P
S,

As I watch you discover your world.
Like me,
You're an independent spirit,
You venture farther from your
mother,
But she guides you back to safety
within her reach.
You are a baby packed
with dynamite,
And will grow into a strong young
horse.

As we both grow,
We will earn each other's
Respect,

Trust, and
Guidance.

We must believe

One wrong step could prove fatal for
one

Or both of us.

Each hoof beat must be

Steady,

Strong, and

Skilled.

Through an intense understanding,
We can communicate using

Mind,

Body, and

Spirit.

Performing for an audience—

Hearts will sing.

Hands will clap.

And dreams will come true.

Without you,

I would be

Lost,

Restless and

Unsettled.

You have given me a future.

With you,

My friend,

I feel as if we could conquer the
world.

My troubles are forgotten and,

I can see clearly again.

The horse will be part of me forever.

that the most important things in the world could not be measured. So it is with writing. We cannot measure a child's confidence as a writer, her engagement in the writing process, the joy she feels when she creates something she feels proud of (regardless of what others may feel), her love of books, the sense of contentment she feels when someone reads aloud to her, the courage it takes for her to share her writing with another person, the satisfaction she feels in writing a note to a parent, or the profound admiration and gratitude she has for a writer whose words have transported her to another world. In the end, what matters most in the world of writing is immeasurable. So student writers have a right to assessment that is not just about numbers, but also

includes room for a smile, a laugh, a sigh, applause, and the honest and passionate response that all writers hunger to hear.

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