Tools For Schools®

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NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL
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INSIDE

Group Wise

Strategies for examining student work together

By Joan Richardson

Examining student work has always been part of a teacher's job. But, in recent years, that practice has moved from being a solitary activity to being a more collaborative effort in which teachers learn about their practice by sharing with and listening to colleagues.

In the hierarchy of professional development practices, examining student work would rank near the top because of the way that teachers work together to sharpen their practice to improve student learning.

Select a strategy for examining student work.

As various organizations have become interested in the strategy of examining student work, different protocols have been developed to guide that work. A protocol is simply a structure and guide for a group's conversation regarding a piece of student work. The protocols are designed to provide a safe place for teachers to share their students' work while also encouraging an honest exchange among participants.

Every protocol has been designed to emphasize a different aspect of evaluation. Some, like the Collaborative Assessment Conference, emphasize describing the student work. Others, like the Coalition of Essential Schools' Tuning Protocol, emphasize evaluative feedback from participants. Selecting a design that fits the culture of a school is a crucial factor in successfully using that design.

The tools on Pages 3, 4, 5, and 6 provide various options for examining student work. School teams may want to practice several options before identifying one that best fits their school. Schools may also discover that one strategy works best for one team while another team prefers a different strategy.

To learn more about practical options, visit the Learning About Student Work web site maintained by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (www.lasw.org). That web site includes a synopsis of about a dozen strategies for examining stu-

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Strategies for examining student work together

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dent work and links to learn more about each of them.

Opt for anonymity.

To introduce the process and to help teachers become comfortable with the concept, consider doing one or two practice sessions.

Bring in student work that does not belong to any of the participants. Visit the Learning about Student Work web site (www.lasw.org) and look for samples of student work that could be used for this practice session. Or, tap colleagues at another school for samples of student work.

"Teachers are often quite shy about bringing their own student work to the table. They feel very apologetic. They feel that others might castigate them for the errors, for work that's not perfectly done," said Lois Easton, director of professional development at the Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center in Estes Park, Colo. Easton does extensive work with tuning protocols developed by the Coalition of Essential schools.

Practicing on student work in which they have no investment can help teachers feel more comfortable about the conversations they might hear regarding the work of their students.

Select a project, task, or assessment that addresses one of the schoolwide goals for student performance.

The task should require that students produce something that demonstrates what they have learned. This could be a long-term project or a short-term task. Whatever the final result, the student product or performance should be something significant, not a worksheet, quiz, or test.

Geneva City Schools in Geneva, N.Y., wanted students to do more writing in math as a way to improve their ability to explain how they solved math problems. So teachers assembled by grade level to study students' math journals, said Jody Hoch, now director of mathematics for the Rush-Henrietta Central School District in upstate New York.

Collect documents that will help the study group participants understand the project or task.

These might include the initial assignment, scoring/grading criteria (or rubrics), objectives of the assignments, exemplars, models, timelines, checklists, etc. Think about other key information participants will need to understand the project or task and that can be shared succinctly.

The presenting teacher should be prepared to briefly describe the context of the student work. The documents listed above would be used to illustrate his or her points during that presentation.

Select samples of student work that demonstrate authentic student responses to the project or task.

Choose two or three samples to provide contrast. Teachers often find that a sample of work that shows promise but is not a stellar response to the assignment provides the best basis for feedback. Work selected may include final products, drafts, reflections, etc.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform suggests a variety of ways to select student work samples:

- Written work (or artwork) from several students in response to the same assignment.
- Several pieces of work from one student in response to different assignments.
- One piece of work from a student who completed the assignment successfully and one piece from a student who was not able to complete the assignment successfully (same assignment for both).
- Work done by students working in groups (include work of at least two groups that were given the same assignment).
- Videotape, audio tape, and/or photographs of students working, performing, or presenting their work. This might be particularly useful for very young children who haven't yet acquired adequate written communication skills.

Watch the details.

If possible, remove student names from the samples.

Make enough copies of the student work so that each participant has his or her own copy. Ensure that the facilitator knows in advance about any unique types of student work, such as sculpture or an entire portfolio of work, that are not easily duplicated. That will enable the facilitator to adapt the format accordingly.

If the student work is a video, a five-minute clip is usually sufficient to demonstrate the work.

Prepare a focusing question.

The presenting teacher should prepare a "focusing question" about the work that addresses a real interest or concern. Questions typically focus on either inputs (the assignment, teacher's support of student performance) or outputs (quality of student work, teacher's assessment of the work).

A broader question may elicit a wide range of feedback — and this may be desirable. For example: *How can I support higher quality presentations?* (input) *What are the strengths and weaknesses you see in the student presentations?* (output)

A narrower question might provide the kinds of feedback the teacher finds most useful. For example: *How can my prompt bring out more creativity in the students' work?* (input) *What evidence is there in the student work of mathematical problem solving?* (output)

Remember, even with a narrower focus question, participants will offer a range of feedback — on and off the question.

See the February 2001 issue of *Results* to read about the use of "tuning protocols," one strategy for examining student work.

Tuning Protocol

BACKGROUND: The Tuning Protocol was developed by the Coalition of Essential Schools to provide teachers with feedback on authentic assessments (exhibitions, portfolios, etc.). A teacher or a team of teachers presents samples of student work and the context for the work. The presenter then offers a focusing question. After reviewing the work, participants offer feedback.

FACILITATION: Can be facilitated by someone inside or outside the group.

TIME: One hour.

Directions

PRESENTATION.
Time: 15 minutes

- Presenter shares the student work and sets the context by describing the teaching/learning situation. Presenter poses one or two key questions to be answered.
- As the presenter speaks, participants are quiet, taking notes.

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS.
Time: 5 minutes.

- Participants ask non-evaluative questions about the presentation, such as "What happened before X? What did you do next?"

INDIVIDUAL WRITING.
Time: 5 minutes.

- Participants write individually about the presentation.

PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION.
Time: 15 minutes.

- Presenter turns to one side and listens silently during this time.
- Participants discuss among themselves, exploring issues raised during the presentation, striving to understand the situation, and raising possible answers to the questions.

PRESENTER REFLECTION.
Time: 15 minutes

- Presenter talks about the participants' discussion.
- Participants are silent, taking notes as the presenter speaks.

DEBRIEFING.
Time: 10 minutes

- Presenter and participants discuss both the process and the content of the protocol.

Source: *Lois Easton, professional development director, Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center, Estes Park, Colo., (970) 586-7109, e-mail: leaston@psd.k12.co.us.*

When looking for evidence of students' thinking:

- Stay focused on the evidence that is present in the work.
- Look openly and broadly; don't let your expectations cloud your vision.
- Look for patterns in the evidence that provide clues to how and what the student was thinking.

Source: "Some Guidelines for Learning From Student Work," *Horace* 13 (2), November 1996. *Horace* is a publication of the Coalition of Essential Schools. Available online at www.essentialschools.org/pubs/horace/13/v13n02.html.

tips

When listening to colleagues' thinking:

- Listen without judging.
- Tune in to differences in perspective.
- Use controversy as an opportunity to explore and hear the perspectives of others.
- Focus on understanding where different interpretations come from.
- Make your own thinking clear to others.
- Be patient and persistent.

Source: "Some Guidelines for Learning From Student Work," *Horace* 13 (2), November 1996. *Horace* is a publication of the Coalition of Essential Schools. Available online at www.essentialschools.org/pubs/horace/13/v13n02.html.

Collaborative Assessment Conference

BACKGROUND: Developed by Harvard's Project Zero, the Collaborative Assessment Conference provides a structure for groups of teachers to look closely at student work, describe it, ask questions about it, and explore implications for instruction. In this practice, describing the assignment and other context factors for the student work is not discussed until participants have described the work and asked questions about it.

FACILITATION: An experienced facilitator should lead this process.

TIME: 45 to 60 minutes.

Directions

GETTING STARTED. The group chooses a facilitator to guide participants. The presenting teacher shares copies of the selected work, without commenting about the work or the assignment.

DESCRIBING THE WORK. The group describes any aspect of the work they notice. They do not make judgments about the quality of the work or their personal preferences.

RAISING QUESTIONS. The group asks questions about the child, the assignment, the curriculum, or any other area. The presenting teacher takes notes but does not respond.

SPECULATING ABOUT WHAT THE STUDENT IS WORKING ON. The group "guesses" about what the child was working on when he/she created the piece. This could include ways the student was trying to fulfill the assignment, skills the child was trying to master, questions the child was trying to answer, or ideas he/she was trying to express.

THE "PRESENTING TEACHER" SPEAKS. The presenting teacher now adds perspective on each of the previous phases of the conference. The teacher provides his or her own perspective on the student's work and responds to questions or issues raised by the group.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING. Everyone is invited to share any thoughts about the student work. These could include thoughts about their own teaching, student learning, or ways to support a particular child in reaching his/her goals.

FINAL REFLECTION. At this time, participants have an opportunity to reflect on the process of their own thinking during the conference.

Source: *Harvard Project Zero, a 30-year-old research group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, works with individuals, schools, and other institutions to help create communities of reflective, independent learners; to enhance deep understanding within disciplines; and to promote critical and creative thinking. For more information, contact Harvard Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 321 Longfellow Hall, 13 Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138, (617) 495-4342, fax (617) 495-9709, e-mail: info@pz.harvard.edu, web site: http://pzweb.harvard.edu.*

Standards in Practice

BACKGROUND: Standards in Practice was developed by The Education Trust as a "quality control'' tool for analyzing and improving the quality of instruction. SIP is typically used in bi-monthly meetings of small teams of teachers, guidance counselors, and parents. The process calls for a close examination of teachers' assignments, student work, and the relevant standard or set of standards.

FACILITATION: Usually done by a coach from outside the school.

TIME: 90 to 120 minutes.

Directions

1. A volunteer teacher brings to the meeting a set of student work, along with the assignment. It must be ordinary, right-off-the-desk work.

2. Group members do the assignment themselves in order to experience the task presented to students.

3. Team members identify the state or local standards (or national standards, if both state and local standards are lacking) that align with the assignment. *Note:* This step has a secondary benefit: In many cases, teachers, parents, and counselors are less familiar with the standards and/or the assessments aligned to them than they should be. Looking through the standards to find those that match gives team members experience with the language and organization of the standards.

4. Without looking at the student work, the team constructs a scoring guide (rubric) for this specific assignment. The scores go from 4, which is an ideal portrait of work that would satisfy this assignment, down to 1, which describes minimal effort. The rubric must include descriptions of exactly what the teacher wants to see in successful work. Descriptions of work worthy of a 4 must include words denoting quality, expressions such as "convincingly persuades," "vividly portrays," "proves without question." It cannot just list features alone.

5. The team uses this scoring guide to score the student work. Team members confine their comments to the work and do not make references to the student who created the work.

6. The team summarizes what happened during the session and makes a plan of action.

Source: *"Examining student work,'' by Ruth Mitchell,* ***Journal of Staff Development****, Summer 1999 (Vol. 20, No. 3). For more information, contact the Education Trust at 1725 K Street NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20006, (202) 293-1217, fax (202) 293-2605, e-mail: rmitchell@edtrust.org. Education Trust's web site is www.edtrust.org.*

When reflecting on your own thinking:

- Ask yourself, "Why do I see this student work in this way? What does this tell me about what is important to me?"
- Look for patterns in your own thinking.
- Tune in to the questions that the student work and your colleagues' comments raise for you.
- Compare what you see and what you think about the student work with what you do in the classroom.

Source: "Some Guidelines for Learning From Student Work," *Horace* 13 (2), November 1996. *Horace* is a publication of the Coalition of Essential Schools. Available online at www.essentialschools.org/pubs/horace/13/v13n02.html.

tips

When you reflect on the process of looking at student work:

- What did you see in this student's work that was interesting or surprising?
- What did you learn about how this student thinks and learns?
- What about the process helped you see and learn these things?
- What did you learn from listening to your colleagues that was interesting or surprising?
- What new perspectives did your colleagues provide?
- How can you use your colleagues' perspectives?
- What questions about teaching and assessment did looking at this student's work raise for you?
- How can you pursue these questions further?
- Are there ideas you would like to try in your classroom as a result of looking at the student's work?

Source: "Some Guidelines for Learning From Student Work," *Horace* 13 (2), November 1996. *Horace* is a publication of the Coalition of Essential Schools. Available online at www.essentialschools.org/pubs/horace/13/v13n02.html.

Descriptive Review

BACKGROUND: Several variations exist for the Descriptive Review. All of them feature close, collaborative description of a student's work as well as the child who created that work. A teacher typically requests a review because he or she has questions about the child. Any artifact of student work can be the subject of a descriptive review as long as participants can view it during their discussion.

FACILITATION: Should be provided by an experienced facilitator.

TIME: At least 45 minutes.

Directions

1. The facilitator introduces the student work and describes what participants should try to "see'' in the work — the underlying values and principles, the habits of mind, the assumptions, etc. *Time: 2 minutes.*

2. Presenters describe their work in detail. Reviewers take notes. *Time: 10 minutes for each presenter.*

3. Reviewers may ask clarifying questions. *Time: 3 minutes.*

4. The facilitator begins the first round of discussion by asking, "What do you see? Describe this work physically. Describe this work as literally as you can." Reviewers respond in turn around the circle. *Time: 3-5 minutes.*

5. The facilitator summarizes what is heard, restates important themes and ideas that emerged from the description before going on to the next round. *Time: 2 minutes.*

6. The facilitator moves into the next round of questioning, framing each round with a guiding question. As the rounds of questions proceeds, the facilitator guides the discussion into becoming less literal. Reviewers should move into discussion of assumptions, values, compromises, patterns, images, etc. *Time: 3-5 minutes each round.*

7. The facilitator summarizes at the end of each round.

8. The facilitator makes a final summation of the reviewers' descriptions. *Time: 2 minutes.*

9. The facilitator invites the reviewers to offer suggestions or make recommendations to the presenters. The facilitator invites the presenters to share with participants any new insights as a result of listening to the descriptions. *Time: 10 minutes.*

Source: *Lois Easton, professional development director, Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center, Estes Park, Colo., (970) 586-7109, e-mail: leaston@psd.k12.co.us.*

Learning about

examining student work

■ "Examining student work," by Ruth Mitchell, *Journal of Staff Development* Summer 1999. Presents plan used by the Education Trust for examining student work. Available at *www.nsdc.org/library/studentwork.html*.

■ "Hoover Middle School Teachers Examine Student Work,'' by John Norton. Describes the work of the history team at Hoover Middle School in Long Beach, Calif., which meets weekly to scrutinize student work and their own lessons. On the web version, listen in on an actual "critical friends" session, examine the student work yourself, and review the Hoover teachers' tips for other teachers who want to start their own collaborative groups. Available online at *www.middleweb.com/Hooverpromo.html*.

■ "Learning to teach better by examining student work. A budding trend and the research behind it,'' by Debra Williams, *Catalyst: Voices of Chicago School Reform*, December 1999. Includes teacher stories, research findings, and examples of student work (high-scoring, typical and low-scoring student work from grade 6 writing) accompanied by the assignments and teacher analysis. Available at *www.catalyst-chicago.org/12-99/129toc.htm*.

■ *Looking at Student Work: A Window into the Classroom* by Annenberg Institute for School Reform. 1997. 28-minute video. Features students, teachers, and administrators at Norview High School in Norfolk, Virginia, as they discuss their experiences in looking at student work. For ordering information, visit *www.aisr.brown.edu/publications/pubvs.html*.

■ Looking at Student Work web site, maintained by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Offers extensive resources for studying student work. Visit *www.lasw.org*.

■ "Looking Collaboratively at Student Work: An Essential Toolkit,'' by Kathleen Cushman, *Horace* 13 (2), November 1996. *Horace* is a publication of the Coalition of Essential Schools. Describes several strategies for examining student work, including the Coalition's tuning protocol. The entire issue is available online at *www.essentialschools.org/pubs/horace/13/v13n02.html*.

■ *Looking Together At Students' Work: A Companion Guide to Assessing Student Learning* by Tina Blythe, David Allen, and Barbara S. Powell. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999. Provides strategies and resources for working together to examine and discuss student work such as science projects, essays, art work, math problems, and more. Offers a clear process for starting and sustaining collaborative discussions of student work and student learning and detailed descriptions of two structures for examining student work, the Tuning Protocol and the Collaborative Assessment Conference. To order, visit *www.teacherscollegepress.com*.

■ *The Cart Before the Horse Before the Cart: How Deeper Understandings of Standards, Instruction, and Assessment Can Emerge from Examining Student Work* by Don Glass (2000). Posted by the Rethinking Accountability initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Documents discussions from two meetings where teachers, parents, and other stakeholders collaboratively examined a piece of student art and writing. Available online at *www.aisr.brown.edu/accountability/lswA/speakout/index.html*.

■ "Student work: This focus for staff development leads to genuine collaboration," by Anne Lewis, *Journal of Staff Development*, Fall 1998. This article was an excerpt from the following article: "Teachers in the driver's seat," by Anne Lewis, *The Harvard Education Letter*, March/April 1998.

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Tools For Schools

Ask Dr. Developer

Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)

Not for everyone

Q I'm intrigued by the idea of having teachers work together to examine student work. But I wonder if my school is prepared for this. How can I tell if we're ready?

A Working together to study student work is an intensive process. Collegiality needs to be part of the culture of a school if this study of student work is going to be successful. That means that teachers must already be comfortable working with each other and learning from other. There must be a respectful and trusting atmosphere in the building.

Although collaborating to examine student work should enhance that trust and respect, it's unlikely that this practice, by itself, would create that atmosphere. So, if you're working in a school where teachers are accustomed to going in the room and closing the door, you may not be ready to jump into this practice.

Ask yourself these questions about your school. Are teachers already accustomed to looking at student data? Do they do this alone or do they do this as a group? Do teachers already work together on curriculum committees? Do they write curriculum together? Do they have regular planning time with each other? Are they involved in other forms of collaborative professional development — study groups, peer coaching, mentoring, etc.?

If you believe that examining student work is a goal you want to work towards, consider laying the groundwork for that by working in one of these other areas first. There are also other factors that will impact a school's readiness for this practice.

STANDARDS. The school should already be using standards. Teachers must have some framework to operate within when they're examining student work. They need to know the expectations for students.

TIME. Teachers also need time to do this work. In many districts, that will require changes in union contracts or, at a minimum, a recognition that teachers participating in this practice need the opportunity to be flexible about their time. Examining student work is not a task for teachers who like to keep one eye on the clock.

EXPERTISE. When a school begins to explore this practice, they probably will initially want help from an outside facilitator who has been trained to lead this process.

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