

How Do We Evaluate Student Writing?

One District's ANSWER

Teachers in North Scott School District in Iowa have set aside their red pencils; they now see themselves as writers helping other writers—their students.

When people ask, "What do you do for a living?" I reply, "I teach writing." "Boy, I'll bet you love the red pencil," they say with innocent admiration. They are pleased to meet a guardian of the public morals.

—From *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Graves 1983).

"Are our school children learning how to write?" Sliding test scores and ominous research findings in the mid-1970s indicated the answer to that question was "No"—and the situation seems to have improved only slightly since then. But the remedy doesn't lie in more emphasis on spelling, punctuation, and grammar, according to educators who have probed the problem. They say the best way to teach writing is to have students—and their teachers—write, write, write.

—From "New Approaches to Teaching Youngsters How to Write" (Kaercher 1981).

The teaching of writing is changing—and the role of the writing teacher. No longer synonymous with the red pencil, the writing teacher is becoming a writer who helps other writers. To motivate our teachers and their students to "write, write, write," the North Scott Community District introduced 143 teachers to the writing process approach, through four-day writing across the curriculum workshops. The remaining 34 teachers individually enrolled in various Iowa Writing Project summer courses.

Consequently, our students are learning to write from teachers who know that writing is an effective tool for learning. We now observe classrooms in which students are using all phases of the writing process approach—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. We see students writing—to check learning, to

answer questions, and to prepare for discussion—in every subject, from art and music to science and math. But are they really learning to write?

Three Assessment Methods

To measure our students' growth as writers, we developed the ANSWER (Assessing North Scott Writers' Essay Reflections) project. We assess their growth using various methods in a variety of settings.

In the first of three major assessment methods, we collect writing samples during fall and spring from all students in grades 2-12 (1st graders participate in spring). Our students prewrite and draft a piece of writing that centers around a specific districtwide topic. After the spring sample, students write evaluations of both their works, noting differences, improvements, and so on. We send

these evaluations and both fall and spring samples to parents for their comments.

We place parent responses, student evaluations, and the two writing samples in a cumulative writing folder, which is the second form of assessment. We can then compare each year's writings and evaluations to those of earlier years. In this way, tangible documents demonstrate student growth.

We also validate student growth by holistic assessment, the third and most objective method used in ANSWER. The holistic method also depends upon the fall and spring writing samples. However, during this phase of evaluation, writing teachers are trained to rank-order the papers rather than make an absolute judgment of quality. In our large-scale assessment, we preselected "anchor papers" to show the various score points and characteristics of good writing. The trained readers, working independently, have to agree on the score to give a particular paper. Teachers use the resulting grade-level analyses of student writing provided by the holistic writing team to pinpoint and correct writing deficiencies as well as to detect any needed curricular changes.

Others Ways to Assess Writing

Writing attitude surveys, completed by both students and teachers before and after writing workshops, are another way we assess our writing program. An overwhelming majority of teachers report that the workshop process approach has resulted in more positive feelings about writing and about themselves as writers or as teachers of writing. They are more confident, more willing to share their thoughts in writing. During the 1987-88 year, we formally surveyed 38 8th graders (chosen to represent all levels of academic and writing abilities) about their writing attitudes; we were pleased with the positive results. Ninety-eight percent of the students described themselves as doing "fair" to "very well" in writing. Only two students said they were "poor" writers.

District writing teachers also assess student writing by reviewing the annual writing folders they keep in their classrooms. These folders contain

pieces of student writing from all stages of the writing process. Some of the folders also include goals students have set for themselves, teachers' notes about what students need to work on next, notes about teacher-student conferences, and plans for future writings. Journals, notebooks, and learning logs provide another means of checking on writing growth. The contents of these folders and logs, coupled with the ANSWER samples, are the best way to show parents the progress their child has made in writing. We also inform parents about their children's writing growth during routine parent-teacher conferences held at all grade levels.

The Red Pencil's Demise

When people ask us, "What do you do for a living?" we now reply, "We help students learn to write." We hope they won't miss our red pencils and will respond with admiration, as parents in the North Scott community have:

● "I'll bet you loved seeing the growth in kids' writing between spring and fall as much as we did."

● "I didn't think you were catching all of Darlene's errors at the beginning of the year, but she's not making them any more."

● "I don't know how you taught Benjie to write, but he does and he likes it!" □

References

Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, p. 314.

Kaercher, D. (November 1981). "New Approaches to Teaching Youngsters How to Write." *Better Homes and Gardens* 59: 21.

Melva Lewis is an 8th Grade Language Arts Teacher, North Scott Junior High School, Eldridge, IA 52748. **Arnold D. Lindaman** is Assistant Superintendent, North Scott Community School District, Eldridge, IA 52748.

Oklahoma City Public Schools Superintendent, Dr. Arthur W. Steller, has immediate openings for outstanding educators for the following positions:

Science Programs Supervisor and Secondary Language Arts Supervisor

The District has 39,000 students, 84 school sites and a budget of 96.5 million dollars. This urban city is approaching 1 million in population.

Science Programs Supervisor: Interpret and implement the science curriculum for grades 6-12; promote and operate the Northeast High School Science Center, direct the District Bio-Medical Careers Program and the regional science fair. Three years of teaching experience in science at both middle and high school levels; experience in curriculum and supervision and Master's degree required, doctorate preferred.

Salary range: \$25,476 - \$35,226

Secondary Language Arts Supervisor: Responsible for the development, implementation and facilitation of the language arts curriculum for grades 6-12; organizes and presents inservice workshops; and provides assistance to principals and teachers in the area of language arts. Three years teaching experience; master's degree, doctorate preferred, with emphasis in curriculum or English and supervision.

Salary range: \$25,476 - \$35,226

Human Resource Development

Dr. Ramona Paul
Oklahoma City Public Schools
900 N. Klein
Oklahoma City, OK 73106
(405) 272-5572
EEO/AA



Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.