

Maps for improvement: Changing assessment practices in a Grade 12 English class

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Abstract

Research has shown that scoring and ranking students does not encourage learning and that, conversely, assessment for learning deepens learning. As a result, many teachers are hungry to change their method of assessment but remain unsure how to make the switch and still satisfy requirements like the Provincial exams, parental expectations, and reporting student achievement with a percentage. This paper—written in narrative style—tells the story of how one teacher did away with marking almost entirely in favour of assessment for and as learning. As a result of this change, her students feel empowered and confident in their improving writing skills, her students' parents feel more involved in the processes of learning and have more understanding of their child's performance in her class, and she sees the benefits of more authentic learning in her classroom. In the final section, this teacher leader shares how she continues to shape her ideas and procedures, and her confidence that she is moving in the right direction and that the students win as a result.

Introduction

As a teacher, I've come to see that marking without criterion-based feedback either inflates or deflates student egos, and neither of those effects help students learn. Students learn when they are involved in their own process of learning, not when their work is scored and ranked. This paper tells my own story about how and why I decided to move from marking without criteria to marking with it entirely, and how I've become familiar with a process that always keeps student learning in mind. I hope that it offers a way for other teachers to think about the nature of assessment, what is possible, and how they might want to modify their own practices.

First, a little about me. I am a teacher at Rockridge Secondary School. This year I am teaching Writing 12, English 12, English 11 Pre-AP and English 10 Pre-AP. I've also been involved in the *Network of Performance Based Schools* since beginning my teaching career. It was my involvement in the network that challenged me to think differently about assessment. Being a part of the network meant working closely and creatively with my colleagues, which continues to be a refreshing and educational practice for me. It also meant that I was supported by hundreds of other professionals with whom I shared similar goals and thinking. The best part, for me, continues to be this shared desire to learn from and challenge one another.

I am writing this article to tell about how my involvement in the network got me thinking differently about marking, grading, and practices of assessment. For me, the truth about marking refused to quiet down last summer. I've never been comfortable with numbers and I've always felt a disconnect in using numbers as feedback for a piece of writing. And computerized grading programs and processes, which are in common use among teachers, encourage an averaging of sorts to calculate a student's final grade. But should a student be assessed based on an average? Should a concept they struggled with at the beginning of the term really affect their mark if

they've mastered it by the end of term? I wondered why we were assessing their progress and not their achievement.

Each time these ideas about the upcoming school year slipped into my mind, an insistent little mantra would nudge me: "Assessment should be for learning, not ranking. *Learning*, not ranking. Learning, *not ranking*," it said. After a few weeks of hearing this chant in my head, I felt uncomfortable about continuing to grade students with scores the way I had been taught. As it turns out, my subconscious was quite persuasive! Once I decided to listen to that insistent voice in my head, I got excited about putting the idea into practice. Could I really stop marking students' work? As an English teacher, this idea in particular thrilled me.

On the first day of school last September (2007), I was nervous; nervous because I was about to teach in a way I had never seen modeled, except in theory. I was nervous because except for academic research, I had nothing to back me up when the students questioned my method or when their parents called to find out what "*hippy-dippy kinda system was I using?*" and "*how is [my kid] going to get into university without an English mark?*" I was pretty certain that responding to these parents with "*I'm not sure, but this just feels better to me*" wasn't going to cut it.

The good news is that after nearly a year spent not grading student work, I can tell you that moving to assessment for learning on a large scale is possible and effective. Here's what it looked like this year in my classroom.

First step: Feedback

I committed to basing all my assessment on the BC Ministry of Education Performance Standards, or rubrics I made for specific assignments that were firmly based in the Performance Standards. This decision was an easy one, as my school has been a part of the *Network of Performance Based Schools* since it began over eight years ago, so our students are familiar with rubrics and comfortable with them. Despite this comfort level, however, I spent several lessons teaching how I would use the rubrics, how they would use them, and what, specifically, each criterion looked like.

Second step: Tracking and goal-setting

I created an Assignment Log and labeled three big, red binders to house them at the back of my room. Each student received a log, marked it with their name, and filed it alphabetically in the binders. To avoid a bottleneck when the entire class has to get their logs, I used lettered dividers and three binders, so that students could spread out and find their log quickly. The log has six columns: Date; Assignment; Strengths; Area of focus; Plan to improve; Resources needed for plan.

Each time I return an assignment, students fill out one row of these columns in accordance with the feedback on their assignment and their decision about how to move forward. Both of these factors are important, so I'll unpack each right now.

1. Feedback on assignment: The pedagogy behind my feedback practices is well-supported by research and has been proven uncountable times, so I won't rationalize it here for you. Suffice it to say that feedback is only helpful when it's meaningful and, for me, putting a number on a piece of written work does not seem meaningful. So, instead, I highlighted the

rubric to indicate the various strengths and weaknesses of a student's work. This method requires a lot of paper over the course of a year. I haven't figured out the best way to mitigate this effect yet, so if you have any ideas, please let me know. Sometimes I would conference with the student and give oral feedback, but often that discussion is logistically impossible.

Peer-feedback and student self-evaluation occurred frequently as well; the feedback was not always from me. The rubrics work well for peer- and self-evaluation because the feedback remains meaningful and consistent, since we are all using the same tool and language.

2. When students receive their work and their feedback, they have a big job to do: they must read through the feedback, evaluate which is the piece most worthy of focus, commit to working on it in their proceeding assignments, and determine how there are going to improve on it.

An example will help illustrate how the log was used by students throughout the year. A student might receive feedback indicating, among other things, that her thesis statements are clear and insightful but that her writing lacked coherence, her sentence variety needed help, and that mechanical errors were distracting. Even for the best writer, so much feedback can be overwhelming. This is why the log I designed for these students asks them to pick only one area of focus for each piece of writing.

Let's say this student picks coherence. In the next column, marked "Plan to Improve," she must explain how she will improve. I've found that this column is the most difficult for students to complete. For the first half of the year, students would stumble at this point and whine or grimace, and I certainly understood that response; figuring out how to reach a goal requires higher cognitive activity than it does simply carrying out teacher instruction or correcting technical errors. However, this step is one of the most important in the process of learning, because in figuring out how to reach their learning goal, students become owners of their learning. Once students own their learning, their rate and depth of learning increases (Earl, 2003).

Here is a conversation I had with a student I'll call Fred:

Fred: (*pointing to the "Plan to Improve" column*) Ms. Smith, I don't know what to put here.

Smith: Okay, tell me about the thing you want to get better at in your next assignment.

Fred: I need to use better transitions.

Smith: Tell me about transitions.

Fred: They're supposed to connect ideas.

Smith: Right. Can you point to a transition in your paper?

Fred: (*pointing to the first word of the second body paragraph*) Secondly.

Smith: Good. Now what made you choose that transition?

Fred: Because I'm gonna talk about my second point.

Smith: Okay, so you've told the reader that your second point is coming right after your first point, but how else are your first and second points related?

Fred: Ummmm... well the second point basically explains that some people might think my first point isn't valid, but that I've got a ton of reasons why it is.

Smith: So, besides being your second paragraph, your second paragraph addresses the other side to the argument and further supports your first paragraph. What phrase or word could you use to show that relationship?

Fred: Ummm... *in addition*?

Smith: Okay, that's closer. But "in addition" doesn't quite hint that you're going to address the opposing side.

Fred: Oh. Ummmm... *although*?

Smith: Exactly! There are tons of transitions that we can use, and the best transitions to pick are the ones that reveal the relationships between ideas. *Despite* is another one you could use.

Fred: Okay.

Smith: So, what did we do to figure out a better transition?

Fred: You asked me questions.

Smith: Could you ask yourself the same questions?

Fred: Yeah, but I don't think I know enough transition words. Not everything is going to be *in addition* or *however*.

Smith: True. So where can you go to find more?

Fred: One of our grammar or writing books?

Smith: You got it.

After this discussion, Fred wrote the following into his "Plan to improve" column: ask myself how my ideas or paragraphs are related and write out a list of transition words and put it into my journal so I don't have to go to the reference books all the time.

The next column, "Resources needed for plan," ensures that students have considered their plan thoughtfully and are prepared to follow through with it. For example, a student might require practice with comma usage, or time with the teacher or a peer to review a concept, or a dictionary, or—simply enough—more time.

Let's say a student, we'll call her Nancy, chooses to work on her comma usage. Under her "Plan to improve" column she has written that she will practise proper comma usage. In order to practise, she will need resources. In her "Resources needed for plan" column she identifies the following resources: *pages 33–35 in Language Power, Ms. Smith's Grrrrrammar Guide, and time with Jen [her friend, a strong writer] to check the pages over.* I'm available to students as a resource as well, but I encourage them to seek help from each other before asking me because (1) I am only one person and (2) when students teach their peers, the teaching-students deepen their learning and the others learn.

After filling out their Assignment Log, students re-file the logs in the binders, and note their area of focus in their own school agendas so they can be reminded of it when they sit down to work on the next assignment.

Third step: Reporting

I'm sure you are thinking, "That sounds good, but what about a mark?" Report cards don't just go away because you're using rubrics. To make things more difficult, our report-card format demands that a percentage be recorded. To deal with this reality, I spend a couple of classes with the students reflecting on their progress and determining their marks at the end of each term. This process takes two classes, because during one class they collect evidence and write about their progress, and during the next class I have them work on an in-class assignment while I meet with each student individually for a 3-minute conference in which we decide their grade. I'll explain each of the two steps below.

In order to reflect on the evidence, students were first asked to take out their Assignment Logs and look at where they've improved. Their improvements become very obvious after using the log format. For instance, a student might have been working to improve their writing's clarity over the time span of several assignments. For each of those assignments, then, "clarity" will appear under the column "Area of focus." Eventually, most students will achieve their goal of increasing clarity to the point where it becomes a strength, and, as a result, a few assignments down the log, "clarity" will appear under the "Strengths" column. If it doesn't, then it might still be their area of focus, and that's valid, too.

Has your heart ever broken from watching a student's paper, decorated with your tireless comments, being crumpled and thrown, 3-pointer-style, into the garbage? It's a tragedy. No one can learn from a mistake that is stewing in moldy sandwich crusts and classroom detritus! To avoid this tragedy, I re-collect their assignments throughout the term after they have filled out their Assignment Logs. I keep their assignments for them all term. I don't organize them; I simply keep a bin for each block and throw them into the bin. During this end-of-term process, students sort through the bin and gather their own assignments. After they have completed examining their log for strengths and improvements, I ask them to review their previous assignments. Another benefit to keeping everything on hand is that I can use them to demonstrate learning during student-teacher conferences and parent-teacher conferences.

Another step in this process involves conducting a mini-lesson on how to define achievement with a letter grade. The students and I review the Performance Standards, which are not meant to be used as a calculation tool, and discuss what qualifies as an A-letter grade, a B-letter grade, and so on in the areas of reading and writing. After the discussion, the students work in groups to create a scale which corresponds with the Performance Standards.

You might question my decision to do this step: In all honesty, the Performance Standards and the students' scales have a lot in common, but I will continue to use this step so that the Standards don't become synonymous with grades. That would defeat the purpose of using the standards as a means of determining general benchmarks. Then, I ask them to make connections from those notes to their own work. They ask themselves what level they are achieving at that point in the term. Some students resist this process and want to find their grade in a calculator, often because it seems easier. Overall, however, most find that the connections are fairly obvious and determine their level of most recent and consistent achievement accordingly.

I've tried determining the exact percentage in two ways and I'm not sure which I prefer. For the first-term grades we decided to limit the percentages possible so that, for example, students who were achieving a B-letter grade would be graded at a 73%, 79%, or 85%. This approach corresponded nicely with the ideology and question that I began with: how to interpret the difference between a student with 77% and 78%.

However, at the end of the second term we decided that students could defend any percentage between, let's say, 73% and 85% for a B-letter grade. Although this approach does not blend as well with my original questions around grading, the students felt better about it.

Interestingly, in both cases, students who achieved at the high end of any one letter grade—let's say 85% and not 86%, which would be an A-grade—were not upset! This attitude marked a big shift in their thinking. In the previous years, students would attempt bargaining for “*just one more percent*” and I would have trouble not giving it to them since, really, what's the difference in one percent? However, when you look at the grade as indicating performance at a certain level, the idea of giving someone “*just one more percent*” seems ridiculous, because one more percent would indicate achievement at another level entirely, which, of course, would not reflect their actual achievement.

After completing this process by reflecting on their progress and achievements and evaluating the evidence, students finally write a **Term reflection** using the following headings to organize their thoughts:

- a) My skills at the beginning of term,
- b) My skills at the middle of term,
- c) My skills at the end of term,
- d) My grade and where I want to go from here, and
- e) My approach to this course.

I also require that students quote evidence from their assignments in their reflection, just as they would in writing a literary analysis. Upon finishing their reflection, the student will bring it to me and we'll review it in a conference-style meeting. The conferences occur during class and last only about 3– minutes each. During the conference, the student must explain the grade they deserve and why.

Fourth step: Communication to parents

In order to make the grade on their report card as meaningful to the parents as it has become to the students, I send the students' reflections home as an attachment with their respective report cards.

Skeptical?

I imagine some of you who are reading this are skeptical. Can kids really mark their own work accurately? After examining all the evidence, my observation is that it is difficult for a student to overestimate or underestimate their achievement. I teach just under 200 students each term and I've gone through this process for two report cards so far this year; up until this point, I've only had a handful of students overestimate their grade. Because the process requires them to be mindful of their skills and achievements, they can usually tell me—at any point in the term—what mark they are probably achieving. No more panicked or whiny “*What am I getting, Ms. Smith?*” inquiries.

Response and results

I wanted to learn more from my students about what they thought about this process and how they believed it helped or hindered their learning. I had some anecdotal feedback from students. They told me they feel like they have a map for “getting better at writing,” that they like their part in the “grade decision,” like knowing why they get a mark, so it’s not “*a big mystery like it used to be.*” However, I also wanted more formal feedback, so in April 2008 I designed a short survey to have students report to me anonymously what they thought about this new process.

Here’s what I found: virtually all of my students surveyed prefer feedback as opposed to a number (i.e., ranking). The two students who said they preferred the number admitted wryly that numbers require less work and you can “just see quickly where you’re at without thinking about it.” For me, their responses just mean that I’m moving in the right direction, because I want them “thinking about their achievement” as much as possible.

One Grade 12 student commented on how, prior to this year, he felt like everyone was fated to be a certain type of writer and there just wasn’t any way to improve. He believed he would always be a “B-English student” because he didn’t see any way to get an “A.” Since developing his own map for improvement through this process, he has begun exceeding expectations and is currently achieving at the “A” level.

I like how he called it a “map for improvement:” how appropriate. Because for me the best thing about *not* marking student work is that they must do all the thinking and mapping. They must begin to understand how they learn and how to improve. Suddenly, everything is student-centered and, for my Grade 12 students especially, that focus is paramount, because outside of high school’s walls, students won’t find themselves in many situations where they have someone fully invested in guiding and helping them improve at anything. The ability to plan for their own improvement will help them throughout their entire lives.

I also felt confident about letting the students choose their own grade.

Obviously, I don’t agree with every student’s decision; if I disagree, I simply engage them in more conversation and reflection. After those conferences, the student and I agree that their grade is an honest, accurate and thoughtful reflection of their achievement levels at the time of reporting.

As for parents, they **loved** it. Many were nervous about my plan when I presented it to them in September at *Meet the Teacher Night*. But, after the first reporting period, I received a couple of phone calls and several emails commenting on how fantastic it was to get a sample of their child’s writing and to know why their child was getting a “C” or “B” or whatever. The grade took on new relevance for them and was obviously not an arbitrary ranking, but rather a level of achievement. Many parents of high-school children feel disconnected from the classroom (not surprising, since many teenagers want their parents as far away from school as possible!), and this is one way to bring them in and give them a peek.

Plan for improvement

Next year, I want to focus on how to make the Assignment Log even more meaningful. Sometimes, in my rush to get back to the novel we were reading, I would hurry the students through the filling out of the Assignment Log. I was wrong to do so. Instead, I should have put *more emphasis* on the importance of the process. I should also review students' logs more often. I could do this easily without adding more work to my load by circulating my classroom more frequently while my students are filling out the log. Some students didn't understand the relevance of the Assignment Log enough to make it as effective a tool as it could have been for them. I realize that this process takes time away from learning the materials, but I think the end result is absolutely worth it. And, in a skills-based course such as English, we have the time to devote to it.

I would also like to use less paper. Handing out a rubric with every assignment is hard on the photocopier and the environment. I'm not yet sure how to get around that, but I'm working on it.

I will also be sure each student has finished their "End of Term Reflection" before meeting with them to discuss their grade. Sometimes I would get anxious and rush this part a little bit, which defeats the purpose. I might also think about changing the sections of the "End of Term Reflection" to mirror those of the Prescribed Learning Objectives organizer: *Comprehend and Respond, Communicate Ideas and Information, and Self and Society*. This change would require a slight alteration to the way I introduce the skills, but might better correspond to the curriculum.

Although in this article I refer mostly to writing skills and the Writing Performance Standards, the process I've explained above works similarly for reading skills and the reading standards, or with the standards for social responsibility. I dealt mostly with writing skills in this article for simplicity's sake, but have used this process for other outcomes I want to assess with students as well.

Having gained confidence in this process throughout the year, I am excited to take it to its full potential next year. Moving to Assessment *for* Learning as my primary means of assessment proved satisfying and rewarding and much less scary than I thought it would be.

Teacher leadership

Teachers are leaders by definition. We guide students and make decisions and model results and understand the larger perspective. Teachers are also innovators. We create lessons and units and assignments and resources and assessment plans. There is no magic formula for this craft; we each come to it in our own way and perform it in our own way.

The assessment plan I've outline above resulted from a creative process and an attempt to understand the bigger picture of how grading doesn't assess learning, and how to design a system that DOES help with learning. When my students leave my classroom, I want their brains to be stimulated and their curiosity nudged, and I want them to feel empowered to keep their brain hungry and their curiosity active. My method of assessment works toward this goal. I would call this process a way of engaging as a teacher leader.

I'm still new to the profession. Three years have gone by since my first knee-knocking day in the classroom, and I continue to work out all my ideas and understandings. Even when those ideas are backed by research, trying them out can be terrifying. But without the innovators, those brave teacher leaders who tried their ideas and guided me in mine, I wouldn't have been able to move

to assessment for learning at all. And, although terrifying, it has been a thrilling year. In order to make this program work I stood on the shoulders of giants, all of them teacher leaders. Had Donna Neilson, Judy Halbert, and Linda Kaser not forged ahead with their ideas and provided me with the space to question and investigate, I would still be getting out my calculator to compile grades. So forge ahead everyone! We have nothing to lose and our students have everything to gain.

References

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