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**Looking at Student Work** Pages 79-80

# Research Says / Looking at Student Work Yields Insights

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Years ago when I was a graduate student teaching college composition, my supervising professor presented the group of us teaching composition with two student papers. One was neatly typed, grammatically flawless, and structurally sound. Its five tidy paragraphs all began with topic sentences dutifully followed by supporting sentences.

The second paper was another matter. It had been scrawled into, and ripped from, a spiral notepad. Some words were hastily crossed out, others misspelled. Yet the writer's observations of late-night goings-on at a local burger joint left us chuckling. He wrote with a voice, including indelible turns of phrase like, "People began chucking the nasty burgers back at the workers." His thesis statement—what makes this fast food place special isn't the food but the unexpected entertainment that comes free with every meal—was clear and supported. In contrast, the first paper, was inert. It consumed five paragraphs saying almost nothing.

"How would you grade these two papers?" our professor asked. Thus began a productive dialogue—one that forever shaped my own make-a-point (but also revise-and-proofread) approach to writing instruction.

That's the promise of teachers looking at student work together. Focusing teacher dialogue on real artifacts can surface tacit differences in our expectations and teaching practices. So what does research say about using this approach—sometimes called the *work sample method*—for teacher professional development?

## Snorkeling or Scuba Diving?

To date, few large-scale, rigorous studies have been conducted on this method, so we must piece together qualitative research to get a handle on its benefits. In 2002, a team of researchers at the University of California-Berkeley (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2002) presented a conference paper that reviewed five different work sample method approaches and concluded there was "emerging evidence" to support the approach.

That's hardly a ringing endorsement. At issue seems to be exactly what teachers do while looking at student work: Do they skim the surface or dive deep into what the work shows students—and possibly *teachers*—are thinking about during the learning process?

Three conditions need to be in place for teachers to take that dive:

* *Be tough on practices, not people.* Analyzing student work, notes teacher coach and author Elisa MacDonald (2011), requires teachers to trust, and be vulnerable with, one another. "Teachers must be willing to expose their struggles and failures with their colleagues," she writes. And "colleagues must be willing to tell the truth, or teams will go through the motions … but never see results" (p. 45).
* *Focus on student thinking*. A five-year study of professional learning communities (Deuel, Nelson, Slavit, & Kennedy, 2009) found that many collaborative conversations defaulted to an approach of proving that students had learned and teachers had done their jobs. In contrast, effective collaborative inquiry moved beyond whether students "got it" and asked instead what students were *thinking* about. Doing so surfaced unspoken assumptions.
* *Encourage self-reflection.* The first step to changing any behavior is recognizing the need to change. There's little benefit to analyzing student work if teachers don't also step back and reflect on their *own* work and assumptions.

## Putting It All Together

As with many endeavors, the key appears to be striking all these notes in unison so that like a chord, they work in harmony. Recently, a study (Dempsey, Beesley, Fazendeiro Clark, & Tweed, 2015) of a work sample method developed by McREL researchers attempted to do exactly that. The results provide some of the best evidence to date that when these conditions are all met, teacher self-reflection and practice and, ultimately, student achievement can increase.

The intervention was designed to address middle school students' waning interest and persistence in mathematics. It began with intensive workshops to help teachers better understand the concepts of student growth mindset and persistence—and the formative assessment practices needed to foster them. In facilitated sessions, small groups of teachers discussed examples of lesson goals and success criteria, and student work that met (or didn't meet) the goals. They shared their own student work samples, discussing their intended goals for each lesson, how well student work met those goals, and what feedback they'd offered along the way. Teachers also reflected on their own progress toward developing expertise and provided one another with critical-friend feedback.

Before and after the study, outside reviewers evaluated teachers' work samples, including the quality and rigor of their learning goals and assessment criteria, the extent to which lessons and student tasks aligned with learning goals, the quality of feedback to students, and the extent to which students engaged in self- or peer assessment. Throughout the study, teachers improved significantly in all these factors. In focus group sessions, teachers reported greater student engagement and persistence on complex math tasks.

Despite these changes, student achievement on the state's math assessment didn't improve at significantly higher rates than that of students outside the study. However, the small sample size (47 teachers) created a high bar for demonstrating statistical significance. Moreover, the state test didn't measure the kinds of complex learning these teachers had been attempting to develop.

This last point is important. Thinking back on my own experience, there would have been little benefit if my colleagues and I had collectively parsed student work for rudimentary (and easily testable) skills like grammar. The real benefit of talking through student work samples was that it helped me reflect upon and change my own paradigm. Writing instructors have a natural tendency to overweight the easy things to grade (and teach), like grammar, spelling, and structure. Colleagues helped me see it was more important to teach complex skills like developing ideas and writing with voice.

The power of collaboratively reviewing student work lies in diving deeply into vexing teaching challenges. And, as any scuba instructor will tell you, always dive with a buddy.

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