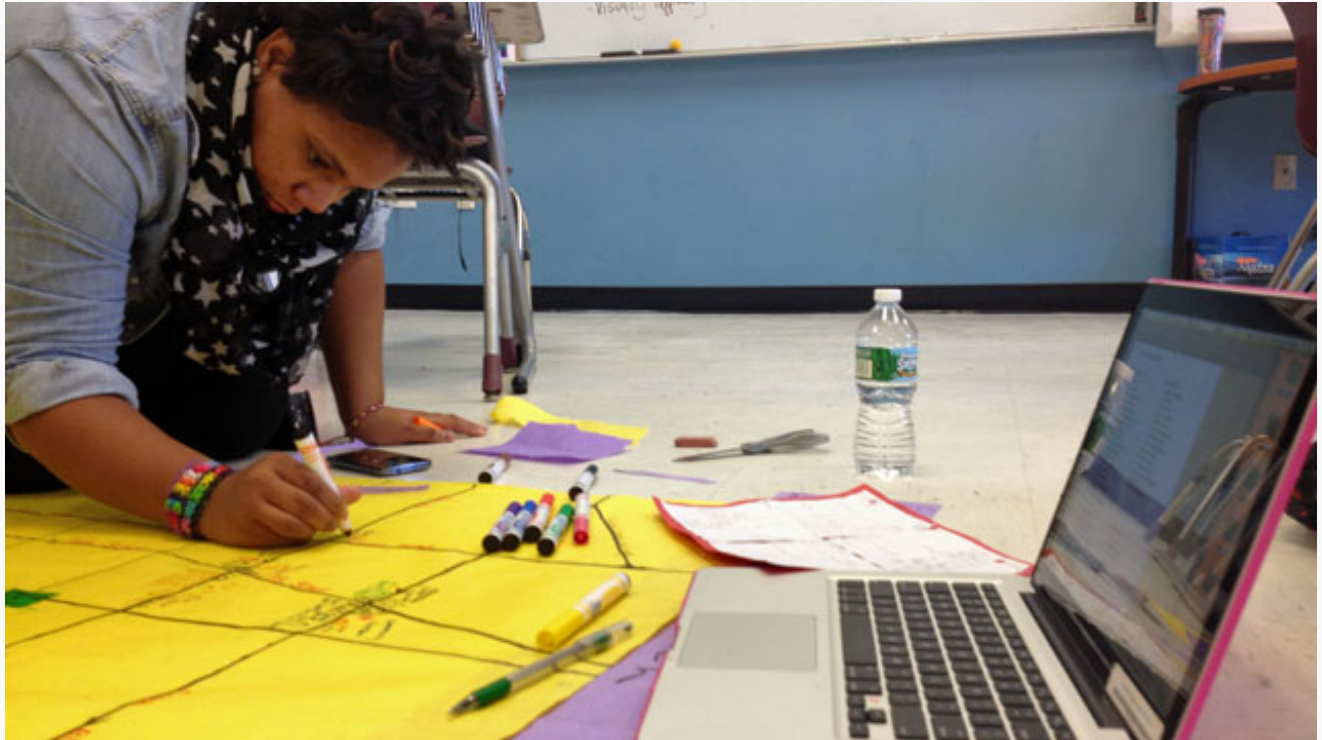


# How Looking at Student Work Keeps Teachers and Kids on Track

[www2.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/09/19/how-looking-at-student-work-keeps-teachers-and-kids-on-track/](http://www2.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/09/19/how-looking-at-student-work-keeps-teachers-and-kids-on-track/)

Katrina  
Schwartz



A Science Leadership Academy sophomore puts the finishing touches on a geometry project during her lunch period.

Much of the work students produce is read only by their teachers. It can feel disconnected from the class as a whole and irrelevant to a broader conversation. That's why examining and critiquing student work as a regular part of classroom interactions can be a powerful way for both teachers and students to reflect on their work, while building a community culture that focuses on the process of learning.

Increasingly, educators are focusing on teaching students about their learning brains, in addition to specific subject content. Research by Stanford psychologist [Carol Dweck](#) and others on [developing academic mindsets](#) have helped show that students' perceptions of themselves as learners plays a large role in their academic success. Evaluating student work throughout the creation process is a great way to make sure students are grasping the concepts being taught along the way, and can be a gentle way of focusing evaluation toward improvement.

Educators use student work for many reasons: to fine-tune lesson plans, to give students practice offering constructive feedback to peers, even to inspire other students. Whatever reason for using student work, it should be clear to both the student and teacher why the work is being evaluated at that moment.

## A TOOL TO EVALUATE LESSON DESIGN

"I learn a lot about how well I'm scaffolding a student or where I'm lacking in that," said Edrick Macalaguim, a seventh-grade teacher at [High Tech Middle Chula Vista](#) during a [Deeper Learning MOOC panel](#). He prefers to look at student work several times throughout its creation so he can see how well students are able to execute the task and if they are understanding its goals. If he sees that they aren't on the right path, he can take steps to modify the

assignment. “It helps me understand what they know and what they can articulate, as well as whether or not I’m doing a good job in the project or lesson design,” Macalaguim said.

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When discussing projects, educators often jump to examples in English or social studies classes. But this same approach to student work can be taken with math, where it may be even more important that students learn to think divergently.

To do this, the math problem has to be open enough that students can approach solving it in various creative ways. This is not “drill and kill” practice, where the only thing being tested is whether the student learned a specific math rule. Looking at students’ math work using this model is instead about identifying their thought processes and following those thought lines to see if there is evidence that the student understands the underlying concepts.

“We want to see the approach they took and really get insight into the way they solved the problem,” said Carissa Romero, associate director of the [Project for Education Research That Scales](#) (PERTS) at Stanford. If teachers only assess to see if students got the correct answer, she said, they don’t get quality information about whether students really understood what was being taught.

## **STUDENT WORK INSPIRES**

Teachers often assign work to students without giving them a clear sense of what a great project would look like. “As teachers we spend a lot of time hoping that students will create great work,” said Ron Berger, chief academic officer of [Expeditionary Learning](#) with 25 years of classroom experience. “But if we haven’t sat down with our colleagues and looked and talked about what we hope for, we don’t have a common vision of what we’re expecting.”

Students might get a rubric describing what’s expected of them in a project, but that doesn’t mean they have a clear vision of what success would look like. “The main thing for me about student work is it creates a model and a discussion point of what we’re aiming for,” Berger said. He has created a downloadable “museum of beautiful student work,” hand-picked from the thousands of projects he’s seen over his career, that educators can use to help inspire their students.

“It’s important to compliment people on their work sometimes,” said Iza McGawley, a seventh-grader at High Tech Middle Chula Vista. She is inspired when another student’s work is held up as an exemplar. It makes her want to work harder so that her work will be recognized, too.

Honoring student work in this way, as well as taking the time to deeply discuss, compliment and critique projects, helps hold them to a higher standard. “It sends the message that the quality of what kids do in school matters,” Berger said. “And that’s a message that’s transformational for kids, to elevate their work as something that’s worth being looked at closely.”

It’s important to recognize that all students have something to offer, even the students having difficulty. Macalaguim said he often holds up a part of a struggling student’s work so that he or she can be recognized for the positive aspects before moving on to point out areas of growth more privately. “Using that process with our struggling students helps build their confidence level,” Macalaguim said. It also helps make struggling learners feel supported, like they have a learning community.

## **STUDENTS GAIN PERSPECTIVE**

“Every time that I look at someone else’s work, I learn about their way of thinking,” Iza said. She admits that at first she was offended when her peers pointed out flaws in her work, but she has come to see the process as a helpful way to improve. “I think that I also learn a lot about how it’s OK for people to help you out on your work,” Iza said.

‘Looking at student work, especially during the process, can help move a classroom culture toward the direction that school is for learning.’

As teachers already know, student work can be an important window into their lives. When students share their work with one another, it can build a stronger classroom community. Iza described a writing assignment one of her classmates shared that was very personal to him. “We understood each other more and it helped us build a stronger relationship with one another,” she said.

Regularly reviewing one another’s work also builds student capacity to give and receive constructive feedback. Educators who regularly utilize this teaching technique often rely on protocols to help structure feedback, asking students to first describe what they see before making any judgments, and offering both positive and constructive insights into the work. It’s important to tell students what they are doing well so they can build on that success in addition to pointing out areas for improvement.

Research has also shown that when teachers clearly communicate to students that they are receiving feedback because the teacher has high expectations for the student and wants to be sure he or she can meet them, students are less defensive and perform better, said Romero. She explained this approach worked particularly well with African-American students in the study who were sensitive to critique because they were aware of societal biases.

## **CHANGING PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WHAT SCHOOL IS FOR**

Perhaps one of the most subtle but important benefits of regular showcases of student work is the way it can focus learning on the process, rather than on achieving one outcome. “A lot of students see school as a place you go to be judged, to learn whether you are smart or not,” Romero said. Looking at student work brings the focus back to a baseline understanding that all learning starts from somewhere and that improvement and growth are the real goals of school. “It bring the focus back to learning goals,” Romero said.

“I also believe that we should collect the early drafts of work so we can talk about the fact that all great work starts out with struggles and problems,” Berger said. “Students can see that we all make mistakes in process.”

That message is coming across clearly to students at High Tech High Chula Vista. Iza said her class motto is “fail to prevail,” and she candidly acknowledged that every student encounters times when she doesn’t understand everything. That’s the point from where she starts learning.

“Looking at student work, especially during the process, can help move a classroom culture toward the direction that school is for learning,” Romero said. “We want to be making mistakes and we’re working together towards better work all the time.” And when students make mistakes it often illuminates big misperceptions, that when resolved, can help a learner make the huge conceptual leaps that feel like breakthroughs.

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