Writing Assessment and Evaluation: 
Questioning What is Learned and Valued

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Introduction

As I began my research on writing and teaching writing, I was very interested—both from the perspective of a teacher wanting the best for my students and as an individual with a passion for the written word—to explore the notion of what young writers are learning to do well. Since what students do well is often reflected in teacher evaluation and student achievement, I needed to examine the tools and strategies implemented as a means of grading student performance and learning. As I reflected on my own teaching practice, I noted that with every paper, journal entry, and creative passage I have marked, I have been telling my students what I like and enjoy about their writing. I also tell them what areas they need to improve. In so doing, students have received messages about what is valued in their work. This caused me to question the messages I want to send to them in my feedback. When I take out my coloured pens, Post-it notes, or gold stars, what skills are my students praised for in their writing? What talents do they possess that go unnoticed and unrewarded? I wondered whether I have really been helping these young authors to soar as literary artists. A motivating goal of this work, therefore, became finding ways to assist my students in developing their full potential as writers.

It must be considered that writing plays a large role in measuring students’ abilities in all areas of the curriculum and in many aspects of learning—through testing measures, synthesizing information, comparing and contrasting, making connections, supporting opinions, and drawing conclusions. Based on a philosophy of integrating instruction with assessment and evaluation, The Illinois Writing Program (Chapman, 1990) trained teachers in new writing assessment and evaluation strategies that looked at how well student work accomplished specific goals in a variety of areas. It was suggested that writing can be assessed and evaluated in different genres in numerous subjects, and marked according to measures aimed at meeting students’ needs. The study looked at students’ abilities in a variety of areas, including demonstrating defined writing skills and growth as writers. This method proved successful in helping students learn the skills required of authors by providing opportunities for practice in developing areas of writing; it also sent the message that writing is an important skill. Although this study was not recent, I felt that it held important implications for my own goal of meeting the needs of developing writers.

Teaching Writing: Classroom Context

My study began by gathering various tools for assessing and evaluating writing: rubrics, checklists, observation guides, anecdotal notes, and tests (Georgopoulos & Perry-Watson, 2005). I reviewed many of the tools made available to me through my school library and resource centre, and discussed strategies used with colleagues and literacy leaders. I looked at curriculum documents outlining outcomes of student performance and reviewed the exemplars (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2006). Then, armed with the knowledge of standards of good work and how to mark it, I collected numerous samples of students’ creative writing from portfolios of their published work.

The writing samples were taken from my own Grade 2 class, which was comprised of twelve girls and thirteen boys, all seven to eight years of age. The group was heterogeneous,
having individuals of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and was mixed in academic ability. While there were many students who excelled academically, there were also many facing challenges to learning. Teachers who specialized in Special Education, Reading Recovery™, and English as a Second Language worked daily with select groups of students, as needed.

The school was located in a socio-economically oppressed area of a large multicultural Canadian city. A majority of the students were English language learners. Many families were new to the country as well as the community, and were receiving the support of a settlement worker. A large number of the students’ parents were unable to find work in their chosen professions here in Canada, and were either unemployed or underemployed. Despite economic challenges, most families supported their children’s learning, valuing education as key to future success. Homework was encouraged by parents, who supported children’s learning at home. Because a majority of the parents were formally educated and held professional status in their home countries, they were able to share school literacy practices with their children. Students had all been exposed to numerous languages and/or dialects, and were often able to speak more than two fluently, in addition to English. The children and their families were therefore all active learners possessing skills that would aid in supporting the students’ writing development.

Student achievement and teacher development in literacy were both strong focuses of the school. Teaching writing included mini-lessons, modelled and guided writing, paired sharing of writing ideas, and conferences throughout the writing process. Sometimes these conferences were one-on-one with a particular student; sometimes they were in small groups. Conferring (Calkins, 2003) proved to be a successful method of teaching students to develop story ideas and plots, and for helping students to revise their work. Students also became skilled in editing writing by being exposed to a daily morning message that included a class edit. That is, they were able to find the “mistakes” made in messages I wrote to the class—in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation—and to correct the errors once spotted.

Writing was also taught in a manner that builds on “the natural link between spoken and written language” (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998). To help students achieve this effect in their work, I provided opportunities for paired discussions in a variety of situations. Children had the choice of sharing while sitting comfortably in the library centre, role-playing tea party scenarios, dramatizing telephone conversations, or talking while colouring at the art table—all with the aim of inspiring conversations that allow students to naturally express the stories they feel need to be told. This pre-writing exercise was designed to enable students to write as freely as they would talk (Calkins, 2003).

Students were also taught to learn from other writers (Bigelow & Vokoun, 2005). I pointed out the styles and techniques authors use, and asked students to remember what they felt a connection to. They were able to note what they liked and what they think worked well. They were also taught to pay attention to the author’s use of literary devices, and to notice whether or not the author had been skillful and effective in delivering his or her message. In this way, read alouds and shared readings provided examples of modelled writing that fostered students’ development as authors.

Creative writing lessons were implemented in a number of ways, and in different genres with a variety of topics. Sometimes students were given a visual and were asked to create a story from the picture. The picture may or may not have had a caption. One such lesson integrated Art History and art appreciation, as students used higher-order thinking skills to write their interpretation of why Mona Lisa is smiling (see Student Writing Samples 1 and 2 from this assignment).
There were also lessons that allowed students to write freely, without any prompting or direction from the teacher (see Student Writing Samples 3 & 4 from this assignment). Such lessons provided opportunities for young authors to develop their skills in writing on topics of personal interest.

Other times, students were given a topic or a story lead to begin their work. Writing lessons were aimed at helping young authors write to an audience. For example, students were taught to add descriptions and details that would allow readers to feel they were transported to the time and place of the story. Students practiced by first closing their eyes and imaging the picture painted by the words of other writers.

Assessing/Evaluating Writing: Using Two Different Checklists

After compiling a variety of writing samples depicting the breadth of students’ work, I was ready to begin the lengthy process of marking. In order to first evaluate works according to traditional means, I reviewed the numerous rubrics, checklists, and curriculum guidelines (Ministry of Education and Training, 2006; Georgopoulos & Perry-Watson, 2005) compiled from a variety of sources, comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences. I then took the common elements contained in these tools, and devised a checklist highlighting the learning skills frequently measured in writing assessment and evaluation (see traditional scoring guide below). I graded students’ writing first using these traditional criteria. This approach to evaluation was similar to the strategy I had previously been implementing, in which I utilized the tools available at the school where I was teaching.

Checklist: Traditional Tool of Evaluation
Focus: Learning of Conventions and Mechanics

Description:
- Writing demonstrates effective use of descriptive language

Organization:
- Story contains a beginning, middle and end
- Title complements story

Conventions:
- Words are spelled correctly
- Ideas are written in complete sentences
- Writing is grammatically correct
- Sentences are written with correct use of capitalization
- Sentences are written with correct use of punctuation
- Work is written neatly and is well presented
- Words are properly spaced

Once this process was complete, I was then ready to evaluate students’ skills in the craft of writing. This entailed creating a revised checklist that featured none of the items measured according to traditional standards (see checklist revised below). With the aim of nurturing
creative writing development, items in this new evaluation tool targeted skills such as: formulating an original idea, creating a unique story plot, writing in a manner that draws the reader in and makes one want to read more, and forming a connection with the audience through expression of the self. In order to master these skills, the author was required to demonstrate an understanding of the chosen genre while taking risks as a writer. Creativity in writing could also be expressed through word choice, with the use of new and challenging vocabulary, a selection of strong verbs, and language appropriate for the topic or genre. If, for example, the student did not write a fairy tale, the beginning line of the story should be something other than “Once upon a time…” and the finish should contain something stronger than “The End.”

**Checklist: Revised Tool of Evaluation**

**Focus: Learning the Craft of Writing**

**Purpose:**
- □ Work shows an awareness of the intended audience
- □ Writing is compelling and draws readers in
- □ Student uses formatting and graphics/drawings, where applicable, that work well with the writing
- □ Work shows an understanding of what can be achieved in chosen genre

**Creative Style and Growth:**
- □ Student demonstrates risk; writing is new and challenging to the author
- □ Work reflects use of an original idea; story line is unique
- □ Author uses self-expression and feelings effectively to connect with audience

**Word Power:**
- □ Vocabulary is appropriate for the purpose and chosen genre
- □ Writing contains words the author has not tried before
- □ Author uses strong verbs to create impact

Using the same writing samples, I applied the new standard of assessment and evaluation to re-mark students’ work. That is, the criteria for grading student writing shifted from traditional measures, such as conventions and mechanics, to examining students’ creative abilities and skills in the craft of writing.

Results were compared and contrasted to determine student performance according to both standards of measurement.

**Results**

Results supported the hypothesis that some students hold skills that go unnoticed and unrewarded when their writing is graded using traditional methods of evaluation. Traditional scoring guides favoured the writing in **Student Writing Samples 2 and 4** for neatness and proficiency in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Under such marking conditions, the craft of the writing in **Student Writing Samples 1 and 3** was not given merit. The reverse was true when writing was assessed and evaluated using non-traditional standards. Grading that valued creative measures provided greater opportunities for success for students’ work in **Student Writing**
Samples 1 and 3; these students’ marks soared under such conditions. That is when grading overlooked errors in spelling, grammar, and other areas of conventions, students’ writing could be seen as demonstrating skills in a number of areas: drawing in the audience, devising original themes and plots, creating captivating stories, and holding the readers’ interest.

Looking at writing samples, the story in Student Writing Sample 4 appears to be written by a student with a good understanding of writing conventions. This student scored high marks when evaluation used the traditional tool, earning points on all criteria with the exception of effective use of descriptive language and correct use of capitalization. This student capitalized the T in the word the in the middle of each sentence. It could be argued whether the story has a clear beginning, middle and end. Overall, this paper earned a B to B+ based on traditional measures. The same work received an extremely low grade when evaluated using the revised tool. This author lacked important skills in the craft of writing that would make the work compelling to readers. Alternately, Student Writing Sample 3 received a low grade when it was evaluated using traditional means, but received an A when marked according to measures in the craft of writing. This young author was able to write a story of adventure that was of interest to the audience. The work was original and demonstrated risk-taking and growth of the writer—all skills that had previously been overlooked. Although this student had not yet mastered many of the conventions and mechanics typically prized in written work, the story suggests this author possesses high levels of skill and ability.

Similarly, the writing in Student Writing Sample 2 met all criteria of the traditional evaluation tool, other than effective use of descriptive language—earning this student an A. According to the revised criteria, the student has not yet learned many important skills as a writer. The writing does not draw readers in and hold interest. The opposite is true of Student Writing Sample 1. This story line is unique and captivating to an audience. Readers would be curious to know what happens next, and the student should be encouraged to continue to expand on ideas. Unfortunately, this work receives little credit when marked according to traditional standards of writing. It is not neatly written, it is difficult to read and understand, and it has none of the correct uses of conventions and spelling. This student, although highly imaginative as a story writer, would receive a low grade when work is evaluated according to the traditional checklist.

Discussion and Implications for Classrooms

The common thread among most traditional tools for assessing and evaluating student writing was a strong emphasis on conventions. This may be interpreted as heavily rewarding mechanics over craft. Time and again, students received a majority of their marks for correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. The traditional marking tools also required me to look for the proper use of capitalization and correct sentence structure. Neatness and good penmanship were also frequently listed as important criteria.

Organization was also a highly prized skill. However, organization was strictly viewed from the traditional style of writing that denotes a clear beginning, middle, and end. Other organizational formats such as circle-story writing, and stories that begin at the end and then go on to reveal how the events unfolded, tend to go unnoticed according to traditional means of evaluation. This is interesting, as these unique styles of organization in writing involve tremendous creativity and provide opportunities for individual expression.

The only opportunity I found for a young writer to earn marks for creativity according to the traditional checklist was through descriptive wording. Frequently, this skill translated to the
student’s use of adjectives in the work. A student could write the sentence, “My grandpa is nice,”
and do so neatly and without any mistakes and would probably earn very high marks. Is this
good writing? Is the reader caught up in the story? Can we picture the character and story events
in our mind? Did the writer take risks? The answer is “No” on all counts. To the reader, adding
an extra word to the sentence only makes it slightly more specific (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998;
Spandel, 2005). It does not resonate as good writing.

Do these students really know how to write? Do they have anything to say? Are readers
interested in their work? Perhaps…but our traditional assessment tools do not allow us to reward
these qualities. Traditional tools for assessing and evaluating writing hold the danger of merely
rewarding students for their ability to repeatedly master the rules of conventions, memorize
spelling words each week, and comply with teacher expectations.

So, why are the conventions and mechanics of writing so highly valued in traditional
tools for marking writing? It is possible that these skills are frequently graded because the
outcomes are tangible. It is easy to circle the glaring spelling mistake. One can point a finger at
the improper use of capitalization. The error in grammar can be underlined. Paragraph writing
might be taught with a topic sentence, three supporting sentences, and a conclusion. In my own
marking, I was able to readily check whether or not the above criteria had been met.

Tools that focus on grading the craft of writing, however, contain measures that are less
tangible, less concrete, and more difficult to quantify. Many of these areas are subjective and
open to interpretation. It is easy to question or disagree with how such marks are derived. The
assessment and evaluation of writing using the specifications in the revised checklist was highly
problematic, given such measures are open to variations of interpretation. It can be difficult to
know precisely how to measure such skills—they are qualitative. I was the only teacher grading
my students’ writing. It is possible, and highly probable, that writing marks would differ had
additional markers also evaluated the work. It is suggested that future research take the approach
of having a panel of graders during the process to control for any bias.

A solution to issues surrounding ambiguity and subjectivity in marking the craft of
writing may be to provide teacher training programs, similar to that of The Illinois Writing
Program (Chapman, 1990), which helped educators assess student growth in writing. Having
undergone such professional development, teachers may be better equipped to look at students’
skills in areas such as the development of individual style and creative expression. Assessment
could aim to help students set goals for achievement in these areas, thereby providing
challenging opportunities that allow for growth.

Based on the findings of this study, all of my students could benefit from being exposed
to lessons that value the craft of writing. This research suggests that questioning what is valued
in student writing may increase learning and performance, while enhancing creativity in
individual written expression.

References

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