

Grading Written Work: An Integral Part of Writing Workshop Practice

I come from a long line of teachers. When I embarked on my first year of teaching, I had an educator grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins congratulating me, and with each word of encouragement also came the obligatory good luck: all the English teachers they know have been buried under essays for multiple decades.

One aunt in particular, who was retiring from a career of teaching AP English, said that she'd keep going for a few more years if it weren't for the grading. I jumped into my career with anxious dreams of endless stacks of looming papers, but in the waking hours earnestly remembered how much I loved reading, writing, and teaching.

My social calendar during the first year consisted of caffeine and lesson planning from the time I got home—after an hour-long subway commute (also known as my break, where I let myself get lost in fiction as I transferred boroughs)—until 11 p.m. Grading was not only tedious and filled my weekends, but it also became a matter of just getting it all finished so that I could make it through to the next deadline or, for that matter, to the next day. By the time I got to each stack of papers, the unit had been over for weeks.

Now, I'm not saying that with experience, grading has become an exhilarating aspect of my job, but my perspective has changed immensely. I used to be convinced that quality teaching came from preparing amazing lessons, but I have learned that quality teaching grows out of spend-

ing time with student work. Amazing lessons grow out of *that* time, not the hours that I wrack my brain in an attempt to conjure an amazing lesson out of thin air about what *I* think kids should know.

Despite my revelations, I still have an inbox for each of my classes that is often overflowing. I still dread the Sunday afternoons that are sometimes dedicated to grading. Like so many other teachers, I have created a reward system for myself to get through the paperwork: grade 15 at home, then I can go grade 15 with a vanilla latte; grade them all and I can watch CSI. There is no better feeling of accomplishment than when the stacks of short stories, poetry anthologies, and letters of progress are moved to the outboxes and confidently crossed off my to-do list. But I have also found that the more time I spend with student work (within reason, of course), the better teacher I become.

The kicker is that I also become a better person as I spend time with student work. Teaching English is a special kind of privilege that educators in other disciplines do not always get to experience. While we are reading their creative writing, personal essays, reading responses, and literary essays, we get a glimpse into each of the lives before us. I find in front of myself not only the skills I am looking for, but a piece of a life and heart: how it feels to be 13 and utterly confused, the sweetness of infatuation, the struggles and the victories. We get to really know the precious lives of the students with whom we spend countless hours, and I am continually reminded of why I became a teacher. The more I know my students as people, the more I want to be the best teacher I can. I know my students because I read

their writing. So, as I have moved forward looking at student work with new eyes, my practice has transformed, and I believe that I'm finding the true definition of quality teaching. Here are some things that have changed in the past few years.

I read drafts: A rationale for why this is worthwhile

By the time students have turned in a finished project for writing workshop, they have moved beyond thinking about it. No matter how I try to bribe them with revision conferences when they get their grades back, it is to no avail. It is checked off in their mind, and because they are young adolescents, they have no desire to go back to it. It does not matter whether they got a low score or not. Lesson? We miss a crucial moment for learning paired with motivation if we wait until the final drafts to give feedback.

I used to give minilessons based on what I thought students should know. The problem with that was that I had students who struggled with all of the skills. Instead of making true progress in a few of them and moving on from there, these students were utterly overwhelmed and floundered in every skill. At the other end of the spectrum were students who were talented writers—these minilessons did not help them grow, either; they merely checked off the skills they already knew, got a high score, and remained unchanged as writers. Now, however, we read drafts, actively collecting data generated from real work. In so doing, we can track student growth on differentiated skills throughout the year.

I begin my units with some structural anchoring lessons in the genre work we are doing with mentor texts. The students draft their pieces and turn them in for feedback. I try to get a sense of their strengths (and compliment them!) and the skills they need to work on, no matter their writing level. I then structure the middle of the unit based on what I have noticed, using a combination of whole-class lessons for skills everyone needs to learn and small-group conferences for differentiated needs.

I often collect second drafts (attached to the first) of major projects to see how students are progressing. Since I have already seen the work and made notes on it, I have found that these read-throughs are generally much faster. They also help to prevent struggling students from falling through the cracks and hold all students accountable for the revision work—where I believe most learning really cements. As students finish, we typically meet in small groups or one-on-one conferences. I end the unit with kids sharing before and after excerpts, either verbally or with the document camera. The actual grading of the final drafts is much quicker and, I believe, more accurate, because I am much more aware of the work the student put into the writing piece.

Obviously, this is a time-consuming process, but I have found that it is infinitely more worthwhile for skill building than reading final drafts. Final drafts are for celebrating! With this process, students know that I am paying attention to how they are growing—and they *are* growing.

I create minilessons and small-group conferences based on my reading of drafts: Or, how to make this work on a practical level.

First, I create a list of typical writing elements that cause students trouble. Then, while I read drafts, I add student names under those headings, noting whether this represents a strength or weakness for each. This helps me see which issues are classwide and which ones are more individualized. The classwide patterns become whole-class minilessons and the small groups become my differentiated conferences. Emotionally, students feel less alone in their writing struggles when they realize they are not the only ones who need to improve. The groups and skill needs shift from genre to genre as well, so rarely is there any kind of stigma about a particular group. The bottom line is that everyone has something they need to work on to become a stronger writer. Academically, students feel a lot better about working on one or two skills than trying to decipher which

one they should work on by themselves. Improvement seems manageable and attainable in their eyes, rather than overwhelming, and gifted writers tend to feel inspired, instead of bored, because they can work on skills to build their own level of writing.

I give each group (usually 3 or 4 total groups) a handout with a short note explaining the skill I want them to focus on and specific directions to start tackling it: sometimes it involves group work, sometimes hunting through their own work, and sometimes studying a mentor text. This way, each group has something specific to do. During the activity, I make my way around the room to meet with each group. On a good day, I can make it to each group twice, holding them accountable for making in-class progress. I end each workshop session by asking for a show of hands of who made some real changes in their writing. The results have floored me.

I get to celebrate small (and large) victories with my students: What makes this process worth it.

In middle school, tiny things can feel like the whole world. I have watched some seriously struggling writers find confidence they didn't know they had when I made a big deal that they were (choose one): showing not telling/using dialogue/using paragraphs/etc. Celebrating progress and earnestly looking a student in the eye to say they did great work is one of my favorite parts of the job. They walk back to their tables standing a little taller and feeling good about themselves, something that happens on too few occasions in middle school. I love pulling student work and sharing strengths at the beginning of a minilesson—and doing my best to make sure it represents a variety of students, not just the kids who always get high scores. I tell the class to check in with these students if they need help, and it is such an empowering moment to watch. I only get these moments if I am spending quality

time with their writing. Middle school is not just about teaching skills, it is also about believing in the students who sit in front of us each day as they try to figure out what it means to be young adults and what it means to be themselves.

One typical question at this point might be, How do you manage the amount of work you could be faced with, an amount that could realistically consume your entire life? Answer? Make choices:

- I check everything for completion because it is important that students are held accountable. I've found that, as I take a few minutes to walk around and do this, there are always a handful of students who want to tell me the amazing moments they had in their writing the night before. Again, this is one more opportunity to show them you are proud of their work . . . and typically more good work comes from those small compliments in passing.
- I check everything for quality. My students write reading responses every week. Every month, I have them pick their favorite, submit it for feedback, and then revise it. This way, I know they are working on improvements, but I'm not having to read 100 responses every Monday.
- I spend more time with drafts and less time with final papers. I am already closely acquainted with both their work and the rubric, so I've found I don't need to belabor every last word for hours.

In spending time with student work and paying attention to how it has changed the craft of my teaching, I am continually reminded of why I wanted to be a teacher in the first place. I would easily trade the few hours I have to spend grading for the indelible moments I have witnessed in watching students change as writers. It has also been a delight to share those moments with my family of educators.

Kristen Robbins moved to New York in 2003 to attend Teachers College at Columbia University and has been teaching English language arts in Brooklyn ever since.