Breaking Down Classroom Writing Assessment: Ideas & Approaches

Assessing
Refers to looking at a student text to see what’s working or not independently of giving grades or testing. Assessing student writing focuses on the writing itself rather than the student. Being able to assess writing well is an important part of being able to write well. Making assessment a part of the writing process for a student reduces the anxiety and aversion students often have to evaluation. To assess a student’s writing we must look at what linguistic and rhetorical targets the student has set for herself and how close the student has come to satisfying those goals. This type of assessment is formative, since it occurs while the student is still working on a piece of writing and can use the assessment to improve the writing itself. Involving the student in your assessment of her writing is an important step in helping the student to learn how to assess her own writing. Assessment that focuses on the student’s writing can be an important way to teach, since good writers have a well developed sense of being able to evaluate how well their writing has achieved certain goals. When we focus assessment on a student text and involve the student in that evaluation we can also help the student learn to evaluate her own writing and as such help her as a writer. Learning to assess others’ writing is helpful for students learning to assess their own writing.

Responding
Responding to student writing can include description, evaluation or even grades. Because writing in a formal sense involves an audience, learning to write involves learning to think about who the audience is for a specific piece and what that person(s) needs in order to make sense of what it is we’re writing. Effective response needs to be more than just an analysis or annotation of a student’s writing. Crafting a helpful response to a student writer requires that we think through what the writer is trying to do at a particular moment in a text and in the process of writing and deciding what kind of response will be most helpful for that individual at that time. Response to a student writer is also a form of communication. Research on responding to student writing has told us that often students do not understand what it is teachers are trying to tell them about their writing, so it is crucial that we make what we are trying to communicate as clear as possible to the students we respond to. This requires that we heed our own teacherly advice about the importance of considering our audience. We need to ask ourselves questions like what is it this student-writer needs to learn how to make this writing better?

Grading/Testing
Grading or testing is sort of like the flip side of assessing because when we test or grade, we move away from the text that a student has produced, and we infer from that text the ability of a student. This type of reading is summative because it occurs after a student has completed a piece of writing. For most of us who teach, testing and grading are facts of life over which we have no control. However, limiting the amount of testing or grading we do can allow us to focus more of our attention on other ways to read and respond to our students’ writing, and this might give the student more instruction that will actually allow her to improve her writing. For example, more than one research study has shown that when teachers mark up a student’s writing for the purpose of grading it, around sixty percent of all commentary on the paper is directed toward justifying the grade.
Response for Revision and Editing
One way to make decisions about the type of response to give a particular piece of writing is to determine what stage of the writing process a writer is going through. It does little good, for example, to mark errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation on a rough draft, when a writer plans on making substantial revisions anyway. It is impossible for you as a teacher and reader or your student as a writer to see and attend to everything at once. Knowing where a writer is within the writing process helps to determine what to comment about. For example, very rough drafts often get quite a bit better if the student concentrates on maintaining a consistent focus. Elements involved in focusing a piece of writing also tend to affect organization, support and transitions. Mechanical correctness is often best attended to after a student has rewritten in response to concerns about unity, development and organization. It is often helpful to convert concerns about error into instruction on editing and proofreading. Why waste time polishing prose you may eventually revise out of your writing?

Conferences
Conferencing involves a one to one meeting between the student and teacher. Since conferences replace the traditional method of grading stacks of papers, a decision regarding conferencing doesn’t necessarily mean spending more time but rather involves how an instructor wishes to spend the time needed to respond to student writing. Good conferences are conversations where the student does most of the talking. It is important, then, to involve the student as fully as possible. This can be accomplished by requiring the student to show up for conferences with a written agenda for the meeting. This agenda can include class materials as well as specific questions about the writing to be discussed. Successful conferencing techniques include questioning the student about her writing, and resisting the urge to tell the student exactly what to do in a mini-lecture. Conferences can be conducted for any purpose, including the communication of grades, or direction on rough drafts, and can even occur within a workshop classroom where students are meeting groups and working on their writing within the classroom context.

Focus Check
This type of response is most useful for early drafts. Without letting the student look at the paper, ask him or her what the main point of the paper is. After the student has told you what the paper is about, have him or her show you where in the paper he or she talks about the main point. More times than not, there will be a difference between what the student thinks the paper is about and what the paper is really about. Having the student check and refocus the paper often leads to a vastly improved draft. How well can a paper be organized or supported when the writer is not writing about what she thinks she’s writing about? Can be done in groups but works better with a teacher student conference which can take five minutes or less.

Portfolios
Portfolios consist of viewing student writing as a body of work produced over time. Some portfolio systems structure no grading until the end of the semester. Portfolios can also involve students choosing a smaller sample of their written word for formal evaluation. Usually, portfolios include a reflective or analytic piece along with multiple assignments from throughout the course. Having students write a memo or letter detailing how they revised their papers in response to peer or teacher feedback is a good way to help student-writers learn how to revise beyond just correcting a first draft. Portfolios allow students to produce multiple drafts without the constant pressure of grading.

1. Turn your comments into a conversation.
2. Create a dialogue with students on the page.
3. Do not take control over the text: instead of projecting your agenda on student writing and being directive, be facilitative and help students realize their own purposes.
4. Limit the scope of your comments.
5. Limit the number of comments you present.
6. Give priority to global concerns of content, context, and organization before getting (overly) involved with style and correctness.
7. Focus your comments according to the stage of drafting and the relative maturity of the text.
8. Gear your comments to the individual student behind the text.
9. Make frequent use of praise.
10. Tie your response to the larger classroom conversation. (p. 23-24)


Purpose of responding to student writing is to “demonstrate the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because ultimately, we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing” (p. 148)