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Slaying the MEAP Monster

Mary Anna Kruch

Introduction

The recent demands for more standards-based teaching can feel like an enormous impediment to differentiated instruction, especially for educators who recognize that students differ in their readiness to learn, interests, learning styles, experiences, and backgrounds. Standards-based instruction dominates the field of education in a time of great academic diversity in our classrooms (Tomlinson). It is standards-based instruction and its subsequent testing that appear to drive classroom lessons, often at the risk of individualized learning.

In the midst of high-stakes testing in Michigan, teachers' instructional methods are constantly being questioned, probed, and amended to accommodate preparation of students for what I refer to as the MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) Sweeps. In our school, as in countless others, children are encouraged to get lots of rest the night before testing, along with eating "a good breakfast," which could mean anything from Skittles grabbed on the run, alone, to a sit-down, full family feast resembling that unforgettable scene in *Moonstruck*.

Differentiation, a philosophy of learning, is what *should be* the focus, as it is based on strong beliefs, ones that impact not just student learning, but student assessment. Some examples of differentiation are when learning occurs when a connection between curriculum and students' interests and life experiences is made, when learning opportunities are natural, and when there is a sense

of community in which students feel significant and respected. Differentiation must be a refinement of, not a substitute for, best practice instruction. Best or, as I call it, promising practice focuses on the understandings and skills of a discipline, when students reflect on profound ideas and when they can organize and make sense of ideas in connection with the "real world." And I am obviously not referring to the popular MTV survival show.

For the majority of educators, curriculum is fast becoming a prescribed set of academic standards where sometimes teachers are expected to follow set, pre-written lessons. There is a race to cover the standards, where the unspoken main goal is to raise student test scores. What's a teacher to do? Better yet, what's a child to do?

Students are often urged to approach testing with the ceremonial wearing of little buttons with some slogan or other, rivaling the presidential race with its impassioned messages. Great boxes of pencils and granola bars are purchased, tape recorders are set out for the newly added section on Listening, and "Quiet Please, Testing" signs decorate halls whose walls crave posters that instead advertise the next school dance. These are attempts, I am sure, to develop a sense of team spirit and community. Still, all in all, it is a frenzied, shooting-for-hopeful attempt at organized achievement. Amid all this, there must be a rationalization for all the razzle-dazzle pressure. And the pressure is on to not only meet, but also surpass state testing standards at all levels, each year. Not only is money involved as an incentive for high

enough scores, the scores are posted in newspapers and even in real estate brochures to lure prospective residents, for all to see how “smart” the kids are, and how capable the teaching staff is. Pressure personified.

While not many can agree on the authenticity of the MEAP assessment as a tool that guarantees that children who meet or exceed all the objectives will be successful in the world of work after graduation, many others say it is the “best” measure we have so far. So with testing, standards, and the HOPE of differentiating instruction for learners, educators at all levels are faced with a tremendous undertaking.

Just how closely do sections of the state test mirror actual classroom lessons? And, can classroom teachers slay the MEAP “monster”? I believe the use of authentic, promising practices will become the shield that impacts not only students’ level of achievement on tests, but also their future career employability.

The Good News

There is some good news, and it is twofold. First, state tests that require a lot of writing, like the MEAP, are striving to be more authentic. By this I mean they are attempting to measure what children actually know. It is true that while some of the tasks students are expected to complete, in reality, do not mirror “best practice” classroom lessons, some do. Take the “2003 English Language Arts Prototype for Grade 7.” Students are asked to write from knowledge and experience in Part 1, listen and read for understanding in Part 2, and apply ideas to new contexts in Part 3. Literally all of these tasks are delineated in the Content Standards and Benchmarks, written by educators working with the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). In addition, the purpose of the last section is to “draw generalizations from within and across three thematically linked texts in order to apply them to a task” (MDE, “Description . . .” 3). The thematic focus on this prototype is likened to what many cross-curricular educational teams have created or are in the process of creating for their stu-

dents.

Part 3 also presents an authentic, complex problem that is linked to a given topic or theme and is presented as a scenario question. And this is the second bit of good news. A highly successful MEAP Writing Classroom Unit, built upon students’ need to explore and create thematic scenarios, follows. Hopefully, what sixth graders created in my classroom at Williamston Middle School, holistically graded and reflected upon, will serve as an inspiration for those who want to prepare students for testing and for life in general, without the cloud of “teaching toward the test.” The unit offers differentiated instruction guided by promising practice, and it offers students a chance to practice what they “MEAP”!

Getting Started

Last summer I was part of a group of educators who, through the Red Cedar Writing Project at Michigan State University, took part in a writing consultants’ workshop to plan in-service sessions for classroom teachers. It didn’t take us long to decide that what we wanted to focus on was a series of workshops for English Language Arts educators in support of gaining confidence in reading, writing, listening, and reasoning strategies, as these relate to the 2003 MEAP. We started out with the premise that, if given the opportunity to become familiar with and incorporate best practice, the key processes required for the testing situation later would flow more smoothly and with less stress for students and teachers alike. So, we all became students the first week and took the ELA MEAP designed for our respective levels, making notes on what teachers have to know and what students have to learn in order to be successful on the test. We then scrutinized the test’s directions and rubric. We noticed that the test we were studying, still in draft form, needed more clarity, particularly on the writing rubric used for grades 4, 7, and 11. We then partnered up, decided upon a five-session, two-day workshop format and presented these on November 1 and 2, 2000, at the Kellogg Center on the MSU campus. Session 5,

“Refining the Scenario Process: Writing Our World,” offered participants the opportunity to go through the same process of creating and scoring a scenario prompt. They witnessed firsthand how this would look in a classroom when a small group of four of my middle school students modeled holistic scoring, the type used on the MEAP test. The student plan for the three-week MEAP Scenario Unit follows, along with some reflections, by the students and by me.

Student Plan for MEAP Scenario Unit

My two classes of sixth grade English Language Arts students participated in this unit over the course of about three weeks. The plans below are in brief, and I have included some of the handouts used during the unit. Students read the three literature selections from the seventh grade level of the MEAP 2003 Prototype, which could not be reprinted here due to copyright law.

Week 1:

1. Introduce unit to class, including discussion of the concepts *theme*, *cross-text theme*, and *scenario*.
2. Give brief overview of unit, including purposes.
 - a) Let students know some of the work will be completed in small, assigned groups.
 - b) Review student roles, which will rotate on a weekly basis: facilitator, literary illuminator, recorder, and reporter.
3. Students individually examine the literature selections in the prototype: “Prometheus” from *The Greek Gods* by Bernard Evslin, et al. (1966); “The Noble Experiment” contained in Property’s book *I Never Had it Made* (1998); and “The Scholarship Jacket” by Marta Salinas, reprinted in *Nosotras: Latina Literature Today* edited by Maria del Carmen Boza, et al. (1986). Students read each piece, noting in journals what they believe to be the *theme*, along with *supporting evidence from each piece* for this theme.
 - a) Small group task 1: Discuss cross-text theme, as noted in journals, along with supporting evidence of theme.

b) Small group task 2: Look at the directions given in the MEAP test for Part 3: Applying Ideas to New Contexts, the Scenario and Scenario Questions. Brainstorm possible ways to approach the written answer to the scenario after examining rubric checklist/scoring guide provided. (A copy of this checklist, whose characteristics are drawn directly from the rubric in the MEAP 2003 Prototype, page 24, follows.)

c) Journal Prompt: Write a persuasive letter to the Student Council stating and making a case for your opinion of the issue and apply the cross-text theme to the answer. *Use at least two examples from the texts read to illustrate and support your view.* Share some with whole class. Hand in as a quickwrite.

Week 2:

1. Individually read two selected texts with the theme of COURAGE (“Encounter With a Bear” from *Incredible Journey* and “Flight of Icarus,” the Greek myth).
 - a) Whole class discusses possible themes in these selections; brainstormed ideas are placed on board.
 - b) Journal Prompt: State what you believe is the theme for the two selections and give two or more examples from the text. Suggest other texts read previously with the same theme (i.e. *The Giver*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and *Sign of the Beaver*). Share with whole class.
2. Groups contemplate and create scenarios.
 - a) Small group task 1: Given the Michigan Theme list (a copy of this is included), locate the selected theme on the list and brainstorm possible scenario ideas where the writer would need to incorporate the theme of COURAGE.
 - b) Small group task 2: Come to a *consensus on the scenario* idea, which necessitates the writer synthesizing and applying the two related texts we read on this theme. Report out.
3. These scenarios are typed, one from each group, and the class votes on one.

Week 3:

1. Reintroduce rubric/checklist for use in writing and grading the writing responses to Part 3 of the MEAP.
2. Introduce, teach, model, and practice holistic grading procedure to classes.
3. Trade scenario with other class, and writers respond to the scenario prompt after rereading the two chosen related texts.
4. Completed responses are sent back again to be read and graded holistically (according to the given rubric/checklist, in small groups) by the students who created the scenarios.
5. Teacher reads all holistically graded assessments and notes any impressions of students' efforts, grading and otherwise, before returning these to the writers.
6. Assessments are returned, students reflect in a quickwrite on their scores, the whole process of constructing an assessment, and the act of writing a response to a scenario prompt created by their peers.
7. Reconvene in small groups to share student writings and discuss general, overall reactions to the project. Note these and report out.
8. Given a uniform prompt created by the teachers, students will write a one-page response on their learning following the project.

Extensions:

1. Students pair up and revise their scored assessments.
2. Report the group responses to the project.
3. A group of students present their reactions/learning reflections to the unit to classroom teachers attending the workshop at MSU.

Student Reflections

The following excerpts are taken from students' reflections of the unit, including what they learned.

** I liked taking time out to read, discuss, and write. We got a lot of say in every part of this, even the grading.*

** My group was awesome and only got weird once or twice. By the end of the three weeks, we knew and respected each other pretty well.*

** The stories were interesting to read and I think our scenario question was the bomb. The best part was reading what the other class wrote in answer to our question.*

** I felt like the writers took the scenario question to heart. They put themselves into the situation so the writing seemed true.*

** Being able to do the grading was cool and gave me an idea of how tough it is for teachers to decide on a score. I liked that we all had to agree on a grade in our group for each paper and then write notes to the writers.*

** It was neat to see what my peers thought of my writing. I felt pretty good knowing I got through to them.*

Teacher Reflections

After all is said and done, I felt the unit went very well. Since one of my overriding goals as a classroom teacher has been to differentiate instruction, it was heartening to read my students' reflections and note their interest and positive reactions to the unit. These told me I had met this goal. Apparently they saw the connection between curriculum and their life experiences, felt a sense of community developing at that critical time in the early fall, just as school was beginning, and felt like what they said and did counted. They were able to reflect upon the profound ideas they proposed in their scenario questions, organize writing and holistic assessments to make sense of these ideas, and connect with the real world. The need to feel significant and respected, and to know you are doing worthwhile work are the motivations for students that seem to lift everything else that may come along with the school day into a more positive perspective. Being a middle school student can seem almost insurmountable at times unless students have a personal stake in their own learning. These lessons appear to have helped in that regard.

On a final note, my students really surprised

and delighted me all the way through, and especially when they learned how to holistically grade. I took four of my students, two from each class, with me to the MSU presentation for educators in November, and they blew the audience of educators away! When they modeled the holistic process and then were able to articulate what they had learned about self-assessment, my heart swelled with pride. It is my strong feeling that students of all abilities (and that describes my classes), when given the chance to learn and evaluate that learning authentically, are enabled to not only slay the MEAP monster but also to more aptly sit in the driver's seat of their own education. And that is what best practice, and this unit, are all about.

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Mary Anna Kruch, an adjunct professor of teacher education at Michigan State University and frequent conference presenter, teaches language arts, social studies, and team time at Williamston Middle School.