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PRACTICE

Listening to Our Students: Assessment That Fosters Growth

SERENA KESSLER

“The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance”

We are an educational culture obsessed with data, specifically standardized testing data, and while there is a certain value in standardized testing, I worry that in our over-reliance on both standardized tests and common assessments, teachers are beginning to metaphorically “lose the use of our feet,” or more aptly lose trust in our ability to use our feet. In all the chatter about standardization—not just of assessments, but of curriculum and delivery too—teachers are getting a message that suggests that if everyone isn’t doing it—if Pearson didn’t create it—if we can’t compare it to something else, then somehow it can’t be trusted. This is unfortunate, because if we can block out that chatter and really listen to our students, we can learn so much more than what a number on a standardized test, or even on a traditional classroom assessment tells us. And in turn, we can do so much more to help our students achieve.

I’ve come to rely on three methods of assessing literacy that are at their essence quite literally listening: the reading conference, the writing conference, and the peer-to-peer group conference. When students make a mistake on a standardized test or even on a classroom quiz, we typically don’t know the thought process that led to an incorrect answer. There are so many types of wrong answers. A student may simply not know the concept, he or she may have made a careless error, or he or she may have tried to apply new knowledge, but did so incorrectly. Sometimes there is sophisticated thinking going into a wrong answer. Perhaps a student is taking risks with a concept, but needs a little coaching to get it right. Or sometimes, the student is so

disengaged from school that if the test is multiple choice, he or she simply guesses or responds in a superficial way that belies his or her actual abilities. The information that teachers can gather from listening to our students’ thought-processes allows us to effectively differentiate instruction and create meaningful small-group and whole-class lessons. We teachers must not only trust our ability to collect and analyze this type of data, but we must also convince our administrators and politicians that it will help our students grow the most.

The Reading Conference

I learned of the power of the reading conference from Penny Kittle. In *Book Love* (2013) Kittle writes, “The most important condition in my classroom is my relationship with my students . . . The magic formula is the relationship we form and my ability to meet them where they are, accept where they are, and then put books in their hands that will ignite their own intrinsic motivation to read” (p.35). Finding the books that will motivate my students to read is perhaps my biggest call to action as a high school English teacher. We know that there is a correlation between independent reading and school success: “The amount of free reading done outside of school has consistently been found to relate to achievement in vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and general information. Students’ reading achievement correlates with success in school and the amount of independent reading they do” (Cullinan, 2000). We also know that independent reading declines significantly in middle school and high school (Sullivan, Nichols, Bradshaw, & Rogowski, 2007).

None of this research is surprising. I see it every day in my classroom. The students who walk into class and get a few minutes of reading in before the bell rings, the ones who constantly browse my shelves for new books, the ones who beg for more silent reading time: these are the ones who score well on both my classroom assessments and standardized tests. And the ones who, during silent reading time,

have a book open but are staring at the wall, the ones with their phones not-so-surreptitiously buried in the folds of the book, or the ones who have been on page 70 for the past 12 days: these are the ones whose scores are predictably not so good. My job is to help both groups—and the ones in between—improve and grow, and the best way for me to do that begins with listening.

I use the conference structure that Penny Kittle outlines in *Book Love* which is to “question and listen, recognize insights from that information, and then find out whether the reader has a plan for the next steps” (p. 79). Per Kittle’s suggestion, I hold most reading conferences in a quiet voice during silent reading time. I worried initially about this being distracting to other students, but found my worries to be largely unfounded. Only the students sitting closest to the student I conference with can hear us, and the conversation is often of benefit to the students who are overhearing us. I also sneak in conferences with students who visit me before school, at lunch, and after school.

My initial questions are simple: What are you reading? How did you decide to read this? How’s it going? For students who struggle to find the right book—the one that matches both their skill and interest level—their lackluster answers may suggest that they are simply complying with my expectation that they read, but are not fully engaging with the book. At that point, the student and I work to determine whether we need to find a different book—one that will issue a more encouraging invitation into reading—or if they simply need to read more of this particular book and at perhaps a quicker pace as a way to get more fully immersed. Sometimes a student will try up to seven or eight books before she finds the right one. I’m okay with that, as long as at some point she finds a book to stick with.

Many of my students struggle with exposition. The longer, more descriptive sentences are antithetical to the sound bite world they live in. Their inexperience with these sentences may cause them to give up on the book more easily, but sometimes they just need a nudge to work through them or a reminder that with more practice with these types of sentences, they will soon become less tiring and confusing to read.

Some of my students will get hooked on a certain author, like Ellen Hopkins or James Patterson, or a series like *The Ranger’s Apprentice*, and when our conferences all start sounding the same, we discover that it’s time for them to move on and discover new writers, new themes, new styles. These books can often be the gateway to more sophisticated

writing. A student who began with Hopkins was soon reading Plath, and another who read all of the Rick Riordan and John Flanagan books moved on to Kurt Vonnegut.

Another of my standard questions is “what is something that is confusing about this book?” Issues of structure and narration come up frequently with this question, especially when books are told from multiple points of view or not in chronological order. This not only provides for good one-on-one discussion (with students nearby listening in) of how stories are told, but also good material for whole class mini-lessons. Using a student’s independent reading book as a text for a mini-lesson gives the lesson more authenticity and makes it more personal. Other common confusions center on vocabulary and figurative language. I work with students to use context clues for figuring out difficult vocabulary, but they also keep lists of words they simply need to look up. Each student has his or her own personal vocabulary list in addition to the vocabulary we learn as a whole class. The figurative language students encounter in their books also provides for rich mini-lessons.

After a mini-lesson on punctuation or sentence types, I send students on hunts in their books (in the sections they’ve already read) to see what their authors are up to. I follow up on this in conferences, during which students will make observations to me like “John Green sure uses a lot of dashes,” to which I love to respond—and they know this is coming—“Why do you think that is?”

Once students figure out that the conferences are not about me quizzing them to see if they are actually reading (and then punishing them if they are not), they tend to relax and animatedly recount an exciting event in the book, reveal what is frustrating about it, or tell me about their favorite characters or least favorite characters. I don’t use the conferences to grade students, but to ask myself, “What is it that I can learn from the conference, and how does that knowledge help me move the student forward?” As for grading their independent reading, the students do it themselves. At the end of each grading period, they answer a series of reflective questions about their reading lives, including the grade they think they deserve based on their expectations at the beginning of the term.

These questions give students ownership not only of their grades, but also of the learning itself. Some tell me that they are starting to see and hear new words they’ve encountered in their books; others say that they have tried mimicking the style of one of their authors in their own writing—something we practice in mini-lessons with mentor texts. Some

discuss their abilities to read for longer and longer periods of time without needing a break (stamina comes up often in our conferences and seems to be one of the biggest struggles students have); others claim that for the first time since elementary school, they actually enjoy reading. And this is crucial, because when they enjoy what they read, we know that they are engaged, and engagement is crucial for life-long learning.

I keep brief records of our conferences, minimally writing down the date, name of the book, and page number, but also recording anything that I want to take note of for a mini-lesson or to help that particular student in the future (ideas for future books, for example). I have eight tables that seat four students each in my classroom, and I typically conference with the students at one table per day, but if I see a student clearly not engaged in her book, I will often intervene by holding a conference. In these conferences, I often learn that a student is tired, upset, angry, or struggling to quiet his or her mind enough to read. That is data that a typical test, standardized or not, can never give us, but it's important data nonetheless, especially if this is a chronic problem, which it often is. Sometimes, simply being able to verbalize the feelings is enough for that student to move forward with her reading, though sometimes further intervention with a school counselor or social worker is needed.

The Writing Conference

I have been holding writing conferences with students much longer than I have been holding reading conferences. I read Atwell's *In the Middle* in my English methods class over 20 years ago and ever since have made the writing conference part of my practice in some form. It is only recently, however, that I have begun looking at it as a form of assessment. I had always thought of the grade I gave the piece of writing or portfolio based on a rubric as the assessment, but if we think of assessment as what we do to find out where our students are so that we can help them grow, then the writing conference is as much of the assessment as the final product. As assessment expert Rick Stiggins (2014) says, "Assessment is the process of gathering information to inform instructional decisions." He bemoans the fact that "almost all tests are used for accountability purposes" and not as instructional tools (p. 69). The writing conference is an assessment that is also an instructional tool.

In the writing conference, we can learn so much when we ask writers about their choices. "I'm curious about why

you put a semi-colon here," I might say to a student who has been using semi-colons a bit liberally and seemingly randomly, and I might get a response like "You told us that we can use semi-colons to join like ideas." And then I learn that this student had been paying attention in the mini-lesson and was attempting to put this lesson into practice, but missed the part about using them (sparingly) to join complete sentences with like ideas. The conference is the perfect place to assess a student's understanding of such a concept and to clarify or correct it in a non-threatening way.

I ask a lot of "why" questions in our writing conferences. I want each student to know that as the writer, he or she controls the decisions about it, but I always want to know why he or she make the decisions that they do. This encourages students to be deliberate and thoughtful in their writing and revision, and in turn gives me a window into their thinking. Many of my students will awkwardly or incorrectly use the vocabulary words we've been working on as a whole class and when I ask why, I may learn that they are simply trying to please me, or that they want to "sound smart," or that they want to practice using these words. The conference allows us to have a conversation about word choice and precision in language and when "small words" are sometimes more useful than "big words." And it helps me to understand why students are making some of the decisions that they are making.

The Peer-to-Peer Conference

A third way I assess students' literacy through listening is by eavesdropping while they talk to each other. In my reading/writing workshop, once a week students study a challenging piece of literature—a short story, poem, essay, or article—and they do this in groups of four. Rotating the roles of reader, summarizer, questioner, and clarifier, they divide the piece into sections, read each section out loud, and then pause to summarize, question, and clarify what they read. At the end, I have them answer a couple of questions about the piece on their own, and while this serves as the official assessment, the one that goes in the grade book, what I learn from walking around the room and stopping at each table to listen to the reading and conversation tells me so much more.

When I listen to the students read out loud in the non-threatening small group setting, I am able to gauge their fluency and see what sorts of words and sentence structures are difficult for them. When I listen to the summarizers, I learn how well they can pull out main ideas and how that varies depending on the text. I also learn from the students

who inevitably jump in to add important information that the summarizer left out. The questions that students ask give me even more information. For example, my students read “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin, a story set in the late 1800s about a woman who finds out her husband has died in an accident and instead of being overcome with grief as one might expect, she is overcome with a sense of joy and freedom. At one point the narrator tells us that the woman—Louise—“was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window,” and in one of my groups the questioner wanted to know why Louise didn’t know that she “shouldn’t be drinking alcohol at a time like this.” There ensued a lively debate about “the elixir of life” and whether it was alcoholic or not, which I observed for a while before suggesting the possibility of figurative language.

Engagement and Independence

My number one goal for my students is for them to become engaged and independent learners. This can be very difficult if the school culture rewards compliance over engagement, but it is not impossible. Assessing them through conferences can give teachers a much more complete picture not just of what students know and can do, but also their level of engagement, something that must be factored in if learning is to be sustained. And this can all be done while establishing relationships with students—relationships that are essential to learning. When I see that students are compliant, but not engaged, that is my call to action. That’s when a conversation can make all the difference. In her book on mindfulness in the classroom, Meena Srinivasan (2014) explains, “I made it my policy to always engage my students in dialogue in order to really understand them. I realized that only when I understood them could I truly teach them” (p. 28). A teacher’s ability to understand her students is a skill that is too often ignored and undervalued, but it is something that must be cultivated.

Sadly, education policy makers are making decisions that ignore the huge benefits of the teacher-student relationship. In an effort to standardize everything, they forget that children are not standard, nor are teachers, and that is the beauty of our humanity. I am not naive enough to think that standardized tests will ever disappear, nor do I think they should. They serve a purpose—largely as a means of comparing kids—but they do not serve the main purpose of education, which is to help all children develop their minds and realize their potential in order to lead happy and fulfilling lives as

contributing members of our society. We can’t achieve this purpose if we don’t trust teachers to do this very important work. We are in big trouble if we rely largely on standardized tests to tell us how well kids are learning and how well teachers are teaching.

In a discussion I had recently with a colleague over the merits of the NWEA MAP testing—with me arguing that money spent on the test would be put to better use reducing class sizes, buying books, or hiring a librarian—he contended that without the MAP test, we would be unable to gauge what specific skills we needed to teach or how to measure student progress. And it was at that point that I thought of Emerson and what we lose when we think we have advanced. Have we really reached a point that teachers can’t trust their own abilities to assess their students’ literacy and plan appropriate interventions? Have we really reached a point that we must depend on a computerized test and the interventions it prescribes? When a student comes to me at the beginning of the year having never completed a book on his own in his life and leaves my class having read four books, I know he has improved. And if you ask me how I know he’s read these books, I can tell you that I watched him “sneak read” *The One and Only Ivan* when he was supposed to be writing sentences using his vocabulary words. I can tell you that in one of our reading conferences, he passionately defended Jack Gantos’s decision to smuggle drugs into New York City in *Hole in My Life*, and I can tell you that I saw him swell with pride when he gave a book talk on Paul Valponi’s *Black and White* in front of the class. I could see improvement in his writing, too, as he gained a better sense of language, using bolder words and more complicated sentences.

Listening to and conferencing with students allows teachers to not only assess students in a non-intrusive way that fosters growth, but it also allows us to build relationships with them and understand their full humanity, which is an essential component of effective teaching. When conferencing is included in the assessment repertoire, both teachers and students grow and improve.

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