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Sarah Chanski
Hamilton High School

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PRACTICE

Assessing Writing Through Metacognitive and Reflective Practice

SARAH CHANSKI

In recent decades, reflective and metacognitive practices have gained more attention and popularity in discussions about teaching practice. It is not enough for learners to simply attain content knowledge in order to maintain growth momentum; they must also be able to conceptualize “how one learns content or practices a procedure” (Silver, 2013, p. 1). Numerous studies have documented the benefits students experience from being asked to think about their thinking—to reflect and practice metacognition—throughout the learning process (Hattie, 2009; Hudesman et al., 2013; Perry, Nordby, & VandeKamp, 2003; Yarrow & Topping, 2001). These are only a few examples of the research that have shown the benefits of deliberate implementation of reflective and metacognitive processes to student learning.

While reflection and metacognition are important and challenging to teach, including metacognitive and reflective practices in the assessing of student writing is also crucial and often overlooked. In his 2009 book *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, John Hattie presents the synthesis of data in thousands of research studies, concluding that a student’s ability to self-assess is the number one predictor of success, demonstrating that reflection has a place not only in the learning process, but also in classroom assessment processes. A more complete, accurate assessment of writing includes both what the student wrote and how he or she came to the finished product.

Reflection describes the capacity to engage in “a conscious exploration of one’s own experiences” (Silver, 2013, p. 1). Flavell (1979) defines metacognition as “knowledge and cognition about cognitive phenomena,” specifically the practice of “monitoring [one’s own]...memory, comprehension, and other cognitive enterprises” (p. 906); and Silver (2013) succinctly restates the definition as “the act of thinking about one’s own thought processes” (p. 1). So reflection is the more commonplace practice of thinking about (in respect to writing and the teaching of writing) what one has written: how a

piece of writing developed and the changes that were made. Metacognition, on the other hand, is the rarer practice of thinking about how one came to the choices that were made—why, for example, a certain word was used instead of another, or how the rules of a certain genre were acquired.

Thinking About Assessment and Thinking About Writing

Before we investigate the role of reflection and metacognition in assessment, perhaps a conversation about the purpose of assessing writing is a good starting point. I would posit that the purest, best impetus behind assessment, or the giving of grades, is to measure learning. In various communities and for some teachers, grades serve as a kind of currency—a reward for completing a task or a punishment for not completing it—but this is hardly ever the main purpose, and most teachers agree that, even when grades occasionally must serve as a carrot or a stick, those situations are rare and less than ideal. So we accept the premise that the purpose of assessment is to measure learning.

But in a discussion of assessing writing, we must not only consider the purpose of assessment, but also what it means to write or to have learned to write. If we are merely assessing the finished product, the words on the page (or computer screen) strung together with (hopefully) some punctuation and paragraph breaks, our picture of student learning is incomplete. Yes, evidence of what a student has learned to do with and through writing is present in the finished product. But to accurately measure what that student has truly learned, we must examine what the student did, as well as why she did it, and how she got to the finished product. In essence, I am arguing that when assessing that student’s learning, we must consider the student’s metacognition, or her ability to reflect on what she’s done, why she did it, and how her work measures up to expectations and the work of others. Only by asking students to think about the choices they have made

in their writing (think about their thinking) and to explain those choices can a teacher fully understand the learning that has taken place and more accurately assess the writing that resulted.

In *Leaving to Learn: How Out-of-School Learning Increases Student Engagement and Reduces Dropout Rates* (2013), Elliot Washor and Charles Mojkowski describe the way assessment has become obsessively and narrowly focused on academic standards at the expense of “arts and design, creativity and invention, career skills and personal competencies” (p. 79). By including metacognition and reflection as a part of writing assessment, we can begin to resist the tidal wave of narrow, rigid assessment and foster an atmosphere of creativity, individuality, and personal development in the English/Language Arts classroom. When students realize that we are not just concerned with the final product but with *how* they came to that final product, they realize that why they did what they did matters a whole lot—that writing is a deliberate, thoughtful process that they have control over. They aren’t throw-

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ing darts in the dark; they must make thoughtful choices and be prepared to explain those choices alongside of the finished product.

Of course, as I mentioned in the introduction, reflective and metacognitive practices cannot simply happen in the assessment stages: these are habits that must be taught. Metacognition must be modeled, practiced, discussed, and injected into every part of the learning

process in order for it to be successful as a part of assessment. Metacognition is difficult and does not always come naturally (Larkin, 2009). In a deliberate, habitual atmosphere of reflection and self-assessment created by practicing metacognition, we signal to our students that assessment is not the end, but instead is a stepping-stone to greater personal growth. Metacognitive skills prepare students for a future of development by constant reflection and awareness of thought processes and writing choices.

Incorporating Metacognition into Writing Assessment

My excitement in sharing the power of assessing writing through reflective and metacognitive processes is partly due to the fact that it doesn’t take a lot of work. You don’t have to start from scratch, recreating writing assignments, rubrics, and standards. Here are a few ways to make learner metacognition a part of assessing writing. These strategies

can also be used to teach, model, and practice reflection and metacognition.

Writing logs: While planning, drafting, and revising a piece of writing, ask students to stop at regular intervals (maybe once a day or a few times a week) and reflect for five minutes on some of the choices they’ve made and why they made them. This approach is ideal for making metacognition and reflection a continuous, reciprocal process rather than a one-and-done event at the end of a unit. These logs can be part of writing conferences, turned in at regular intervals, or submitted with the final piece.

Interviews: Conducting interviews with students as they submit their writing works especially well if you already have a classroom set up as a writing workshop, but it can work even if you don’t use a workshop model. In as little as three to five minutes (although they certainly could be longer if you have more time), an interview between teacher and student can take place in which the teacher asks the student to identify and explain specific choices she made in her writing and why she made those choices (what effect she hoped to have on the reader or message). Depending on the focus of writing instruction, the teacher might ask specifically about word choice, organization of ideas, or use of particular pieces of evidence.

Or, if it’s a culminating piece at the end of the year, the student might be charged with independently identifying and explaining the choices she made. At the conclusion of the interview, the teacher may decide that the student has shown enough evidence to be given a grade on the spot (for one area of the rubric or the entire rubric), or he may decide that further evidence is needed to determine a final grade. That may require reading and grading the writing during a planning period, or it could mean asking the student to follow up with one of the following tasks.

Self-Grading: Rather than immediately collecting a piece of writing when it is due, the teacher distributes rubrics to all students and instructs them to grade themselves in each area on the rubric (each skill or standard being assessed by that particular assignment), providing evidence from their writing to support the grade they are giving themselves. Students might copy evidence of each skill word-for-word from their writing, highlight in various colors evidence that they’ve demonstrated certain skills, or, if students are submitting their work electronically, use the comments feature available on Microsoft Word, GoogleDocs, and other word processing tools. The teacher may then choose to base the grade

on student-selected grades and evidence, provided that the evidence fits the rubric criteria.

Reflections: A written reflection can look a lot like an interview, but in written form instead of a face-to-face conversation. This is an ideal method for those teachers with limited class time or especially large classes that prevent one-on-one interviews with every student. There are several ways this can be done, but the easiest way is to simply have students—on a separate sheet of paper at the end of their piece, or on a teacher-designed handout—identify three to five specific choices they made in their writing and why they made those choices. Like the interviews, the teacher may want to specify the type of choices students should reflect on (word choice, organization of ideas, etc.), or he may allow students to focus on any authorial choices they made. I have found that the following prompts encourage reflection:

- Highlight in yellow one choice you made regarding how to organize/sequence your story. Describe that choice below.
- What did you hope to accomplish for the reader or for your story by making that choice? How effective do you think it was?
- Highlight in pink one choice you made regarding word choice. Describe that choice below.
- What did you hope to accomplish for the reader or for your story by making that choice? How effective do you think it was?
- Highlight in green one choice you made regarding character or setting detail. Describe that choice below.
- What did you hope to accomplish for the reader or for your story by making that choice? How effective do you think it was?

Another way to ask students to provide written reflection on their choices is to require larger margins on one side of the piece (two or three inches), and ask students to reflect in the margin on the choices they made or how their piece evolved over the course of the writing process. This strategy allows the reflection to be more closely connected to the actual product, similar to the comment feature on word processing software.

Rubrics: If a teacher has control over the wording of rubrics (sometimes referred to as learning progressions or proficiency scales) used to assess writing, he may want to include language about a student's ability to articulate and identify the use of that skill. For example, when using a four-point scale to assess the organization of a piece, a three might

include the criteria that students are able to identify major organizational pieces in their writing (background, transitions, etc.), but a four might include the criteria that students are able to explain how their organizational choices enhanced their purpose or the reader's understanding.

Student Choice: To promote even more student ownership and awareness in the assessment process, the teacher presents multiple options for demonstrating metacognition and allows the students to choose. For example, students might choose between signing up for an interview time with the teacher or completing a written reflection before submitting their work.

And of course, some teachers may find that a combination of the above strategies presents the most complete picture of a student's cognitive processes, metacognitive abilities, and writing growth. Combining self-grading with a reflection on why certain choices were made could provide a clearer picture than utilizing only one of the evaluative tools.

Developing Reflective Teaching Habits

Is it possible to teach self-reflection and metacognition if we do not practice them ourselves? I close with a few questions to ask yourself—a final metacognitive practice, if you will. Ask yourself these questions:

How did I learn to be reflective about my work and my own writing? What questions do I ask myself as I write? When I've finished a draft, what processes or strategies do I follow in order to make revisions? How can I model these questions and strategies for my students? How can I design writing tasks that encourage reflection and student choice? How can I use writing samples to teach students to think critically about what authors do? What steps can I take to give control over writing to the student-writer? When we as teachers of writing routinely reflect on our own work and writing, we'll be better equipped to help our students do the same.

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Sarah Chanski, a 2008 graduate of Grand Valley State University, teaches AP English Literature and AP English Language at Hamilton High School. She is a Lake Michigan Writing Project fellow and is studying the relationship between peer feedback, metacognition, and learning to be a writer.

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