

## On the Verge of Understanding: A District-Wide Look at Student Writing

Kathleen Reddy-Butkovich

“What is this writer on the verge of understanding?” This is a powerful question. It has a tone of urgency, a hey-pay-attention-something-is-about-to-happen quality. It also served as a fulcrum phrase in the collaborative assessment conversation of elementary teachers in the Plymouth-Canton Community Schools (P-CCS) as we looked at student writing and writing instruction across the district. Leaving my classroom, for a three-year period, I joined my colleague, Paula Holmes and began my assignment as a district ELA support teacher. English Language Arts had finally arrived as the curriculum area “in focus” and we were rolling out a new curriculum developed in the district. We have sixteen elementary buildings. There was loads of work to be done.

The 2003-04 school year marked the beginning of this P-CCS revised and updated English Language Arts Curriculum. The district’s K-5 curriculum was grounded in a *Four Blocks* framework (Cunningham, Hall & Defee). With the support of this multilevel, multimethod approach, teachers began to find a block of time in their daily schedule for writing workshop. In addition to our local changes, we incorporated the revised Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs). Our school board reviewed our state **MEAP** test scores. The state’s writing comments could not be ignored. We soon faced the challenges these initiatives would have on a packed “where do we find the time” elementary school day? Core genres and forms were divided among grade levels. Rarely had there been a district expectation that required a written narrative and a written expository product from all students, complete with narrative characteristics and text features. We found ourselves wondering just how to teach our students to meet and complete the writing benchmarks. Everything up to now seemed to show us that our students’ writing was progressing slowly. We were most familiar with unassisted writing samples as pre-test and post-test or top-down “writing on demand” that celebrated the talented few. With so many writing expectations, how would we know if our new ELA curriculum and the professional development designed to support it was working?

We turned to teacher researchers in the field—Patricia Cunningham, Richard Allington, Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Katie Wood Ray, Ralph Fletcher and others. We renewed our belief that all teachers in K-5 classroom are expected to be writing teachers. At about the same time, a National Writing Project (NWP) teacher inquiry community called, LETS Work (Learning Essentials from Teacher and Student **Work**) was forming. As a member of the Meadow Brook Writing Project (Oakland University, Michigan) I joined writing teachers from across the country to look at student and teacher work. One resource we used, *The Power of Protocols: An Educator's Guide to Better Practice* by Joseph McDonald (Teachers College Press, 2003) included many useful tools. These protocols guided us through thoughtful conversations and provided a needed structure for collaboration and assessment. Many of the protocols shared an inquiry stance and we had questions!

The Collaborative Assessment Conference (CAC), developed by Steve Seidel at Harvard University, was the tool the ELA support teacher team chose to help accomplish a planned, coherent look at student writing across our school district (K-5). We believed that student work could be used as a model of proficiency, to validate instruction, and as an instructional guide. We used three focus questions to guide our looking at student work:

1. What do we see in the work?
2. What is this writer working on or on the verge of understanding?
3. What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Early in the year, teachers were asked to join this writing review. It was decided and endorsed by our Language Arts Curriculum Coordinator, Penny Joy to collect a random sample of the district's required writing products. All teachers saved the draft(s) and final copies of the #8 and #18 students on the class roster. Student names, teacher names, and school names were removed from papers before they were sent to the Curriculum Center. The grade level of the piece and the date completed were all we needed. There was an established system of ELA building representation. Staff Development funds paid for classroom subs and these thirty-four teacher representatives gathered for two days in May at our first "Looking At Student Work" workshop. Two aspects of the Collaborative Assessment Conference challenged us: withholding the individual contexts and withholding judgments. It forced us to change our focus. We would be reading papers not checking papers. Could we resist our familiar deficit stance?

Rather than beginning with all the extenuating circumstances, we placed student work squarely in front of us. Rather than selecting and sorting the "good, the bad, and the ugly" pieces, we looked at all the students' texts with the same set of questions. Rather than spending time with our writing laments about missing conventions and lack of details, we focused on finding what *was* there by describing what we saw in the work and citing evidence in the student texts. Articulating these discoveries, no matter how small, provided the nudge we needed. It is essential for us to see our teaching, our writing curriculum in the students' work. What teachers *do* makes a difference in how much our students are capable of achieving as writers. This pushed

us to find some answers for the last important round of questions. “What are the implications for teaching and learning?” Based on what we saw in student writing, we brainstormed some next steps for our daily teaching practice. For example, fourth grade teachers read the collected student fantasies. They noticed a variety of dialogue tags—whispered, sneered, demanded, etc. in the students’ pieces, many fourth graders seemed to be on the verge of understanding paragraphing when using dialogue, and one of the implications for teaching included teaching students how to use dialogue to develop plot and characters. This structured look at student work uncovered not only some issues and concerns for P-CCS teachers but also, significant beliefs about the teaching of writing. How do we fit a writing block of time into our daily/weekly instruction? What are the nuts and bolts of a “writing workshop” approach? What is the reading-writing connection for grade level genres and forms? Should we focus on the writer or the writing?

Growth over time is an important measure of success. Every May random samples of the district required written products, including the draft(s) are collected. Teams of ELA building representatives apply the principles of the CAC to this collection. After sharing their perceptions, summary reports are written, narrative and expository products are selected to serve as grade level examples, and teacher-to-teacher recommendations are compiled and shared with each elementary school. Figure 1 illustrates a complete grade level summary from the 2005-06 Looking at Student Work.

**Looking At Student Work 2005-2006**  
**First Grade**  
**Ill.1.1.2 Written Expository**

**Write a how-to book:**

Use a sequential organizational pattern to enhance the understanding of a key idea.

Include:

- a title
- labels
- illustrations
- detailed directions
- transitional words

**What we saw in the work:**

- A greater number of student selected topics
- Logical steps with details
- Progressive illustrations that match the text
- Sequential organizational pattern

- Use of transitional words
- Word wall words spelled correctly
- Attempts at complete sentences
- An increase in the proper use of conventions (spacing, capitalization, and punctuation)
- When graphic organizers were used, many students wrote in complete sentences
- Simple titles

**Many first graders are on the verge of understanding:**

- How to use labels and captions to enhance the text
- Attempting to include a lead sentence that draws the reader in to the text
- How to make a supply / materials list that matches the directions
- Their audience, demonstrated by the use of second person (i.e. "You will need..." rather than "I will need...")
- How to select their own transitional words and phrases
- How to add details to their steps to make the directions more explicit
- Proper use of upper / lowercase letters

**Implications for teaching and learning:**

- Encourage students to "act out" their writing in order to add details to their steps to make the directions more explicit
- Assist students in creating an original title, use mentor texts (published how-to books) to demonstrate a variety of titles
- Demonstrate the use of labels and captions to enhance the illustrations
- Encourage students to include a lead that draws the reader into the text and states the purpose
- Encourage students to include a conclusion that wraps up the text
- Voice can be enhanced by encouraging the writer to add useful tips / details
- Use "sketch to stretch" as a prewriting activity to help students organize their thoughts
- Encourage jotting ideas rather than complete sentences if / when a student uses a graphic organizer
- Allow the students to select transitional words and phrases that fit with their piece and add to the fluency of the text

Our growing knowledge of the writing process, core genres and forms, and essential writing traits are noticeable. Teachers across the district are sharing a common language and specific implications for teaching. Teaching and assessing writing is no longer a solitary act.

Best of all, many teachers see the implications for teaching and learning considered during a collaborative assessment conference as formative assessment. A CAC can provide writing information and a protocol for grade level teacher meetings throughout the year—not just in May. My role as ELA support teacher continues through this 2006-07 school year. It now includes

Collaborative Assessment Conferences with grade level teams throughout our sixteen elementary buildings. We are looking together at all kinds of writing—at various stages of the writing process. Teachers are gathering around a poem in progress, a small moment narrative, a letter to the editor, a field trip report, historical fiction and more. We are honing our perceptual skills and developing the habit of looking for strength, *what's there?* as well as looking for need, *what's missing?* We are realizing the importance of daily writing workshops as a necessary, predictable time and place for *what's next?* writing instruction. We are using this collaborative assessment practice with colleagues as a guide for our writing conferences with students and parents, too. We plan to look again at our district writing products at the end of the year. But right now, across the district, we are beginning to share a hey-pay-attention-something-is-about-to-happen feeling that comes with so many writing teachers on the verge of understanding the power of looking together at student work.

*Kathleen Reddy-Butkovich serves as an English Language Arts support teacher with Plymouth-Canton Community Schools. She may be contacted at [kreddyb@aol.com](mailto:kreddyb@aol.com).*

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## Discussion Questions

1. What might this group of first grade teachers learn from their discussion list of “what are these students on the verge of understanding?”
  2. What actions might this school district take based on the discussion list of implications for teaching and learning at the fourth grade level?
  3. What first steps might your group take toward looking together at student work?
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## Professional Resources

**Blythe, Tina, David Allen and Barbara S. Powell.** *Looking Together at Student Work*. This practical, user-friendly guide provides teachers with strategies and resources for working together to examine and discuss student work such as science projects, essays, artwork, math problems, and more. There are detailed descriptions of two kinds of structured conversation (the Tuning Protocol and the Collaborative Assessment Conference) to guide discussion of student work.

**Cunningham, Patricia M., Dorothy P. Hall and Cheryl M. Sigmon.** *A Teacher's Guide to the Four Blocks*. This resource outlines the Four Blocks framework. The Four Blocks—Guided

Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Working with Words—represent four different approaches to teaching children to read. It provides an overview and explores each block in detail.

*English Language Arts Curriculum Guide K-10: Plymouth-Canton Community Schools.* This is a comprehensive ELA curriculum, developed by educators in the Plymouth-Canton Community School District. It embodies the State of Michigan Content Standards and includes the current Grade Level Content Expectations. Strands, standards, and grade level benchmarks organize this curriculum guide.

**Looking at Student Work Collaborative** <http://www.lasw.org> This web site represents an association of individuals and educational organizations that focus on looking at student work to strengthen connections between instruction, curriculum, and other aspects of school life to students' learning. A wealth of information and references are included on this site. Look for a helpful "virtual" Collaborative Assessment Conference.

**McDonald, Joseph P., Nancy Mohr, Alan Dichter and Elizabeth C. McDonald.** *The Power of Protocols An Educator's Guide to Better Practice.* This is an easy to use resource and a powerful, inquiry-oriented professional development tool. It describes nearly thirty protocols for conducting meetings, conversation and other learning experiences among educators. It would be helpful for anyone working with groups of teachers on everything from school improvement to curriculum development.

**Seidel, Steve.** *Assessing Student Learning: From Grading to Understanding* (David Allen, Ed.) "Wondering to Be Done The Collaborative Assessment Conference". Throughout this chapter, Seidel uses the words and reflections of teachers as they participate in a Collaborative Assessment Conference. You can read about the hesitant observations that lead slowly but surely into a long sequence of more and more specific descriptions. The more teachers saw in a piece of student writing, the more they recognized the complexity of the child's effort and accomplishments.