Handwringing Moments in Teaching
What to Do with Student Writing

Grading papers or giving feedback: by any name, it's often a time-consuming, thankless task with no guarantees. At last count, there were some 13 million entries on Google to the search words "grading made easy." No doubt the bulk of these entries will waver from the topic (and we didn't follow the trail for more than a page or two), but the point is this: It takes enormous effort to respond to student work. Whether or not that effort will move students ahead is anyone's guess. So the search is always on for some kind of invention that might make the process more effective and less maddening.

When it comes to writing, giving feedback gets really complicated. Writing is not just one thing. It's seemingly infinite in purposes and audiences, and in the digital age, in its forms. It's developmental. No student enters the ring with the same experiences, opportunities, abilities, or more often these days, with the same native languages. And if that weren't enough to compound the problem, writing is one of those curricular items that enjoys sporadic attention from policymakers. Sometimes they deem it essential, and other times they overlook it entirely (Murphy & Smith, in press).

The result is whiplash—for both teachers and students. One minute, writing is in the backseat. The next minute, it is surging forward. As a result, not every teacher has experience with a writing program. But whether teachers fall in the novice or veteran categories, they still face inevitable and sometimes daunting questions about the writing they've assigned to their students. What to do with the results? How to help students improve? What to look for in a piece of writing and what to do next?

If it were easy to deal with student writing—if, for example, a checklist would suffice—teachers might be searching out the nearest coffee shop where they could order a mocha latte, relax for a moment, and run down the list. But as any teacher will undoubtedly agree, there is no checklist or calculator or smartphone app or any other magic that can account for all the bits that make up a piece of writing.

The truth is that assessing student writing can feel completely random, not to mention stupefying. Randy Koch (2004) confesses that grading college essays counts as a Sisyphean chore:

I've nodded off more than once at my dining room table while grading essays, pen in my hand, chin on my chest, and the night outside our patio door swirling with bugs, headlights, and the occasional siren. I've resorted to bribing myself, vowing that once I sit down at the table with a stack of papers, I'll grade three complete essays before I get up again. Then I can have a snack, watch fifteen minutes of the Cowboys football game, or do something physical, like vacuum or take out the trash (both of which are deliciously tempting when I have essays to grade). (para 10)

And if it weren't enough that some teachers have to make deals with themselves to get through a stack of papers, for others, responding and grading brings on a kind of delirium:

When you're two-thirds of the way through 35 essays on why the Supreme Court's decision in the case of *McCulloch v. Maryland* is important for an understanding of the development of American federalism, it takes a strong spirit not to want to poke your eyes out with a steak knife rather than read one more. I have lots of friends who are teachers and professors. Their tweets and Facebook status updates when they're in the midst of grading provide glimpses into minds on the edge of the abyss—and, in some cases, already deranged. (Tierney, 2013, para 5)

So enough is enough. Someone, sometime has to invent a better way. After all, K–12 teachers and their university colleagues have invented solutions to classroom conundrums throughout the ages, including the hall pass, the seating chart, the reading corner, the author's chair, the whole array of stickers and happy notes, and not to be forgotten, the student of the day (week, month, or year). Why not come up with a way to work more effectively with student writing?

THE ANALYTIC WRITING CONTINUUM (AWC)

In this book, we introduce an invention in the writing world that has brought some sanity back to the grading/commenting/responding process. At the start, this invention—a scoring guide with a system for using the guide—addressed an immediate need to assess student writing at a National Writing Project (NWP) scoring event. However, once teachers discovered the Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC), it took off into classrooms for an extended stay where it could benefit student writers.

Our goal now is to put the AWC in the hands of teachers who are interested and ready for something new. We invite our readers to look critically at the AWC as a tool to support student writing achievement in an era when writing is a central means of communication. But because we think teachers

should flee from any teaching idea that can't be reinvented for a particular situation with a particular group of students, our invitation comes with this caveat: The AWC is not cast in stone with a single set of directions for how to use it. The best thing to do is to make it your own.

Many teachers are already familiar with scoring guides or rubrics and regularly use them to spell out expectations for an assignment or project. Rubrics also describe what those expectations or criteria look like in varying degrees: from an outstanding paper to one that is not so good. Our rubric serves a similar purpose. It describes varying levels of accomplishment in writing and delineates the attributes of good writing—content, structure, stance, sentence fluency, diction, and conventions—at each level.

Rubrics like the AWC can also do a more important duty. At their best, they can help students identify what it takes to improve their writing. Imagine the breakthroughs in learning when both teachers and students know the meaning of a phrase like "outstanding control and development of ideas and content."

But even with a shared understanding of such attributes, the teaching and learning of writing is a moveable feast with infinite combinations of writers and writing. A distinguishing feature of the AWC is that it has adapted—in both national assessment and in local classroom situations—to a myriad of variations:

- writing of different kinds
- writing in different contexts
- writing at different grade levels
- writing from writers who are at different levels of development with different backgrounds and abilities

In other words, the AWC is a flexible tool that works in multiple capacities—as an assessment tool and as a teaching/learning tool that accommodates diversity of all kinds.

The idea that teaching and assessing writing go hand-in-hand is not new. Typically, however, assessment experts in a large-scale scoring of papers and individual teachers in classrooms live on different planets. For starters, on the lucky occasions when actual student writing is the focus of an assessment, the measurements and outcomes too often fail to have much relevance in a classroom setting. They miss the mark when it comes to daily work with developing writers. One reason is that teachers seldom have a say in how their students' writing is sliced and diced in any kind of outside evaluation. This was not the case with the AWC. Teachers created the framework for its development, and then they created and tested ways to use it in the classroom, giving the AWC credibility among their colleagues. In fact, teachers were central to the entire process.

THE AWC STORY:
A COLLABORATION OF TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS

When National Writing Project leaders needed a scoring system for a national scoring of student papers, they turned to some great minds in education: researchers, experts in assessment, and teachers. The choice to include teachers makes perfect sense in light of the NWP mission. The National Writing Project is a network of university-based sites that work to improve writing "across disciplines and at all levels, early childhood through university" (NWP, 2010). At each site, NWP teacher consultants—exemplary teachers who participated in NWP institutes and other leadership workshops—provide professional development, conduct classroom research, publish articles, and develop curriculum and other resources. NWP's core belief is that experienced teachers are the key to reform in education, and that writing is a critical skill that must be part of every student's education.

So it is no surprise that writing project teachers were at the table when the NWP convened this group of experts to launch a new assessment system that would account for the diversity of student writing across the country. The task was to set the parameters for what would become a technically sound, rigorous writing assessment. But clearly the teachers were already thinking about classroom uses when they emphasized their classroom-based concerns: "The substance of the writing must outweigh emphasis on conventions." "The focus must be on defining the quality of writing." "We need to be able to accommodate the grade levels and prompts. . . ." "We need to be able to see growth where there is growth" (Swain & LeMahieu, 2012, p. 47–48).

Another job for the teachers and their university counterparts was to study existing rubrics in light of NWP beliefs and values. Would any of the available rubrics be a candidate for the national scoring? Here again, teachers brought their expertise to the conversation about what misfired in many of the possible rubrics:

- the language was negative, leading to a negative view of student writing
- the criteria favored "sophisticated vocabulary" over natural, honest word choices
- the criteria privileged long sentences as somehow superior to other sentence structures
- the rubric in some way invited a pre-imposed or formulaic structure
- conversely, the rubric was vague, with no clear direction about the features of good writing

Ultimately, there was one rubric that stood out from the others. The 6+1 Trait Writing Model, developed by the Northwest Lab, had the advantage

of being familiar and credible to many teachers across the country (Swain & LeMahieu, 2012, p. 45). A national panel of assessment experts1 on student writing, along with senior NWP researchers, confirmed the choice of the 6+1 Trait Writing Model as the starting point for the new system. With permission and encouragement from the originators of the 6+1 Trait Writing Model, the panel modified this rubric to create the NWP Analytic Writing Continuum Assessment System.

The AWC debuted in 2005 at the first NWP National Scoring Conference. To date, eight national scoring conferences, with the Analytic Writing Continuum as the centerpiece, have produced student outcome data for numerous local and national studies, spanning grades 3–12. By the end of 2013, 724 teachers from 41 states had served as scorers at one or more national scoring conferences, scoring 48,475 student papers (National Writing Project, 2015).

Standing the test of time is one measure of an assessment system. But in the case of the AWC, which was designed for scoring all types of writing, every year brought another test as new kinds of writing showed up at national scorings, including narrative, informational, and argumentative texts—the big three in the Common Core State Standards. What's more, the papers were not sorted into piles by type or by geographical origin. They were randomly mixed and scorers simply pulled from the stack. At the end of the day, every scoring session produced high reliabilities (see the Appendix). In other words, regardless of location, demographics, writing assignment, or any other mark of diversity, the AWC proved to be a flexible tool.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE AWC

Focuses on the Writing

The AWC spotlights the writing, not the writer—one of modifications made to the 6+1 Trait rubric. Why does this shift from writer to writing make a difference? Isn't it helpful to know something about a student when reading his or her writing?

It's certainly true that teachers know their students, their unique voices, their special interests, and sometimes their life stories. However, this invaluable knowledge can cause some mischief when it comes to looking at a piece of writing. Which one of us has not transported our love for a student straight to that student's paper? Our thinking process may go something like this: "This is not Sam's best work, but he's really trying" or "I think I know what Sam wanted to say here." We let our empathy for Sam color the way we view his writing, and on occasion, we even fill in the blanks for him.

Obviously, classroom teachers are not going to have amnesia when it comes to the writers behind the writing. But treating the writing as an ar-

tifact, if only for a few minutes, gives many teachers that bit of distance they need to think about what comes next for a student or for a classroom of students. Jennifer Smith, a New York high school teacher who returned to her classroom after the national scoring, shares this perspective: "Now I try to be more objective when I'm reading student writing and not think so much about who is doing the writing. Because I think the more objective I am, the more I can step back, the more I will help my students" (personal communication, June 20, 2008).

Many teachers who have shared their own writing in NWP summer institutes know firsthand what it means when members of their writing response groups attend to the writing rather than fussing over the writer. Responding to the writing itself sounds something like this: "This anecdote worked so well as an example of . . . ." or "I have an idea for how to give the evidence a little more punch . . . maybe a quotation." By concentrating on the writing, peer responders invest in making it better, even making it sing. Working with the writer begins with working on the writing itself.

Provides a Common Language

Ask a veteran writing teacher what she or he looks for in a good piece of writing and you'll probably hear some familiar words, such as "interesting opening," "organization," "supporting ideas," and "strong vocabulary." Naming these attributes sounds easy, but in fact, finding a common language among communities of teachers and students has always seemed nearly impossible. What's more, even teachers in the same school don't necessarily share common experiences or ideas that would bring them into agreement about what these terms mean. For example, some teachers might view organization in an essay as one of four or five structures (for example, chronology, cause-and-effect, comparison-contrast), while others would insist that organization depends on audience, purpose, and content.

The AWC uses familiar terms and explains what they mean. For instance, the term STRUCTURE, as it appears in the AWC, attends to the overall organization of a piece of writing as well as its internal order. At the higher score points of STRUCTURE, descriptors include, among other things, a **purposeful, coherent, and effective arrangement of events, ideas, and/or details**, as well as a **compelling opening and an effective closure that reinforces unity**.

Is it really so important to have a common language about writing among local communities of teachers and students? We know that other disciplines like mathematics come with an accepted set of terms. A *fraction* is a fraction. In writing, however, words such as *thesis*, *claim*, *central idea*, *main message*, *theme*, *topic*, *proposal*, *problem*, or *proposition* too often get muddled together. What's more, without a common language that specifically describes the attributes of good writing, teachers may spend hours

responding to complicated and sometimes convoluted pieces of student writing with little more to go on than phrases such as "unclear," "needs facts," "too much summary," and "good idea." Let's confess: Who has not had to reach for words? One reason teacher scorers in the NWP national scoring sessions gave a thumbs-up to the shared language of the AWC is that it makes writing more teachable and provides a basis for responding to student writing.

Evaluates Writing in a Meaningful Way

One of our favorite stories comes from a former colleague, Keith Caldwell, who was carrying a huge stack of papers from his English classes when he met up with a group of mathematics teachers in the school parking lot. A genial bunch, the math teachers invited Keith to go with them to the local pub. "I wish I could," Keith said, "but I have all these papers to correct." The math teachers looked closely at the stack and then one of them asked, "How do you know there's anything wrong with them?"

Of course, Keith was not planning to go on a hunt for missing commas or other minutiae. But evaluating student writing in a way that informs both teaching and learning has the potential to ruin a teacher's social life and lead to hours of frustration. If there were ever a need for guidance, it's in the realm of responding to or evaluating the wide range of papers that are the bane of the writing teacher's life.

In any assessment, students need to know "what counts as good." A focus on strengths in student writing, describing "what is present" before turning to potential improvements, can help teachers and students map out plans for next steps. For example, in describing the attribute of STRUCTURE, the AWC refers to a compelling order and ideas that are connected by smooth transitions. Here's language a teacher can grab onto when conferencing with her student. "How are your ideas connected? Let's try to put them in a logical order so that you can show the connections."

Uses Analytic Scoring to Its Best Advantage

You don't have to be an assessment guru to grasp the difference between analytic scoring guides and holistic scoring guides. Analytic rubrics describe each feature of the writing separately (content, structure, sentence fluency, and so on). Holistic rubrics put all the features together. There are pros and cons for each one of these approaches. However, analytic guides have an edge when it comes to the classroom, according to Susan M. Brookhart (2013):

> Focusing on the criteria one at a time is better for instruction and better for formative assessment because students can see what aspects of their work need what kind of attention. Focusing on the criteria one at a time is good for any

summative assessment (grading) that will also be used to make decisions about the future—for example, decisions about how to follow up on a unit or decisions about how to teach something next year. (p. 6)

Now, remember those teachers who did battle with their stacks of papers needing grading? Well, analytic scoring also has something to offer when it comes to the gobs of time it takes to respond to student papers:

Analytical scoring is not *the* answer, but it is definitely *one* answer to the time problem, because it makes evaluation of student writing not only more consistent but also faster. Teachers who use written scoring guides to assess writing and who teach the scoring guides to their students often find not only that they can score papers rapidly but also that they do not have as much need to write lengthy comments at the end of each paper. The criteria become a kind of shorthand through which student and teacher communicate about writing. (Spandel & Stiggins, 1997, p. 41)

And now for the clincher. If students are to learn the attributes that show up in the analytic scoring guide, most teachers will want to keep the guide around for a good period of time. Indeed, the AWC has the potential for a long shelf life. Here's another reason why:

General rubrics [like the AWC] use criteria and descriptions of performance that generalize across . . . different tasks . . . students learn general qualities and not isolated, task-specific features. . . . (Brookhart, 2013, p. 9)

Since we are concerned about those millions of people who Google "grading made easy," let's look at the advantages of general or comprehensive rubrics over task-specific rubrics:

- Can be shared with students at the beginning of an assignment, to help them plan and monitor their own work
- Can be used with many different tasks, focusing the students on the knowledge and skills they are developing over time
- Describe student performance in terms that allow for many different paths to success
- Focus the teacher on developing students' learning of skills instead of task completion
- Do not need to be rewritten for every assignment (Brookhart, 2013, p. 9)

A word of caution here. The term *general* is accurate in describing the AWC because of its adaptability across genres. However, the AWC is in no way general when it comes to its very specific descriptors.

Sets Up a Continuum for Growth Across All Types of Writing

We call the AWC a continuum because it represents the reality that every scorer in an assessment or teacher in a classroom has experienced. There are an infinite number of possibilities and ways a student can fashion a piece of writing, which is why scorers will sometimes throw up their hands in frustration and ask, "Is this paper a three or a four?" The same is often true for teachers when they wonder, "Is this paper a B+ or an A-?" The idea of a continuum is that papers fall in a continuous sequence. Adjacent papers on the continuum can have minute differences. In the end, of course, you may still have to put a grade or a score on a paper, but the descriptors in the AWC give meaning to that grade or score.

The six points in the AWC also allow teachers and students to detect growth over time or evaluators to note differences between groups of students. In addition, the AWC reflects the NWP belief that, in reality, writing scores fall along a potentially infinite continuum of score points—even though only six of those points are available as actual scores (Swain & LeMahieu, 2012, p. 50).

Accommodates All Types of Writing and Writing Assignments

As we have noted, the AWC addresses all types of writing. However, one phenomenon that crops up in typical scoring sessions—and also in classrooms—is the discovery of papers that are "off topic." In these cases, we can assume that the writers chose to ignore the prompt or assignment in favor of some better idea. In "The Right to Go 'Off Topic,'" Vicki Spandel (2005) tells the story of a teacher who brings her a well-written paper that has received a low score in a testing situation for having veered from the directions. Rather than addressing *one* endangered species as specified in the prompt, the paper gives readers a bonus with its thoughtful discussion of *two* endangered species. Spandel agrees with the teacher that the paper merits high marks. The problem with this off-topic business, she says, is that "it causes us to assess the simple thing, not the important thing":

> It turns writing assessment into a control issue: *Wander from my topic and you will pay.* We get so hung up on looking at whether writers have precisely addressed a question we cared little about in the first place (the easy thing to assess) that we forget to look at the quality of the writing (the hard thing). . . . If I were teaching math, biology, or driver's education, following directions would matter to me enormously. . . . In writing, though, creativity matters. Spontaneity is a virtue. Originality and perspective define voice. Risk is essential to success. And writers who never think for themselves cannot go anywhere. If I try to control your writing, I will never get the best you have to give—nor do I deserve it. (p. 33)

During scoring sessions using the AWC, teacher scorers read papers without knowing the prompt or assignment. They match up the writing and the scoring guide with student papers we call *anchors*, which serve as models of each score point. Each anchor paper has its own *commentary*—a short description of how this paper exemplifies a 6 score or a 5 score or a 4 score and so on. In other words, there is an abundance of supporting materials in the AWC system, all of it designed to help scorers take the writing itself more seriously than things like the assigned topic.

Maintains Its Flexibility

One problem with the printed word, especially in education, is its immutability. We all know too well the problem with standards or frameworks or curricula that outlive their usefulness (sometimes almost immediately), and still, they reign over the land. This was not the case with the AWC. During the national scoring sessions where the AWC made its debut, teachers served as the table leaders and scorers and, ultimately, as the close-at-hand observers of the way the AWC performed as a scoring guide. They suggested changes where changes were needed. In other words, the AWC did not become a fossil like so many tools we have encountered as teachers. And more important, teachers did not suffer in silence. They took center stage to make the AWC more nimble, more accurate, and more in tune with the papers they were reading from students across the country. Then teachers went on to tailor the AWC to a myriad of classroom purposes.

FROM NATIONAL SCORING TO LOCAL CLASSROOMS

From the outset, the teacher scorers had their eyes on the AWC as something they might take back home for use in their classrooms as a way to focus and organize writing instruction more broadly. During the scoring sessions, they talked endlessly at breakfast, lunch, and dinner about how they might invent ways to teach writing with the AWC as a centerpiece. Was it possible, they asked one another, for the AWC to serve a meaningful purpose outside of a large assessment? In what circumstances might it help all the different writers who could show up in their classrooms? Here are some of the uses they envisioned that became realities:

- As a formative classroom evaluation tool that allows teachers to plan their lessons around what students need to improve in their writing
- As a touchstone for writing conferences during which both teacher and student can share a common language

- As a tool for peer writing groups to make the discussions more productive and, in the process, to teach students how to identify the attributes of good writing
- As a guide for revising papers
- As a pathway for teaching, with signposts like CONTENT and STRUCTURE to focus instruction on what will make a difference in student writing
- As a way to view and discuss mentor texts and other writing models
- As a guide for minilessons and other direct instruction
- As a special tool for students so they can learn about and improve their own writing and so they can make goals for themselves
- As a way to prepare students for a district or state writing exam—a preparation that is more substantial and worthwhile in the long run than the usual one-time-only preparation
- As a model of attributes and descriptors to help teachers craft a customized set of criteria (because a good tool should spawn other good tools)
- As the centerpiece in professional development sessions with colleagues

These uses are ones we will illustrate in the coming pages.

UPCOMING CHAPTERS

We have organized our discussion of the AWC in the following way:

In Chapter 2, we introduce our readers to the Analytic Scoring Continuum. With this introduction, the National Writing Project is releasing the AWC to the field for the first time. Previously, it has been accessible only to those involved in the national scorings. So we concentrate on how the rubric works with student writing, threading our way through all six attributes: CONTENT, STRUCTURE, STANCE, SENTENCE FLUENCY, DICTION, CONVENTIONS.

Then our story moves into classrooms, where five brave teachers decided to use the AWC to teach writing. In Chapter 3, they tell it like it happened, all the moments of enlightenment and despair. In the process, we examine the decisions they made about how to use the AWC and why and how their students at various grade levels responded.

Chapter 4 goes into considerable detail on how to set up shop, using the AWC for teacher research or inquiry. It also includes models and ideas for using the AWC for professional development.

One of our goals is to put the AWC into the hands of our readers with step-by-step directions in Chapter 5 for how to use it in local district or in

school scoring sessions. Similarly, Chapter 6 offers a sequenced guide, this time for how to get started using the AWC in the classroom.

Throughout the book we feature examples of student writing, including commentary that picks up the attributes and language of the AWC. In particular, we examine narrative, informational, and argumentative pieces since they are the cornerstones of the Common Core State Standards. We have included references to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) along the way because teachers deserve to know how any teaching tool plays out in a given policy environment. For those who are already looking beyond the CCSS, we argue that the flexibility of the AWC also makes it adaptable to future changes in policy. Whatever its merits, the AWC cannot claim an afterlife in classrooms unless it spares teachers the age-old dilemma, described by Edward M. White (2007), of feeling "forced to choose between tailoring their teaching to an impromptu test and helping their students learn how to write . . ." (p. iv).

Also throughout this book, we continue to ask ourselves a critical question: Why would teachers take a risk on the AWC—a seemingly complicated tool—and put it to work in their classrooms? In 2008, NWP researchers interviewed teachers to find out how and why they used the AWC with their students. Primary teacher Robin Atwood, now director of the South Mississippi Writing Project, offered this insight:

> . . . It's almost embarrassing to admit because I thought I was such a great writing teacher. I had really focused more on, you know, it's so hard for the young children just to get their thoughts on the paper. And I had focused more on that than purpose and audience. But when you focus more on purpose and audience, then you've given them a reason to put their thoughts on paper and there's not as much of a struggle to do it. Or there's not so much of an avoidance of it. Even those children who don't struggle to do it may not see the point of it without the purpose and the audience.
>
> And it seems that bringing in the craft of it just sort of added a whole new excitement to the writing, to the classroom. Because everybody was always trying to hone their craft now that you can put a name on things. They were trying out, "oh, look the way I opened this" and "look at the way that I used this convention. That means you're supposed to slow down." So there's this conversation about it. There's an excitement about the actual getting down on the paper what was not there before. (personal communication, June 19, 2008)

Finally, we want to recognize that teachers engage in an unimaginable juggling act every day, working to find the "right stuff" and then make it right for every one of their students:

They are teaching students with all their marvelous diversity and with all the languages and life experiences they bring to the classroom. Students cannot be standardized and turned out for distribution like cans of tomatoes. Even the best ideas in the world for teaching writing and learning to write may not always work for every student, especially since students grow in fits and starts and not necessarily at the same rate. (Murphy & Smith, 2015, pp. 8–9)

To the extent that the AWC can work to the benefit of teachers and students, our book will have met its ultimate purpose.