Graduate Research Papers                                          Student Work

1997

# Qualitative assessment of the writing process

Laura L. Behrends
*University of Northern Iowa*

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

## Recommended Citation

# Qualitative assessment of the writing process

## Abstract

A strong trend in the language arts is the emphasis placed on the involvement of-students in the language processes to extend their thinking and language abilities. Thus, their involvement needs to be described by qualitative means. Qualitative assessment is necessary in writing because there is a great deal that cannot be measured (Field, 1992). Assessment needs to be continuous and inseparable from instruction, therefore authentic (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Valencia, 1990; Barclay & Breheny, 1994; Stone, 1995). Assessment must be an integral part of each day in order for teachers to plan instruction and communicate with parents and the students (Barclay & Breheny, 1994).

Qualitative Assessment of the Writing Process

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Laura L. Behrends

July 1997

This Research Project by:  Laura L. Behrends

Entitled:  Qualitative Assessment of the Writing Process


has been approved as meeting the research project requirement for

the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.


*October 2, 1997*

Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms

Director of Research Project


*October 2, 1997*

Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms

Graduate Faculty Adviser


*October 2, 1997*

Date Approved

Dale D. Johnson

Graduate Faculty Reader


*Oct. 23, 1997*

Date Approved

Greg P. Stefanich

Head, Department of Curriculum
and Instruction

A strong trend in the language arts is the emphasis placed on the involvement of students in the language processes to extend their thinking and language abilities. Thus, their involvement needs to be described by qualitative means. Qualitative assessment is necessary in writing because there is a great deal that cannot be measured (Field, 1992). Assessment needs to be continuous and inseparable from instruction, therefore authentic (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Valencia, 1990; Barclay & Breheny, 1994; Stone, 1995). Assessment must be an integral part of each day in order for teachers to plan instruction and communicate with parents and the students (Barclay & Breheny, 1994).

Alternative methods of assessing students' growth in writing are being explored and created by teachers who are interested in assessment changes (Winograd, 1994). They are implementing assessment that is a continuous process of observing and analyzing the responses of children and the process is formative rather than summative (Barclay & Breheny, 1994). These authentic assessments, specifically, have children demonstrate not only what they know, but also what they can do in real world situations or in simulated situations. It is one thing to be able to mark the correct answers on a test, but for the assessment to be authentic, the assessment must focus on the application of learning (Bergen, 1993/94).

Many educators support the need for assessment reform. Johnston (1987) contends that the traditional means of multiple-choice, product-oriented, group-administered, and norm-referenced tests are inadequate and inefficient and fragment the writing process. The validity of these types of externally-imposed tests is questionable in programs that emphasize engagement in the language processes to create meaning. Tierney et al. (1991) relate that testing appears to consume enormous amounts of instructional time that is difficult to justify given the nature of the tests and purposes for which they are used. The reasons for administering tests represent a restricted array of purposes, and many of these purposes may be difficult to justify if examined in terms of the goals associated with a child-centered view of emerging literacy. Most tests do not reflect language use in today's classrooms and result in a mismatch between the students' test scores and actual writing abilities. Formal testing has treated the complex task of assessment of reading and writing abilities as if it were simpler than it really is.

Formal tests tend to disenfranchise teachers and constrain rather than enhance teaching practices. Students are viewed as the subjects of testing rather than partners in the testing enterprise. Student self-assessment has long been ignored in the classroom (Johnston, 1987).

Qualitative assessment techniques assist teachers in documenting many aspects of students' responses in the writing process. This documentation validates their approach and provides evidence to administrators, parents, the community, and students that they are knowledgeable professionals and that students are learning (Linek, 1991).

An assessment plan for the entire school year has been recommended by Barclay and Breheny (1994) to guide the timing and use of several assessment procedures. The assessment plan can include anecdotal records, checklists, conferences, and portfolios. From these qualitative measures, teachers and students can set instructional goals, plan learning activities, determine progress, and indicate areas of instructional need.

The goal of the writer, a third grade teacher, engaging in this instructional/assessment development project has been to select qualitative assessment measures for her writing program. She has reviewed the professional literature on anecdotal records, checklists, conferences, and portfolios. Then, she determined how these measures will be incorporated into the writer's instructional program to connect instruction and assessment thus promoting students' self-reflection of their progress and instructional needs.

Qualitative Assessment Measures

Anecdotal Records

Anecdotal notes can include teacher observations about what students are writing, student comments about writing, how students approach writing, how students respond to instruction, how students use writing to learn, and teacher questions and comments (Harp, 1994). They can capture the development of the student as it happens and provide information to further tailor individual instruction for each child (Lowrey et al., 1995). Over a period of time, recorded observations provide valuable information and insight into student learning and allow for reflective decision-making. Though a single entry might not seem to be important, recorded observations over a course of a year, or even a few weeks or months, can show patterns of growth in specific areas (Barclay & Breheny, 1994). Anecdotal notes also can be records of conferences, analytic notes while viewing portfolios, and instructional possibilities on different checklists (Tierney et al., 1991). According to Anthony, Johnson, Mickelson, and Preece (1991), two principles need to be considered when collecting anecdotal records: observations should take place in authentic situations and then inferences about learning need to be made.

Anecdotal records can be organized in several ways. They can be recorded first on sticky notes, large computer labels, or

small pieces of paper and then transferred to a form and placed in a designated section for the child in the teacher's record, or log book. Three-ring binders with divided sections for each student or spiral-bound notebooks with tab dividers for each student also can hold the anecdotal records (Routman, 1991; Tierney et al., 1991).

## Checklists

A list of conventions that will make writing easier for children and more clear for them and their audience can be compiled. On each child's list, his/her understanding of specific elements or need for instruction can be recorded. Also a composite list can be compiled that can assist in offering small group mini-lessons (Tierney et al., 1991).

## Conferences

Conferencing with students during the writing process enables the teacher to learn about their current levels of development and make decisions about how they can be supported in their progress as writers (Kennedy & Gareau, 1992). Both the teacher and the children have important roles in the conferences. The teacher is an active listener and the facilitator who questions thoughtfully and purposely to keep children focused on the writing process and to expand their information (Calkins, 1983). It is important for teachers to listen for what students know as opposed to what students do not know (Hansen, 1987). An

effective conference has the student speaking eighty percent of the conference time while the teacher talks about twenty percent of the time (Graves, 1994). While conferencing, the teacher can also keep ongoing anecdotal records and can record on checklists students' progress and instructional needs (Tierney et al., 1991). Conferences can also serve as mini-lessons for a child's immediate instructional need.

## Portfolios

Portfolios can incorporate anecdotal records of observations and conferences and checklists. They can facilitate students' development of systematic writing collections representing a variety of pieces. With the support of teachers, portfolios can serve to show progress and instructional needs as well as further communication among students, teachers, other school personnel, and parents. According to Tierney et al. (1991) portfolios can be vehicles for ongoing assessment by students that indicate activities and components of processes, such as selecting, comparing, self-evaluating, sharing, and goal-setting. Portfolios can be used across the curriculum, but for the purpose of this paper, the writing portfolio will be discussed.

Portfolios, according to Graves (1994) give a sense of writing history; they hold the past and present and offer an indication of what is to come. Students' writing should be dated so their writing progress can be traced. Samples of students'

writings over time show how the student has grown as a writer and the writing tasks that the learner has achieved as well as tasks that still need to be learned. Atwell (1986) also supports portfolio collection. She states that writing is not one ability but a combination of several: experimenting, planning, choosing, questioning, anticipating, organizing, reading, listening, reviewing, and editing.

Portfolios also meet the accountability demands usually achieved by formal testing procedures. Portfolios provide information that is necessary when considering ongoing curriculum development and direction for instructional decision-making (Stone, 1995; Tierney et al., 1991).

A working portfolio may consist of a manila folder that contains several pieces of different kinds as well as stages of completion (drafts, redrafts, revisions, and published pieces) that have been selected periodically for inclusion (Jongsma, 1989). This type of portfolio allows students to be involved in self-evaluation therefore becoming aware of their development as writers. One of the most promising aspects of portfolio assessment is giving students responsibility for evaluation and making decisions about their learning (Field, 1992). Student self-assessment is an important instructional technique to consider. "Assessment activities in which students are engaged in

evaluating their own learning help them reflect on and understand their own strengths and needs, and it instills responsibility for their own learning," (Valencia, 1990. p. 338). When students are included in the evaluation process, they will gain more control of their own study and development (Graves, 1994). Self-assessment helps students become lifelong learners and assists students with taking responsibility for their learning and the writing they produce (Tierney et al., 1991).

The exhibits for the showcase portfolios are compiled at the end of each school year to be added to an ongoing collection that is sent on year after year. Students with support of the teacher select pieces that represent their writing activity and progress for that year. Labels can be placed on each piece to explain the selection process. The rest of the pieces in the working portfolio can be compiled in a box or folder or bound with a title cover to be sent home (Tierney et al., 1991).

Proposed Qualitative Assessment Program for Grade 3

The students in my third grade classroom come from rural, middle-class families. The average class size ranges anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five students in each section.

The major goals for my classroom writing program are to extend my students' writing abilities and to encourage them to recognize their accomplishments as well as the direction they need to take to grow as writers. The writing process is

emphasized as opposed to the final product. Writers workshop is implemented in my third grade classroom five days a week for forty-five minutes a day. During this time, the students are engaged in writing tasks of their own choice. Small assigned peer groups are formed during writers workshop. Also, other opportunities for writing are available across the curriculum. In the coming year, the proposed qualitative assessment will be carried out. Several qualitative assessment techniques have been chosen for my writing program.

## Anecdotal Records

Records will be kept to document observations of individual students while they are engaged in the writing process. Record forms, dated and recorded on computer labels, will be made to record observations. The labels will then be placed in a three-ring notebook with tab dividers for each student. The anecdotal records will be used in conjunction with conferences and portfolio collection.

## Checklists

Because my school district has language arts objectives for each grade level it is necessary to document the children's progress in acquiring conventions. The checklist that I plan to use is a modification of one offered in Tierney et al. (1991). It is designed in two sections--development of ideas and

conventions. The items will be monitored each quarter of the
school year. The checklist is offered in Figure 1.

Figure 1

WRITING CHECKLIST

Name_____

Key: U - Usually     M - Moderately     N - Never
     O - Often        S - Seldom

| Development of Ideas | Qtr 1 | Qtr 2 | Qtr 3 | Qtr 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Uses logical paragraph order | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Develops & organizes ideas | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Writes well-formed sentences | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Uses paragraphs | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Develops beginning, middle, and end of story | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Communicates clearly in written form | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Demonstrates written fluency | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Enjoys and initiates own writing | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |

Conventions

| | Qtr 1 | Qtr 2 | Qtr 3 | Qtr 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Uses appropriate spelling | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Begins each sentence with a capital letter | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Capitalizes proper nouns | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Uses correct punctuation | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Writes legibly | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |
| Uses quotation marks in dialogue sentences | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |

Conferences

I have been conferencing for several years with my students individually about their writing at least once a week. They have provided opportunities for me to listen to the students' understandings of the components of the writing process. The students' performances on a particular piece of writing have been discussed in terms of both strengths and instructional needs. Mini-lessons have been given at this time on specific writing tasks.

From my reading of professional literature on conferencing, I have found questions that would facilitate this assessment. The questions I will ask during conferences are pertinent to individual students as they evolve in their writing abilities. The list presented below was suggested in Atwell (1986). The entire list will not be used in each conference.

1.  Where did you get your idea for this piece?

2.  What do you like best about this piece?

3.  Did you use any new conventions?

4.  Have you shared the piece with others?  If so, what was their response?  Who gave you helpful responses?

5.  Have you made redrafts and revisions of your piece? If so, what changes did you make?

6.  What problems are you experiencing with this piece?  What could you do to solve them?

7.  What are your next writing activities?

A record form will be used when conferencing with students about their choice of writing that they have selected for the conference (see Figure 2). The reasons students give for selecting a piece will be recorded on the conference form. Their justifications for selecting a piece, also recorded on the form, will have been modeled by the teacher at the beginning of the year. The writing piece should be viewed for evidence of instruction. Such evidence will allow me to show the effectiveness of my instructional program and will be recorded in the column "Evidence of Instruction." This information that children are learning is important and can be reported to administrators for teacher accountability and to parents in connection with conferences. Notes can be placed in the column "Instruction Given" concerning what instructional plans are needed or what assistance was given either individually or in a peer group mini-lesson during the conference or at a later time. Information noted in this column offers evidence that I am aware of students' learning needs and am offering appropriate instruction.

During conferences the writing checklist described in the previous section can also be used.

Peer conferences are also used when a group of students has similar experiences to share or instructional needs. These conferences can provide an opportunity for the teacher to model

## CONFERENCE RECORD FORM

| Name | Title or Type of Piece | Reason for Choice | Evidence of Instruction | Instruction Given |
|------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
|      |                        |                   |                         |                   |
|      |                        |                   |                         |                   |
|      |                        |                   |                         |                   |
|      |                        |                   |                         |                   |
|      |                        |                   |                         |                   |

Figure 2

specific tasks. When conventions and questioning strategies are modeled by the teacher, the students eventually transfer them to their own writing and to peer interaction.

## Portfolios

On a quarterly basis, the writing folders will be reviewed with each student to determine which items should be included in the working portfolio. The students and I will engage in the process of selecting writing pieces to include. Labels will be affixed to each exhibit explaining why the piece was chosen, what the student learned in the process of writing the piece, and what goals for writing are planned for the future. An example is shown in Figure 3. The recording sheet used for conferencing (see Figure 2) can also be used when assessing student portfolios. This recording sheet can be kept in each student's portfolio.

At the end of the year, each student and I will collaborate to select pieces for a showcase portfolio that will represent writing activity and growth for the school year. Each piece will be labeled to show the reason for selection. This collection of writing exhibits will be passed on to the teacher in the upcoming year. The rest of the exhibits in the working portfolios will be bound with a cover and a spiral binding and sent home.

Figure 3

Label of Writing Exhibit in Portfolio

```
Name:                        Date:


Why I Chose This Piece:



What I Learned:



My Future Goals:


```

## Summary

I am looking forward to implementing these qualitative
assessment measures in my writing program for grade three. I
believe I have this assessment program well organized so I can
observe, document, and analyze students' writing in authentic
situations in which students are engaged in the writing process
to create meaning. From these qualitative assessments, I can
collaborate with students to nurture their self-reflections
concerning their progress and instructional needs. Then, we can
set goals, plan instruction, determine progress, and assess areas
of need. As a result, a close connection between instruction and
assessment can be achieved.

## References

Anthony, R., Johnson, T., Mickelson, N., & Preece, A. (1991). Evaluating literacy: A perspective for change. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Atwell, N. (1986). Making the grade: Evaluating writing in conference. In T. Newkirk & N. Atwell (Eds.), Understanding writing. (pp. 137-140). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Barclay, K., & Breheny, C. (1994). Hey, look me over! Assess, evaluate, and conference with confidence. Childhood Education, 70, 215-220.

Bergen, D. (1993/94). Authentic performance assessments. Childhood Education, 70, 99-102.

Calkins, L. (1983). Lessons from a child. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Field, J. (1992). Making judgments, making decisions: The agony and ecstasy of assessment in the elementary school. In C. J. Gordon, G. D. Labercane, & W. R. McEachern (Eds.), Elementary reading: Process and practice (pp. 310-318). Needham Heights, MA: Ginn.

Graves, D. (1994). A fresh look at writing. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hansen, J. (1987). When writers read. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Harp, B. (1994). Assessment and evaluation. 2nd ed. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Johnston, P. (1987). Teachers as evaluation experts. The Reading Teacher, 40, 744-748.

Jongsma, K. S. (1989). Portfolio assessment. The Reading Teacher, 43, 264-265.

Kennedy, C., & Gareau, M. (1992). Early literacy: Instruction and assessment. In C. J. Gordon, G. D. Labercane, & W. R. McEachern (Eds.), Elementary reading: Process and practice (pp. 100-110). Needham Heights, MA: Ginn.

Linek, W. M. (1991). Grading and evaluation techniques for whole language teachers. Language Arts, 68, 125-132.

Lowrey, E. P., Armengol, R., Baxley, L. B., Redmond, K. C., Cronin, S., Cooper, A. D., Irwin, P., McGunnigle, J., Pardini, T., & Kurtz, N. (1995). Teachers' choices in classroom assessment. The Reading Teacher, 48, 622-624.

Routman, R. (1991). Invitations. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Stone, S. (1995). Portfolios: Interactive and dynamic instructional tool. Childhood Education, 71, 232-234.

Tierney, R., Carter, M., & Desai, L. (1991). Portfolio assessment in the reading-writing classroom. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Valencia, S. (1990). A portfolio approach to classroom reading assessment: The whys, whats, and hows. <u>The Reading Teacher, 43,</u> 338-340.

Winograd, P. (1994). Developing alternative assessments: Six problems worth solving. <u>The Reading Teacher, 47,</u> 420-423.