

Communicating with Parents and the Public

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Nothing in the preceding discussion should be taken to mean that assessment of learning is not an important aspect of teaching and learning. The uncommonsense approach to assessment has several significant differences, however, which can be briefly sketched. Among the most important is that uncommonsense assessment is based on positive achievement rather than on deficiency identification. Uncommonsense assessment is, further, individual, holistic, and cumulative, and although it is criterion rather than norm referenced, the criteria used must be based on explicitly negotiated standards.

The importance of the last point that the criteria must be understood by all concerned—students and parents as well as teachers and administrators—can't be overstressed.

—John S. Mayher, *Uncommon Sense* 261

Introduction and Aims

In any attempt to change the way in which students' writing is assessed, the importance of discussion and negotiation among teachers, students, administrators, and parents cannot, as Mayher stresses, be overemphasized. Not only must everyone understand the criteria, everyone must understand and accept the principles on which the proposed assessment system is based. One goal of alternative means of assessment, too, is to give students, parents, and administrators more information about students' writing abilities and to involve them more in the process of assessing and encouraging those abilities.

In this workshop, participants (teachers, parents, administrators, students) will discuss applications of the strategies to their particular situations.

Discussion Topics

- A useful opening activity is to discuss the four sample student reports presented in Figures 1–4. Distribute photocopies of these figures to your group and explain that if the students' writing had been assessed by means of a grading system, each of these students would have received a B.
 1. Have each participant write a description of each of these students on the basis of what can be inferred from the report card.
 2. In groups of three, discuss your descriptions: How similar are they? Why? How do they differ?
 3. Discuss the results of your discussion with the whole group. What did you learn from each of the different reporting methods? What *didn't* you learn?
- Have group members reminisce about grades in their school careers. Was grading a pleasant or an unpleasant experience? Did it lead to improved learning? Compare notes on the range of experiences reported by the group members; typically, you'll have some people (often high achievers) who think grading was helpful and some who report a range of bad experiences, even traumatic ones, that resulted from negative grades.
- Ask the group to discuss the function of reporting. What do parents want to learn from it? What should students learn from it? In what ways do grades interfere with communicating the kinds of information both groups want to acquire?

Activities

- Involve the workshop group in the process of planning a new assessment system. Discuss the goals of writing assessment and evaluate the ability of various assessment systems to meet these goals (see the summary chart in the introduction to this volume). Discuss the effects of the systems on students' learning and on teaching practices. Discuss, too, the resources needed to implement the various systems.
- Integrate student writing and community and school activities. The more parents and the public see and use the writing students do, the more they appreciate and understand students' writing abilities. And, of course, writing for the community is also quite rewarding for students. Interdisciplinary projects—such as an adopt-a-stream project that involves students in cleanup, pollution research, writing a newsletter, or producing a video—integrate learning and skills development and produce results beneficial to the community.

Report			
Name: Joe Kelley			
Writing			
	Low	Average	High
Focus			x
Organization			x
Clarity		x	
Grammar	x		
Spelling	x		

Figure 1. Joe Kelley's report.

REPORT						
Name: Eric Young						
Writing						
	Not a priority					Strength
	1	2	3	4	5	
Has creative ideas			x			
Analyzes ideas		x				
Connects ideas to make a point			x			
Uses information	x					
Uses personal experience						x
Uses descriptive detail		x				
Experiments			x			
Organizes				x		
Expresses opinions				x		
Writes clear sentences						x

Figure 2. Eric Young's report.

- Ask students to write progress reports and the parents to respond. Instead of one-way communication—from teachers to students and parents in teacher-written progress reports—this strategy encourages students and parents to think about what the students are learning about writing and what they need to learn. It also helps teachers.
- Revise report cards. Different educational situations need different reporting methods. Together, students, teachers, par-

Report

Name: Jody West

Jody is anxious about her writing—she says it doesn't "sound right"—and she works hard at it. She is eager to receive feedback from the instructor and classmates (she solicits feedback from her friends too), and she puts the advice she receives to good use. She is also able to decide for herself what she needs to do in her writing. She shows a great deal of initiative not only in attacking the process of writing but also in finding information about her topic (she decided to interview friends about how they felt about educational technology and to interview a counselor at counseling services about tips for dealing with stress in college). She is willing to express her own opinions and to listen to the opinions of others. She organizes her papers in a straightforward fashion and her ideas are clear and make sense.

Figure 3. Jody West's report.

Report

Name: Fred Carney

Writing

Student's report: I like writing and I want to be a good writer. I have a hard time staying interested in the ideas I write about, though, maybe I'm, just not smart enough.

Teacher's report: Fred poses interesting questions in his writing and writes with a great deal of passion about personal experience. He does not like to revise his writing.

Teachers aide's response: Fred is an enthusiastic participant in class discussion and does a good job of facilitating the work of his group.

Figure 4. Fred Carney's report.

ents, administrators, and the public at large need to think about what methods of reporting might work best in their situation.

Follow-up

- Once an alternative system of assessment is in place, writing teachers and their students need to continue to communicate to the public about how the system is working, what goals it achieves, and how it affects their classroom work. They should report to school boards/boards of control and the media on their assessment system. They should also write letters to administrators and local newspapers. And they

should give presentations to administrators as well as on local television and radio programs to keep everyone up-to-date on the reasons for and achievements of their assessment system and to remind them of the principles that underlie the development of writing abilities.

Work Cited

Mayher, John S. *Uncommon Sense: Theoretical Practice in Language Education*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1990.