NAEP/NWP Study Shows Link Between Assignments, Better Student Writing

BY ART PETERSON

With the current national emphasis on testing, students in American schools are feeling daily pressure to come up with the right answers. But a recently completed study conducted by the Educational Testing Service in collaboration with the National Writing Project suggests that the quality of a student's answer has a lot to do with the quality of the question.

NWP's involvement with this eye-opening study began when the Writing Assessment Committee of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) recommended a special study of student writing collected outside the regular NAEP administration. This special study was designed to look at questions central to large-scale writing assessment: How might student writing collected in a natural setting of day-in, day-out classroom work contrast with writing done on the timed tests that are the established NAEP

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By contrast, a weaker assignment might ask students to read a story and describe one of the characters. In this case, students are probably not working with the information; they are merely locating and restating it.

**Organization and Development**

The researchers found that the best student writing occurs when assignments provide guidelines for how to structure ideas and writing with an appropriate level of scaffolding. Many common assignments do not provide this structure. Researchers looked at writing produced by a typical fourth grade assignment—Describe your bedroom, use specific details—and found the assignment did not provide a framework or guidelines for selecting which aspects of their bedroom students should write about.

The team suggested a way this assignment could be strengthened:

Describe your bedroom for a classmate who hasn’t seen it. Your description should include enough detail so that when a classmate reads it s/he will be able to tell what you like, what your interests are, and what’s important to you. In fact, from reading the description, classmates should be able to identify you as the resident of that room. Descriptions will be posted for your classmates to read.

This revision of the assignment provides clearer guidelines for selecting details that focus the assignment (“what’s important to you”) as well as identifying an audience (“a classmate”) for the writing. (See below.)

Another example: The common assignment, “Write a descriptive essay about a favorite place,” gives no direction. The assignment is more likely to yield quality writing when it becomes more directive and complex: “Write a descriptive essay about a favorite place using the five senses.” This assignment worked for a particular teacher, but the researchers realized that no writing assignment can be evaluated in isolation, that support activities such as mini-lessons and prewriting activities play a role in its success or failure. This assignment generated strong writing in part because the teacher used it as a basis for a unit on descriptive sensory words.

**Audience and Communication**

The better assignments asked students to write to an authentic audience in a genuine act of communication. When the audience is not real and the communication not authentic, the writing is often weak. For instance, a typical eighth grade process paper asks students to write to the teacher explaining how to open a school locker. But the writer knows that the teacher—as well as everyone else in the school—already knows how to open a locker. The writing is a mere exercise.

In its report, the team suggests another approach to a process paper. Ask students to identify an area of expertise (say tying fishing flies or collecting baseball cards) not shared by the reader and explain to that audience something about the activity using the writer’s unique information or individual perspective.

**Engagement and Choice**

The researchers found that students wrote best when assignments gave them the opportunity to become engaged. Engagement was most likely to occur when writers had a choice over features of their work such as topic, format (whether to write a letter or an essay, for instance), and audience. In one successful fourth grade assignment, students were asked to “Write an article giving tips on how to stay healthy, using facts from articles read in class.” The students had read many articles that included information for many potential tips. The assignment offered choice about which hints to include. This choice seemed to contribute to the high degree of engagement found in the students’ writing.

Of course, these characteristics of strong assignments can not be seen in isolation; they are interconnected. Consider this successful fourth grade assignment: “Interview an older person at home and write the results of the interview in paragraphs. Include facts about the person’s childhood, young adulthood, and mature adulthood. Include a description of what a typical day would be for this person at each of the three stages of life and how the interviewees had fun.”

This assignment worked because it allowed students several opportunities for success. They were able to choose a subject to interview and reflect on and transform the information they had collected during the interview, but they...
were helped by being given a way to focus and structure the information (the attention to three life stages and the focus on a typical day at each stage.) The problem of audience is solved because, regardless of who reads the piece, the writer is conveying information the reader does not know. Here all the ingredients of a successful assignment come together.

As one might expect, the writing project teachers involved in this work grew professionally as a result of the experience. One of the participants, Kathy Mitani, a teacher at the Bay Area’s Albany Middle School, describes an epiphany that resulted from her involvement with this research:

“For many semesters, I had an assignment that asked students to look at the U.S. history book we were using, specifically, at the way it treated Christopher Columbus. I supplemented this material with material from other sources that presented Columbus in a more jaded light than he was depicted in our text. The students realized they were not getting the whole story from the text, and they would then write the publisher, the school board, or others who they thought could do something about it, lobbying for a more balanced treatment of Columbus.”

Every year, until last year, says Mitani, this assignment resulted in excellent letters. But last year the letters were “dismal.” Because of her involvement with the NAEP study, Mitani says, she was more aware than she would otherwise have been about the reason for the limp writing. It turns out that at the very moment the students were writing the letters, a new set of texts was being processed in Mitani’s room, one that presented a less airbrushed view of Columbus and his travels in the New World. Because many students had attended Back to School Night with their parents where the new text had been described, students were generally aware of the text’s content.

Applying the principles of effective writing assignments with which she had been working, Mitani understood what had gone wrong. “It struck me that the credibility was no longer there. The problem had gone away.”

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl says that while the TCs involved in this project benefited immensely from the chance this work gave them to reflect on their classroom practice, and while TCs and other writing teachers will be able to make immediate application from these findings, the team’s work also exposed a new set of challenges for the National Writing Project.

“It was good to have a window into a more generalized body of classrooms,” says Eidman-Aadahl. “We are often used to working within the writing project network where learning to write and writing to learn are central to everything that happens. Here we were working with a randomly selected sample of classrooms from across the country. It’s fair to say that students in many of these classrooms were not being asked to do a lot of writing.”

Further, Eidman-Aadahl points out, “Teacher interviews suggested that many teachers had had little or no staff development in the teaching of writing, yet they were being held to standards that required writing for assessment.”

“These interviews put a different spin on the several surveys and studies that have suggested that most U.S. teachers have adopted something they call a process approach to writing,” Eidman-Aadahl explained. While it was true that many of the teachers surveyed in the study had been introduced to the language of a process approach to writing and used that language to describe their classrooms, the process language masked significant differences in activities, practices, or values in the classroom. For instance, according to Eidman-Aadahl, “Many teachers in the study report working with revision and response groups. But when you look at how teachers and students actually describe the response groups, or when you look at the student work, you see that the work of these groups is often limited to editing and correcting mechanics with no attention given to communicating with an audience or possibilities for revision. So what does it mean to say, for example, that my students are meeting in response groups?”

“The teachers in this study were facing enormous pressures but with little support and not many opportunities for professional development,” says Eidman-Aadahl. “I guess that means there’s still a lot of work for us all to do.”

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