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Living with Hope, Rather Than Doubt: Classroom Assessment of Adolescent Literacy Learning

by Gwynne Ellen Ash

In an interchange on the PBS show *Frontline*, Mortimer Adler (educator and philosopher) suggested to William F. Buckley that the purpose of schooling is to develop talent, not to select it. When Buckley demurred that perhaps not all children could learn, and suggested that Adler himself might not actually believe that all children could learn, Adler retorted, “No, but I don’t believe that you are sure that all kids can’t, and **I prefer to live with my hope rather than your doubt**” (Guskey, 1999, cited by Alberta Assessment Consortium, n.d.). Formative classroom assessment is a way for teachers to nurture that hope, in themselves and in their students. The recent focus on high-stakes assessments may have left teachers with the sense that literacy assessment consists of an end point that is measured outside of the classroom environment. However, research indicates that ongoing classroom assessment, which includes the students as partners in measuring progress, results in not only higher test scores, but also stronger performance in the classroom (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Classroom assessment of literacy learning: What do I want to measure?

To inform your instruction, you want to assess literacy proficiencies that affect students’ literacy performance, their ability to make meaning with text. Most research suggests that adolescent literacy performance is affected by four factors: orthographic knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, fluency, and comprehension strategy use. Each can be assessed in the classroom, and each can be assessed both by the teacher and by the students themselves.

Orthographic knowledge, which is a catch-all term for understanding how words work, encompasses word

analysis, spelling, and morphology-related vocabulary knowledge (knowing words’ meanings as a result of understanding the meaning of their component parts--roots and affixes). Orthographic knowledge affects students’ ability to read unknown words and make informed guesses about the meanings of those words. Vocabulary knowledge is multifaceted, but it includes the ability to recognize the meaning of words in context, infer the meaning of words in context, compare the meanings of similar words, and interpret the role of word choice in the author’s point of view. Vocabulary knowledge affects students’ comprehension of text and content-area learning.

Fluency is “the ability to read smoothly, easily, and readily with freedom from word recognition problems” (Harris & Hodges, 1995). Fluency includes elements of automaticity, rate, and prosody. Automaticity is the automatic and correct decoding of words, even words that are unfamiliar. Rate is the reading of the appropriate number of words per minute. Prosody, sharing the same root as prose, is the ability to read written language in a manner that emulates speech. Prosody includes elements such as expression, intonation, phrasing, pitch, and pacing. Fluency is strongly correlated with comprehension performance, and it appears that fluency is a necessary, but not sufficient, component of proficient reading.

Proficient use of comprehension strategies is what delineates most good readers from those who struggle. Good readers understand that all text poses certain difficulties. As they read, good readers monitor their comprehension, making sure that their reading is making sense; and if there is a point at which their reading does not make sense, they use a strategy or a number of strategies to help put their reading back on track.

How do I assess these elements and still have time to teach?

The assessment of the four elements can be incorporated into classroom-based instruction and its evaluation. The first step is discussing the four elements with students, explaining why the elements are important, why you want to help them develop these elements, and how you and your students might work together to assess their progress.

Knowing where your students are is essential to knowing where to begin your instruction. Educators have learned that one-size-fits-all instruction is not as efficient as it might seem. Giving ninth-grade-level spelling words to students who are reading on a third grade level might lead to memorization, but it will probably not lead to students understanding the way those spelling words work and how to apply that knowledge to similar words.

Orthography is typically assessed through spelling inventories. These brief assessments contain 20-25 words focused on particular orthographic features (such as consonant doubling, vowel alternation, or unaccented syllables). The assessments are usually administered in small groups, but they can be administered to whole classes. Students' development can be targeted, and instruction can be designed to match students' needs. Ongoing assessment takes the form of student participation in ongoing word-study activities and traditional spelling assessments. An example of spelling inventories can be found in *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004). To see an example of such an assessment, see <http://cwx.prenhall.com/bookbind/pubbooks/bear/chapter1/deluxe.html>.

Vocabulary assessment appears to be most effective when it is related to particular sets of words under study, whether they are words with related roots or words related to a particular reading. Many researchers suggest that students first be asked to evaluate their own knowledge of groups of words, so that the students can assess how much they may need to learn to understand a text or apply a root meaning to new words. Janet Allen (1999) provides many examples of vocabulary pre-assessments in her book *Words, Words, Words: Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 4-12*. The following chart, "Do I Know These Words?" is an adaptation of one of her graphic organizers.

Do I Know These Words?

Title _____

Directions: As you read each word listed below in the context of the story, you and your partner should decide if you know a meaning for the word that would fit the context. List the word, and your guess for the meaning of the word if you think or know that you know it, in the appropriate column.

I still need help finding a meaning for this word	I think I know the meaning	I know the meaning

Adapted from Allen (1999)

Teachers' assessment of students' vocabulary growth should be keyed to the purpose of instruction. Teachers should first decide how well students must learn the words for their instructional purposes, and then assess vocabulary knowledge appropriately. For example, if students are to gain a surface-level acquaintance with word meaning, more superficial assessment procedures, such as recognition, might be efficient. But if students are to develop in-depth word knowledge, production and application of the words should be required.

Fluency assessment involves measuring in two ways: a quantitative measurement of automaticity/rate, which is typically measured in words correct per minute (WCPM), and a qualitative measurement of prosody, which is usually measured with a descriptive scale. The National Assessment of Educational Progress Scale is often used for measurement of prosody. (To see the NAEP scale, as well a brief report on the fluency development of fourth graders in 1992, see <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs95/web/95762.asp>; for more recent 2002 data, see http://www.nagb.org/pubs/r_framework_05/append_b.html.) Median end-of-the-year WCPM for middle grade (6-8) students would range between 160 and 200; for high school grades, you would expect median scores between 175 and 220 WCPM.

Although you can set aside time to have each student read with you individually, assessment of fluency can take place during effective instructional activities such as timed repeated readings and peer repeated readings. Students can also be taught, very quickly, to time and assess each other, keeping daily and weekly records of their progress. For more information on alternative prosody scales and expectations for WCPM, see Tim Rasinski's (2003) *The Fluent Reader: Oral Reading Strategies for Building Word Recognition, Fluency, and Comprehension*.

Assessing strategy use is complex, as it attempts to measure not only students' proficiency at using strategies, but also their proficiency at deciding when and how to use strategies. Research suggests that students learn strategies of all types in three stages:

- **Declarative knowledge:** The stage in which they can describe the strategy and its purpose
- **Procedural knowledge:** The stage at which they can use the strategy on demand
- **Conditional knowledge:** The stage at which they can analyze a situation, determine that a strategy should be used, and select a strategy that appropriately meets their needs (Garner, 1990)

In assessing strategy use, you will want to make sure that students understand what the strategy is (declarative), can use the strategy (procedural), and can apply the strategy as is appropriate in their reading

(conditional). Declarative knowledge can be assessed through oral explanations or written descriptions; procedural knowledge might be observed or assessed through students' written reflection. Conditional knowledge can be assessed through think-alouds and other reflective interview and writing techniques. In all cases, students can be active participants in their own assessment, reflecting on their knowledge and how applying their knowledge of strategies helps or does not help their reading. Assessment of Reading Comprehension Using a Reading Interview (see http://www.ohiorc.org/adlit/in_perspective_content/0,6479,143_146,00.shtm) is a protocol for a reading comprehension interview assessment, developed by a colleague of mine when I was at the University of Delaware. For more information on assessment of comprehension strategies, as well as self-reflection frameworks, see *Guided Comprehension* (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002). For an example of McLaughlin and Allen's lessons and students' reflections, see http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=226 and http://www.readwritethink.org/lesson_images/lesson226/self.pdf.

Students and teachers as partners

Good classroom assessment informs both the teacher and the students, and it involves both the teacher and the students (Black & Wiliam, 1998; IRA, 1999; NCTE, 2004; Sadler, 1989). As has been noted above, students provide not only the work that is assessed, but their input, self-assessment, and reflection, which can be key in helping shape their instruction. Likewise, reviews of the research seem to indicate that students who are involved in the assessment process are more likely to be engaged in their learning and interested in improving their proficiency (Black & Wiliam, 1998). A perfect example of this motivating effect can be seen in students who are monitoring and charting their own fluency development. I have encountered scores of struggling readers highly engaged in repeated reading activities precisely because they were charting their WCPM and they could see that their word counts were increasing. The charts of repeated reading provide specific feedback to the students, and that feedback demonstrates their growth clearly. Letting students in on their assessment information works in similar ways in other aspects of reading as well. Assessment should not be hidden from

students; rather they should understand where they are--and thus where they are going.

Moreover, for teachers to gather all this information on their students, but then to continue to teach as they had planned to all along, obliterates the meaning in the assessment. Teachers need to take what they have learned from student learning (or lack thereof!) and use that information to guide their planning. Black and Wiliam argue that this is the hardest part of using classroom instruction effectively. If, for example, 80 percent of the students in your class indicate that they do not have declarative knowledge of drawing inferences, you should use that information to design further instruction on what an inference is and how a student might draw one, rather than continuing on with your scheduled lesson that asked the students to apply their declarative knowledge and draw inferences in a text. Similarly, if 90 percent of your students correctly self-assess that they know the meaning of key vocabulary words in an upcoming chapter, it would be unwise to spend a full day teaching the class the meaning of those words. The International Reading Association (2002) has concluded, after a review of research, that focusing instruction on adolescent students' needs is key to supporting their ongoing literacy development; assessment is necessary to pinpoint those needs and to begin to design more effective instruction.

Assessment stress: Remembering your purpose

Classroom assessment of literacy learning can be stressful (Johnston, Guice, Baker, Malone, & Michaelson, 1995). It involves reflection on your own teaching (If the students didn't understand, how much of that was due to the way I taught it?), concern for student growth (What will happen if my students have difficulty understanding this?), and worry about how others might perceive you and your teaching (Only Class 6b didn't meet expectations for fluency growth?). And that's just the teachers! Initial assessments should guide your focus for ongoing assessment. Is fluency development a dire need for your students? You won't know until you've conducted an assessment, and only by viewing classroom profiles can you evaluate the importance of ongoing fluency assessment and instruction in your classroom. What you can rely on is the knowledge that your focus on improving student growth and strengthening your own instruction by fitting it to student

growth will serve to keep the hope alive that all children can learn.

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“Will This Be on the Test?!” Literacy and Assessment in High School English

by Colleen Ruggieri

While we educators are in the driving seat when it comes to assigning grades to our students, we are often better teachers when we remember what it feels like to be on the other side of the desk. Think about a time in your life as a student in which you were preparing for a big exam. Perhaps it was way back in high school. Maybe it was during your undergraduate years. Or possibly it was while you were pursuing your master's degree. You took notes, read and reread the sections that would be covered on the test--and yet you still had anxiety about it. You might have been nervous because you weren't confident about your skill levels. It's highly likely that at least part of that anxiety stemmed from your lack of comprehension of the material. Most of us are not mind readers, and we spend a great deal of time wondering what will "be covered." In the end, this leads to that universal question that just about everyone has asked during his or her learning experiences: "Will this be on the test?"

As teachers, we cringe when we hear this question. We want our students to yearn to learn--to have undying enthusiasm for our subject matter. Furthermore, we feel as if we've had a successful day in the classroom when our students were "into it." In the end, though, we are one stop on the daily train for our students, and many of them want straightforward answers when it comes to driving their own learning. As a novice teacher, I believed that I was being dedicated and conscientious when I designed a new test at the end of every unit. I realized that not all parameters would remain constant each time I taught a unit of instruction; therefore, I believed that I was doing the right thing when I waited until I had finished the unit to design a new exam. After 10 years of teaching and a stint at the Ohio Department of Education, I finally decided that I had it all wrong. Assessment, I concluded, should not be the one test for which I held the key. Rather, authentic evaluations of my students' learning should come in a variety of forms throughout the learning process.

All of this is especially important when it comes to adolescent literacy. High school instructors face a variety of students each day: the enthusiastic hand-raising teacher pleaser, the quiet listener, the class clown, and the poor soul who seems to be lost in space. We tend to be content-driven experts, striving to expose our learners to solid curricula featuring the cornerstones of American, British, and world literature. We might know how to assess student knowledge of a Shakespearean play or of a great American novel--but how are we to assess student literacy? After all, most of us do not consider ourselves reading teachers. In light of this, we face an incredibly challenging dilemma: How do we know if our students are truly comprehending and making meaning of the material we are teaching or if they are merely memorizing and regurgitating empty facts? The answer to this question lies in the implementation of several strategies. Literacy experts Vacca and Vacca (2002, p. 71) note that using different tools (such as tests, observations, checklists, interviews, inventories, writing folders, and conferences) will ultimately make assessment more valid. Indeed, there are endless possibilities for assessing student understanding. The question is, though, where do we start?

Positive Results with Pre-Assessment

The beginning of authentic assessment actually occurs in a different place from where we might imagine. For many years, I reviewed literary terms with my sophomore students during the first week of school. While I did this, something I did not take into consideration was that many of my students already had a firm grasp on this part of my curriculum--which overlapped with the freshman curriculum. After reflecting on authentic assessment and conferring with other master teachers, I changed the way I start the school year. My new approach for presenting material in each unit is to first assess students' prior knowledge. I do this in several ways, based on what will be taught in the upcoming lesson.

K-W-L-R Charts

In *Tools for Teaching Content Literacy* (2004), Janet Allen provides helpful strategies in flip-chart form for assessing each phase of literacy. One particularly helpful strategy, regularly used by elementary teachers, is the instructional chart known as K-W-L. After constructing

a basic table on chart paper, I use this strategy when beginning my unit on the Puritans. I give each of my students a jumbo Crayola marker, and everyone makes a comment in the first two columns of the chart prior to any literature lessons. Once the class has completed the first phase of the chart, students discuss what they know as a group and what they want to know about Puritan literature. After students have read the literature, they reexamine the prereading comments on the K-W-L chart (Figure 1), completing the third column with information they've learned. In addition, I add an "R" column to the chart--for research. Upon completion of the reading assignments, my students then proceed to a nonfiction research assignment to extend their comprehension and overall knowledge.

Figure 1: Sample block from a K-W-L-R chart

What I know	What I want to know
<p>Puritans left England</p> <p>Puritans were strict and very religious</p>	<p>Why aren't we all Puritans today?</p> <p>Did everyone believe in such strict rules?</p>
What I've learned	What I will research to learn more
<p>Society was more like a theocracy--the Bible was the law!</p> <p>Most of the writing was in the form of prayers, sermons, diaries--and some poetry</p>	<p>What impacts did the Puritans have on early America that still impact us today?</p> <p>(i.e., allusion to the "city on a Hill")</p>

Anticipation Guides

When preparing to teach a unit, I've also incorporated the use of anticipation guides (Figure 2) into my lesson plans. These guides enable me to activate my students' prior knowledge and to determine their opinions on certain ideas. Burke (2000, p. 198) notes that such a guide "inspires lively discussions" as students compare their own ideas with those of their classmates. While preparing to teach *The Scarlet Letter* (1986/1850), an anticipation guide enabled me to determine student attitudes toward public punishment, discover which vocabulary words would need additional instruction, and decide which types of assignments might best be used during the study of the novel.

Figure 2: Anticipation guide for *The Scarlet Letter*:

Directions: Rate each statement according to the Strongly Agree/Strongly Disagree continuum and explain your choice on a separate piece of paper. In your group, discuss each statement; your group must reach consensus on your rating. Finally, ask at least one adult (who is not in high school) to rate these items and share his/her reasons with you. These comments will be shared in class discussion, along with your group's ratings for each item.

1) Making a shoplifter carry a sign in front of the mall that reads "I STOLE FROM KAUFMANN'S" would be a good punishment and deterrent for future crimes.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Depends Agree Strongly Agree

2) If a person did something harmful to me, seeking revenge would bring satisfaction.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Depends Agree Strongly Agree

3) Keeping a secret can cause more mental grief than "coming clean" and telling the truth.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Depends Agree Strongly Agree

4) If a convicted sex offender is moving to a new area, all neighbors should be notified about the offender's presence and previous crimes.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Depends Agree Strongly Agree

5) In an effort to combat cheating, the high school staff has decided to post a list of all students who have been caught in acts of academic dishonesty. This list would be distributed to the National Honor Society Selection Committee. This will ultimately be a fair way to address the problem and to make more students think twice before cheating.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Depends Agree Strongly Agree

Making Meaning by Marking the Text

After I have determined my students' levels of prior knowledge, I typically revisit my lesson plans and adjust them accordingly. For example, if my students lack complete background understanding of Puritan life in early colonial America, I teach a brief mini-unit to develop a context for the upcoming lessons. When assigning text, however, I now make students share in the accountability of their learning. In the past, I tended to read assigned selections with my classes, going over every intricate detail and pointing out every literary device. Of course, this was driven by my self-imposed pressure to "cover all the material"; sadly, what it amounted to was a glorified form of spoon-feeding that did not empower my students to develop stronger analysis and comprehension skills. To combat this mad dash to cover information (which does not foster student accountability), I've added a new item on my list of school supplies--sticky notes. While students are reading their assignments, I give them specific instructions for assessing their own levels of comprehension. Using advice from Cris Tovani's *I Read It, but I Don't Get It* (2000, p. 29), I have students use different-colored notes with codes: "BK" for background knowledge, "I" for inference or conclusion, and "?" for something that is not understood. I remind my students that when responding with solid literary analysis skills, they should be able to use text-based evidence. When I start a class discussion, I first address the questions that students have marked in their texts. What is significant about this strategy is that it forces students to stop and think about what they are not processing, rather than merely skipping past a section without comprehending what is on the page. In addition, it enables them to appreciate the connection between current curriculum and what they learned in the past--thus solidifying the significance of schema and moving along the continuum of knowledge. Finally, it allows students to become more organized when reflecting on a text. When students come to class upon completion of a reading assignment, they truly feel more prepared to contribute to discussion and to ask questions about material they didn't understand (as opposed to closing their books and announcing, "I didn't get it" or faking it and offering generic answers).

Double-Entry Diaries

Another strategy that empowers students with an ongoing assessment tool is the use of double-entry diaries.

Tovani (2000, p. 30) recommends a modification of the Cornell style of note taking, and the process is relatively easy for students to implement while completing reading assignments. Students should fold a sheet of notebook paper lengthwise ("hotdog" style) and use the left side of the paper to jot down key passages, phrases, or words. On the right side of the sheet, learners should note their critical thinking and inferences about the text material they've noted on the opposite side. Teachers may provide specific prompts for the right side of the sheet (Figure 3) if they feel that students will need more structure and direction.

Figure 3: A sample of a double-entry diary for *The Scarlet Letter*

Quotation/Text and Page Number:	Possible Responses:
<p>"A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments, and gray steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes" (p. 45).</p>	<p>I wonder what the words throng and edifice mean...From context, I think throng must mean some kind of group--and I think an edifice might be a building, since the chapter title is "The Prison Door."</p> <p>If I drew this, I would use lots of dark, gothic colors to depict those nasty, serious Puritans.</p> <p>This reminds me of a scene in Harry Potter!</p>
<p>"In her late singular interview with Mr. Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne was shocked at the condition to which she found the clergyman reduced. His nerve seemed absolutely destroyed. His moral force was abased into more than childish weakness" (p. 146).</p>	<p>This is relevant because Hawthorne wants us to see how sick Dimmesdale is getting from his guilty conscience.</p> <p>I wonder why he didn't just say something like "Dimmesdale was on the edge of a nervous breakdown" instead of using that stiff language.</p>

From Study Guides to Comprehension Construction

Once students have learned to mark text and to develop their own double-entry diaries, I then move on and begin to use study guides that specifically require comprehension strategies (Tovani, 2000, p. 32). These guides can be created for any work that is being taught--from nonfiction to novels. First, I create a question or two that requires students to activate prior knowledge (Figure 4). The initial schema-directed questions make students connect with the reading, and such questions enable readers to feel a sense of purpose as they journey through their thoughts. Next, I tell them to read the chapter, the paragraph, the poem--whatever chunk of print I have assigned that day. As students are reading, I ask them to write at least five questions about the passage--using sticky notes (if the book is a school copy) or using the margin (if they have their own copies). After completing their personal questions, I then guide students to write a paragraph of response (a free-style response that is not necessarily based on rubrics, etc.). Finally, I have students select at least two of their questions and try to determine where the answers might be found. These handouts are really quite basic from the teacher perspective, as they are geared more toward student discovery, rather than asking students to skim and scan a text for "the answers." Upon completion of these guides, I am much more equipped to determine my students' comprehension levels. In-class discussion is richer because students have individually prepared--and they have already attempted to figure out trouble spots for which they need help or more resources. In addition, using these comprehension constructors makes students realize the purpose of their assignment--learning how to monitor their comprehension and analysis skills, rather than perceiving the questions as busy work that can be readily copied in the hallway before class.

Figure 4: A Study Guide & Comprehension Constructor

The Scarlet Letter: "The Leech" (Chapter 9)

- 1)** Think about a time in your life when you wanted revenge. What sorts of feelings did you have that could be associated with that motive? Were they dark? Destructive? Stressful? Explain!
- 2)** Consider the impact of a guilty conscience--what impact can this have on your mind? Your health?
- 3)** Read the chapter.
- 4)** Using your Post-it Notes, write at least five questions that come to you as you are reading.
- 5)** Write a paragraph response to this chapter.
- 6)** Review your questions and select three of them. Think about where you might best find the answers to these items.
- 7)** Be prepared to discuss your ideas in class tomorrow!

As a creative extension to reading and to developing comprehension strategies, another form of assessment can be obtained by assigning a RAFT (role-audience-format-topic) writing assignment (Allen, 2004). This type of response features four components: the role of the writer, the audience for writing, the format the writing will take, and the topic covered in the writing. When preparing for a RAFT assignment, which my students generally enjoy, I brainstorm lists with my classes (Figure 5).

Figure 5: RAFT assignment for *The Scarlet Letter*

Role	Audience	Format	Topic
Doctors	Puritans	Medical Release	Dimmedale's Death
Dimmesdale	Himself	Diary/Journal	Guilty Conscience
Minister	Congregation	Sermon	Learning from Hester
Hester's Mom	Hester	Letter	Suffering and Strength
Musician	Puritan Village	Poem/Song	Judging Others

In the past, if I asked my students to tell me how they knew when they really learned something, they would have probably responded with answers such as “when I get a good grade on the test.” Today, some of my students would still say the same thing, but I also often receive very different answers (Figure 6) to this question. I attribute the reason for these very different answers to my realization that I must do more than teach content matter--I must empower the teenagers in my classroom with strategies that they will use long after they’ve closed the book on Hawthorne. In conveying this sentiment to my students, I’ve shifted the responsibility of learning back to them.

Figure 6: Some student responses to “How do you know when you have really learned something?”

Alyssa	I know I have learned if I can apply something to my life and use it in the future.
Tai	If I can explain what I have learned to someone else, then I know that I understand the lesson.
Nicole	If I can answer questions about a text, and visualize things in my head, then I know that I get it.
Barrett	I know I learned it if I am just talking to someone and something I learned in English class just pops into the conversation without thinking about it.
Anthony	When I can think of something I learned a while ago and still understand its importance, then I know I learned it. When I memorize something to get a good grade on a test, I forget it in 2-3 days.

Ongoing assessment is truly essential in the high school English classroom, and it must span beyond knowing content-based information. From assessing prior knowledge to monitoring comprehension during reading, we can all help our students to realize the tremendous importance of reading--thus authentically preparing them for the real world.

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Ensuring Success: Daily Short-Cycle Assessments

by Darla Wagner, Joe Paris, Judy Mikita, Jay Falls, and Pat Tallman

Too often, as teachers, we become frustrated at having spent weeks of study only to give an exam and find that many of the students have not learned the material, strategy, or information. We consider the amount of teaching time that we have "wasted." The real concern, however, is the amount of student learning time that has been wasted. We are well aware that the number of standards to be met in any content area does not exactly match a nine-month school-year time frame. It is more important than ever that we know where each of our students is in the process of understanding new concepts on a daily basis. Formative short-cycle assessments are imperative to the learning process.

Are students aware of the daily learning goal?

In our classrooms, we make a daily habit of writing the target objective on the board so that students are aware of where we are headed with the lesson. Using one of the state language arts grade-level indicators as the daily target goal enables us to also introduce some of the language of the indicators, as well as the assessments, to our students. In their Daily Learning Logs, students copy the daily target objective prior to taking notes or completing short classroom activities, which also get recorded on that date in the learning log.

"I think that writing down the daily objective is helpful because it helps me to try to use the concepts or skills throughout the class. It also helps me understand how the activity or assignment we are working on relates to the assessment." [a student in grade 7]

Daily Learning Logs. Students use a composition book divided into three sections. Section I contains any literary terms that we cover. Section II contains a daily dated entry consisting of the target goal, notes and information, and some daily class activities. Section III provides students with a place to document the title, author, and

parent signature for each independent reading book that they complete.

"When I walk out of class everyday, I can feel confident that I am learning. When I get my report card at the end of the grading period is not when I find out that I am learning. My learning is all around me. I look on the board and see our objective. I review my composition learning log to see what I should know how to do. I clearly know what I am learning, and it gives me confidence." [a student in grade 7]

"I Can" Statements. Students receive a list of standards to be learned for any given unit of study. Grade-level indicators are written in "I can" statement format (i.e., "I can explain how interactions of specific characters impact the plot of the story"). Because the language arts standards are strategy-based, the list of "I can" statements serves as an agenda for the unit and provides parents with the types of strategies that will be assessed at the end of the unit.

Do students understand the connection between the class activities and assignments and the learning goal?

In connection to measuring students' understanding of expectations, we have become more explicit in our explanations of how activities and assignments fit into our curriculum. We often introduce assignments by explaining to students what the activity should help them develop. As an example, when we assign a vocabulary list for which students are to determine meaning from context, we explain to students that the important skill to develop is the ability to determine the meaning of a word by the way in which it is used. After students develop their own meaning of the word from the way it is used, they must work collaboratively in small groups to come to a consensus about its meaning. It is essential during this discussion that students be guided to talk about the process they used in coming to a group decision.

When students leave the room, how do we know which ones "got it"?

In order to meet the needs of all students through differentiated instruction, teachers must implement, on a daily basis, ways to find out where each student is in his or

her understanding of the strategy or concept. Exit slips and checklists are both helpful in determining this.

Exit Slips. Exit slips or note cards are a quick way to check on student understanding of the strategy learned that day. The exit slip strategy works this way: As students are about to leave the class (5-7 minutes remaining), we ask them a question (put on the board) that deals with the most important idea of the day. They write their answer on note cards (3 x 5) and hand them to us as they exit the room. Quickly we sort them into three piles (Gets it, Kind of gets it, Doesn't get it). Anyone who falls into the Doesn't-get-it category receives intervention, usually at the beginning of class the next day. If students repeatedly fall into this category, they must come in early for help; or sometimes they are pulled from study hall and placed into general support where they have the opportunity to work one-on-one with a classroom teacher. Students can also use a space in the learning logs to jot down a quick response to or reflection on the daily lesson. The key here is to keep the assessment short, concise, and easy to manage.

Checklists. Checklists that follow a given assignment and encourage reflection are helpful in getting students to recognize what they can do to improve their learning. We type up checklists that ask the students to evaluate their writing process strategies. The students receive their checklists when their essays are passed back, prior to receiving their rubrics that contain their grades. Statements like "I knew I needed five paragraphs" or "I knew this was a letter so I needed a salutation" are types of checklist items we include. The students fill their checklists out. Then they have a conference with the teacher. Next they reread their essay and grade themselves based on the previous activities. After they receive their rubric with their grade, they compare their grade to what they anticipated they would receive based on the checklist and conference. This helps them be aware of what they need to include in each essay and helps them understand why they received the grade they did. In essence, this type of formative assessment forces students to think about the work they have done and to identify what they can do in the future to ensure improvement.

A brief summary

Short-cycle assessments--daily knowledge of student understanding--are essential to the learning process of

all students. Gone is the day of neatly prepared units of study and lessons that can be pulled from the drawer and used over and over again. Gone is the day of asking students questions about the minute details of a novel. Strategy-based standards have nudged (or shoved) us into truly educating kids for the future by making sure that they can apply the knowledge to other situations, activities, or texts.

We all teach at Solon Middle School. We all are full-time classroom teachers of seventh grade language arts, with the exception of Pat Tallman, who is a full-time interventionist for students with special needs. However, as the article shows, Pat is as much of a regular classroom teacher as we are.

Darla Wagner is in her thirteenth year of teaching. Last year she won OCTELA's teacher of the year award for middle school language arts. She also is one of the coordinators for the Northeast Ohio Writing Project (NOWP) at Kent State University. This program works with teachers of writing.

Joe Paris, a teacher consultant for NOWP, is in his fifth year of teaching.

Judy Mikita has taught in Solon for 25 years.

Jay Falls, a veteran of the Vietnam War, began his teaching career in Ravenna (Ohio), where he taught for three years before going to Brazil to teach. He has taught in Solon for the last 15 years. He is also a teacher consultant for NOWP.

Pat Tallman has taught in Solon for 20 years.

Improving Students' Writing

by Carol Brown Dodson

In this column, over the past few months, we have analyzed components of the reading and writing Ohio Graduation Test. We have shared strategies for improving reading and writing and have included ORC resources for teaching the strategies.

Ohio tenth-grade students have now taken the OGT, and so it's time to push the specifics of test preparation to the background and bring the overall teaching of writing to the forefront. This month the column features specific ways to improve the teaching of writing and highlights resources that support each technique. For a review of the Ohio standards for written composition, read last month's column in the archives of *Adolescent Literacy In Perspective*.

Writing Suggestions

Writing Tip 1: Write frequently

You don't have to grade all their writing, but students do need feedback if their writing is to improve. Feedback can be provided by peers during writers' workshop or in other revising and editing groups, by the teacher in teacher-student conferences, or through comments on drafts in the portfolio. Responding to students' early drafts is often more important than responding to their final drafts because writers still have the opportunity to change the early drafts. Once the writing is final and submitted for a grade or publication, changes are not likely to be made.

Choosing the Best Verb: An Active and Passive Voice Mini-lesson

http://www.ohiorc.org/ohiorc_resource_display/0,3820,3365,00.shtm

For most students, speech and informal writing flow naturally. Yet, students often struggle with formal or academic writing. This mini-lesson explores verb choice in a variety of online resources and then encourages students to draw conclusions about verb use which they can apply to their own writing. Students begin by identifying verbs

in a variety of contexts, determining whether constructions rely on active or passive voice. Following classroom discussions about verbs, students apply the strategies they have learned to their own writing by revising verb choice to match audience and purpose. (author/ncl)

Writing Tip 2: Write for many different purposes and audiences

Becoming a good writer involves much more than writing essays or other school assignments. According to the Ohio Writing Applications Standard, students should write letters, essays, and narratives. Multiple purposes may be presented for these applications--purposes that include persuading an audience, requesting information, entertaining the reader, exploring a topic, or explaining a process.

Writing for varied audiences allows students to work with word choice, tone, and voice as they produce writing intended to appeal to a specific audience. They soon learn that they must express ideas differently for a group of parents or other adults than for their peers.

Frequent writing, whether in the form of text messaging, weblog commentary, reading response, or formal writing, leads to improved writing. Christina McCarroll wrote recently in the *Christian Science Monitor* (3/11/2005), "Many experts insist that teenage composition is as strong as ever--and that the proliferation of writing, in all its harried, hasty forms, has actually created a generation more adept with the written word."

The "printing press" activity in the following lesson lets students choose from a variety of writing purposes and styles. Templates are included in the activity, and students are guided through the process for developing such varied publications as brochures, newsletters, flyers, and booklets. Although the title indicates the lesson is appropriate for middle school students, the activities and content of the lesson are aligned to Ohio Standards for grades 9-12.

Leading to Great Places in the Middle School Classroom

http://www.ohiorc.org/ohiorc_resource_display/0,3820,1360,00.shtm

The lead of a story is the beginning, and yet it can be the end if the reader is not engaged in the writing. This lesson examines examples of leads in young adult literature

such as setting, action, character, reflection, event, and dialogue in a shared reading experience. Subsequently, students are asked to generate different leads for a read-aloud book in the classroom. Finally, students complete the reading-writing connection by creating or revising a lead in one of their pieces of writing. (author/ncl)

The Electronic Messages Rubric included in the next lesson is a useful assessment tool for looking at word choice, audience awareness, and ideas in the context of the audience.

Audience, Purpose, and Language Use in Electronic Messages

http://www.ohiorc.org/ohiorc_resource_display/0,3820,2753,00.shtm

With the increasing popularity of e-mail and instant messaging among teens, a recognizable change has occurred in the language that students use in their writing. This lesson explores the language of electronic messages and how it affects academic writing and more formal communication. Students construct communications appropriate for specific scenarios. Furthermore, this lesson validates students' freedom and creativity for using Internet abbreviations for specific purposes and examines the importance of a more formal style of writing based on audience. (author/ncl)

Writing Tip 3: Read and think like a writer

Students should read daily. As they read, students should be encouraged to think about the writer, asking themselves some of the following questions:

- How does the writer organize her thoughts?
- What is the author's style?
- What words does he select to provide emphasis and create a desired tone?
- Why does the writer choose the verbs she uses?
- Why does the author select concrete nouns?
- What are some other conscious decisions the writer makes?

Make students aware that their reading can serve as a model for their own writing. The ORC resource described below asks students to read an article and look for examples of how the author tells the reader about the

person in the article by including:

- what the person says
- what others say about this person
- a description of the person's personal life
- a description of the person's professional life

Prize-Winning Profiles: Reading and Writing Profiles of Noteworthy People in the News

http://www.ohiorc.org/ohiorc_resource_display/0,3820,1410,00.shtm

In this lesson, students read an article in which a famous person is profiled. After analyzing the techniques used by the author, students research and write a profile of a well-known person. Using the news article as a model, students integrate specific writing techniques into their pieces. This lesson may be adapted to a variety of learning situations. Instructors may alter the assignment by having students write profiles of historical figures, authors, local personalities, or other noteworthy individuals. (Author/ncl)

Writing Tip 4: Write about what they know and care about

Although it's not always possible for students to choose their own topic for writing, they will likely take the most interest in their writing if they care about the topic. Students usually can make choices within the boundaries of a prompt; for example, if they are asked to write about their favorite season, they can choose not only the season but also the examples they will use and the incidents they will describe.

When students are engaged in researching a topic, they can choose a part of the overall assignment to focus on. For example, writing about the fauna and flora of New Mexico may not appeal to a student from southeastern Ohio, but researching the fauna and flora of the Ohio River Valley connects to what the student already knows from personal observations. When selecting a topic for writing, students need to be guided so that they pick a topic with which they have some background knowledge.

Writing Tip 5: Focus on eliminating one type of error at a time

Mina Shaughnessy, in *Errors and Expectations* (1977),

classified typical student errors into groups, illustrating that many errors are simply extensions of one basic error type rather than individual mistakes. For example, the student who misuses "there," "their," and "they're" isn't making a separate mistake each time the wrong form is used. Instead, the student doesn't understand the difference between the homonyms.

The same is true of errors in subject-verb agreement. A student who writes four sentences in which subject-verb agreement is faulty isn't making four errors. This student needs to work on subject-verb agreement. Thus there is no need to mark each error of the same classification. Let the student know he or she needs to work to correct the errors in subject-verb agreement. Specific lessons should address the error classification to help the writer eliminate the mistake.

According to a 1992 study titled "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing," by Andrea Lunsford and Rob Connors, 91.5 percent of all grammatical errors can be attributed to a list of 20 specific kinds of errors. The list of the *20 most frequent errors*, along with full explanations and suggestions for each, is included in the ORC resource below. The list, along with a few common ESL (English as a second language) errors, may also be found at <http://www.eng.odu.edu/techwriting/20mostcommonerrors.pdf>.

Twenty Common Errors

<http://www.bcc.ctc.edu/writinglab/errors.htm>

According to a 1992 study, completed by Rob Connors and Andrea Lunsford, over ninety percent of all grammatical errors found in students' academic writing can be attributed to twenty specific kinds of errors. This website provides a brief overview of those twenty common errors and areas of confusion for students. While this resource does not offer specific teaching strategies, teachers may use the list provided to guide their instructional decisions. A downloadable list of the twenty common errors is also available online. (author/ncl)

This next ORC resource is also useful for teachers and students who are interested in improving the quality of writing.

Guide to Grammar and Style

http://www.ohiorc.org/ohiorc_resource_display/0,3820,3387,00.shtm

This content resource, while assembled by a Rutgers professor concerned primarily with bettering his own students' writing at the college level, provides a detailed grammar and style reference guide appropriate for high school use. Divided into seven sections for getting an "A" on an English paper--thesis, research, close reading, style, and mechanics, this resource both explains the concepts that elevate a student text beyond the ordinary, and links to other relevant sites that address mechanics, citations, grammar, and stylistic nuances. The author lists advice for students to generate good writing, and comments specifically about those elements of writing that influence audience, purpose, and style. (author/bc-brown)

There are many reasons for placing major emphasis on written composition. Teachers need to help students understand the importance of writing. Give students adequate time to compose, and provide them with many purposes for writing. You'll discover that students who improve their writing also improve their thinking and thus their work in other parts of the curriculum. The process of thinking, including analyzing and reasoning, is invisible. By writing what they are thinking, students can make the process visible.

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- McCarroll, Christina. (2005, March 11). "Teens ready to prove text-messaging skills can score SAT points" [electronic version]. *The Christian Science Monitor*.
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*From the ORC Collection***More Resources on Assessing to Inform Instruction**

Here are some resources from the ORC collection related to this month's theme, Assessing to Inform Instruction:

Effective Reader Scoring Guide

www.nwrel.org/assessment/pdfRubrics/ReadingScoringGuide.pdf

Resource Type: Professional Resources

Grade Level: Grades 3-12

Topics: Reading -- Assessment; Reading; Literary Response; Reading-Strategies & Skills

Professional Commentary: Developed by educators at the Northwest Regional Education Lab (NWREL), this reading assessment provides a thorough, yet practical, way to evaluate students' oral and written responses to texts.

Full Record of ORC#: 715

Authentic Assessment Toolbox

<http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/>

Resource Type: Professional Resources

Grade Level: Grades Kindergarten-12

Topics: Reading -- Assessment; Professional Development; Writing

Professional Commentary: The Authentic Assessment Toolbox is a how-to hypertext about creating authentic tasks, rubrics, and standards for measuring and improving student learning.

Full Record of ORC#: 4408

Smart Tests: Teacher-Made Tests That Help Students Learn

www.stenhouse.com/productcart/pc/viewPrd.asp?idcategory=58&idproduct=8166

Resource Type: Professional Resources

Grade Level: Grades Kindergarten-8

Topics: Reading -- Assessment; Professional Development; Reading-Strategies & Skills

Professional Commentary: This resource is a book that is downloadable (pdf format) by individual chapters. Authors Walker and Schmidt focus on accountability and the growing move towards standardized testing.

Full Record of ORC#: 4593

Tools for Thought: Helping All Students Read, Write, Speak, and Think : Samples

www.heinemann.com/shared/onlineresources/E00464/appendix.pdf

Resource Type: Content Resources

Grade Level: Grades 7-12

Topics: Reading -- Assessment; Reading-Strategies & Skills; Vocabulary

Professional Commentary: Created by Jim Burke, this resource provides access to graphic organizers and offers strategies for using them to improve student learning. Designed to spark student thinking, this set of instructional materials is applicable to grades 6 to 12 in all subject areas. These tools range from annotations and literature circle notes to Venn diagrams and vocabulary squares.

Full Record of ORC#: 4585

Differentiated Instruction in the English Classroom [excerpt]: Content, Process, Product, and Assessment

www.heinemann.com/shared/onlineresources/E00577/chapter4.pdf

Resource Type: Professional Resources

Grade Level: Grades 6-12

Topics: Reading -- Professional Development; Reading-Strategies & Skills

Professional Commentary:

Differentiated instruction is a recognition that students vary in their needs, interests, abilities, and prior knowl-

edge. It is a springboard from which students work toward the same ends, but they use different content, processes, and products to get there. The aim of differentiated instruction is to successfully teach each student.

Full Record of ORC#: 4442

Instructional Module: Assessment

www.glef.org/modules/Assessment/index.php

Resource Type: General Education Resources

Grade Level: Grades Kindergarten-12

Topics: Reading -- Assessment; Professional Development

Professional Commentary: This online assessment resource is designed for professional development providers. Divided into two parts, this module begins with a brief introduction to assessment that includes an expert interview on the importance of assessment, an overview of the different types of assessments, and strategies for using rubrics.

Full Record of ORC#: 2554

Adolescent Literacy In Perspective

Each issue of *Adolescent Literacy In Perspective* highlights a topic in adolescent literacy. Here you can read teacher-written articles, see what experts in the field are saying, gain insight from students, and find resources for classroom use.



About the Ohio Resource Center for Mathematics, Science, and Reading

The Ohio Resource Center works to improve teaching and learning among Ohio teachers by promoting standards-based, best practices in mathematics, science, and reading for Ohio schools and universities. The Center's resources are available primarily via the web and are coordinated with other state and regional efforts to improve student achievement and teacher effectiveness in K-12 mathematics, science, and reading. To learn more about ORC, visit the website at www.ohiorc.org.

The Ohio Resource Center is a project of the State University Education Deans, funded by the Ohio General Assembly, and established by the Ohio Board of Regents. ORC is housed at the Eisenhower National Clearinghouse.



The Office of Reading Improvement is part of the Ohio Department of Education. The ultimate goal of the Office of Reading Improvement is to help all students become proficient readers. The initiatives from this office communicate research-based practices and attempt to build an awareness and understanding for a richer, broader view of adolescent literacy in schools and communities. The office engages in statewide collaborations with other institutions and agencies. AdLIT is one of many collaborations that bring together a variety of constituents and stakeholders in promoting value for focus on adolescent literacy. For more info, see http://www.ode.state.oh.us/reading_improvement/.

What Is AdLIT?

Advancing Adolescent Literacy Instruction Together (AdLIT) is designed to address the unique literacy needs of adolescent learners by promoting and supporting effective, evidence-based practices for classroom instruction and professional development activities in Ohio's middle and secondary schools.

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