



Learning From Looking at Student Work

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Important Dates

April 15, 2008:
STEP=UP Field
Advisory Meeting
4:00 pm

May 13, 2008:
Advisory Board
Meeting 4:30 pm

STEP=UP

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<http://www.uic.edu/orgs/stepup/>

What can teachers learn by looking at student work collaboratively? What are the ways in which teachers can use, adapt, and create processes for looking at student work to learn both about their students and how to enhance their own reflection and teaching practices? In the last five years greater attention than ever before has been given to exploring the power of studying students' work for teacher and student learning. In this article we look at some of the reasons for and ways to looking at student work collaboratively.

Teachers spend a significant amount of time individually, in isolation, looking at student work. They do this for several reasons: to provide feedback to students, to evaluate, assess, grade, plan for future achievement goals, future curricula for students, and parent conferences. Though looking at student work individually is important for teachers, there are several benefits for looking at student work as a central and valued part of collaborative inquiry. These include understanding an individual child as a learner, establishing standards for student performance, collectively reflecting on data to make the best possible decisions for students, and developing a shared understanding of a child's needs (Allen, 1998; Blythe et al, 1999).

These components can be

especially critical for students with special needs since several teachers and related personnel try to bring together resources to provide opportunities for learning and meeting IEP goals.

Allen and Blythe (2004) cite several purposes for examining student work that include uncovering even more about an individual child, setting standards for all students' performances, honing observational and interpretive skills and therefore learning even more about our own teaching and assessment practices. Through their work in national projects where several schools' staff work collaboratively, they have identified some steps for examining students' work collectively: a) taking stock of current ways of looking at student work in a department or school, b) establishing goals and framing questions for the investigation, c) choosing, adapting and developing a process/protocol, d) implementing the process and e) reflecting on and revising the process.

During these collaborative discussions focused on student work, structured conversations called "protocols" could be helpful. Protocols provide a structure for conversation as well as ways for all participants to be heard and involved. By doing this, they create a safe supportive environment for teachers to share students' work and their reasoning. Following a structure

can help encourage colleagues to provide useful feedback, avoid quick judgments, stay focused and look carefully and deeply while having conversations about student work (Allen & Blythe, 2004; Blythe et al, 1999; Himley & Carini, 2000).

The protocol selected for a discussion depends on the purposes and goals of examining student work. In addition protocols vary in their structure depending on whether teachers are required to provide background at the beginning or later in the discussion; whether participants are required to observe, evaluate and/or interpret; and if the teacher is required to specify a focusing question or not. Allen and Blythe (2004) share three different protocols that vary in structure based on the above mentioned features – the collaborative assessment conference, tuning protocol, and consultancy protocol. Other considerations while selecting the protocol include the group size and the number of student samples.

One often wondered question is what kind of student work should one look at and how can one choose it? Primarily that will be determined by the purposes and questions at the meetings. Allen and Blythe (2004) suggest additional aspects to consider. Think about work that piques teachers' curiosities,

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the number of pieces the group can reasonably examine, and use varied quality of work. Think about how everyone in the group will examine the work, e.g., make copies, allow participants to have time to look at a poster board or three-dimensional work. Use a very short video clip, and provide the background.

One of the major outcomes of such structured conversations for looking at students' work is to stay focused and specific to how instruction and modifications can be based on students' learning. That takes us beyond grading and evaluation (Allen, 1998).

References:

- Allen, D. & Blythe, T. (2004). *The facilitator's book of questions: Tools for looking together at student and teacher work*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Allen, D. (1998). *Assessing student learning: From grading to understanding*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Blythe, T., Allen, D., & Powell, B.S. (1999). *Looking together at student work: A companion guide to assessing student learning*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Himley, M with Carini, P.F. (2000). *From another angle: Children's strengths and school standards*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Digital Corner

Looking at Student Work (LASW)

LASW (www.lasw.org) provides ideas and resources about a set of practices they term "looking at student work." It presents the work of educators committed to new ways of looking at student work that emphasize collegial investigation, focusing on small samples that are specific, and considering how particular ideas are being understood as demonstrated through the work sample.

LASW emerged from a meeting on "Examining Student Work and School Change" held in Chicago and hosted by the Chicago Learning Collaborative and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

Some of the resources available on this website include: links to web sites that post authentic samples of student work, along with teacher and student commentary; information about instruction and assessment criteria; brief description of a number of protocols; books, articles and videos; current research.

Research Corner

Little, J. W, Gearhart, M., Curry, M. & Kafka, J. (2003). Looking at Student Work for Teacher Learning, Teacher Community and School Reform, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(3), p184-192.

The authors describe several projects that have enabled teachers to leave the isolation of their own classrooms and think together about student work in the broader contexts of school improvement and professional development. The authors share findings from a two-year study that examined the growing interest in investigation of students' work. They reviewed published studies and discovered a wide range of purposes and practices that can be classified as looking at student work. However they found little details of how to achieve the benefits demonstrated in these studies.

To close this gap the authors chose to identify specific practices employed by teachers who come together to examine student work. Towards this aim, they conducted case studies of several teacher groups working with Harvard Zero Project, Coalition of Essential Schools and the Academy for Educational Development.

Despite differences in philosophy, practice and local contexts, the authors identify three key elements of these practices:

- Bringing teachers together to focus on student learning: They note that a significant contribution of these projects was that they created occasions where the primary agenda for talk was student learning and teacher practice.
- Getting student work on the table and into the conversation: All the projects placed student work on the table in a systematic and serious way, thus creating an expectation that there would be student work to look at during the meeting.
- Structuring the conversation using discussion protocols: All three projects promoted the use of protocols to organize discussions and structure participation. Furthermore, they suggest that participants used protocols to "open up" or "close off" opportunities for deeper questions into student learning or teaching practice.

The authors also point out that creative use of the protocols, ability to bring in subject issues and expertise, balancing comfort and challenge, and strong facilitation were all important conditions for meaningfully examination of student work. Lack of time, multiple interests, concern for personal comfort and collegial relations, and uncertainty about what to highlight are cited as challenges teachers face.