

# STEP=UP

Special Teachers and Exceptional Pupils = Urban Promise



## Looking at Student Work to Guide Teaching

### Newsletter Features

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### Important Dates

**April 14, 2009:**  
SPED 448 4:00 pm

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A year ago, in April 2008, the theme of our newsletter was "Looking at Student Work." We highlighted several purposes for looking at student work as a central task for good teaching. We return to that theme, and focus on how examining student work can guide next steps in teaching and therefore become an essential part of good preparation.

One major question to begin student work investigations is simple, but fundamental: What am I teaching; that is, what are the big ideas? Accompany that with wondering why are you teaching that particular concept? Why teach it that particular way? How do I know my students are getting it, and what is the "it" they are getting? How do my students know they are getting it? What did I learn in the process? (Williams, 1999). According to David Allen, a researcher at Harvard Project Zero, "the process of looking at student work in a collaborative manner helps teachers take a closer look at how they teach" (Dunne, 2000, p.1). Collaborative teacher inquiry around student work gives space for teachers to "see" each other's planning and preparation, and to map backwards by looking at the end product, and wondering how students and teachers produced it (Dunne, 2000).

We recognize that close investigation of student work can help educators learn about the

effectiveness of their instruction (what did students do with what I taught?), better understand students' learning (what did they get and not get?) and modify curriculum for individual student strengths. At Yarmouth High School in Maine, faculty gets together every Wednesday morning in part to look at student work. That process of inquiry has changed teachers' instruction, use of rubrics, and nature of assignments (Dunne, 2000). The principal, Wendy Houlihan, notes that the quality of student work has improved as teachers change based their collaborative inquiry. For example, at one of the meetings science teachers revised an assignment that required students to report lab results as if they were writing for a newspaper. Teachers realized they had not instructed the students on how to write a newspaper article. This led them to make changes to the rubric and the instruction.

The emphasis on thinking about "why the teacher does something" in addition to "what the teacher does is" essential to understanding why a certain practice works the way it does. Wondering collaboratively about why a certain practice worked can help teachers develop specific understanding about a certain instructional practice instead of simply seeing something in isolation (e.g., a literacy strategy disconnected to the content a student is trying to read.) In the

National Writing Project, teachers develop by looking carefully at student work and then formulating observations and questions that allow them to teach other teachers and themselves. Teachers are asked individually to step back from their students' work and ask a question about it that guides their examinations and presentation of the practices (Peterson, 2004).

Looking at student errors, too, is invaluable. "What is it that I want them to do differently," some ask. What do I need to do differently so they get it?" These are questions central to planning a successful lesson. At Hoover School in California, history teachers began the collaborative process of analyzing student work which led them to challenge their own teaching (Norton, 1997). While the work amongst teachers began with fairly safe conversations, the reflections and discussions grew to become deeper as teachers became more comfortable with each other and developed trust. Pointed questions like "Was there rigor in the lesson? Were kids meeting standards? How can you deliver this better?" began surfacing. In one meeting, for example, the following question from one of the teacher's lead the discussion deeper: "I have a real concern about something in your rubric. To get four points, students have to demonstrate a 'thorough understanding' of the

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Amendments. To get three points, they just have to demonstrate 'an understanding.' What's the difference? How do they know what 'thorough' means?"

History teachers at Hoover School have identified two essential aspects for looking at student work collaboratively: providing and being open to critical feedback, and being willing to change teaching practices. According to them, examination of student work will not improve teaching without concurrent critical feedback **and** a willingness to accept up front that changing teaching practices is a part of studying student work. "We all believed we were good teachers before we began this work. But we've learned so much about how we can be better. Maybe we think we've developed a good lesson, but the review of student work tells us that it's just not helping enough kids .... So we have to change, to experiment, to try something else." (Norton, 1997). Ultimately, analyzing student work enables us to judge ourselves as instructors and to make instructional changes to benefit students.

References:

- Dunne, D.W. (2000). Teachers learning from looking at student work. *Education World*.
- Peterson, A. (2004). Digging deeper: Teacher inquiry in the summer institute demonstration, *The Voice*, Vol. 9, No. 2.
- Norton, J. (1997). History teachers dig deep into their students' work and their own teaching. Retrieved from <http://www.middleweb.com/Hooverpromo.html> on March 10, 2009
- Williams, D. (1999). Learning to teach better by examining student work. *Catalyst Chicago*. December, 1999.

## Digital Corner

### **Rubistar from 4Teachers.org**

Rubistar (<http://rubistar.4teachers.org/>) is a free tool from 4Teacher.org (<http://www.4teachers.org>). It helps create, plan and develop rubrics by providing generic yet easily customizable rubrics which can be printed and used for many typical projects and research assignments. Teachers can change almost all suggested text in the rubric to make it fit their own project. 4Teacher.org offers online tools and resources to help teachers improve instruction through integrating technology into the classroom. This site helps teachers locate online resources such as ready-to-use Web lessons, quizzes, rubrics and classroom calendars. There are also tools for student use. 4Teachers.org is developed and operated by Advanced Learning Technologies at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning.

## Partner Corner

We asked David Rench, a CPS partner with STEP=UP, to share how he supports UIC pre-service teachers as they begin thinking about looking at student work as a guide to their planning and preparation.

*How do you help UIC students think about the planning and the preparation that went into producing the student work that you brought in?*

I usually start with a current concept that I'm trying to teach my students. I will know what information I will want them to learn and be responsible for, but I may not have an exact method for delivering the material to them. I usually bring in the same questions that I ask myself and ask them of the UIC students before presenting the student work. For instance, what is the best modality to use to present this material to my students? How much of the material should they be responsible for? How can I modify the material to best reach all my students?

Besides the questions I mentioned earlier I also try to bring in my 'initial' attempt to present the material. It is extremely rare that educators present something to their students and, after the first exposure to it, every student understands the material. Changing and refining the material is always best practice and letting UIC students see this process is important. I will usually have ideas of how I will change the material the next time I present it so I want UIC students to use a critical eye to determine what they think could be improved. Usually they not only come up with similar suggestions but also think of things I never thought of so it is beneficial for all of us.

*How can teachers "use" students to help them reflect on their lesson planning and preparation, and how can this help teachers think about future planning and preparation?*

In our first years of teaching I think it is common to present a lesson that fails and we think "oh just scrap it" when we really shouldn't be thinking this way at all. The material is still important and I'm sure there are parts of the lesson that were successful. Being able to take a step back and look at your lessons with a critical eye and being willing to change it to best fit your students is an important process that every successful teacher must be willing to do. Planning and preparation is something that not only occurs prior to a lesson but also during a lesson and then again afterwards. Looking at a students work to see if they understand what is being presented and then making changes to improve that understanding is a necessary part of our job. I feel that letting new teachers see how important this process is to good teaching is an important part of STEP=UP.