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TE 848 Inquiry to Assessment

Personal Narratives to an Authentic Audience

For this assignment, I'm reviewing personal narratives that my students wrote for my Composition class. The requirements for this piece were to compose a story in 600-700 words that captured a moment or a brief period of time that had left an impact on the student, or was a significant memory. Goals for this assignment included using vivid description to help the reader see what the author was describing (that whole "show don't tell" idea), to try to connect to the audience through storytelling techniques, use clarity in writing for a story that is easy to understand, and to submit the story for publication. That's right - part of this assignment grade was for the students to submit their pieces to an inter-school writing contest, the River Rat Writing Prize, or to another publication medium.

I had thought that since the students were writing for an audience outside only the classroom, there would be a lot of attention to polishing pieces before sending them out, especially considering that the Writing Prize has cash prizes for winners. The results I got were mixed; overall they were solid, but there were a few that needed further attention to various mechanics (clarity, structure, etc.). I didn't use a rubric for this assignment, but the [goals and requirements](#) were made clear to the students. Also, I didn't necessarily think it would be fair to the students for me to judge the quality of the story they chose to tell, per say. I guess I didn't want them to become insecure about the story they were sharing by thinking it would only amount to a number or a letter in the grade book.

As Huron High School, we are in the process of becoming an International Baccalaureate World School, and we are aligning our entire curriculum and school improvement plans to this program. Specifically, the English Department's SIP goals are to help students to write and/or speak for an authentic audience. Our objectives were for 90% of students grades 6-12 to write to or perform for an authentic audience by submitting a piece of writing to a literary

collective or writing contest, speak publically, etc. The rationale for these opportunities comes from the IB assessment criteria, specifically [“Producing Text.”](#) This criterion requires that students create written and/or spoken text in a creative medium to make connections with the reader and audience. This criterion specifies the goals for student choice in text production, and for students to become actively responsible for their own learning.

I planned this personal narrative unit specifically around the time of the River Rat Writing Prize so the students would all have a specific, unique piece to submit for the contest. I really wanted to guide students toward realizing the importance of *their* story, and for them to see the value in sharing their experiences with others. As storytelling is, perhaps, the original form of entertainment, I had hoped students would find some kind of spark to tell their own story. A 2014 article from *The Atlantic* helped me rationalize this assignment. The article is called “The Psychological Comforts of Storytelling,” and it is all about why humans tell stories to begin with. According to the article, “Humans are inclined to see narratives where there are none because it can afford meaning to our lives” (Delistraty, 2014). I think that, many times, students don’t realize the value of the stories they have to tell as a unique footprint of time spent on this planet. I gave the students copies of this article to read in preparation for picking memories to write about, hoping they would identify with what the article was encouraging.

As I stated above, the essays I received were of mixed quality. As I read through their pieces, I could tell that I didn’t give any attention to what that means - what *is* an authentic audience, or an authentic writing opportunity? According to “Real World Writing: Making Purpose and Audience Matter,” (2009), Wiggins specifies that “‘Authentic assessment’ in the teaching of writing amounts to [this]: ensure that students have to write to real audiences and purposes, not just the teacher in response to generic prompts.” All semester, my students had been writing assignments to me. I was their audience, and I was the one to give them a grade on their performance. If I had spent more time, even at the beginning of the semester, of what audience really means, I think there may have been a lot more attention to reviewing their

writing to make sure everything is clear and organizing. The students I will be mentioning go by the pseudonyms David, Kristen, and Jack, all three seniors.

David approached this writing assignment with some significant mental baggage of past experiences, such as his parents' divorce, moving away from Detroit, his father's death, and the death of his baby sister. As he approached graduation, a lot of these instances started to manifest into some depression and anxiety; as a result, he began to miss a lot of school, which cut into the time that I could have worked with him. His assignment was turned in late, and was far from our original story map about his parents' divorce and moving to Ann Arbor. He wrote about the divorce, moving from Detroit, what it was like growing up in Detroit, his relationship with his dad, playing basketball for Huron, and the death of his baby sister, in that order. I think his written piece was a lot like his mental state at the time: broken apart. He was sorting through a lot of these built up emotions and was really struggling with facing them.

Based on my requirements sheet (which I'll use as my first assessment), I generously gave David a B-. I wanted to take into consideration the work that he put into it, and the struggle it must have been to write about the things that were causing him such depression. He used some specific details to show, not tell, and had structure into paragraphs with, mostly, good transitions. I wrote plenty of feedback and comments on his piece, and tried to balance praise and suggestions for feedback. This most closely aligns with Wilson's (2007) study on abandoning rubrics, as "[Providing] specific feedback [is] one of the most important ways [to] help students become better writers" (p. 63). I think David specifically benefited from supportive comments like this, instead of comparing himself to the, often, rigid and specific requirements listed on a rubric. In fact, when given a rubric for his final projects (a research proposal, an annotated bibliography, and a digital medium presentation), he became very overwhelmed (amid still missing a lot of school), and did very poorly on all three.

Comparatively, I'll assess his narrative according to a [personal narrative rubric](#) that a colleague of mine has used. By this rubric, David would have gotten a D. The language of this

particular rubric requires that an A paper achieves things such as focusing on one story, avoiding grammar errors, avoiding errors that get in the way of understanding, and employing effective word choice in regards to audience of peers and teacher. By these standards, David's story was "starting" or "beginning" to meet those requirements, but, according to this rubric, would need some significant revising or editing. I think it's interesting that this rubric specifies an audience of peers. I wonder if David's writing would have changed if I had focused more on the aspect on the audience, and the fact that he could have moved people with his writing.

According to Jacob Lewis's 2012 *Business Insider* article, "Students Need an Audience if We Expect Them to Learn How to Write," "Through writing, we articulate ideas, arguments, and ourselves - and we determine how to articulate these concepts by considering our audience and the impact we hope to have with them." David's stories, if polished, organized, and focused, would definitely leave an impact on readers.

Like many other assignments she submitted, Kristen's personal narrative was rushed and poorly constructed. For Kristen, "senioritis" was an understatement; when she walked into my semester long class in January, it became clear early that she was checking out, fast. This is not to say she was a bad student. Kristen was very creative and insightful - but she was so ready to be done. I didn't notice this attitude with the initial assignments. These were activities like writing a professional email to a teacher (because, yes, that's something that warrants instruction), writing a cover letter, putting together a resume, and other "lighter" assignments.

Kristen's personal narrative turned out cluttered. She switched between tenses quite a bit, had long, rambling sentences, and didn't seem to have a structure that unified everything. To start for Kristen's piece, I decided to assess it based on the [IB Middle Years Program Year 3 Rubric for Language and Literature - Criterion B, Organizing](#). According to this rubric, Kristen's personal narrative would land in a 3-4 score out of 8, which meant that there was "adequate use of organizational structures," and "organizes ideas and opinions and ideas some degree of coherence and logic." I could follow the storyline she was telling, and her ideas didn't totally

rabbit trail off to parts unknown; but her piece would have been so much stronger if she had taken time to employ some structure and coherence. I wish I could say that this assignment was a wake up call for Kristen, and that she was able to turn her study habits around and get quality writing turned in on time. But, no.

I used a process similar to TAP for having mini conferences with all of my students during the process of this assignment. Individually, I called students out to the hall with me to read a section of their work outloud. The point of this conferring was for students to be able to *hear* how their ideas sounded once they put them on paper. From what I listened to, we talked about what was working well, and what they heard in their writing. This allowed them to review material that sounded unclear or garbled so they could fix the issues immediately. Kristen did very well on this part. Though she had only a small part done, as soon as she started reading, she began to catch her mistakes. Kristen would stop and fix things right away on her computer as she was working on the document as she listened to how her work sounded. Once she read all that she had, Kristen had come to a much better draft than she had started with because she was actually listening to herself.

Based on my requirements, I gave Kristen a B (again, generously. Maybe I'm too generous...). Compared to the rubric my colleague used, Kristen would also have gotten a C, The language specifies that a C score "**mostly** does the following: focuses on one story, uses details that show as opposed to tell, opens with a powerful sentence, has a title that draws the reader in, meets the 600-700 word requirement, follows MLA format conventions, and has a clear and logical structure." "That word mostly is very characteristic of Kristen's work. Her first part that she thought aloud about was well organized and stuck to a logical order. However, from there she did not pay enough attention to keeping a logical format, and continued with rambling sentences sprinkled with solid word choice and description. Compared to her final research project, that had three very specific rubrics for assessment, Kristen performed about the same. In fact, Kristen was randomly selected to go first on senior presentation day, and she

admitted to having only completed the assignment the night before, which I could have guessed, anyway.

Finally, Jack is a typical high school senior boy. He's focused on his academics and gets his assignments, but is also prone to slacking off and submitting work that is unfinished. Additionally, Jack plays football, soccer, and la crosse. He is very interested in athletics and sports sciences. This interest really showed strongly when he did his final senior presentation on Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, which is a degenerative disease caused (in part) by multiple concussions. Jack's research was solid and thorough, and the delivery of his presentation was very engaging. Students had choice in topic for their final presentations (literally anything they wanted to research), and Jack was definitely in his element when talking about athletics.

Jack's personal narrative about his struggle with depression was very, very beautifully detailed. He used a lot of similes and very vivid descriptions to paint pictures for the reader. However, the situation he was describing was not totally clear. There is mention to a night out in the cold shoveling snow, and trying to go back inside but the door is locked. With all of his vivid references, it was hard to tell if I was to read this metaphorically or literally. By my colleague's rubric, Jack would have scored between a B and a C. As a B grade requires, Jack used great detail to show not tell, and was very considerate of his word choices to appeal to an audience of peers. However, he was lacking clear organization/structure or specification of a singular event(s) that he was describing. While it hit spot on for imagery and powerful word choice, the actual storyline itself wasn't very strong.

Assessing Jack's narrative to the specifications of the IB Criterion B rubric for organization, he would have scored between a 4-5 out of 8; as the 5-6 score in the rubric lays out, Jack made "**competent** use of organizational structures that serve the context and intention." He clearly paid attention to structure, as the story seemed to be organized sequentially. However, as the 3-4 score specifies, Jack made "**adequate** use of referencing and

formatting tools to create a presentation style suitable to the context and intention.” To this end, Jack’s presentation of information focused too much on the details and vivid descriptions, which took away from the overall message of the story. For me, that’s where the intention got lost. It seemed that he was mostly describing depression, instead of linking himself to a case of depression.

In comparison, assessing Jack to the IB rubric for Using Language (available on the same document linked above), Jack would have scored solidly in the 5-6 range. As specified in this rubric, Jack used “a **varied range** of appropriate vocabulary, sentence structures and forms of expression **competently**.” I think that, of these three students, Jack did the best at trying to write to an authentic audience. The way he describes what depression feels like definitely leaves an impact on the reader, and the message is very relatable to many people of all ages. For this to be directed to high schoolers shows Jack paid attention to showing how this depression felt to him, and I’m sure that it’s relatable for many others, too. Additionally, Jack “writes and speaks **competently** in a register and style that serve the context and intention.” Like Delistraty (2014) states, “Storytelling can also inform people’s emotional lives. Storytelling...allows people to peek into someone’s conscience to see how other people think.” Jack definitely hit the mark on the purpose of telling an individual’s story, and did his best to allow a reader to peek into his conscience.

After reviewing my students’ writing by a number of rubrics, I have a whole new outlook of how to assess student writing. I really liked that I looked at things such as organization, producing text, and using language individually, instead of lumping them together into a rubric like that of my colleague. This sets me up to have a better idea of how to help know how to prioritize requirements based on purpose and audience. I know that I will need to do more research into how to incorporate authenticity into writing assignments. I am interested in what ways I can get students to write to an audience that isn’t just me, and for them to see what they are capable of creating when they do so. Additionally, now that I reflect upon how well every

student did during their individual readouts, I want to incorporate more TAP activities in the classroom wherever I can. I think this will serve my ninth graders especially well; this kind of activity would be helpful for them get comfortable with from their first year of high school as they progress to harder assignments and requirements.

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