The Reading and Writing Project
Teachers College, Columbia University

Studying Student Work: Protocols and Practices

Studying student work helps a school: create shared language; norm expectations; monitor growth; and democratize knowledge of writing. It creates opportunities for teachers to have meaningful conversations about writing. It shines a spotlight on how students are responding to instruction. Studying student work is as important as planning instruction. It's how you know if your instruction is *working*.

It's often helpful to practice some protocols with teachers as a way to get better at this work, together. Following are a variety of protocols, some of which go very quickly, some of which take a little more time. They build on each other, introducing skills gradually, giving practice at talking about student work, creating opportunities to get a lot of practice at talking about writing, and using tools such as checklists and rubrics.

What you'll need:

- Some student samples of narrative, information, or argument writing. We recommend starting with the type of writing schools have focused on the most. Today, we'll start with narrative. These samples should be 'typical' – that is, they should represent the writing that a lot of students are currently doing.
- One student sample from this collection that will be our practice sample – we'll all work with this piece. The piece should not have the school or student name on it. Today we need one student piece that is about a fourth grade level.
- Grade level exemplars of narrative 'on-demand' writing (writing that was collected under similar circumstances, that is, students had one class period in which to plan and draft a narrative). Today, we'll use the grade level exemplars that are found in the *Writing Pathways* collections. We'll have the K-5 and 6-8 collections. Today we need a 2nd, 3rd, 4th grade exemplar.
- Student checklists for narrative writing, K-8. We'll use those in *Writing Pathways.*
- Rubrics for narrative writing, K-8. We'll use those in *Writing Pathways.* Today we need the 4th grade rubric.

Protocol 1: Learning to Talk About Student Writing – Naming Qualities of Writing

In this protocol, we'll study a piece of student writing, to try naming the qualities of writing that stand out. The leader will listen to participants do this work, call on them to share, and then add in some insights. The leader may add in some technical language – vocabulary used to describe writing techniques. Often, this language will mirror that of the writing checklists.

1. Display one piece of student writing – on the screen and/or printed at tables. (We'll be looking at a piece that is a second grade level, to practice – it's fast and easy to look at a short piece, and it's good to know what even very young children can do. Also, many older kids who are learning English, or learning writing, will write at this level!)
2. Invite participants to notice and list some of the qualities of the writing. They can do this work in partnerships or at tables. Listen to how they talk about writing. Notice who is particularly strong at this work.
3. Invite participants to share. If this work was hard for them, you might, instead of calling on them, say, "I heard some of you say…" and then list some qualities yourself.
4. Do some ranking of these qualities. You might say, "So knowledge of the genre is one of the first things I look for. So…is this a narrative at all? Does the writer understand what a story *is*? Then second, I look for focus – is this a small moment? Does the writer stay focused on his or her topic, or story? Third, I look for some knowledge of the *craft* of this genre. Does the writer display any narrative craft? Finally, I might look for conventions… The point is to help colleagues pay attention to the skills that most matter when writers are getting started. If they have good conventions but know nothing else about writing, all that knowledge of grammar is for naught. At the same time, you do want to look across all the qualities of writing, bit by bit.
5. Give the participants some feedback. Be honest and kind. "So one piece of advice I want to give you, is that you want to become good at this, and we need more practice," you might say. Know that the ability to *talk about* writing is linked to the ability to teach it. Describing a piece of writing in terms of its craft and structure helps teachers teach those skills. Also, pay attention to which participants were silent – they may need more support with this work. Pay attention to which were vocal – maybe they can participate in many of these meetings, giving their support to colleagues.

Protocol 2: Noticing Small Signs of Growth

Now, you'll turn to a second piece of student writing, which will be just one level higher. This time, participants will practice looking for signs of growth. This means they're looking to see if the child still does everything that was in the earlier piece, *plus* there are signs of growth. This is also a chance to practice planning for continued growth – what this child needs *next.* Keep this protocol brief, as protocol four, which uses the checklists, will help more with these skills.

1. Display one piece of student writing – on the screen and/or printed at tables. (We'll be looking at a piece that is a third grade level).
2. Invite participants to first find indicators that this piece has indicators of the same qualities as the prior piece, in terms of knowledge of the genre, focus, structure, etc.
3. Then lead them to talk about signs of growth. Remind them that teachers of writing need to be able to see the 'stickiness' of their instruction, in the small moves that writers make. So ask, "what's getting better here? What are some moves this writer makes, that show growth?"
4. Next, invite participants to imagine they are meeting as a grade level team of teachers, and they find that their kids write like this at the beginning of the year. For instance, pretend the teachers from the grade below send up the kids' on demand writing and it looks like this. They want these teachers to know what kids already know. Now, what could they imagine teaching next? What tools could they use to inform their teaching? Listen to this brief conversation – do they mention checklists or rubrics? Do they think about looking up the ladder in the *Writing Pathways* collection?
5. Finish with some feedback, and a conversation about how important it is for teachers to be able to see, in the student writing, evidence of their teaching. Also, how important it is for a school to see progress up the grade levels. Remind them that the first year a school starts a writing program, the kids' writing may look the same at all grades. But in the second year, those teachers need to plan for continued growth. That means they need to visualize a progression. Give them feedback that teachers will need tools to do this work well – such as the exemplars and checklists from *Writing Pathways,* and/or a local collection of student writing going up a ladder of levels.

Protocol 3A: Norming Student Writing to Exemplars, Checklists, Grade Level

In this protocol, participants will practice judging a new piece of student 'on demand' writing, to say what grade level they think it should represent and why. One reason to do this work is so that teachers introduce the appropriate checklist. If kids' writing matches third grade exemplars, they need the third grade checklist to begin, no matter if they are currently in sixth grade. Another reason is that it's hard for teachers to know how their kids are doing in terms of global grade level standards. It's important to note that you don't expect kids to meet these standards immediately. The important work is that teachers have a shared vision of what they're working towards. (It's possible this protocol should be delayed, until teachers have seen end-goals or standards they are reaching towards. On the other hand, clarifying your vision often helps teachers and kids strive towards this vision)

1. Introduce a new piece of student writing (you'll know it's a fourth grade level piece, but participants won't. Meanwhile you've also shown teachers 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade level narratives, so you are helping them build a progression in their minds)
2. Invite participants to compare the grade level they think it should ultimately represent – as a goal. Ask them to elaborate, to explain the qualities they see in it. Listen so you can give feedback on how they may be setting their expectations too low or too high.
3. Have them compare this piece to the student exemplars in *Writing Pathways,* to calibrate their expectations. Does it match the 3rd grade pieces more closely, or the 4th or 5th grade? Help them match the piece to the appropriate exemplar, so they could then introduce the appropriate checklist – 4th grade.
4. Lead a conversation about introducing checklists that kids can be successful with, and doing this by looking at their writing and matching it to shared exemplars. Then move to a brief discussion of long-term vision, realistic expectations, and setting shared goals for schools, about the level of writing most of your students (English Language Learners) should be striving for at each grade level. Invite participants to look at some of the student exemplars in *Writing Pathways* and consider high-level yet realistic goals for the first year of writing workshop – which piece could represent an exemplar for 6th grade, for example, this year? You might introduce the notion of a vision for growth - Carol Dweck's 'Growth Mindset,' so that it's less important where kids start, and more important where they are going…

Protocol 3B: Using a Checklist – Annotating Student Work, Setting Writing Goals

Ultimately, you want teachers and students to become skilled at using a checklist to assess student writing and set goals as writers. In Protocol 3A you practiced deciding which checklist to introduce. Now you'll do some work to engage with the checklist. One goal is to introduce

these checklist to teachers. Another is that it turns out that using a checklist – reading the items, annotating student work, setting goals - merits some practice. This means learning to closely read student work, to find evidence in the piece of qualities that are described on the checklist – and find qualities that are not evident, that will be writing goals.

1. Return to the piece of student writing that you used in Protocol 3A. Invite participants to lay the checklist (for fourth grade) next to it and simply read down the checklist for a moment – the first few items.
2. Demonstrate, inviting them to do the work alongside you, how you consider one item from the checklist – perhaps 'Lead,' and you look for evidence in the piece of this quality. When you find it, you put a post it, or highlight/underline it and annotate in the margins (depending on your materials).
3. Invite participants to keep going with a partner – to continue to use the checklist, and to annotate the piece whenever they find evidence of qualities described on the checklist.
4. Have participants share at a table, and summarize some of their work – display an annotated exemplar that would serve as a good example for teachers and kids.
5. Invite participants to imagine and jot down one or two writing goals, using the checklist to inform this work.
6. Demonstrate how you might use a large post-it, or a notebook, and immediately try to 'revise,' the piece together, striving towards one of these writing goals.
7. Lead a discussion of how checklists can raise the level of kids' discourse, revision, agency, writing.
8. Possible add-on: Watch part of Kelly Boland grade three argument lesson, where kids' analyze a mentor text – for how they use the language of the 3rd grade checklist, one week into the unit of study.

Protocol 4: Becoming Familiar with Rubrics, and Using Them to Track Progress

There is no doubt that checklists are easier to use than rubrics. But good rubrics can really teach teachers a lot about writing. The rubric can help a teacher envision what's next for a child. Also, kids often are good at some things and less good at others –the rubric will help you see those patterns. For a school that wants to track student progress over time, using shared rubrics will let you measure and document that growth. That means you want teachers to do some shared work with rubrics.

1. Introduce a new piece of student writing or use the same one you used in Protocol 3. If it's the same one you used in Protocol 3, then introduce the rubric for that grade level (we used 4th grade). If you introduce a new piece, give participants five to ten minutes to practice matching it to the student pieces in the *Writing Pathways* , and choosing the appropriate rubric based on this match.
2. Give participants a few minutes to compare this rubric to the grade level checklist. Point out that a 3/Meets Expectations, matches the checklist for that grade level.

3. Call participants' attention to one 'box' or item on the rubric: Elaboration. Have them go back to the student piece, and with a partner, 'score' elaboration. Is it a 2, 2.5, 3…? Explain about the .5 and how student writing might be in between levels and look a lot of different ways. Listen in to conversations as they compare at their table.
4. Lead a discussion about the amount of time it takes to use a rubric, and yet how much you can learn from it. Bring attention to the final scoring box, and clarify how it can be used to trace student progress/grade, etc.

Protocol Five: Becoming Familiar with the Teacher Texts – and How to Use them

Writing Pathways offers teachers a set of narratives, information, and argument pieces, that demonstrates taking one piece of writing up levels. Teachers can use these pieces for their conferring and small group work, and to inform their instruction. Often, when you want to show kids' a mentor text, it helps to show them one that is just *slightly* above their level. (We might practice with information writing, which will also introduce this genre to participants, or we might stay with narrative, so they can practice from a position of knowledge).

1. Begin with a brief talk about demonstration writing and mentor texts, and how useful it can be to have a piece that moves up levels, and the content doesn't change.
2. Show the earliest level of the ladder – not annotated. Hand out level one and level two – not annotated, and invite participants to figure out, with a partner, what changes.
3. Hand out the annotated pieces, and have them compare what they said, with these annotations.
4. Tell them you will give out another level along with the checklist for that grade level, and invite them to practice, again. Have them notice what changes, and have them underline those changes.
5. Invite tables to come up with ideas for using these with teachers and students. Have them prepare 10 minute lessons, including a demonstration and active engagement. If necessary, the leader can demonstrate using one piece of student writing, and one level, and participants can use a different level.