**Formative Assessment in Writing**

The key to improving writing is self-assessment. Self-assessment encourages “the sort of autonomous mastery of writing strategies needed to overcome the limitations of working memory…,” according to researcher Kristen Nielsen. She also states that the process of writing and revising is complex and has been described as a conversation with the writer’s self.

*“In this sense, writing requires continual meta-cognition, as writers must*

*learn to assess and evaluate their own idea and expression objectively, as*

*well as their writing process, in order to make continual improvements to*

*writing tasks and further develop as a writer.”*

Formative assessment in writing to teachers has typically placed a spotlight on teacher feedback through written annotations and/or oral comments. Too often, students tend to correct only those specific errors or directions that are noted without taking the steps to revise the draft (Beach & Friedrich, 2006; Fisher & Frey, 2007), resulting in no real improvement in the draft. These researchers recommend providing feedback through modeling of metacognitive processing and carefully focusing feedback in written and oral comments on students’ understanding of writing development. They emphasize that conferences about writing drafts should end with a written plan of action.

A national study of effective writing conducted in the U.K. (Grief, Meyer, & Burgess, 2007) credits constructive and timely feedback with significant development of competence and confidence. The study’s authors recommend that group dialogue and individual feedback become part of a writing curriculum.

Below are 12 strategies for self-assessment that are supported in Kristen Nielsen’s review of the literature:

1. Give students direct, explicit and step-by-step training before they carry out self-assessment exercises and include practice time.
2. Help students develop a clear understanding of the aspects of writing they are self-assessing such as tone, attention to purpose, etc.  In order for students to evaluate their writing for each of the different aspects, they need to have a clear understanding of the concepts.
3. Use writing models to demonstrate specific writing skills and to give students the opportunity to practice assessment. Writing models can be used independently of self-assessment to reinforce learning of concepts.  When they are used as practice for self-assessment, teachers can correct student miscomprehension and modify the exercise as needed.
4. Invite students to participate in developing the criteria for self-assessment exercises. This process helps develop a shared understanding of good writing in the classroom.
5. Increase student motivation in self-assessment by making the self-assessment part of the grade.  Positive verbal prompts and guidance also support student motivation. Motivating students is a challenge, but for self-assessment to be meaningful students must be committed to the task.
6. Use self-assessment for formative rather than summative evaluation and not to determine a final grade on an assignment.
7. Provide sufficient independent time and space in class to complete self-assessment exercises. Self-assessment works best in your classroom where you can reinforce a sense of quiet, focused time that students may not have outside the classroom.  You can also provide support and corrective feedback.
8. Engage students in dialogue during self-assessment to provide feedback, answer questions and provide clarification.  Some students will need more scaffolding and guidance than others.  One of the great benefits of self-assessment is the opportunity to work one-on-one with students.
9. Self-assessment should include tasks that address specific components of writing as well as prompts that ask for a global response to their writing.  Students should work to improve specific aspects of their writing as well as the overall content.
10. Nurture students’ sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem through positive feedback, reinforcement and modelling.  Student writers tend to think writers are born not made.  They need a sense of self-efficacy to persevere in writing.
11. Give students the opportunity to revise their work after self-assessment so that they can transfer what they’ve learned to the task of writing.
12. Regularly evaluate your teaching methods.  How are students responding? Conduct student surveys to find out what’s working well.

References:

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