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Three Lessons Learned On The Journey To High Quality Student Work (Part 1)

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by Eric White, TeachThought PD Workshop Facilitator

While educators have differing philosophies on how students best learn, one statement I routinely make continues to gain unanimous agreement with teachers: "Students can produce higher quality work than they are currently producing." It is not an issue of philosophy, but one of practicality. How can we make high quality student work a feasible reality in our classrooms? Below are some lessons learned that have helped me on my journey.

Lesson #1: Provide Feedback When the Clay is Wet

When providing feedback on student work, one rule rings true: do it early and often. This approach not only results in better work, but it also fosters student motivation and a growth mindset. Nothing can kill a student's drive more than being asked to revise work, especially if it involves drastic changes, after they've already committed an extensive amount of time. I learned this lesson the hard way.

A few years ago, I assigned students the task of writing an editorial to promote an opinion or a solution to a current issue. I informed them that they would have two class periods to develop their draft and one period to complete revisions. Students were generally motivated to do well on the assignment, but I killed that when I offered my feedback on the third and final day of the assignment. I recall one particular student who refused to make his revisions. More than a little irritated, I asked him what his problem was. Looking down at the red ink that covered his writing he said, "I've gone too far to start over. Just give me an F."

The bottom line is that early and often drafts must be a part of the learning process. When feedback is provided when the clay is still wet, the work can take shape much easier than breaking the pot and starting over.

Lesson #2: Critique the Critique

I love using peer critique for a variety of reasons. It can build a culture of high quality work in the classroom, and it truly warms my heart to see students mutually invest in each other. In a classroom that embraces peer critique, students are obligated and empowered to help everyone succeed. But, with that empowerment comes accountability. If valuable class time is being used for peer critique, the quality of that feedback must also be up for review.

I must admit, my first few attempts at peer critique were a complete waste of time. I tried using a variety of critique strategies, thinking that those opportunities for peer feedback would improve the work and make my job more efficient when my turn came. Wrong! Most of the feedback was general and did little to push the work forward. After a few disappointing rounds only seeing phrases like "good job" and "looks good to me," I decided to jump off the treadmill of half-hearted critique and offer support.

This support started with students reviewing and evaluating low, medium, and high quality models of student feedback. Then, I assigned each class to create a "Critique Do's & Don'ts" anchor chart to offer visual reminders during peer critique. One group of students took the assignment a bit further and offered an additional "Mad Libs" section, which involved some fill-

in-the-blank sentences starters (ex. "What if you tried _____ to improve _____ about _____?"). This investment in time to recalibrate their understanding around peer critique paid off as students became much more specific and intentional about what they were saying and writing to each other.

Oh, and one more thing...

Armed with this new understanding, be ready for students to call you out on your critique pitfalls. Mine wasted no time with reminding me of all the times I simply wrote, "excellent" on their papers, and they had the evidence to prove it. Accountability works both ways.

Lesson #3: Honor the Patina, Not Just the Shine

In my zeal to lead students to high quality work, I became obsessed with how the final products looked, especially with student projects. I wanted to turn my hallway into a museum that highlighted only the best. Aesthetics and craftsmanship matter, but my tunnel vision turned many of my students off. I had become too focused on "pretty" products, and that prevented me from respecting the real learning.

To honor all student growth, I turned my focus from product to process. Students started archiving drafts of work in their digital portfolios. In the past, students had just thrown those away. Now, they were platforms for reflection and growth. It was amazing to look back on a project and see how a student progressed through those drafts. It provided a compelling narrative of the struggles and accomplishments that can only happen when you are willing to curate and use crude, flawed work.

Remember, shiny end products can be nice. However, nothing is more beautiful than the patina that is earned over time through imperfect drafts. Perhaps nothing makes this point clearly than Austin's Butterfly.

Read Part 2 for my three final lessons and a bonus tip that might be the most important of all.

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Three Lessons Learned On the Journey to High Quality Student Work (Part 2)

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In my previous post, I discussed three major lessons learned on my way to high quality student work. Let's continue the conversation with three new lessons and a bonus tip that may be the most important of all.

Lesson #4: Create Rites of Passage

If we expect high quality work from students, we must have measures in place to ensure students do not just rush to the finish line. I referred to these measures as "rites of passage" with my students. To transition into the next phase of a project, students had to prove they were ready. This proof usually involved a draft of work and a teacher conference. Holding high standards for work required me to draw a line in the sand. No flinching allowed. However, if a student was not approved to move forward the first time, it did not mean she or he failed. It simply meant the student was not ready yet. "Yet" was critical to maintaining motivation. "Yet" meant an opportunity for students to revise and improve without fear of having their grade suffer. "Yet" also meant that I needed to scaffold, differentiate, and personalize my support to meet students where they were. To see "rites of passage" in action, check out the short video below of a former student passing through the process.

Critique and Revision in Action from Eric White on Vimeo.

I facilitated my first project without "rites of passage," and it was a disaster. Being new to PBL, I instructed students to create a tri-fold on an ancient civilization. It was not a rigorous, creative, or well-designed project. In fact, it was not true PBL at all, but that's another conversation. I gave students a week at home to complete the work and, to really raise the stakes, decided to count the final product as two test grades and invited the assistant principal to view the presentations. This completely backfired when presentation day came. Once the bell rang for 1st period, a procession of shoddy, careless, and plagiarized work entered the room. I knew then the rest of the day was going to miserable, and it was on full display for my superior. I left school angry and embarrassed. I even threw the tri-folds away in our dumpster. I figured I needed to get rid of the evidence before the rest of the staff became aware of my crime. Luckily, I had a thoughtful assistant principal who helped me understand the value of quality control and formative assessment. I never again facilitated a project without "rites of passage."

The big takeaway here is to perform more routine check-ups and fewer autopsies. That approach will help you avoid those DOA (dead on arrival) student products that haunted me early in my teaching career.

Lesson #5: Put More Eyes on the Prize

Remember that you don't have to do all the heavy lifting when it comes to critique and feedback. Peer and self-assessment can be an effective and efficient way to leverage the collective wisdom of your classroom. As a colleague and friend of mine used to say, "The smartest person in the room is the room."

In addition to your students, consider appealing to those in your community that may be able to move student work forward. Bringing in community stakeholders isn't a new idea, but I

often didn't utilize their expertise in the best way possible. I often just asked them to come in and speak to the students about their expertise or to nod politely at presentations. These were missed opportunities, but a fellow teacher helped me discover a better path. Her geometry students were working on a design challenge, which involved creating architectural blueprints. To make the feedback as authentic as possible, she brought in local architects to provide feedback on the drafts. That real feedback resonated in a way that could not have occurred if she only brought in the architects with my approach.

Lesson #6: Let Students Own the Rubric

One of my biggest pet peeves occurred when I reviewed rubrics with my students. After spending hours agonizing over just the right language, we would read through the entire document together, line after excruciating line. Once the bell rang for dismissal, my frustration and disappointment quickly set in. Many of my students left class, leaving the rubrics on their desks or the floor. And there I stood, alone in my room with my masterpiece scattered like confetti. How would my students create great work if they didn't care about the rubric? After having enough of this repeating scenario, I tried a few interventions that put my rubric back on their desks and in their minds.

My first strategy was shifting from students just reading the rubric to students applying the rubric. I had students use my rubric to assess a piece of anonymous student work before starting on their own. Low, medium, and high quality models helped calibrate students' understanding, so I didn't have to pick perfect artifacts. I also had an instance where I could not find any relevant models, so I created one myself. Students had fun using the rubric to point out all of my flaws, and I actually enjoyed the vulnerability I had to have in front of my students. Best of all, they had a firm understanding of the standards for success.

Another strategy to foster rubric ownership is to include students in creating them. A co-constructed rubric provides student voice with learning goals and assessment, which are areas that sometimes lack student involvement.

Bonus Tip: Stop Giving Trash Can Work

The most important lesson I've learned on the way to high quality student work is this: If I want students to invest in high quality work, I must give them work worth doing. The work I provide needs challenge them. It needs to tap into their interests. It needs to feel authentic and live beyond the classroom. In other words, it must pass the "Trash Can Test."

I once conducted a survey with students at a former school with one simple question for them to answer: What happens to your work once it has been graded? Without exception, students said it ended up in the trash. These were honest and candid responses that caused a number of us to redesign the type of work we were giving students. High quality student work doesn't happen by chance; it happens by design. And, that design starts with the quality of work we provide students in the first place.

What are some of your lessons learned on your journey to high quality student work? Comment below, and allow us to learn from your growth.