

A Constructivist Approach to Evaluating Eighth Grade Students At the Beginning of the Year

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[Editor's Note: This article was written in 2001, following the author's first attempt to introduce a new way to evaluate 8th grade students' writing and language arts abilities at the beginning of the school year. It is presented as a genuine "voice from the field" in the process of learning about constructivist approaches to English Language Arts as a teacher-researcher. Since this original writing, the author has made revisions to the approach; however, the article is presented in its original form to encourage others to undertake similar action-research.]

Abstract

A constructivist approach to writing assignment for middle-level students of English Language Arts is presented. Students were asked to become more fully engaged in the writing process than using a traditional approach, including student-based development of evaluation rubrics to guide the writing, more open selection of topics, and the use of a "Critical Friends" review as a form of formative evaluation and support. The article concludes with quantitative and qualitative results of the author's evaluation of the pilot.

Introduction

"Ok, class. I want you to read Scene III, Acts 1-5 of Shakespeare's *McBeth* and answer questions 1,2b, and 4 at the end of the reading. We will discuss these tomorrow. There will be a quiz on Friday, so read carefully."

"...And if we didn't understand it?"

"Well, read it again slower and think about it this time."

That is my memory of high school English. I can still see my teacher, an older lady due to retire at any moment, the required bifocals completing her English teacher uniform, standing in the front of the room dictating our assignments and

dutifully testing us every Friday. In all honesty, I don't remember any details about my English classes except the repeated pattern of read, answer questions and Friday tests. How different things are today!

If you were to walk into my classroom today, you would see a typical reading and writing workshop replete with the popular beanbags, book towers, standard based bulletin boards, and writer's and reader's response walls. My teaching is a combination of reading and writing workshops and standards. In reading workshop, I use pieces of literature to illustrate the standards; in writing workshop, they practice writing to meet those standards. I also spend time in my classroom reviewing and practicing for the 8th grade English Language Arts test. One of the biggest challenges I face every day when I work on lesson plans is the struggle between the way I would like to teach students to write and the way I have to teach them so they pass that test. What ends up happening is that I always feel like I'm pressured for time to do both. I never have long enough to teach essays or conference or study reading comprehension strategies, much less have a chance to talk to the kids about themselves and that wonderful story they are living called their lives. It is this life story that I spend as much time as I dare trying to get them to explore on the written page. I am always looking for new methods or techniques that help students increase the thinking and comprehension skills that are necessary for the state tests while at the same time include assignments that require a creativeness and relevancy that the students will appreciate.

A Different Approach

Over this past summer I thought I found a possible answer when I participated in the Constructivist Design Conference held at St. Lawrence University. While I was a little leery at first of its objective of allowing the students to be more engaged in their own learning and content selection, I wondered if this program might enhance my own style of teaching. I was also aware that constructivism did require a little more time than traditional methods, but so did any reading and writing workshop (Perkins, 1999). Time is what I am looking for, but if this method of teaching could get more learning out the same amount of time as a workshop, that would be great. What I really needed was something for the beginning of the year that would get students involved in an activity involving literacy and creativity as well as something of their own personality, motivation, and interests. I didn't know at the time that this was one of the major components of the constructivist method of teaching (Brooks and Brooks, 1993).

I also had another problem that I hoped a constructivist method of teaching would solve. As soon as I start giving them ideas or examples of writing, I have noticed the students begin to conform to the examples. They tend to write according to what they think I want. How could I get a piece of work from them that was truly their own? How could I make them feel comfortable enough to break away from what they think I want and do what they want?

Our school has adopted the America's Choice school reform program, and it requires a beginning, mid and end of year writing sample. These samples are supposed to show how the student is progressing in the area of writing. This year, I decided to pit these regular writing sample against a project completed under constructivist design to see which activity actually revealed more about the student's true ability as well as help me get to know the students more quickly and in-depth than through my regular workshops.

The First Assignment

The first assignment was traditional in nature. It was the day after the World Trade Center was bombed. In the halls and the classrooms, all we heard were people wondering what the president was going to do about it. Would we go to war? Who did it? Are they coming back? How many people died? My assignment was to have my students write as if they were the president of the United States and tell the American people what he/she was going to do to handle this crisis. For this assignment, they were given about 35-40 minutes of class time to write a rough draft. For homework, they were to complete a final copy after they did a self-revision and edit. The student's reaction to this assignment was less than enthusiastic. One student refused to do that assignment and asked for an alternative topic because the whole bombing situation bothered her. The other students didn't really seem to know where to start writing. Many were complaining...they just wanted to talk about it...why did they have to write about everything?

To help alleviate the confusion and to use as a sort of brainstorming activity, we did discuss some of their ideas. Most of the students had opinions on the matter and could easily explain what they thought the president should do. After about ten minutes, the discussion dwindled down and I had them begin to write. Most set upon the task immediately, a few sat chewing on the end of their pencil or doodling on the side of their paper as they thought about what they were going to say. There was no talking. Occasionally a student would raise their hand and ask me a clarifying question or wanted me to read their paper to see if it was “right.” I would re-iterate that the paper couldn’t be “wrong” because it was a creative piece, but they still wanted that reassurance from me.

At the end of about 35 minutes, the bell rang, signaling the end of class. For homework, they had to take those pieces, revise and edit them and then bring in their final copies the next day. There were many groans and questions ranging from “What if our first copy is good? Do we *have* to rewrite them?” to “If we have a computer at home, can we type them or use graphics?” There was no doubt in my mind that I would be getting a wide range of quality in their papers.

The next day, I realized quickly that I was right. Some students handed in the assignment on torn out notebook paper, fringe still intact. Others handed me professional looking typed papers of three and four pages long. I can’t say that this was a particular surprise. I haven’t been teaching long, but this is frequently

the spread of papers that I get. Usually, in a workshop setting, the papers that were not final quality material or did not meet the standard for revision, editing, or writing, would have to be re-done until they did meet the standard. But because this was an evaluative writing sample, I collected them as-is to evaluate.

The most obvious thing I learned from these papers was which students like to write and which did not and which students were better at grammar and spelling in their rough drafts and which needed work in this area. I made some notes to myself about each student's paper and then had the students file work in their portfolios. In the mean time, I had begun a constructivist approach to an introductory writing assignment.

Experimenting with Constructivism

As an anticipatory activity for my constructivist experiment, we had a discussion about whether they thought that the paper they had just handed in to me was an example of their writing abilities they have gained so far in school. A few students said yes, but most said it wasn't because they didn't like it so they didn't try as hard. A few also said that it was one of the first assignments so even if they got a low grade on it, they could still bring it up with other work we would be doing. That is when I told them the problem we had. I needed to find out just how good they were in their reading and writing. They needed to show me what they could do so that they didn't have to re-learn everything from the year before.

This was one of the few times I saw twenty heads nodding in agreement. So I gave them the following problem and mission:

Here is the problem: *You have just entered eighth grade and are starting out with a fresh slate. I need to know how well you write. Since it is the beginning of the year, I don't have any work from you yet. How am I going to know your writing and creative ability for English?*

Your Mission: *To come up with some writing project that can be completed within 24 hours and provide me with the best, most creative, and professional piece of writing that you can do. Consider this your introduction to me. You may do whatever you want as long as it can be completed in the time allotted and is appropriate for the classroom. If you need help with some ideas, see the attached project ideas list.*

At first the students were very reluctant to choose something. They wanted me to give them a topic or pick out a project for them to work on. I kept asking them to think about what they could do well. What did they like to do? What is something that they knew they would be proud of when they were finished? I also encouraged them to discuss it with other members of their group. If they weren't sure about an idea on the list, they were to ask other group members first. I also stressed that the list was only for those who could think of nothing else to do. Another requirement of the assignment was that there had to be at least a paragraph worth of writing in it or the equivalent of about twenty words. This paragraph could be spread out as in the case of a comic strip or much longer as in the case of a creative story or personal essay. A last requirement I put on the project was a time limit.

To coincide with the other writing piece, I only gave them 24 hours to complete the project.¹ They had the rest of the class to begin working on their project and then they had to finish it for homework. During the class time, I only saw one student that wasn't engaged in the project. The rest were busily writing or constructing some other part of the project. As they worked, they would occasionally stop and read part of what they had written to another student in their group. The enthusiastic responses they received would send them off on another writing flurry. One student was creating a comic strip and he and two other members in his group became involved in a discussion about what type of characters he could use because he couldn't draw. Their questions changed from, is this alright or is this enough to "Do you have a copy of this I could look at?" or "What does a real Wanted poster look like?" to excited statements of what they planned to do to their project that night to make it look better, bigger, grander.

I was almost in shock at the difference that I had seen from yesterday. These didn't even seem like the same kids. The project was open enough for students to begin where they felt the most comfortable (Brooks and Brooks, 58). As a teacher, I could use the observations I made watching them work on their projects to guide me in choosing future projects that will hit the different areas of intelligence that the students displayed. One student that informed me at the beginning of the year that he "didn't write, never wrote and would not ever write

¹ This ended up being a mistake because they could have used longer, but I was under a time pressure to get them well into my unit on essays before the five-week marking period. Unfortunately, there really wasn't anything I could take out of my unit and substitute this constructivism activity in its place.

for anybody,” was actively engaged in designing a graffiti wall with words that had a common theme. When I questioned him as to why he was only using pencil, he said that it was just a planning page that he would have to do the real one at home because I didn’t have the right materials. A planning page??!!! I had tried to get him to use a planning page with an essay but had only met with refusal. It was bad enough to have to write an essay once, who in their right mind would practice it first, right? However, because he was doing something he truly cared about and wanted to be his best, a planning page to practice on made perfect sense to him.

Out of the class of nineteen, there were three students I was worried about. One would not take part in the activity at all. Another was very involved in the cutting and pasting to create a replica of the twin towers, but couldn’t tell me what the writing portion was going to be about or how he was going to work it into his project. The third had a similar problem. He kept creating origami figures but didn’t seem to know what to do next. My suggestions didn’t seem to interest him, so I just repeated the written requirement for him to think about and left him alone. He said he was just trying to think of ideas and he could think better when he was doing something else.

The next day they returned and were given 30 minutes to put the finishing touches on their projects.² We then moved on to essay writing during the regular

² One child never did do the project; the twin towers student refused to do a writing piece for his project and the origami student did create a very realistic Italian restaurant menu.

reading/writing workshop format. Each day during writing workshop, I called the students up to talk to them about their projects. We began each conference with a warm-up “chat” where I encouraged the students to briefly talk about themselves. This chat along with the answers to the following questions revealed valuable information about the student’s personality and interests—valuable information for helping this student pick creative writing pieces or books to read. Some questions that I asked them were: Why did you choose this particular project? What does this project tell me about your reading/writing ability in English? What do you like the best about your project? If given the opportunity, are there any parts of it that you would like to change or make better? and finally, Overall, based on effort and the final appearance before me now, what grade would you give yourself on this project? I also let them talk about themselves at the beginning of the conference as a warm-up.

A Student-created Evaluation Rubric

At the end of the conferencing process, the students were given a chance to create a rubric that I would use to grade their final projects when they handed them in. I gave them the following criteria: Appearance, Writing (Must have at least a paragraph’s worth), Creativity, and Effort. Working in groups, the students jotted down ideas for what would be a grade of three first. Then they went back and put down a couple of things for each of the other grades. As a class, we filled in a rubric on chart paper that used pieces from all their rubrics. I typed it up and provided them with a copy of it the next day. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Student-created rubric for constructivist projects
(left in student words as much as possible)

Criteria	4	3	2	1
Appearance	Extremely neat with no mistakes or cross-outs. Typed. Lots of vivid colors are used when necessary. Smooth, unwrinkled paper. Looks like you could send it in to a magazine.	Very neat. Could have one cross out, but only one line through or use whiteout. Written in very best handwriting. Color is used when needed to make pictures or titles stand out. Paper is not wrinkled or has fringe on side.	Pretty neat, but could have two or three neat cross-outs or whiteouts. Handwriting is neat enough to read easily. Paper a little wrinkled, but no fringe on side. Some color is used in pictures or as emphasis.	Not very neat because there are lots of cross-outs or whiteout is sloppy. Handwriting is hard to read. Paper is wrinkled or torn and has fringe on side. No color is used-very plain looking.
Writing (Must have at least a paragraph's worth)	There is a lot more than a paragraph's worth of writing. High level of vocabulary that uses a lot of different words. No spelling or grammar mistakes. Used a lot of description and sensory details.	If writing were condensed, there would be at least a paragraph's worth. Vocabulary is varied so same word isn't used all the time. Very few spelling/grammar mistakes (1-2 mistakes) Tried to use lots of description and sensory details.	There are only two or three sentences worth of writing. Vocabulary uses different words but they are too easy. There are more spelling/vocab. mistakes (3-5). A little description is used but doesn't give you a picture in your head.	Little or no writing in the project. Vocabulary uses words like "nice" a lot. Lots of spelling/grammar mistakes (more than 6). Hardly any description is used so you can't picture what the person is talking about at all.
Creativity	The project is really different and even surprising. When someone reads it or sees it they will think, "Wow!" The author tried to see something in a really different way. The author has succeeded in making this project their own because you can see their personality in the writing and/or drawings.	The project isn't the same thing as everyone else is doing. It is really different. You can tell the person used their imagination and thought about it for a while. The person's project shows signs of the author's personality.	The project may be something other people are doing, but the author tried to change some part of it to make it different and their own.	The project is something that is very common that many other people may have chosen. The author didn't try to use their imagination to change anything or put their personality in it.
Effort	The author spent a lot of time coming up with the project and completing it. They are very proud of their project and seem eager to show it to people.	The author has obviously spent some time thinking about their project and putting it together. The person acts like they are proud of their work.	The author spent some time on the project but some things could have used more thinking through. Some parts look hurried like the author was getting behind.	It doesn't look like the author spent very much time on their project. (Like it was done on the bus.) The project might not even be finished.

A Critical Friends Approach to Conferencing

They were now ready for peer conferencing and I had decided to try the “Critical Friends” review I had learned at the Constructivist Design Conference in the summer. I was skeptical about the Critical Friends review at first because I wasn’t sure it would be possible to do with eighth graders. I did modify the time limits for everything to make it much shorter. Each student was given a handout of the Critical Review Protocol (Figure 2):

Figure 2 **Student Critical Review Protocol** (Adapted from Institute, 2001)

Students will be working in pairs

- 2 min:** Student A presents his/her project to Student B
- 2 min:** Student B asks any question about the project that they didn’t understand
- 3 min:** Student A takes a minute to reconsider their project and then explains to student B what changes they are planning on making.
- 1 min:** Student B may ask any questions that they still don’t understand about the project.
- 3 min:** Student B offers warm and cool feedback. Student A will take notes.
- 1 min:** Student A reflects quietly on student B’s feedback. There is no talking during this time.

I allowed them to choose their own partner because I wanted them to feel comfortable talking and receiving feedback from that person. Then we went through each step as a class.

The first step. This step went very well. The two minutes were plenty of time for them to explain their projects but not so much time that they would get off on a tangent.

The second step. This was a long two minutes. No one seemed to have any questions. The projects were fairly straightforward and obvious in nature.

The third step. It took most of them a minute to ninety seconds to tell the other student what they were going to change. They seemed too nervous to just sit quietly and think about their projects before going into the changes they were going to make. If there were a second or two where they were both sitting there without saying anything, the giggles would start.³

The fourth step. This was about right. Most didn't have any further questions, so it turned into a quick recap of "This is good except ___ which I know you are going to change."

³ Any kind of peer revision takes them almost a year to get to the point where they are giving each other feedback that is really good. This step in the critical review will get a lot better with practice.

The fifth step. This is where student B offers warm and cool feedback (3 min) was tough for the students. They had no problem offering the warm feedback, but didn't want to offer any cool feedback of a serious nature. We went through this section twice. The second time I had them go through the rubric and tell the student where they thought they were below a 3. This would be the cool feedback because it would be the area the student would need to work on. Unfortunately, most students gave each other 4's.

The sixth step. Lastly, Student A reflects quietly on student B's feedback. There is no talking during this time (1 min.) I had student A look at the rubric and then their project and think about what parts they were going to need to change to bring those areas up to at least a three. This worked pretty well for those students whose rubric was marked honestly. However, this was a long minute for those students whose rubric was marked all 4's.

At the end of class, I asked the group what they thought of the critical review. They said they liked it, but that it took too long. They did think it was very useful, however, and would be able to use some of the advice they had gotten. I told them that they could have the rest of the class to begin working on a final copy of their projects. Surprisingly, this was met with a lot of resistance. They had good ideas for improving their projects during the conferences, now they didn't seem interested. Apparently it was one thing to be able to point out what they would like to change and another to actually put the effort into making the changes.

The next day, there were only two students who made changes in their projects. The rest handed the first projects back in again for a grade. Needless to say I was very disappointed. I asked several of the students why they didn't fix up their project and their response was generally that it took too long or they had too much other homework. So I collected the projects, graded them and returned them to the students. I was left feeling as if the project fell apart. The student reactions and progress at the beginning of this project were too favorable to discount this type of teaching completely. I began to reflect on different aspects of the last two weeks that I didn't particularly like and what I could do to change to make the project turn out better.

Reflections on the Pilot Project

One of the biggest problems that I had was that my students were not ready for this type of activity yet. Because it was so close to the beginning of the year, they were not at ease working in groups and had done very little conferencing and no peer evaluations. Much of their classes to this point had been minilessons on classroom structure and reading/writing workshop expectations. We had also started working some on Literature responses and essays. So this project was like a detour for them.

First, I think it was a mistake not to give them enough time to complete the project. They could have worked on these during writing workshop for up to a

week and had plenty to do. I could have then conducted the conferences while they were in progress instead of at the end. A larger project might have worked better. This project was so small it was more of an assignment than a project.

Second, I think that I should have had the students work on the rubric before beginning the project instead of at the end. My reasoning was that I didn't want to influence them in any way as to the choice and content of the project, but I think that they needed more criteria at the beginning. Then, after they finished their projects the first time, I needed a big block of time to conference with them so I had them work on various essay assignments while I conducted the conferences. They found this confusing and I didn't like it either because everything seemed disconnected.

Third, during the second step of the critical review I should have had them refer back to the rubric to ask their questions. A guided sheet where students jot down questions and suggestions might not be a bad idea during the review process.

After the project was completed, I gave the students a questionnaire to fill out regarding their preferences for English and writing assignments. The results were are found in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Student Responses to Questionnaire
(Projects vs. Traditional Assignments in English Class)

	Questions	True	False
1.	I really liked the writing assignment that asked us a question and we had to answer it.	15	23
2.	I really liked the project.	24	13
3.	I prefer assignments that are given to us with the topic written out and all the criteria listed.	14	22
4.	I wish we could pick our own projects and assignments without all the requirements	31	5
5.	I love to write	15	23
6.	I usually get pretty high marks in English class	16	21
7.	English is my favorite subject	7	30
8.	Math is my favorite subject	11	26
9.	Science is my favorite subject	11	26
10.	Art and Music are my favorite subjects	8	27
11.	Talking to other people in groups helps me to think and get better ideas.	22	14
12.	Whenever I work on writing or other homework, I need it to be completely quiet.	16	21
13.	Sometimes there are so many requirements to an assignment that I feel like my writing gets stilted and really isn't the best I could do.	30	7
14.	I wish I had longer to work on my projects because I like to change things to make them better.	29	8
15.	I find that I usually like the way I do a project the first time the best. I usually don't ever try to change anything.	10	28
16.	I consider myself a perfectionist	9	28
17.	I think that other people's opinions and advice on how to improve my work is very valuable to me.	22	15
18.	I hate it when other people look at my work. It makes me very nervous because I'm afraid they won't like it.	19	18
19.	When we have to do a project, I prefer the teacher to give me a list of things I can do.	25	11
20.	When the teacher gives me a topic to write about, I feel like some of my creativity has been taken away.	16	19

The table shows that most of the students liked the project better. An overwhelming majority of the students would like to choose their own projects without all the predetermined criteria. Most felt that sometimes there were so many requirements to an assignment that their own writing became stilted and not really the best they could do.

Given this information, however, a majority of the students ironically said they preferred the teacher to give them a list of things to choose from rather than trying to think of something on their own. Another area that seemed contradictory was that almost all of the students considered themselves perfectionists and wished they had longer to do their projects so they could change things to make them better. Yet almost the same number of students also said that they found they usually like the way they did a project the first time and didn't usually try to change anything. This was made very clear to me in class when the students were enthusiastic about beginning the project, but elected not to make any changes on it, even changes they themselves thought would make their project better.

Another question that I found interesting was that over half of the students said they love to write and usually get pretty high marks in English, yet almost all of the students said that English was not their favorite subject. Math, Science, Art and Music each got about half the votes, whereas English received less than a quarter of the votes.

I think what the students are trying to tell us is that they do want more control over their assignments and take enough pride in their work to do their best. Even though they chose not to redo the projects I gave them, I think more would have, had we the time and had I set it up a little differently.

Conclusion

In attempting to stay as close as possible to the format of the Constructivist Conference in which I participated over the summer, I didn't modify the program enough for my students. In "The Many Faces of Constructivism," Perkins (1999) talked about pragmatic constructivism:

View constructivism as a toolbox for problems of learning. Troublesome knowledge of various kinds invites constructivist responses to fit the difficulties—not one standard constructivist fix. If a particular approach does not solve the problem, try another—more structured, less structured, more discovery oriented, less discovery oriented, whatever works.

(Perkins, 1999, 11)

This makes a lot more sense than trying to force fit the practice in the classrooms. Teachers are going to have to take a close look at the program and decide what parts of it are going to work for them. Then they are going to have to work with their students to get them to a point where they are willing to do the type of thinking that a constructivist classroom demands. It is going to take modifications and hard work, but I am excited about the possibilities.

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