WriterKEY

Building Better Writers

Article Analysis

Article:

Frey, Nancy, Fisher, Douglas. "A Formative Assessment System for Writing Improvement." *English Journal* 103.1(2013): 66-71.

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Publisher Abstract: *The authors assert that the time teachers spend providing feedback could better be used to focus on formative assessment systems.*

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The writers of this article, Frey and Fisher, begin with the premise that the feedback teachers provide to students on summative tasks is of little value. They contend that:

> Feedback that is deferred until after the summative task has been completed is unlikely to affect student understanding because students' attention is now focused on a new topic. In these cases, students typically check their grade and fill the physical or digital trash bin with the papers that have been returned to them. We realized that our hard work in giving them feedback was for naught (p.66).

Frey and Fisher support these claims with student survey data that queried attitudes about feedback and grading. The range of response was startling; only 3% sought feedback about their editing, but 80% wanted to just know their grade. The authors conclude the initial section with the assertion that teachers need to think about writing as a formative skill-building process if they want to change the focus from grades to student improvement. They commit to "get better at analyzing students' writing for errors and misconceptions" (p.67) and conclude that a responsive formative assessment system is required to address this issue.

Yet, perhaps, the more compelling section of this paper is not what drove them to search for answers, but their recognition of the real problem. In the section of the article titled *Shifting Time and Energy,* the authors point to a necessary shift in teacher perspective. "Instead of requiring them [students] to submit drafts periodically to measure for compliance, we began providing students more detailed feedback about their progress" (p.68). Frey and Fisher found that the time saved recognizing errors allows feedback to be more efficiently communicated to students in a timely way. "As a result, we now spend a significant portion of what had once been our grading time focused on cataloging the errors that students make such that we can respond to those errors appropriately." (p.68). This efficiency makes the instruction more effective and more relevant to the students who need it.

In the next section of their article, Frey and Fisher describe the more purposeful driven instruction that emerged once they recognized where they were inefficient. Similar to other published research, they found that understanding the purpose of their assessment led to more-focused instruction. This link provided the motivation and understanding to focus on formative data in their

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How can WriterKEY help?

Frey and Fisher's remedy of tracking errors and issues and then using that information to guide instruction is the right course. WriterKEY is the digital tool that makes the process more effective and efficient. By digitally tracking this data over time, teachers make informed decisions.

How can WriterKEY help?

WriterKEY allows multiple teachers to view and provide feedback to students about their writing. Because everything is all housed in the same application, monitoring and improving student progress can truly be collaborative.

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collaborative planning time as well. Their analysis of data also included an eye toward the Special Education teacher and students with IEPs. "As error analysis tools became more prevalent in our department, special educators were able to focus more reliably on the content. Now they are able to integrate IEP goals and objectives more meaningfully" (p.69). The authors recognize the importance of putting data in the hands of people who can act on it to help students advance their learning.

Frey and Fisher spend the next portion of their article describing the differences among error types and aligning them with the proper instructional approach. And, for many teachers, this is when the science becomes an art because they not only know what and how to teach, they differentiate to ensure each student receives appropriate instruction. For these authors, the key "has been error analysis, as it has allowed us to use formative assessment data in a truly informed way" (p.71). Understanding the gaps in the informative assessment model is the first step in finding a solution. The second step is understanding what does not need fixing and move on. Frey and Fisher concluded, by "shifting our focus from grading summative assessments to looking more closely for patterns of errors that can inform instruction, we discovered we had more time to analyze students' work in progress" (p.71). By becoming more efficient, these teachers have become more effective.

> **How can WriterKEY help?**
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> *WriterKEY teachers and students use rubrics that are designed to be formative, not just long-range targets. The defined objectives in our rubrics- that are explicitly aligned to standards- are both an instructional tool and an assessment tool.*

Implications for Further Consideration

WriterKEY's systematic formative assessment system aligns to the findings presented. WriterKEY teachers benefit from our system, which moves formative assessment into the areas of helping students focus on craft as well as editing. Distinguishing those two is a key pedagogical approach of our tools. We believe in systematizing the connection between teachers and students and have built WriterKEY to facilitate a personal, year-long-writing-conference approach. Students can greatly benefit from the personal touch of a spoken comment, a writing conference, and the ability to be part of a conversation about data. To help them grow into better writers, students should be active participants in the analysis. By being fully engaged in the analysis process, students see where their writing is strong and where they need to improve.

These authors approach the topic with an open eye toward continuous improvement. Clearly, they are thoughtful, reflective educators who enrich the conversation about what works in a real classroom, in a real school, and with real students.

About WriterKEY: WriterKEY is a web-based application designed to improve the teaching, learning, and assessment of writing across the curriculum. More information about WriterKEY may be found at www.writerkey.com.