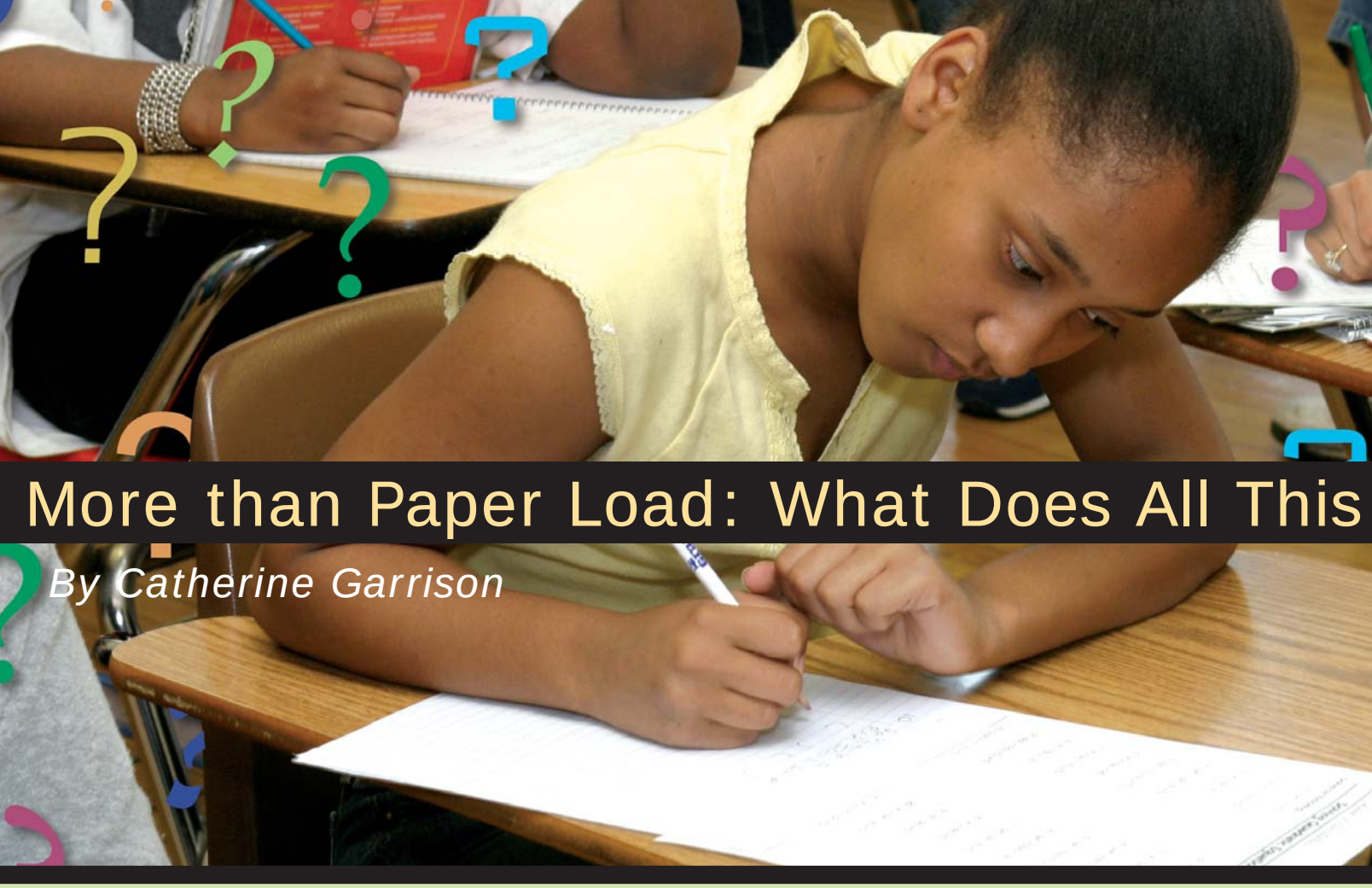


More than Paper Load: What Does All This

By Catherine Garrison

Today's educators pay close attention to standardized tests and disaggregated data in relation to accountability reporting. Although this is a critical step in improving student achievement, the most valuable tool you have to guide your instruction and to inform you about the progress of each of your students is right in front of your eyes and completely within your control: the student work you see every day and that you take home each night to grade.

Educators often overlook this largest body of evidence about student performance. But with careful and deliberate examination of various sources of student work, teachers can gather a wealth of information about student achievement and about their own instructional practices.

No, I am not suggesting more marks or comments on the papers or more stringent grading policies. I'm suggesting the opposite. Examining student work is not about grading or scoring papers. It is about looking critically at and asking some serious questions about what students produce relative to a given task. In *Collaborative Analysis of Student Work*, Georgea M. Langor, Amy B. Colton, and Loretta S. Goff refer to these as "focusing questions." Here are some examples of questions to ask:

- Are the students meeting the standard or expected performance, and what are the indicators that tell me this?
- If the students' responses are incorrect or off base, what does that reveal about my instruction or the way the task was designed?
- How well do the students understand the concept? At what depth can they respond or demonstrate their knowledge? Was I teaching at a lower level than I expected in their performance?
- What growth has this particular student exhibited?

These engaging questions help educators use the information power of student work in a formative way when it is still possible to intervene and adjust to the needs of individual students. The most effective way to answer these questions and use the information that is revealed by analyzing student work is to establish collaborative teams or to set aside existing team time for this purpose.

Student Work Tell Us?

Why Spend the Time and Energy?

The most valuable aspect of coming together as a faculty team to examine student work is the support system that is established through a professional community.

Let's think about professional communities. In other professions, major decisions are made through collaboration or by sharing research and new information in a collaborative way. In many middle schools, faculty teams make regular decisions about curriculum, scheduling, and conferencing, yet they do not sit down together to examine student work, at least not on a regular basis or with a purpose other than scoring common assessments. Determining what happens in the classroom, good or bad, is left solely to the individual teacher. This reinforces the old adage, "Teaching is the loneliest profession."

Teachers are not the only beneficiaries of collaborative examination of student work. By engaging in this process, faculty members are better prepared to establish and articulate to their students clear learning goals and targets, to help parents and other stakeholders understand what quality student work looks like, and to set consistent expectations across grade levels and content areas.

During the collaborative process, teams reach consensus or agreement on four significant elements:

- Recognizing the importance of and using protocols for specific purposes
- Establishing common understanding of content standards
- Analyzing student work against intended levels of performance
- Evaluating instructional and curricular implications that are revealed in the student work.

Teachers become empowered. As stated by the *Harvard Project Zero*, "The collaborative examination of student work is a window into students' thinking and learning and a significant model of school improvement from within."

Protocols

If doctors are willing to present to colleagues medical cases in which they made errors, if attorneys sit together to analyze the transcripts of a case that was lost, why can't teachers share their student work and ask for help in determining progress toward a targeted standard or enlist collegial help to improve their practice?

The most frequent response to this question is that teachers are afraid of being chastised or criticized. If this is the case, then let's look at a process that will enable faculty members to come together effectively and safely as they reveal what goes on in the inner sanctum of their classrooms.

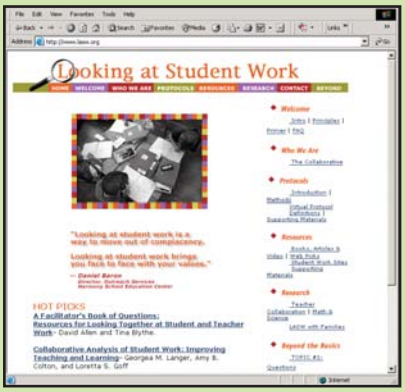
We all function under protocols or established rules for various situations. Protocols are agreed upon guidelines for conversation and a way to build the skills and capacity of a faculty team to collaborate and communicate more effectively. We certainly create protocols for classroom behavior

expectations and procedures with and for use by students. We also expect that students will not jeer at others' comments or questions.

Using protocols, as outlined on the Web site Looking at Student Work *(www.lasw.org)*:

- Helps to create a safe process for asking challenging questions and to ensure equity when addressing issues
- Makes the most effective use of precious time
- Prevents domination by one person
- Supports conversations about teaching and learning.

There are many types of protocols, and teams should establish several formats for different purposes. A different protocol would be needed for each of these scenarios: looking longitudinally at one specific student or a designated group of students; work produced as a culmination of an extended, integrated unit of study; and one teacher presenting student work based on a lesson targeted to a specific standard.



Here is a step-by-step example of a protocol for one presenting teacher.

- Identify one presenting teacher from the team.
- Have one person designated to be the facilitator and to keep the process flowing.
- Have a sequence of activities such as the following:
  1. The facilitator asks focusing question(s).
  2. The teacher presents instructional context and targeted standards.
  3. The teacher provides a description of the task and the expected performance.
  4. The group provides feedback relative only to the focusing question.
  5. The teacher asks probing questions for clarification.
  6. The teacher reflects on the feedback.

It is difficult to imagine that any faculty member would have a negative attitude toward a colleague who is seeking honest and supportive answers to questions about how to improve practice. My advice for dealing with anyone who challenges, who resists, or doesn't have "buy-in" to the process is to simply uninvite that person to the meetings when collaborative examination of student work is planned. Using protocols and having a strong facilitator will eventually eliminate this kind of behavior.

The first time a team works through this process, it may be a good idea to use student work samples from a previous year or to ask one outgoing team member to model the presenting teacher role. The facilitator must keep the team from descending into scoring practices or getting side-tracked by conversations about the students not relative to the work. In other words, this is not the time to discuss Mary's consistent tardiness or Joe's inability to complete his homework.

Content Standards

While examining student work, faculty teams often realize the need to agree on the language of content standards. Content standards are not add-ons that must be taught after the "regular" curriculum; they are embedded in the curriculum and provide a scope and sequence from kindergarten through grade 12—the enduring knowledge and skill sets students must achieve.

Given their importance and the general way they are usually stated in state or district documents, it is imperative that teams of teachers have common understanding of exactly what students are expected to know and be able to do. As Anne Wheelock states in *Safe to be Smart*, "Standards provide a means to focus instruction and help teachers think more deeply and critically about what they are teaching and what students are learning."

Reflecting back to the targeted standard while examining student work will reveal any discrepancies among faculty. Some collaborative meetings should be set aside for content-specific conversations across grade levels for this purpose. These are the rich and valuable professional conversations that will establish content priorities and frame consistent instruction for any stated standard.

This consistency becomes invaluable for team members in other content areas when everyone agrees on the application of specific standards across the curriculum. It does a great disservice to students if one seventh grade language arts teacher is explaining the expected application of summary writing to his team one way, while another seventh grade language arts teacher is explaining the same standard differently to her team. Establishing criteria and suggested ways to instruct toward a particular standard will assist in the evaluation of student work by making reflection on instructional practices more meaningful.

Performance Standards

Every middle school teacher hears this lamentable whine, "Why do we have to do that? Ms. Jones doesn't make us do it." True, we've all heard it, but have we really listened? There

may be more truth to the statement than we might care to admit. How can we promote student learning and achievement if we do not all carry the same expectations?

Relative to content standards are performance standards or grade-level expectations. If content standards form what students are to know and be able to do, performance standards describe and establish how well. Reaching team, grade-level, and cross-grade agreement on performance expectations with exemplars of quality student work for a particular standard reinforces the skill and capacity of a team to determine instructional implications revealed in student work.

Sample:

General Standard: Understanding Text
Grades 5-8: Identify and analyze sensory details and figurative language.
This skill set has a span from grade five through grade eight. What is the expected performance toward this standard for a fifth grader as opposed to a sixth grader, a seventh grader, or an eighth grader? Where is the differentiation for depth of knowledge and the ability to demonstrate it as students mature in their learning?

If faculty members do not agree on how student performance should be reflected in grade-level expectations and exemplars of quality work, it is quite conceivable that students could remain stagnant in their ability levels for four consecutive school years.

Through the deliberate and collaborative approach to examining student work, faculty teams will soon recognize these issues and begin to formulate instructional practices that scaffold learning toward higher achievement expectations. Engaging in these dialogues helps to create a uniform understanding and application of essential skills and performance expectations by all teachers for all students.

Willingness to Implement Change

American author James Baldwin is quoted as saying, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." This idea is applicable to many life situations, but its relevance to the education change process is paramount. It is easy to become mired in procedure and lose sight of what we can control and change. But, if we do not commit to making the changes that are within our control when we recognize them, the process of analyzing student work and the engaging dialogues have no value.

We must listen to what our colleagues are saying and reflect on our teaching practice. The willingness to grow, to be self-evaluative, and to adjust where necessary is not only professional, it is what we expect of our students. This is a life skill. Those same doctors and attorneys I referred to earlier do not practice in the same way or use the same research they did 10, 15, or 20 years ago. At least we hope they don't!

Examining student work is a valuable process that benefits everyone. Teachers become invigorated by collegial support and a stronger professional community. Students benefit as teaching improves and their individual needs are recognized and met. Parents and community members benefit when they come to realize the strength of the faculty members and their ability to establish criteria for standards and learning. On a larger scale, examining student work is a powerful tool for establishing accountability from within and improving student achievement. ■

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