

Using Samples to Co-Construct Criteria for Writing

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What does quality writing look like? Working together, students and teachers can use writing samples to build a picture of what counts in quality writing. As Anne Davies (2000) suggested, “When we give students samples to review, and we talk with them about what is important in their learning we help them build mental models of what success looks like” (p.6). Co-constructing criteria with students supports them on their journey to become self directed, independent writers.

Why Should We Co-Construct Criteria With Students?

When students and teachers work together to co-construct criteria a **clear learning target** is identified. It increases the students’ understanding of what they will be learning and what will be assessed. As the class studies samples, they begin to develop a **common language** for thinking and talking about writing. Students and teachers begin to use this common language in the **descriptive feedback** they provide throughout the writing process. Co-constructing criteria is a **student centered** process that encourages students to **construct their own understandings** of what counts in quality writing. When students know what counts, they are able to set goals, self assess and improve their writing.

“Students can reach any target that they know about and that holds still for them.”

-Rick Stiggins
Davies, A. (2000)p.19

How Do We Co-Construct Criteria With Students?

1. Selecting Samples Teachers can build their collection of writing samples by:

- saving student writing samples from year to year
- sharing with colleagues
- selecting samples from published authors
- downloading exemplars available on the internet. (Links to some exemplar sites are listed at the bottom of this article)

The teacher chooses 4-6 samples for the process based on her assessment of current student writing. She chooses samples that represent the writing her students are currently producing

as well as samples that lead to the next curricular outcome for her class. For example, if her assessment reveals that the students need to use more adjectives, she will select samples that include the effective use of adjectives.

Co-Constructing Criteria

- Brainstorm
- Sort and Organize
- Make and Post a Chart
- Add, Revise and Refine

Davies, A. (2000). *Making Classroom Assessment Work*.
Courtenay, B.C. : Connections (p. 31)

2. A Framework In her book, *Making Classroom Assessment Work*, Anne Davies (2000) outlines a four step process for co-constructing criteria with students: Brainstorm; Sort and Organize; Make and Post a Chart; Add, Revise, Refine. When using criteria with students, targeted instruction, practice and assessment takes place between the third and fourth steps.

3. Using the Framework - An Example for Paragraph Writing The teacher would assess student writing to determine which 5 or 6 samples would be used in the process in order to move students forward in their writing.

Brainstorm – As a class, students brainstorm what counts in a quality paragraph with their responses recorded on a chart. Then the whole class looks at one or two paragraph samples together and talks about what the author did well. Any new attributes of quality writing are added to the chart. Working in partners, the students analyze the other samples, noting what the authors did well. They come back to the group and share their findings and again, new attributes are added to the chart. If the students don't notice an attribute, the teacher can point it out and then add that attribute to the final chart.

Sort and Organize – As a class, the students and teacher sort the attributes into groups and choose a title for each category. For instance, the category entitled organization might include: lead sentence, closing sentence, relevant details, sentence order makes sense. Other categories may include mechanics, word choice, voice, ideas or content.

Make and Post a Chart – The classified criteria are recorded and posted on a class chart. Student copies of the criteria chart can be used before writing as a tool to set goals, during writing as a self assessment tool and after writing as a tool for offering descriptive feedback.

Targeted Instruction – After the criteria chart is created, the class practices using the criteria to assess other samples and finally their own writing. Then, based on their self assessment, students set goals for their learning. The teacher plans lessons to target common student identified needs. As they practice their writing, students regularly refer to the criteria. Students are taught how to offer descriptive feedback to peers and a cycle of self, peer and teacher assessment supports students as they practice writing.

Add, Revise, Refine – The criteria chart is not a finished document. As the class uses the criteria, they may choose to change, delete or refine their attributes. As student writing improves, new samples may be studied in order to add new attributes to the list.

All students can learn to write effectively. When we co-construct criteria with students we invite them to build their own picture of what quality looks like. As Stiggins (cited in Davies 2000) reminded us, “Students can reach any target that they know about and that holds still for them.”

Websites for Samples:

http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/perf_stands/writing.htm

http://www.tki.org.nz/r/assessment/exemplars/eng/index_e.php

References

Davies, A. (2000) *Making Classroom Assessment Work*. Courtenay B.C.: Classroom Connections International Inc.

Gregory, K., Cameron, C., Davies, A. (1997) *Setting and Using Criteria*. Courtenay B.C.: Classroom Connections International Inc.