

To Worksheet or Not to Worksheet: Using Student Writing to Direct Instruction in Grammar and Mechanics

by Dave Ellison

This article started as a conversation with *English Practice* co-editor Joanne Panas as to how and when worksheets for the purpose of teaching grammar, punctuation, and usage can be considered best practice. In subject areas such as math and chemistry, it's safe to say worksheets provide valuable opportunities to perform numeric operations or balance equations. In English language arts classes, using worksheets is not so straightforward.

After teaching at six different high schools in three districts, I have noticed many ELA colleagues have the persistent belief that if they aren't including fifteen to twenty minutes of discrete grammar, punctuation, or usage instruction several times a week they're shirking their responsibilities. Another factor encouraging ELA teachers to use stand-alone worksheets is the simple fact there are scads of them—everywhere! The ubiquity of these resources makes them hard to resist.

Students can deepen their understanding of grammar, punctuation, and usage concepts if their teachers can learn to be more strategic. Here's how.

Whenever students provide a writing sample, it's an opportunity for informal assessment as to their skills in a given area. The key is to develop a mindset of collecting "data" and tailoring the instruction to fit the needs of the students. This practice of adjusting instruction based on the information that students are providing is at the heart of the assessment-to-instruction cycle.

The teacher takes on the role of a grammar diagnostician and thereby resists the temptation to fix individual student errors, which we all know has negligible payback for all involved. Instead, the teacher looks for patterns of errors displayed by a number of students, and then creates a worksheet by simply compiling the recurrent errors from the students' own work. An even simpler way of doing this is to write the sentences on the board and have pairs of students work to correct them (this has the added benefit of saving paper).

There are immediate benefits to both the teacher and the students by using this approach. The teacher doesn't have to stop and flag errors on student papers but can devote energy to providing descriptive feedback on the actual focus of the writing assignment. Students benefit because this type of feedback is more individualized and promotes their understanding of the big ideas. Descriptive

feedback takes time, but it's time well spent. It is a key component of formative assessment—assessment for and as learning—that acknowledges we don't have to assess everything every time.

The students who display a weakness in an aspect of grammar, punctuation, or usage get the important message that they aren't the only ones. Finally, an added benefit of having student-generated sentences as the focal point for grammar, punctuation, and usage mini-lessons is they provide an opportunity to revisit the group discussion or piece of literature that was the basis of the student writing activity. Opinions or ideas that may not have been expressed are then shared.

I've used this approach over the years to cover everything from faulty pronoun reference to misplaced modifiers (always entertaining!) and vary it to include editing on topic sentences, sentence beginnings, and wordiness.

Another way I use student work is to create a worksheet by compiling a list of sentence "gems" to showcase well-crafted sentences. I try to tie this into an aspect of writing—usually in the course of reading and discussing literature—I have been trying to get students to notice, such as effective short sentences, active voice, creative sentence beginnings, etc. A simple way to use the "gems" worksheet is to have students circle a few sentences they really like and discuss their reasons in pairs, then share out to the whole group.

I still think there's a time and place for using conventional worksheets, especially on a selective basis with individual students; for example, the student who simply needs more practice to master the semicolon. When done in this manner, use of worksheets becomes part of differentiated instruction for supporting individual student learning.

What I have learned to avoid is the out-of-context, spirit-deadening, whole-class worksheet that wastes valuable instructional time. When I take my students into "grammar land" as I call it, I want them to recognize the material (they wrote it!) and know that we'll only stay long enough to learn something important.

When I collect subsequent writing samples, I'll look to see if the students are making the same mistakes. If some of them still are, I can do a few things to keep it on their personal radars, such as providing a mini-lesson prior to a writing activity, pointing out its proper use in published materials, or making it a focus during a peer editing exercise. It might also appear again on another worksheet of student-generated sentences—either as problem sentences or as "gems" for those who have mastered the particular concept.

The following are examples of two lists I put together for my students—"student sentence gems" and "student topic sentences." In the first case I asked students to pick a couple favorites and be prepared to explain what they liked. In the second, using topic sentences I'd selected from student

paragraphs on *Obason*, by Joy Kagawa, I asked students to rate the sentences in terms of four criteria: context, focus, fluency, and diction. In each case these exercises helped us discuss and evaluate effective writing.

Examples of Student Sentence “Gems”

These are all good examples of sentence fluency and variety. Pick out a couple of favourites and be prepared to explain what you like about them.

1. Now, I am not a cheater by nature, I’m just not the type, but with this teacher it was just too easy; it didn’t seem wrong.
2. So my pen was vigorously scratching on the sheet of paper while my English teacher got closer and closer, looking over everyone’s work to see if it was complete.
3. Over the years I have learnt that if you want to receive good grades, not only do you have to put effort into it, but you also have to have a good relationship with your teacher.
4. As I reached into the garbage which was full of candy wrappers and juice boxes, I dug through them as the pear had sunk to the bottom.
5. On the first day, he didn’t have a pen or a pencil with him and had to borrow mine, which he never returned.
6. Our parents were outraged! I remember sitting in between my parents and the teachers and learning a very new vocabulary.
7. Her face was all red and blotchy. Her eyes were swollen and glossy.
8. When the class ends, the teacher leaves, and one of my classmates turns to me and says quietly, “You know what? The test we have just written—I saw it before.”
9. His hair was grey and slicked back, he wore a large belt that held a laser beam, a clock, a cell phone and other “necessary” tools.
10. I sat in the middle of the class, the exact same spot I sat within the world of marks; an average student with an average mark.

Examples of Student Topic Sentences

*Below are 10 topic sentences from student paragraphs on the use of metaphor in Joy Kagawa’s *Obason*. Rate on a scale of 1 to 4 in terms of how they:*

- provide appropriate context for a paragraph
- establish a clear focus for a paragraph
- show sentence fluency
- use effective diction

1. The iceberg metaphor is a very deep and thoughtful way of bring up the “silence” in the 1940’s with the Canadian Japanese.
2. I thought this [well metaphor] was a good metaphor because it helped me to understand about the emotions that can hurt a person.
3. Kogawa’s well metaphor points out how the effects of racism can affect the victim for long after the initial damage was done.
4. If a person has to deal with discrimination at an early age, it takes a toll on the child’s emotions throughout his or her whole life.
5. Many extended metaphors are presented to the audience in “The Pool,” starring an elderly Japanese-Canadian woman.
6. Joy Kogawa uses the metaphor of a well to explain her emotions.
7. The volcano metaphor is explaining how someone (a child) bottles up his or her feelings about discrimination.
8. The iceberg metaphor had a great impact on the way I look at self-consciousness.
9. I got lots out of the well metaphor.
10. Joy Kogawa used a metaphor that described the bottled up emotions of the Japanese people kept in internment camps during World War II by using a well.

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