David Narter

“The first essay I’d like to show you . . .”: 1:1 DV for Writing Assessment and Reflection

Ten years ago, during a lull in parent-teacher conferences, Gabby, a student in my AP Language and Composition class, sat down beside me to go over one of her essays. She took out her most recent attempt—covered in so much red ink that the pages were damp—and together we had a conversation about her writing. My first inclination was to simply direct her attention to the copious notes I’d already left her—the circled misspelled words, the calls for stronger verbs—but she clearly wanted something more. I really didn’t have much more to offer than the comments already on the page, but for Gabby my recitation seemed enough. As she gathered her essays into her backpack, I asked her if everything I’d said made sense. She said, “Oh, yeah, I’m pretty sure I can write this now.” I was befuddled. I asked her what changed, and she said, “I don’t know. When I see the writing all over the paper, it just sounds like you’re saying ‘you’re a bad writer.’ But now, I feel like I can actually write this.”

All I’d done was read the comments back to her, but somehow, getting the face-to-face affirmation along with the informal affirmations that are part of casual conversation completely transformed my message for her. I had entered the periphery of the feedback loop, the circle of student efficacy, teacher feedback, and mastery experiences.

The Feedback Loop

According to Frank Pajares et al., “It has now been well established that the beliefs that students hold about their writing capabilities powerfully influence their writing performances” (117). Student efficacy correlates best with student mastery experiences, and those experiences are primarily informed by feedback from a primary reader: the teacher.

And the feedback I provided, in line with Melanie R. Weaver’s analysis of student perceptions of college tutors’ feedback, “showed a decided lack of positive comments” (390). Given the burdens of high-volume grading in a high-stakes academic environment, I simply didn’t have the time to clarify my admiration for my students as writers and communicate with them as an empathetic coach when I was so overwhelmed by my responsibility to clarify their missteps. I want my students to run free as writers, but I do have an obligation to let them know when their shoes are untied. Unfortunately, in trying to guide them toward a mastery experience, I continued to communicate to them only how far away they still were.

I knew the answer was to provide more opportunities for student writing conferences, but, as is the case with so many of us, the math just doesn’t work out. For me, 150 students × 15 minutes per essay conference = no life and a sore hand.

1:1 DV Assessment

Then, in September 2012, I began using 1:1 screencast video assessment tools: nimble apps such as Movenote, Screencastify, and Snagit that attach to my browser and allow me to efficiently provide a far more valuable assessment experience for my students than ever before.

Rather than write on student work, I have my students submit their work electronically (in-class
essays are scanned), and with the document open, I record a screencast with audio comments. There, I am able to suggest changes, compliment their strengths, present habits of writing in need of improvement in this particular assignment, and contextualize these comments within an understanding of their work overall and the esteem with which I hold them as human beings.

Through DV assessment, I am able to do far more than I ever have with paper and pen. Unlike with standard red-ink edits, I am able to change a simple mistake in their writing in front of the student, change it back, and note its appearances later in the same assignment. I’m able to open several of their documents at once to compare features and note their progress. I am able to refer back to standards rubrics and exemplar essays to suggest where things might have gone awry and provide clearer pathways to improvement. And I’m able to do all of this much faster than I have ever been able to with a stack of papers and a pen.

Admittedly, even at five minutes per essay, grading is still a physically demanding and time-consuming task. However, as one of many assessment strategies, DV is a tremendous improvement on long sessions of hand cramps and angry scribbles.

Example Review
For this article I randomly chose a video I recorded for Giselle, a student in my Freshmen Core English class, who’d submitted a first draft about *Of Mice and Men*. The video is 3:49 long, and I spend the first 40 seconds complimenting the writer’s attempts at formal academic style and hard work. But that’s not to say it is all gushing overtures of admiration.

One minute into the review, I point out her frequent comma splices: “One thing to look out for is you have a real propensity for comma splices. For instance, this one . . .”

At that point, I scan the entire paper, dragging the cursor over the offending run-ons, adding, “You do this a lot. You do this at least once per paragraph. Here we go. Here’s another one. So look out for that in your final draft.”

In the final minute of the video, I toggle back and forth between a rubric from class and the corresponding elements of the draft to indicate where her draft met and fell short of expectations.

My corrections and explanations are delivered quickly but clearly in that I have the opportunity to offer in-text suggestions, multiple instances of problem habits, all with clear connections to stated expectations. Most surprising, even to me, in fewer than four minutes, I provide 16 discrete and sincerely delivered compliments. Although I recorded the video two years ago, I can still hear my affection for my student and my deep concern for her learning process. I can’t pull that off in five minutes of red ink.

**Verbal vs. Written**
On the wall above my desk, I have posted the following list of Richard Straub’s suggested approaches to responding to student writing:

1. Turn comments into conversation (28).
2. Do not take control of a student’s text (31).
3. Give priority to global concerns of content, organization, and purpose before getting overly involved with style and correctness (34).
4. Limit the scope and number of comments.
5. Select your focus according to the stage in the writing process (40).
6. Gear comments to individual students.
7. Make frequent use of praise (46).

With screencast video assessment, I do a far better job at all seven items, in particular 1, 2, 6, and 7. Consider the following informal analysis.

Recently, I studied the difference in the quality of comments between video and written assessment by revisiting video comments I had left on a student essay in my AP Language and Composition class. I then printed the same essay and handwrote my comments in the margins (see Figure 1). As I listened to my screencast, I wrote checkmarks next to the items upon which I had commented so that I would be reviewing the same items. The verbal comments took me 3:43 minutes, so after giving the essay a quick read (as I always do before a screencast), I started the clock.

While the flaws in my methodology may be obvious, the results are compelling and revealing. The video took four minutes to record, and the comments within are specific, informative, friendly, and, at times, complimentary. The written comments are vague, diagnostic, mechanistic, and—if Gabby is right—convince kids that they are “bad writers.” More importantly, they emphasize the notion that writing is about the objective notion of getting it correct.
The first essay I’d like to show you . . .

Video Portfolios

The most powerful use of digital video, however, came last year, when it occurred to me that I was hearing only one side of the conversation. Here I was talking about their writing when their perceptions are just as, if not more, valuable.

Now, two to three times during the school year, my students submit short video portfolios of their written work in which they identify strengths and weaknesses that they notice in their writing. They are instructed to begin the portfolio with an outline, previewing the foci of their screencast, specifically the two strengths and two weaknesses they will be identifying in their work. In the directions, I give them a list of foci from which to choose, such as syntax, handling of source material, and paragraph unity. Though they are encouraged to choose areas to focus on that are not listed, I always require one complex item (such as cohesion) that we have been studying in class. While students often refer to suggestions I have offered in my assessment videos, I discourage simple summaries of my reactions to their work by requiring that they review at least two different assignments to highlight each weakness and strength. Doing so also serves to clarify any recurring habits to be encouraged or discouraged.

These videos are the highlights of my year, and I can’t wait to hear the students’ voices over the videos of their essays as they laugh about this or that stupid mistake they made over and over again on some essays they barely recognize as their own, or proudly present their best sentences, explaining to me why they’re good.

Consider Madeline’s video portfolio, the first one I ever received. The video was recorded on Movenote, an app that allows me to see the student’s face (if the student chooses to allow the camera) as he or she speaks next to images of preloaded document pages to which the students refer.

My Alfred M. Green speech I did OK, but I didn’t have a conclusion, really. Just sticking the word overall is something that I do to indicate that I’m going to conclude now, but [laughing] I don’t conclude. As you pointed out in the screencast, I just talk about new information, which is not very . . . conclusion-like. So this one doesn’t even have a conclusion! Except I made a little space there, or maybe you did, and that is not . . . oh . . . that is not a conclusion. So that’s really what I need to work on is better planning, better conclusions.

Her embarrassed laughter at her repeated failure to successfully conclude her essays is such a refreshing tone to associate with this work we do, and it shows up in the majority of student portfolio videos submitted.

Even more rewarding, though, is how they talk about their successes. Here is Damian talking about one of his positives:

The next strength I feel I have is verb choice. I just highlighted a few throughout the essay. Like here, “illustrates.” “Emphasizes” over here, “benefits”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE 1. Comparison of Verbal and Written Comments on Essay Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verbal Comments</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You talk about Collins disagreeing with this point up here, which is pretty terrific. But if you could find a source that employed this point and then have Collins disagree with them, you’d be synthesizing your sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When you say McLean, that assumes that we know who he is, that we’ve heard of this guy before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Instead, when you introduce him as so and so McLean from this source, that’s going to make it clear that you understand if this is a credible source or not. Because if it’s just a radio [jock] or a picture, you could say, “Although he’s just a radio host, he does make a good point when he says . . .” And that makes it clear that you’re willing to consider the credibility of your sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You get away with getting a “6” from me because I think this is written so well. And you show that you’re a clever stylish writer. But in a synthesis essay, they’re going to be looking at much better source incorporation—really just a question of quantity. But also putting them against each other and doing like you do here, building them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Most people would score this a 5 and I scored it a 6, and I don’t know what the heck I was thinking. This is a little short with not enough source work. But it’s obvious you’re a really smart person and a really good writer. You should be writing 8s and 9s with just a couple of simple inclusions. So let’s see [that] next time you write one of these.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My Alfred M. Green speech I did OK, but I didn’t have a conclusion, really. Just sticking the word overall is something that I do to indicate that I’m going to conclude now, but [laughing] I don’t conclude. As you pointed out in the screencast, I just talk about new information, which is not very . . . conclusion-like. So this one doesn’t even have a conclusion! Except I made a little space there, or maybe you did, and that is not . . . oh . . . that is not a conclusion. So that’s really what I need to work on is better planning, better conclusions.

Her embarrassed laughter at her repeated failure to successfully conclude her essays is such a refreshing tone to associate with this work we do, and it shows up in the majority of student portfolio videos submitted.

Even more rewarding, though, is how they talk about their successes. Here is Damian talking about one of his positives:

The next strength I feel I have is verb choice. I just highlighted a few throughout the essay. Like here, “illustrates.” “Emphasizes” over here, “benefits”
“produce.” In the Queen Lizzy [sic] essay, “argues” “highlights.” In general, I feel that I, uh, use verbs a lot. And I kind of . . . I like it. I’ve seen the change it’s made in my writing. And it makes the writing much better, I feel, my writing. It just makes it more interesting.

Damian’s able to talk about choices he’s made in his writing that, in his own estimation and validated by class instruction, have improved his work. The student takes possession of his strengths and weaknesses and sees each move as contributing to his overall understanding of writing and his own acumen as a writer. That’s not a message I can communicate alone. I need my students to be active and confident parts of that conversation, and DV portfolios allow that as nothing else ever has.

Student Introductions
This year, I added one more piece to the puzzle: introduction videos. I collect the email addresses of next year’s students and ask them to submit a video introducing themselves and (more importantly) their writing to me. I ask them to identify what they feel they do well, what they feel they need to work on, and what they want to learn about in the coming year. The videos are creative and hilarious, and they remind me, as my school year begins, that the students sitting before me are on a path upon which they have had many successes and many failures, but they are anxious about this next oasis of knowledge and the skills they will acquire. Most importantly, their first communication with me is one in which they fully control the message.

While most students tend to be a little tentative with this project, careful not to brag and far too contrite in their humble presentations of their perceived shortcomings (many of which they’re wrong about), a few dive in cannonball style and make sure I’m aware I’ll be dealing with a personality and a spirit, one that I would not have discovered so easily on the page. One of my favorite videos began with a screenshot of an essay and the sound of the student, Ariel, belting the chorus of “Take on Me” while a-ha played on speakers in the background. When that long “daaaayyyyyy” ended, Ariel said, “Hi, Narter. I’m Ariel, and the first essay I’d like to show you is . . .” as if maybe “Take on Me” were just her opening theme song.

Conclusion
For far too long my writing class has been a place where students come to me for knowledge and acquisition of skills, an economy centered around our work as products discrete from our overall senses of self. Now, with the help of DV assessments, student DV portfolios, and student DV introductions, writing is not just easier to grade quickly, but it is part of our communication, a part that so often fails to live up to our hopes or even our perceptions in hindsight, but one that, for a year at least, we are working on together.

Works Cited

David Narter, host of Chicago’s Detention Hall (a summer literary salon for teachers), has taught English at Leyden High Schools for 22 years; is the author of several humorous books, plays, and articles; and thinks he has been a member of NCTE since 2005. He can be reached at his twitter feeds @dnarter and @mrteachwell or at dnarter@leyden212.org.

READWritethink connection
This lesson helps students become more comfortable with the revision process, both as writers responding to their peers and as writers engaged in revising their own pieces. Once students watch authors Kate DiCamillo and Debra Frasier revise their work through online videos, students develop a checklist to help them see what effective writers do to be able to create a well-developed piece of writing. Students are then guided through the process of revising their teacher’s work. Later, students communicate their ideas for revision of their peers’ work through a written conversation so that peers can remember and reflect on their thoughts. http://bit.ly/24odjhI