

Reflection

This project was designed to help students improve their writing through practice, instruction, and constructive feedback. This was implemented in both sections of my 9th grade World History I classes during student teaching. The students had already begun to write on tests and a bit for homework prior to my teaching, but they had not received much direct instruction in historical writing. I wanted to see if there will be any further improvement of student writing by combining instruction with practice and good feedback.

The students were new to writing in history classes as of this school year, so I chose to focus on a few basic writing skills. As seen in the rubric, I focused on supporting their answers with explanations. Many of the students have had difficulty with expanding on their ideas, so focusing on using evidence as support should help them to develop that ability. I also looked at organization, which is important in constructing a good essay. Finally, the rubric included the thesis statement and accuracy. I chose to use this type of rubric over holistic because it is very organized and clear. This rubric helped students to see if they are doing what I asked of them as they wrote the essay in a clear and easy way. I also included essay on each test that I gave during student teaching to further promote the development of writing skills.

The feedback for take-home essays was constructive and helpful. There were sincere, positive remarks as well. Overall, feedback was to the point and not overwhelming. Students needed to know how they could improve for the next essay.

The first time that I gave the students a writing assignment, I went over the rubric with them in class. Then I showed them an example of a good essay, which I had written myself with information from their textbook and notes they would have. We went through the essay in detail, and graded it according to the rubric. Based on the results from the first essay, I had to make a slight change to the rubric to focus more on expanding the explanations in addition to using specific examples. The second time I gave a writing assignment, I pointed out the change to the rubric and what it meant. Then we went through another example of a good essay, but this time it was not an example of the essay that they would write. I also had to go over the seriousness of using outside sources without citing them. There were two or three students who copied portions directly from websites which I found quite easily. I gave the class a firm warning that not citing sources would result in them losing points on the assignment. I did not find anyone doing this on subsequent essays. They began to cite outside sources. I did not require that they use outside sources because there are several students who did not have access to internet at home.

The third writing assignment was slightly different because I asked students to analyze artwork from the Renaissance. The students practiced doing this in class, individually and as a whole

class. This was important because I wanted to focus on helping the students grow in terms of writing. This essay allowed them to think and incorporate some of their own ideas. They were graded on the quality of their writing, so as long as they made a sincere attempt, they were not penalized for wrong art interpretations. In this way, advanced students could be challenged to do something new, while struggling students could focus on mastering the basics of the writing assignment.

Based on descriptions from my cooperating teacher prior to starting student teaching, I was surprised at the difference in writing abilities in the classroom. I had not expected many students to write at a high level, but there were several students who were not especially challenged by the first two writing assignments. This is one reason why I put an extra level of cognitive demand into the third essay. This did seem to appropriately challenge some of those students. However, there were also several students who struggled in the beginning, but began to improve over time. It is difficult to say for certain, but I would think that clear and constructive feedback aided some of these students. My feedback put focus on the rubric as the grading criteria, so that students who read and followed my suggestions would see an improvement in their grade. (Return to the portfolio to see examples of student essays.) Of course, there were also some students who did not read my comments because they repeated the same mistakes over and over again, despite repeated reminders to read my comments.

There were a few students with IEPs who had specific trouble with writing. Before assigning the first essay, I met with the special educator who is in the classroom for one of the sections. She told me to make the instructions clear and separated out (not in one paragraph). She also sent the assignments to their parents and other teachers who might help them during their life skills classes. This step seemed to be very helpful for these students. All of them did pretty well on the writing assignments and improved over time.

In the future, I need to find more ways to challenge advanced students. There were a few students who wrote exceptional essays because they always want to turn in their best work, but there were several students who turned in the bare minimum for a good grade according to the rubric because it was easy for them. I came closer to achieving this with the third essay, as described above.

Overall, I think these assignments were a success. There were several students who improved over time. The examples included in this portfolio are only a few of those students. It was difficult to stick with the same rubric for every assignment in terms of choosing the questions, but I do see the advantages. Over the three essays, the students became aware of what was expected of them and most of them made adjustments for the better each time. I absolutely intend to assign writing in my future classrooms.