

# A DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW PROCESS: LEARNING ABOUT TEACHERS' WORK FROM A STUDY OF STUDENT WORK

## **Background**

During the past several years, educators across the country have been gathering in small groups and as faculties to read and analyze student work. These sessions may have a variety of purposes including evaluating the quality of the student work, scoring portfolios, determining student strengths or needs, or, as in the case with the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform, for the purpose of determining the quality and qualities of teacher-designed work that elicited the student work being reviewed.

In any case, when using the Schlechty Center adaptation of a Descriptive Review, participants will first want to keep in mind the descriptive approach—not an evaluative approach—being pursued through this protocol. Secondly, participants need to be mindful that the purpose of the review of student work is to move to the analysis and improvement of the teacher-designed work that generated the student work being reviewed.

## **Purpose**

From the outset of participation in the Descriptive Review Process, all participants will want to focus on the purpose—to study student work for the purpose of analyzing and improving the teacher work from which it comes. Moreover, the analysis of the teacher work and subsequent discussion of ideas for improvement will be disciplined by the framework of the Schlechty Center's 10 Design Qualities.

The Schlechty Center is committed to the belief that we cannot directly control the work that students produce, but as educators, we have control over the work we provide students, so it follows that the concern in the Descriptive Review Process is to use an analysis of student work as a vehicle for getting to that which we can control—the quality of work provided students and the qualities embedded in that work.

## **Description vs. Evaluation**

Most educators have vast experience in reading and grading student work. Growing numbers of educators during the past two decades have had experience in collaboratively reading and judging or scoring student work using some standard, a set of criteria, or a well-articulated rubric. Unlike any of these evaluative experiences, the Descriptive Review outlined here will ask participants to suspend judgment of the student piece in order to look closely and deeply at the student work with emphasis on what is apparent—both explicitly and implicitly rather than what is missing or lacking in the work.

Participants may find it useful to think about approaches to reviewing student work as falling along a continuum:

## Evaluation

## Description

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While there is probably no such thing as either pure evaluation or pure description, some approaches to reading and studying student work fall closer to the evaluation end of the continuum, whereby readers judge students' work against a standard, in comparison to other pieces of student work (benchmarks), or by some other means. In contrast, some approaches ask readers to move toward the descriptive end of the continuum and to read/review carefully student work in order to take detailed note of the qualities visible in the student work.

The Descriptive Review Process will probably require that participants consciously discipline themselves not to judge the student work so that they might move within the realm of description.

# GUIDELINES FOR LEARNING FROM STUDENT WORK\*

*Prior to engaging in a descriptive review, participants should read carefully the useful reminders outlined below.*

## **When looking for evidence of student thinking:**

- ✧ Stay focused on the evidence that is present in the work.
- ✧ Avoid judging what you see.
- ✧ Look openly and broadly; don't let your expectations cloud your vision.
- ✧ Look for patterns in the evidence that provides clues as to how and what the student was thinking.

## **When listening to colleagues' thinking:**

- ✧ Listen without judging.
- ✧ Tune in to differences in perspective.
- ✧ Use controversy as an opportunity to explore and understand each other's perspectives.
- ✧ Focus on understanding from where different interpretations come.
- ✧ Make your thinking clear to others.
- ✧ Be patient and persistent.

## **When reflecting on your thinking:**

- ✧ Ask yourself, "Why do I see this student work in this way?" "What does this tell me about what is important to me?" "What does this tell me about what is important to the student?"
- ✧ Look for patterns in your own thinking.
- ✧ Tune in to the questions that the student work and your colleagues' comments raise for you as a designer of student work.
- ✧ Compare what you see and what you think about the student work with how you design student work.

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\*Adpated from: "Some Guidelines for Learning from Student Work" in *Horace*, Kathleen Cushman, ed., November 1996.

**When reflecting on the process of looking at student work, ask:**

- ✧ "What did you see in this student's work that was interesting or surprising?"
- ✧ "What did you learn about how this student thinks and learns?"
- ✧ "What about the process helped you see and learn these things?"
- ✧ "What did you learn from listening to your colleagues that was interesting or surprising?"
- ✧ "What new perspectives did your colleagues provide?"
- ✧ "How can you make use of your colleagues' perspectives?"
- ✧ "What questions about designing and assessing student work did looking at this student's work raise for you?"
- ✧ "Are there things you would like to try in your classroom as a result of looking at the student's work?"

# A DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW PROCESS: LEARNING ABOUT TEACHERS' WORK FROM A STUDY OF STUDENT WORK\*

*The Descriptive Review Process asks teachers to look together at pieces of student work, to discuss what they see in the work, and to bring multiple perspectives to an analysis of the work in order to improve the quality of the work designed for students.*

**Step 1. Getting Started**—The group chooses a facilitator to keep the group focused. The presenting teacher distributes copies of the selected student work or displays the work. At this point, the teacher says nothing about the work, its context, or the student. The participants read or observe the work in silence, making notes if they choose.

**Step 2. Describing the Work**—The facilitator asks, "What do you see?" Participants respond without making judgments about the work.

**Step 3. Raising Questions**—The facilitator asks, "What questions does this work raise for you?" The presenting teacher makes notes but does not yet respond.

**Step 4. Speculating About the Work**—The facilitator asks, "Does the work show evidence that the student was engaged, that he or she valued the work and found it meaningful? If so, what is that evidence? Does the work show evidence of Strategic Compliance? Ritual Compliance? Retreatism? If so, what is the evidence?" Participants offer ideas.

**Step 5. Presenting Teacher Responds**—At the facilitator's invitation, the presenting teacher tells about the work, responds to the questions raised, and comments on any unexpected things that he or she heard in the group's responses and questions.

**Step 6. Discussing Implications for Designing Student Work and Student Learning**—The group and the presenting teacher identify the Design Qualities evident in the assignment and offer suggestions of ways the Design Qualities might strengthen the work so it will increase student interest and commitment.

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\*Adapted from: *The Collaborative Assessment Conference* by Steve Seidel and Harvard University's Project Zero, 1988.

# A DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW PROCESS: LEARNING ABOUT TEACHERS' DESIGN OF WORK

**Step 6.** The group and the presenting teacher identify the Design Qualities evident in the assignment and offer suggestions of ways the Design Qualities might strengthen the work so it will increase student interest and commitment.

## **Design Qualities:**

- ✧ Content and Substance
- ✧ Organization of Knowledge
- ✧ Clear and Compelling Product Standards
- ✧ Protection from Adverse Consequences for Initial Failures
  
- ✧ Product Focus
- ✧ Affirmation of Performance
- ✧ Affiliation
- ✧ Novelty and Variety
- ✧ Choice
- ✧ Authenticity