

# Assessing and providing feedback for student writing in Canadian classrooms

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## Abstract

This paper reports on the feedback and assessment practices of Canadian grades 4–8 teachers; the data are drawn from a national study of the teaching of writing at the middle grades in all ten Canadian provinces and two (of three) territories. Respondents were 216 grades 4–8 teachers from rural and urban schools. Data sources were audio-recorded telephone interviews analyzed using a constant comparative method. Participating teachers were mindful that feedback is important for student self-esteem; they valued peer editing and viewed feedback as essential for fostering students' writing development; they strove to be what they considered "objective" while adhering to criteria for standardized exams.

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In this article, we report findings from a national study of the assessment and feedback practices of grades 4–8 teachers across the ten Canadian provinces and two of three territories. Drawing on interviews with 216 teachers, our research addresses the question: How do Canadian teachers in grades 4–8 assess and provide feedback to students on their writing?

Prior to our current study, the only national data on classroom writing practices in Canada came from an analysis of teachers' responses to a questionnaire component of the national writing test, the 2002 School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP), for 13- and 16-year olds (Hunter, Mayenga, & Gambell, 2006). In their analysis, researchers found that 58% of the 4070 secondary teachers who completed the questionnaire provided written feedback on students' assignments and

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that 35% of teachers reviewed models of good writing with high frequency. Teachers used essays, open response tests and short answer quizzes to assess writing. Over half of participating teachers discussed with their students the criteria for assessing written assignments. Our study provides a more comprehensive picture of teachers' writing assessment and feedback to students, contributing to an understanding of opportunities and challenges for teachers in using feedback and assessment to foster their students' writing development and their positive views of themselves as writers.

## 1. Theoretical framework

Assessing writing and providing feedback to students are social practices; these practices are influenced by teachers' views of what constitutes good writing and good teaching practice within both their local contexts and the broader contexts of education and society (Barton, 2001; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). We are interested in the ways in which teachers take up the values, perceptions, and the socio-cultural understandings of effective writing assessment and good writing in their day-to-day interactions with students.

Feedback and assessment practices must be seen within the broader context of teachers' professional constraints and mandates. In Canada, provinces and territories control education; each province and territory develops programs of studies for each subject area, and any large-scale testing is ostensibly based upon that curriculum, or upon some aspects of it. Although there is no national curriculum, there are regional frameworks underpinning provincial curricula, and so there are similarities across the curricula of the provinces and territories. They are predicated explicitly or implicitly on a social constructivist view of learning (Vygotsky, 1986) that promotes group work, collaboration, inquiry approaches, and classrooms in which students learn from one another (see Alberta Education, 2000; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, 1998; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006; Quebec Éducation, Loisir et Sport, 2001). With regard to the teaching of writing in particular, the curricula encourage teachers to consider the processes of writing and to have students write in varied forms and for varied audiences; the tenets of peer sharing and feedback are clearly consistent with a social constructivist framework.

The curricula for English Language Arts, therefore, fit comfortably within the theoretical perspective of the foundational writing process advocates of recent decades (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1985, 1991; Murray, 1985). Such canonical representations of writing processes and writing instruction, however, have been critiqued as revealing overly Romantic views of the individual writer, taking neither the complexities of contemporary classrooms nor the full complexity of recursive writing processes into account (Lensmire, 1994, 2000). Both the early process approach advocates and subsequent modifiers of process approaches regard the social aspects of composition instruction as essential in successful writing instruction. Hairston (1982) noted a paradigm shift from focus on product alone to focus on process in her (perhaps premature) heralding of "the winds of change" in the teaching of writing. The extent to which this paradigm shift had or had not taken hold in Canadian writing instruction had not been explored, and our interview questions were partly designed to probe this issue.

Among the theorists who view teaching, feedback, and assessment as integrally related in the classroom, Elbow (1973, 1997, 2000) has consistently stressed the importance of feedback that is timely and related both to the ongoing teaching and to the nature of the assigned composition. His call for attention to a number of "low-stakes" assessments and ample feedback at varying times throughout the duration of the assignments demonstrates awareness of and a sensible response to the pressures of classroom teaching and the requirement for teachers to provide summative judgments of the quality of student writing (1997). His emphasis on multiple opportunities for

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