

Writing Self-Assessment and Goal-Setting

In my seven years of teaching first grade, I've found that the subject that students most struggle to learn - and I most struggled to teach - is writing. Measuring growth in math and even reading can be very concrete, as students learn how to add two numbers or read sight words. On the other hand, learning how to write can be very abstract and demanding for students. Rather than simply assigning writing grades to students, I wanted to find a way to make students more accountable for their growth and more aware of their strengths and weaknesses as writers. Ultimately, I hope to empower young writers and push them toward greater independence and self-reflection.

School Context

The enrollment of this Southwest side urban school is 969 students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. The school is a neighborhood school with a general education program. Currently, the school occupies three different buildings due to the increase in enrollment the school has seen since originally being built 15 years ago. The three pre-kindergarten classrooms occupy a modular outside the regular school building. A former Catholic school a block away houses several classrooms, as well as a special education classroom. Each grade level has three or four classes of students, with approximately 30 students per class.

The population is approximately 99% Hispanic. 98% of students receive free- or reduced-price lunch. Just over 50% of the population is classified as Limited English Proficient. To meet the needs of the English Language Learners, all but one class in each grade level from kindergarten to second grade is bilingual. Students are placed based on their language proficiency on the ACCESS test administered to all ELLs in January of each year. In grades 3-8, there is at least one bilingual classroom in which students who are in the bilingual program or who are newcomers to the United States can receive support in Spanish.

The staff at our school is highly qualified and professional. Nearly all teachers hold an endorsement in English as a Second Language. Four teachers hold National Board Certification, with several others currently pursuing their certification. For the past three year, the school has participated in a literacy-based professional development opportunity with a local non-profit

organization, in which teachers worked in study groups to learn about and implement best practices in literacy. Teacher representatives make up the school's Instructional Leadership Team, which is responsible for decisions regarding the focus of professional development and areas for growth within the school. This team samples teachers from each grade level, bilingual and monolingual classrooms, a range of disciplinary areas, and school support staff. Over the past several years, we have shifted from using a basal to a workshop model of instruction in reading and writing, with small groups taking a key role in developing our students' literacy skills. This year, we are also moving away from our math series to develop Common Core-aligned lessons and materials to help our students meet the needs of these new, rigorous standards.

There are four first grade classrooms in this school. Two classrooms are bilingual with more emphasis on Spanish instruction, one is transitional, and one is monolingual English for students who are either not bilingual or who have shown English proficiency. I am starting my seventh year in the monolingual English first grade classroom. There are two veteran teachers on my team, one of whom is in her second year at our school. The other teacher is in her second year of teaching. While I am not the most veteran teacher on my team, I was selected as the team leader and represent our team in various capacities.

At the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, there were 18 boys and eight girls in my class. By mid-year, there were 17 boys and five girls in my class. While there are no major discipline issues, there are several students who do not work well with one another, and two of my students can be aggressive toward their peers. Two of my students are pulled for special education services, including writing minutes outside of my classroom, and several others are pulled for speech and reading intervention services. One student transferred in from another school at the beginning of the year, but the remaining students were in the same 40-student kindergarten class in my school. In my observations of student writing samples and discussions with students about writing, I wonder if my students did not spend as much time on writing in kindergarten as previous classes. I think this could be due to the sheer size of the class, making it difficult to meet in small groups or individually during writing. I am striving to provide the best possible opportunities for students to learn hands-on and to self-reflect on their learning, while differentiating my instruction to meet the various needs of my young students.

Literature Review

Writing can be an intensely personal process; as we write memoirs of our lives or voice our opinions on topics that carry deep meaning for us, we put our emotions and passions on paper for others to consume. As writing instruction has evolved from responding to teacher-created writing prompts to drafting, revising, and publishing student-selected pieces in the writing workshop format popularized by Lucy Calkins and Nancy Atwell, assessment and evaluation have not evolved in a similar way. In many classrooms, including my own, the teacher is the primary assessor of writing. The teacher identifies strategies the student used, evaluates the piece on a teacher-created rubric, and posts the piece on a bulletin board or places it in a student file. As Andrade (2001) showed, students who receive rubrics, even with explanations, may understand the criteria for good writing, but struggle to put it on paper. I would like to ensure that my students excel as writers by integrating the feedback they're receiving and reflecting upon it in their work. As part of my action research, I created a two-part approach to these assessments.

1. Students will reflect upon their own pieces of writing, both during and after the completion of a writing piece, to determine their strengths and areas for growth in writing.
2. Students will then set goals as writers for future pieces. These will be based upon students self-assessing their own pieces against level student- or teacher-created exemplar texts.

My goal is for my emergent writers to improve their self-efficacy to become more independent, reflective writers.

The Need for Self-Reflection

Ohio's early childhood language arts standards require that students in pre-kindergarten through grade 3 are able to "apply tools (e.g., rubric, checklist, and feedback) to judge quality of writing" (Schulz, M.M., 2009). This means that, even at a very young age, students who are just learning how to write are also expected to evaluate their own writing, and perhaps even the writing of others.

Self-assessment has been shown to promote self-efficacy, the belief that an individual has that he or she is capable of achieving a particular goal (Bandura, 2003). Paris & Paris (2001)

argue that self-assessment helps students to monitor progress, revise their work, and promote self-efficacy.

Bandura (as cited in Nicolaidou, 2010) argues that self-efficacy evolves from students being exposed to three types of experiences. *Mastery experiences* give young students the opportunity to receive feedback about the writing process, while *vicarious experiences* enable young writers to see comparisons between the achievements of others. Finally, *verbal persuasion* communities to students the expectations others believe they can meet. These three experiences can be found in a classroom in which students confer with their teacher and receive praise for the skills they are successfully using. Using student work samples, ladders or pieces along a continuum of growth, students have the opportunity to compare the work of other student writers. Teacher can push students to move along these continuums with encouragement and belief that students can achieve difficult goals.

When students have a high level of self-efficacy, they become more independent writers. Parajes (2006) suggests that, in order to improve student writing at the elementary level, students need to accurately understand their current abilities, but also have self-efficacy that is beyond what they can actually reach, since this belief drives persistence and effort. Therefore, there needs to be a balance between realistic understanding and ambitious expectations for oneself.

Setting Goals

As students become increasingly able to self-reflect and identify areas for growth in writing, students can take steps to address weaknesses by setting goals that will improve writing quality. Schunk and Swartz (1991) found that students working toward challenging goals performed better than students with vague (such as “Do your best”) or no goals. This finding supports the push to increase rigor in goal setting. When students have specific, challenging goals, their work to achieve these goals improves their academic performance. Schunk (1985) studied elementary students who were struggling to master subtraction concepts. When students set their own goals, 86% of students met their goal. Interestingly, when students were assigned the same goal rather than setting it themselves, only 55% of students met the goal. This indicates that student-created, rigorous goals are more likely to help improve student achievement than nonspecific or teacher-created goals.

So, if setting realistic but challenging goals for oneself is desirable, how do we as teachers help students become adept at this skill? White, Hohn, & Tollefson (1997) studied whether elementary students as young as second grade could learn to formulate realistic goals in both physical and academic settings. Students repeatedly set goals and then performed a task (tossing a beanbag at a target from varying distances or spelling words on a spelling test). Between tasks, students were given feedback about how they performed relative to their goal. The majority of even the youngest students were able to learn from past performance to set goals that were realistic, and took personal responsibility for meeting those goals.

What Does This Mean For Me - And My First Graders?

As a teacher, I am in a role that can not only improve my students' writing this year, but also for many years to come, if I can teach students to reflect upon and learn from their writing pieces. I can teach students a discrete skill, such as writing a lead, over the course of a few mini-lessons. While ideas and mechanics are critical areas about which to teach students, I have the power to grow my students' self-efficacy. This means that, with appropriate feedback given at the right time, students can learn to take ownership of their writing and believe they have the power to change their achievement. As a result, we will invest time in class to learning to be reflective and honest writers. Additionally, my students will be challenged to think about their next steps as writers and make personal investments in meeting their goals.

Rationale

When I met the students currently in my class and assessed their writing on an informal, on-demand writing piece, I quickly noticed that their writing didn't seem to match the level that I predicted they would be capable of based on their reading scores and past writing experiences. I soon realized this would be an area of growth for my students.

While I feel that my writing instruction is one of my areas of strength, it is also an area in which I see many opportunities for growth and refinement of my teaching practices. One thing I want to improve is how I scaffold students to take more ownership of their learning. Too often, when I sit down to confer with a writer, I come with a set agenda: I need to teach you X, so let's

try Y. Writing is intensely personal, and I believe it would be highly advantageous for students to begin taking an equally personal stake in their improvement as writers.

My young writers can tell you that a mentor text is good, but struggle to tell you WHY it is good. They can point out strategies I use in my own writing as I model during our mini-lessons, but struggle to pull these into their own writing.

By teaching students to self-assess their writing and set goals for themselves, I hope to see students become more independent, reflective writers who more deeply understand how to produce quality writing.

Research Questions

Cycle 1 Research Question: “What happens when my first grade students self-assess their writing and set goals to improve their writing?”

In order to answer this question, I explored the following subquestions:

- Does student writing improve?
- How do self-assessments of writing change?
- What language do students use to self-assess their writing and set goals?

Cycle 2 Research Question: “How do students’ perceptions of writing change?”

In this cycle, which I dove into more deeply as my students explored opinion and narrative writing, I focused on the following subquestions:

- How do students’ perceptions of themselves as writers change?
- How do students’ perceptions of what makes writing “good” change?

Tools for Data Collection

1. I collected writing scores for each genre of writing (narrative, informational, opinion). Three writing scores were obtained per unit. Immediately before and after a unit, students were given an on-demand writing piece, which was prompted, open to student choice of topic within the genre, and timed for 45 minutes. These were meant to serve as a pre- and post-test within each genre, as the prompt, conditions, and time constraints were constants.

Additionally, I collected scores for published pieces for each student within each genre.

Students worked on these pieces over the course of several days or weeks of instruction, and students had conferences with me during this time to improve their pieces. Students had ample time to revise, edit, and collaborate with partners to improve these published pieces. All student writing pieces were scored with the Lucy Calkins' Writing Units of Study rubric for each genre, tied to Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

2. I assessed students' overall perceptions of themselves as writers with a survey that included both a rating scale and open response questions. I read aloud the survey to all students, because I believe that unless I am assessing reading skills, all students should have access to the content regardless of reading ability. I took dictations for students who struggled to write a readable response by annotating their original attempts at writing.
3. I asked students to write reflections of their published pieces for each unit, in which the students were asked to name their strengths, areas for growth, and goals for future writing.
4. I interviewed a subset of students to obtain more detailed information about those students' progressions as writers and their ability to self-assess their work and goal-set.
5. Each week, I summarized things that went well, struggles I was having in the classroom, student comments, and other reflections in my teacher journal. This journal allowed me to notice patterns in my observations and reflect on how my students and I are growing in our learning about writing and being self-reflective.

Data

In late August, students were given a pre-assessment of their writing skills. During this assessment, students were asked to write a piece that was true, about themselves, and that told of a story of something that happened to them. After scoring this piece with the Lucy Calkins' Units of Study rubric for narrative writing, I found that 20 of my 25 students were writing at a pre-kindergarten level. As I evaluated the writing pieces, I observed that students struggled to produce very much writing at all, regardless of topic. This data concerned me deeply, considering that they had been exposed to writing workshop in kindergarten. During my years teaching primary grades, I observed that students who read at or above grade level typically write

approximately at or above grade level. While 15 of my 25 students read at or above grade level, only five of 25 wrote at grade level and none wrote above grade level. It was at this point that I knew I needed to adjust my teaching of writing to be more responsive, focused, and intensive than it had been in years past.

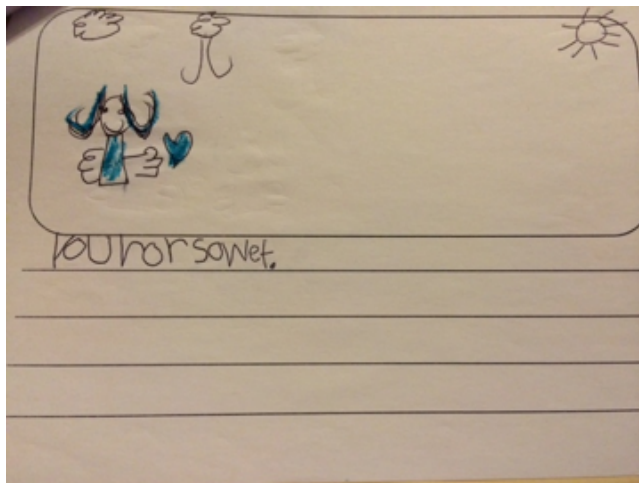
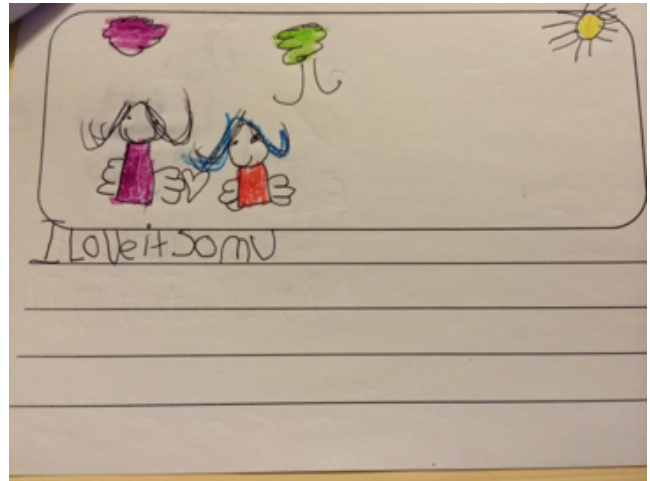
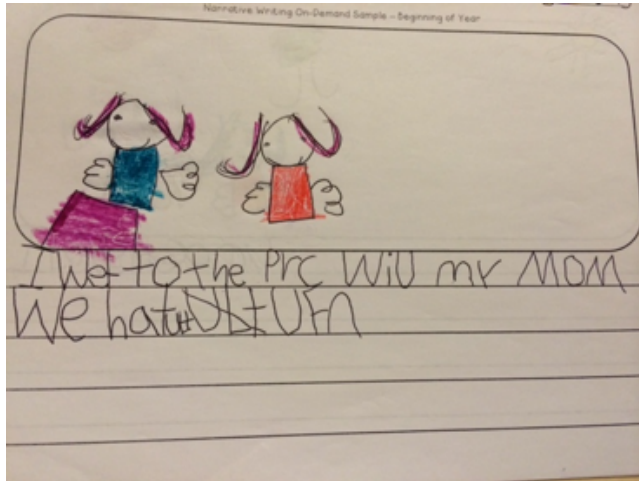
In our introductory unit, Launching the Writing Workshop, I observed students’ writing behaviors, conferred with each student, and analyzed their writing samples. I noticed the following patterns emerging from my data.

Struggling Writers	Mid-Level Writers	Strong Writers
Daniel, Ethan, Alexander, Taneisha, Alex, Mya, Michael, Ashlee, Christopher, Jacklyn, Abraham, Nicolas, Ernesto, Brian, Aryan, Angel	Crystal, Danny, Carlos, Luis, Henry, Elijah	Andres, Isabella, Kathia, Jimena
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggled to initiate writing (especially generating a topic independently) • Distracted easily (for example, Daniel traced over the letter repeatedly; Mya shaded in her drawings with the black pens used for writing) • Passive in writing conferences (minimal responses when asked, “What are you working on today?” and similar questions) • Wrote very few pages during the unit (as little as two three-page books within a four week unit) • Pages included very simple text (often one sentence) and some pages, even within the published pieces, contained an illustration but no text • Minimal use of strategies taught in mini-lessons • Frequently observed waiting for help and needing many prompts to get started on or to continue writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes struggled to generate a topic, but once started, they wrote a piece in two-three days • Distracted at times, often spending too much time on illustrations (especially Carlos, Henry, and Elijah) • Would participate in writing conferences, but often still relied on conferring with me to get started on their pieces or to help solve a problem (even simple problems we established procedures for, such as not knowing how to spell a word or needing more paper) • Attempted some of the strategies taught in mini-lessons • Wrote more pages than the struggling group, but less than would be expected given their literacy skills and familiarity with texts (as evidenced in their reading levels and writing assessments such as spelling tests) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilized many of the mini-lessons taught with little teacher guidance • Used time wisely with minimal distractions (especially Isabella, who was particularly focused) • Would sometimes come up with their own observations of things they needed to work on while we met during individual conferences • Wrote an expected number of pages, often with more complex story lines or stretched across a longer “book,” and word usage was usually more sophisticated (for example, Andres “comforted” his mother in his piece) • Typically self-starters, needing little prompting to begin or continue writing <p>(The four students in this group all scored above level in reading at the beginning of the year. Andres and Isabella wrote at a kindergarten level at the beginning of the year. Kathia and Jimena wrote at a pre-kindergarten level at first, but they soon adjusted to writing workshop in our classroom and their writing levels improved quickly.)</p>

When I grouped students by their writing needs, one area of focus was performance on an on-demand writing sample prior to instruction in the unit. This assessment, given the first day of school, was designed to assess writing strengths and areas for growth based on prior knowledge

about writing. I thought this was a good source of baseline data and gave me a quick glimpse into my students as writers. Samples from Ashlee, Carlos, and Isabella show the range of skills within the class.

Ashlee's writing sample (struggling writer)



Transcription:

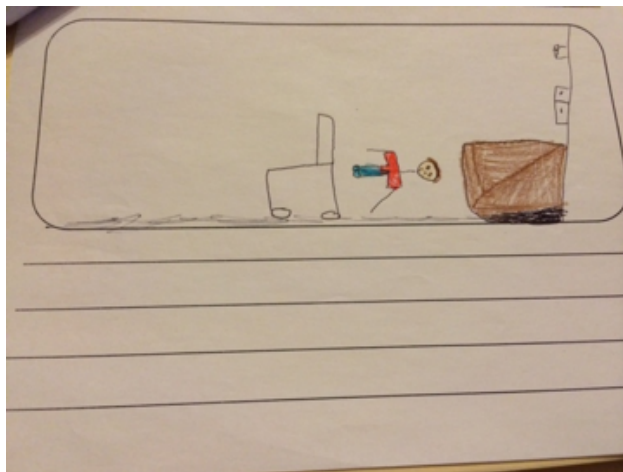
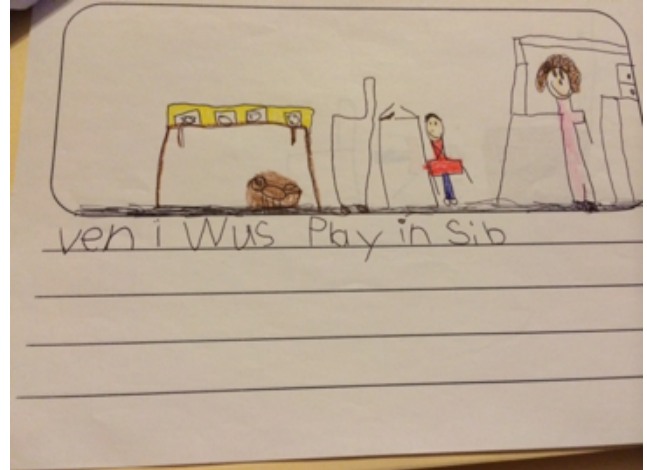
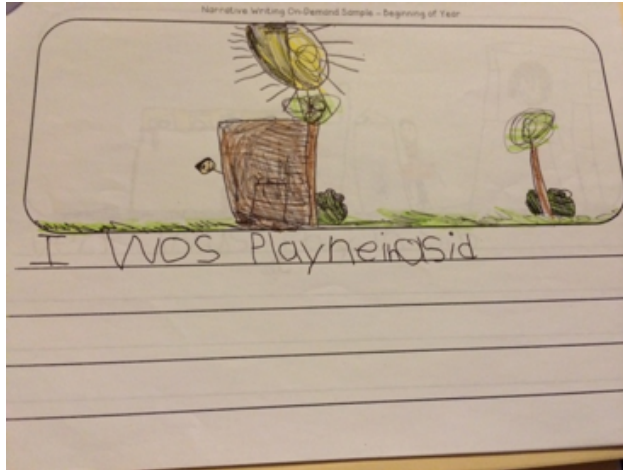
I went to the park with my mom. We had a lot of fun.

I love it so much.

You are so sweet.

While Ashlee includes many letter sounds and her first page seems to indicate a story is taking place, the second and third pages do not continue the story.

Carlos' writing sample (mid-level writer)

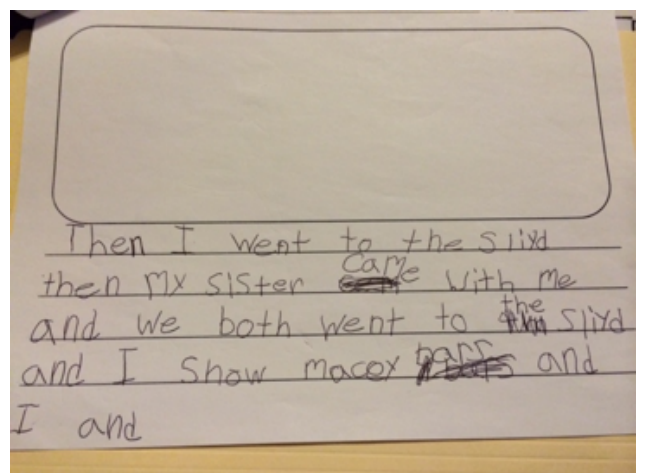
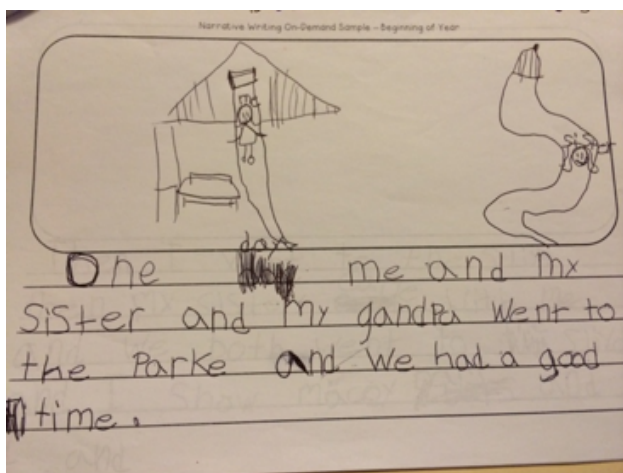


Transcription:

I was playing outside. Then I was playing inside.

Carlos' story simply ends, although the illustration on the third page seems to indicate he wanted to write more. While his story has minimal development, he uses multiple pages to tell a story.

Isabella's writing sample (strong writer)



Transcription:

*One day me and my sister and my grandpa went to the park and we had a good time.
Then I went to the slide then my sister came with me and we both went to the slide and I show
monkey bar and I and*

Like Carlos, Isabella's story just ends. However, there are more details in Isabella's story - a clear setting with specific items at the park (slide, monkey bars). Isabella also writes a lot on each page. She uses the transition word "then" to indicate the passage of time. Overall, I felt this was a strong beginning of a writing piece on the first day of first grade.

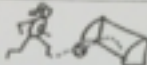
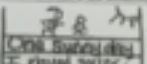



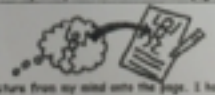
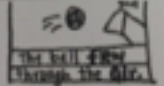
While I looked at writing performance, attitudes, and needs across the class, I wanted to select two students from each group to further study with interviews and more intensive observations. Because there were so many more boys in the class than girls, I considered selecting six case study students in a ratio that represented the overall class gender ratio (two girls and four boys). However, I felt that it was important to select students based on the qualities of their writing that made the representative of trends I noticed across the class, regardless of gender. I selected the following case study students:

- Angel, a struggling writer - He was often off-task during writing, and his writing was very difficult to read. When asked to explain his writing or to talk about his plan for his piece, he used stronger vocabulary and more elaborate ideas than his writing would suggest. Angel had minimal support at home for writing, so I knew nearly all of his writing practice would come from class.
- Ashlee, a struggling writer - She was often shy and waiting for help, and she responded positively to attention during conferences. Although she tried some of the strategies I taught, she easily lost focus in her piece, either writing to produce a greater volume ("I love my mom. I love her so much. So so so so so much.") or writing a narrative within an informational piece.
- Carlos, a mid-level writer - Carlos struggled to produce writing without some oral rehearsing before writing. He began the year with an IEP for speech, though speech services were discontinued in March. I noticed his difficulty in starting writing was similar to his difficulty in forming ideas orally. However, once he got started on a topic, he could write

much more fluently. I was interested to see how he would improve with additional instruction.

- Luis, a mid-level writer - Luis intrigued me because he was a very proficient reader, but was extremely brief in his writing. I thought because he was such a strong reader and read much longer books than many students, his writing would mirror what he read, although it did not.
- Isabella, a strong writer - Isabella eagerly tried each strategy taught during a mini-lesson in her own writing and was a very focused writer. She often wanted affirmation that she was using a strategy correctly, but otherwise was a self-started and needed very little support to keep writing.
- Kathia, a strong writer - Like Isabella, Kathia was a focused writer who quickly started writing and tried a range of strategies taught during mini-lessons. I did observe her relying on some of our class examples in her own pieces, and I knew she was capable of writing much more in her own writing. I wanted to monitor how she'd grow in her independence as a writer.

How does my story go?

	Did I do it like a first grader?	Yes	No
Start	 I write about what I did something.		
Lead	 I tried to make a beginning for my story.		
Transition	 I put my pages in order. I used words like and, then, so.		
Ending	 I found a way to end my story.		
Organization	 I wrote my story across three or more pages.		
Elaboration	 I put the picture from my mind onto the page. I have details in pictures and words.		
Detail	 I used labels and words to give details.		

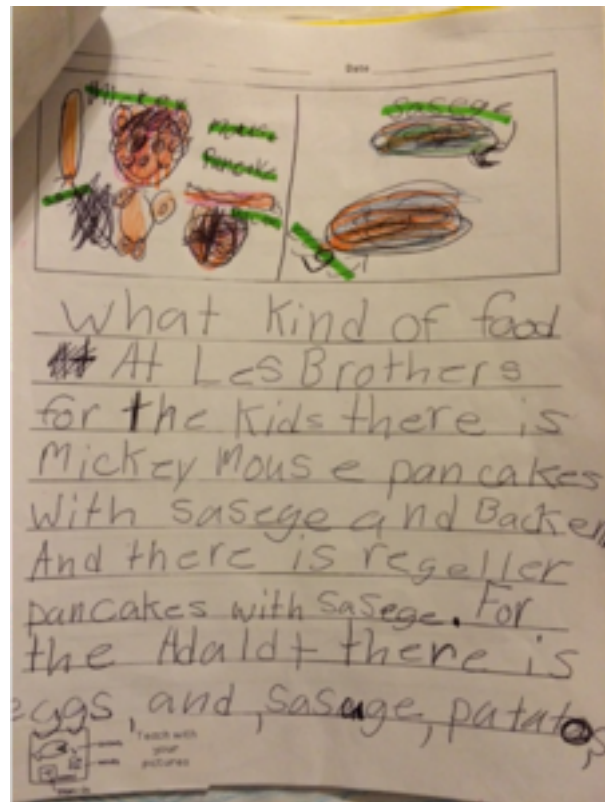
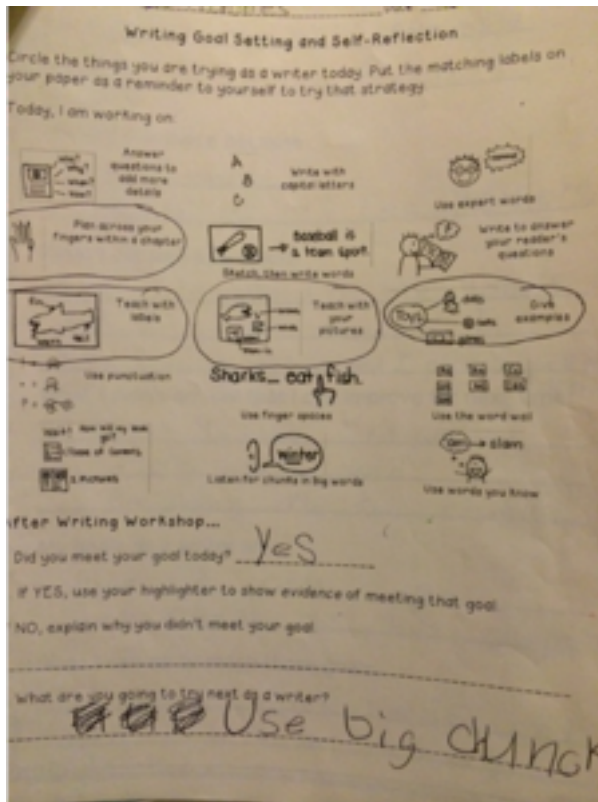
In addition to our usual strategy-based mini-lessons, I began to teach students to reflect on their writing and to “grade” their own work using checklists. During at least two points in each unit, students evaluated their writing against a checklist that included items such as “I wrote my piece in order from beginning to middle to end.” Students would check their work against the checklist, and if they needed to continue to work on any component of the checklist, they worked both individually and with a partner to do so. These checklists are directly aligned to each component of the rubric I used to score each published and on-demand writing piece, allowing the students to see a more student-friendly

version of the rubric they were scored with in order to make their work as strong as possible. I read aloud each component of the checklist, and students self-assessed their work.

After using the checklists as-is during our narrative writing unit, I began to question how well it really worked for my students. There are *many* components to the checklist, and trying to help students use it in a whole-class setting left many students struggling and saying, “I’m not sure what to do.” Additionally, I waited to use the checklist with them until they were in the revision stage of the unit, which meant that any fixing up of their pieces needed to occur quickly, and perhaps more importantly, they weren’t being pushed to self-reflect as strongly before bad writing habits were further engrained.

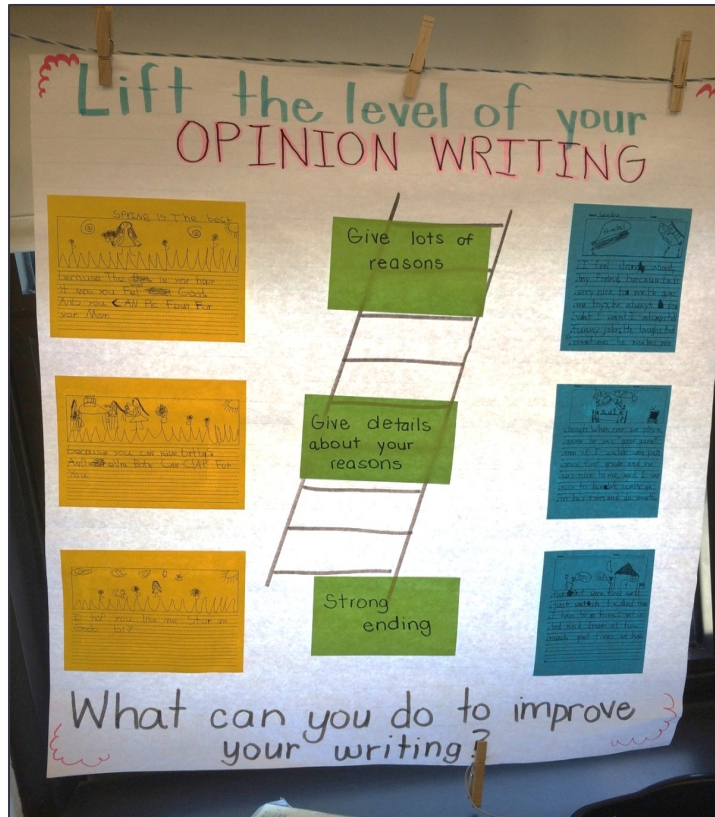
In the second major unit, information writing, I continued to use the checklist. However, I used it for the first time much earlier in the unit - after the first “bend,” which essentially was after students created multiple nonfiction picture books but before they expanded their writing into deeper, more intense nonfiction chapter books. As the students pushed into the chapter book portion of the writing unit, I introduced using labels with the strategies taught noted on each. I intended these to be used as a reminder for students that they had learned a strategy and that they should use it in their piece. Students set goals for what they’d work on in their chapter book, such as writing topic-specific vocabulary, and placed the label on the page where they were going to try that strategy. After they wrote the full book and revised it with the help of the checklist, students went back and provided evidence that they used the strategies on the labels in their writing.

In this example, Isabella circled strategies that she worked on as she revised her piece to improve its quality. She was asked to provide evidence in her writing that she actually used the strategies. The below pictures show her reflection page and one page of a writing sample that shows how her focus on this part of her piece was on teaching using her pictures. She highlighted in green the labels she added to her illustration to help teach her reader about the food they serve at Les Brothers.



I originally intended my Cycle 2 question, “How do students’ perceptions of writing change?,” to be a separate question after concluding Cycle 1. However, I found that the two cycles were a bit hard to distinguish, as the lines between student writing improvement and the concept of “good” writing were very blurred.

Cycle 2 was designed to delve more deeply into the thinking these students have about what makes writing “good,” both when the writing is of another, anonymous students and when the writing is their own. I’ve observed that the class as a whole, as well as my particular case study students, can quickly pick up on identifying one piece as being “better” than another. However, they struggle to articulate particular response that go beyond visual appearance. For example, as we looked at kindergarten and second grade exemplar pieces, Angel noted that the second grader wrote more, “so that makes it better.” Similarly, Carlos pointed out that the second grade writer used periods, an important part of writing but not one on which we had dwelled. I wanted to equip these students with not only the ability to identify what is good writing, but to be able to identify reasons one piece is stronger than the other.



In the first attempt at improving student awareness about what makes writing “good,” we used a continuum of writing. To simplify the task and make the differences between pieces more clear, we used kindergarten and second grade sample opinion writing pieces that were written by students and published on the Lucy Calkin’s Units of Study DVD, which came with our writing series. Rather than pointing out strengths and weaknesses directly, I asked students, “What makes this piece good?”

Students quickly named out some differences. Some students dwelled on visual differences (the better piece was longer, the second grader used periods), while others named specific strategies the author used, such as naming the topic after giving an interesting introduction. However, when students were asked to decide if their piece looked and sounded more like the kindergarten piece or the second grade piece, students overwhelmingly picked the second grade piece - even though that was not an accurate self-assessment of their writing. For example, Angel said his piece was more like the second grade piece “because it has lots of words,” when really, Angel’s piece scored in the pre-kindergarten/kindergarten level. There seemed to be no accountability for the students in making accurate assessments of their work, even though I assured them their self-assessments were not for grades.

To help promote more accurate self-assessments, I decided to use a more supported system for really studying mentor texts and creating more evidence-based self-assessments. I created a story, which I wrote at three levels - roughly kindergarten (Level 1), first grade (Level 2), and second grade (Level 3). We started by looking at the kindergarten level piece, and

- This is how I feel when I write about true things (nonfiction).
- This is how I feel when I write to tell what I think (opinion).

For each statement, students were instructed to think about how they felt about that statement. The survey included a student-friendly rating scale, in which students could circle a smiley face if they felt positively about the statement (such as liking to write at school), a flat face if they felt neither positive nor negative about the statement, and a sad face if they felt negatively about the statement (such as disliking writing at school).

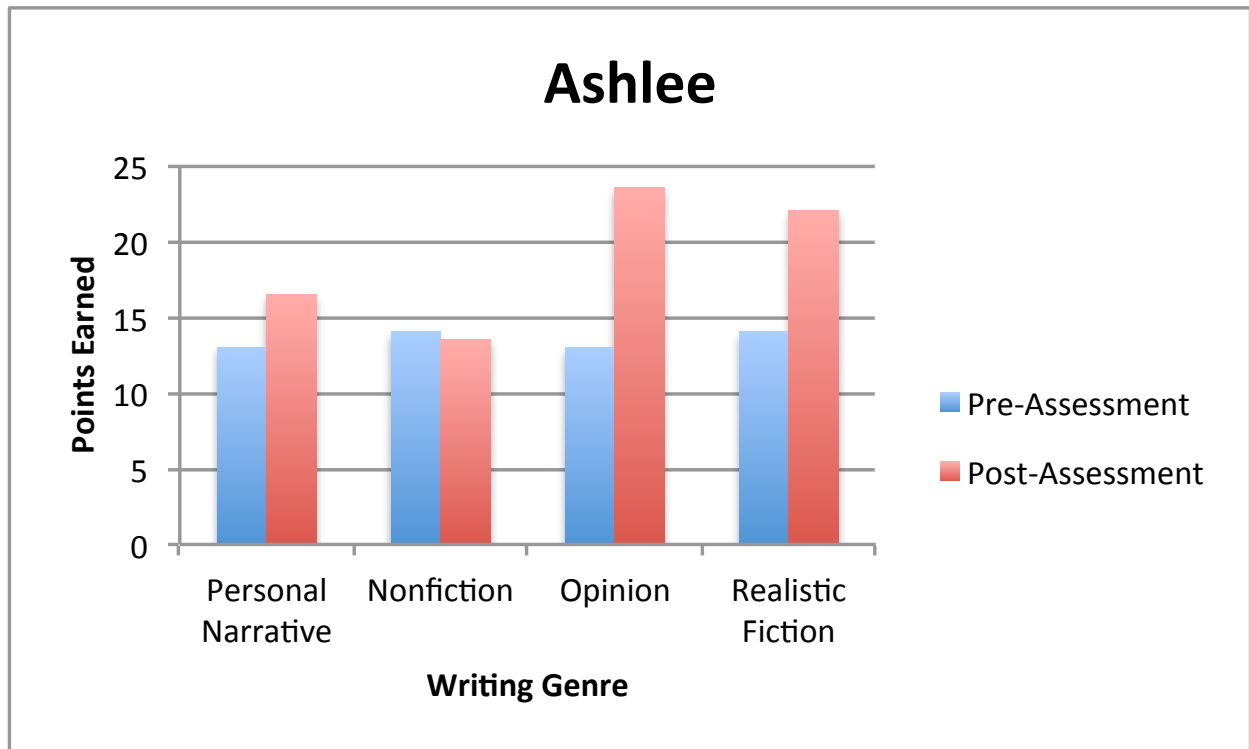
Students then responded to open-response prompts so I could elicit more specific thinking about writing. I also wanted to obtain some understanding of the words students chose to describe their strengths, weaknesses, and goals. They were read aloud the following questions so that all students would understand what the question asked. Each student then responded to each question. I scribed several students answers as necessary so their thinking would be easy to read. They were asked:

- Do you like to write? Why or why not?
- Do you think you are a good writer? Why or why not?
- What do you do WELL as a writer?
- What do you need to WORK ON as a writer?
- How can you become a better writer?
- What do you want to learn about writing?

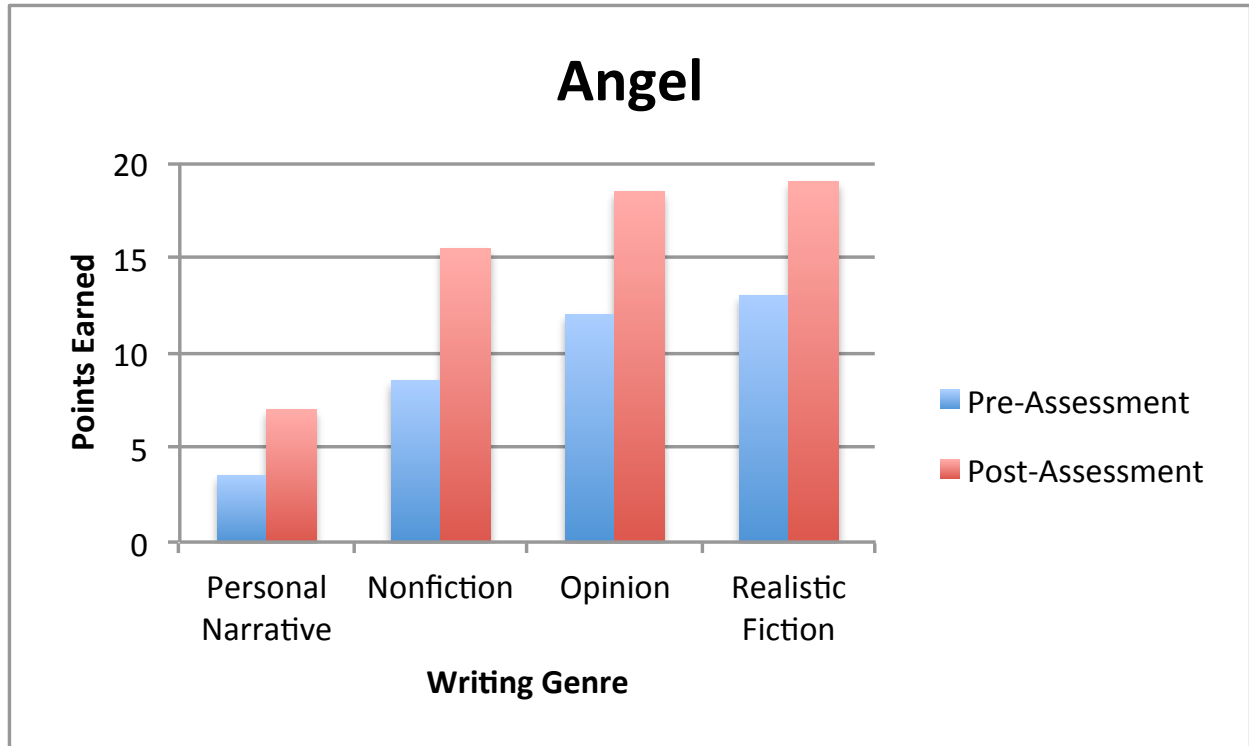
I decided to analyze growth in writing scores within a genre for each of my case study students. I wanted to compare timed, on-demand assessments at the beginning and end of each unit to best judge student growth in writing in that genre. I understand that sometimes students are stronger writers in one genre than another, and thought that, while many writing skills are applicable across genres, noting growth in the same genre may be more informative in my instruction.

I graphed each student's pre-assessment and post-assessment for each genre. I assessed growth in four genres: personal narrative (September/October), nonfiction (January/February), opinion (March/April), and realistic fiction (April/May). By graphing data, I was able to see growth within the genre as well as which genre(s) were areas of strength or weakness. As I

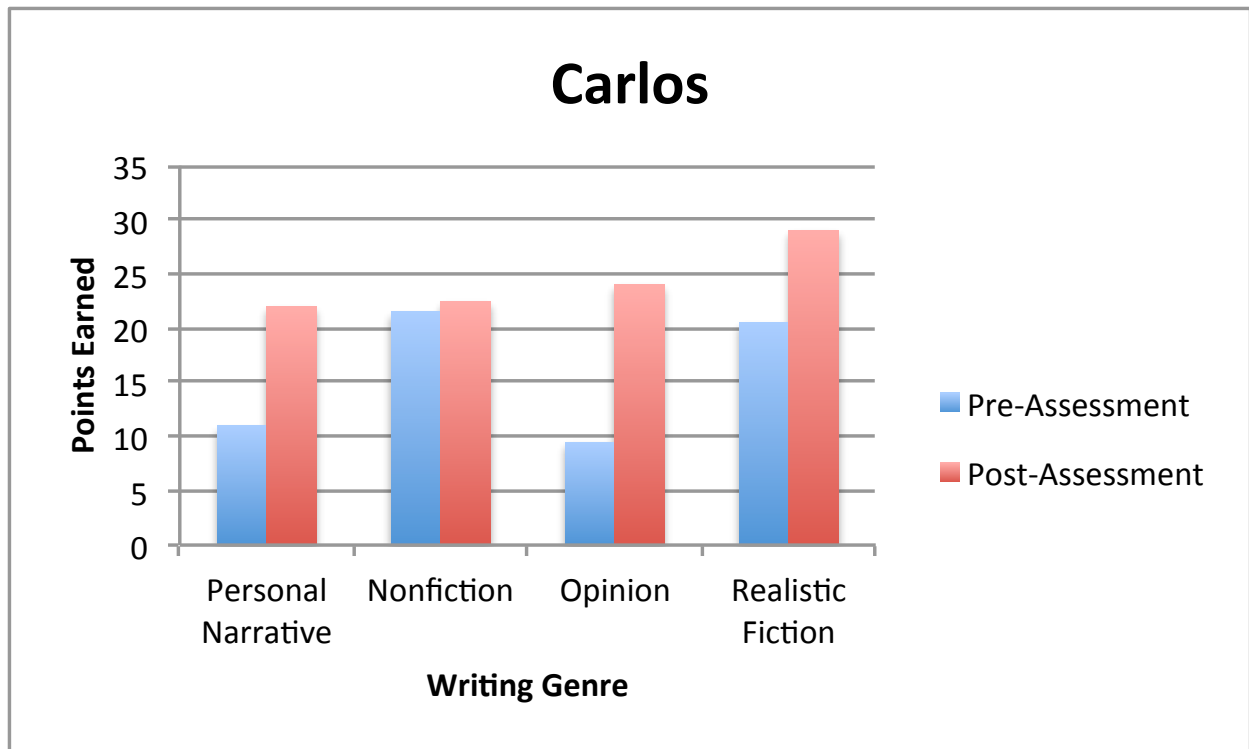
studied each graph, I was able to make some inferences about each student’s evolution as a writer.



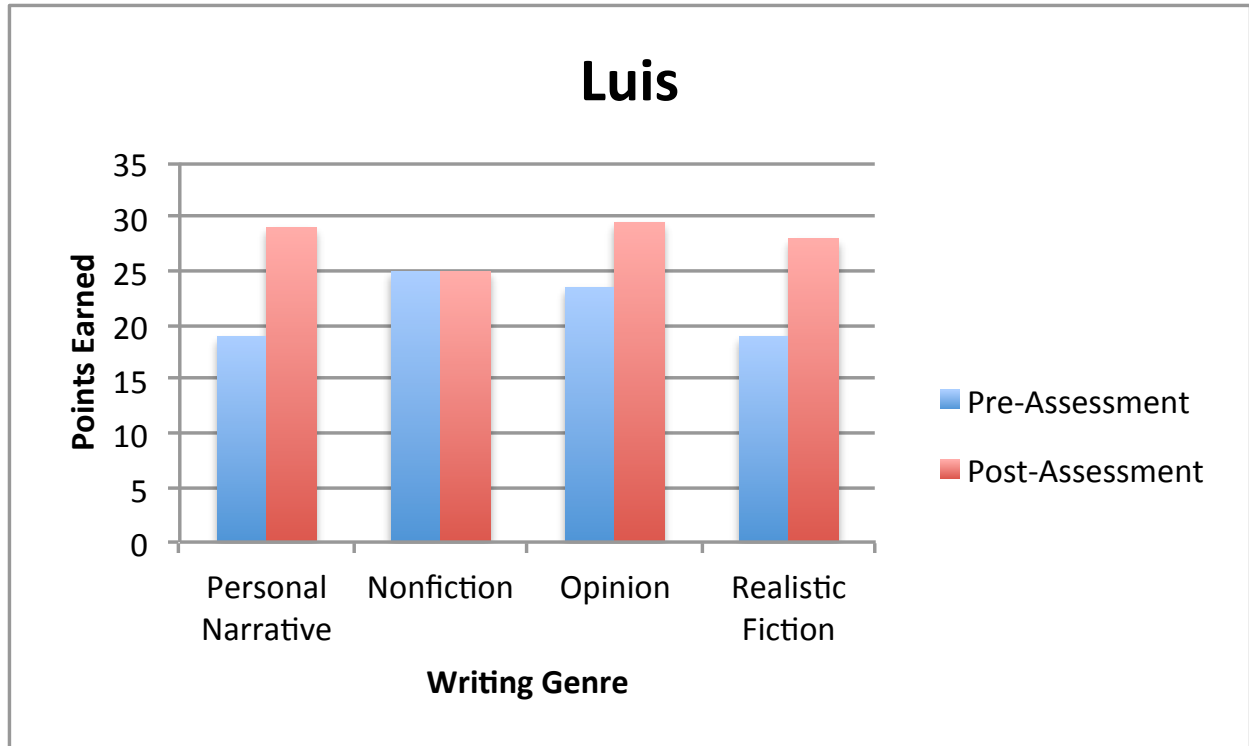
Ashlee, a struggling writer, consistently began each writing unit scoring between 13 and 14 points out of a total of 44 possible points. This placed her writing between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten levels. Ashlee’s growth was minimal in personal narrative (3.5 points, which was enough to move her to the very low end of kindergarten level writing), and she actually lost a half-point in nonfiction writing. Her greatest area of growth was in opinion writing, where she gained 10.5 points, which is approximately one year of growth in the genre. I wonder if this growth is due to simply learning about how to write opinion pieces (this was not a genre studied in kindergarten), or if it is due to overall growth as a writer.



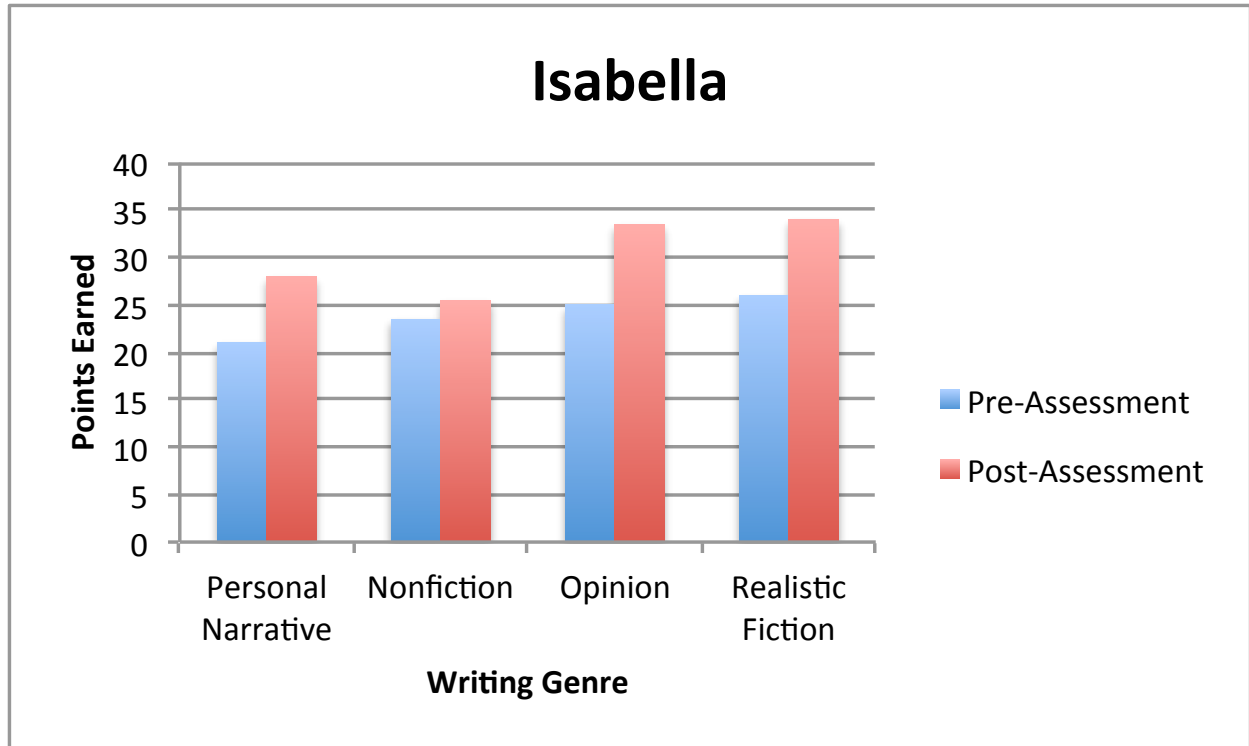
Angel, another struggling writer, really had difficulty with writing at the beginning of the year. His first piece contained a single word (“he”), and two very detailed pictures. Writing is a challenge for Angel, although he told me he wants to be a writer when he grows up so he can “entertain people.” This comment intrigued me, because I think his continued struggle with writing may stem from difficulty motivating him to write. His pre-assessment pieces fall into the pre-kindergarten category, but he is showing growth both in the genre (as his post-assessment scores are a few points higher than his pre-assessment scores), and through the year (each pre-assessment score is higher than the pre-assessment score before it, and each post-assessment score is higher than the post-assessment score before it). Angel’s slow growth concerns me, however, and I wonder if he might need additional academic support in the coming years.



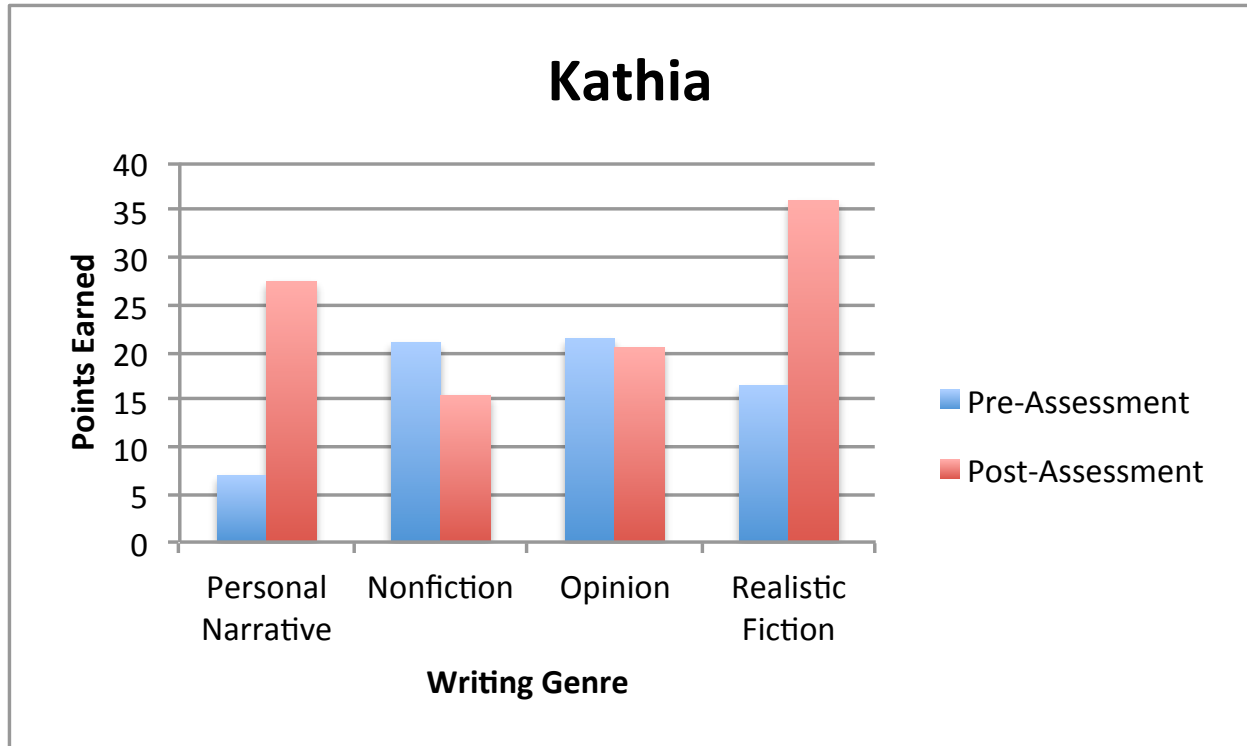
Carlos’ pre-assessment writing scores in personal narrative and opinion writing placed him in the pre-kindergarten level, and he consistently scores between kindergarten and first grade level on the post-assessments in each genre. This seems to indicate that, while his initial writing within each genre starts low, he make at least one grade level of progress within that genre after the four to six week unit. Like Ashlee, Carlos’ nonfiction scores were nearly identical. I think this may be due to heavy exposure to nonfiction writing in kindergarten, relative to the other genres. Carlos also quickly latched onto realistic fiction writing, and he easily came up with stories for this unit. Realistic fiction was definitely a strength for Carlos, as evidenced in both his pre-assessment and post-assessment writing scores.



Luis, another mid-level writer, began each unit at the kindergarten or kindergarten/first grade level, and he showed growth of six to 10 points in personal narrative, opinion, and realistic fiction writing. His post-assessment scores are very consistent and place him at the first grade level. I wonder if he might meet this grade level expectation each time because he understands the expectations for meeting the standard. Could this be due in part to our self-reflection in class or the use of the student-friendly checklists? Luis' pre- and post-assessment scores in writing were identical, showing minimal growth like Ashlee and Carlos did in the same genre.



Isabella, a strong writer, started each unit already scoring in the kindergarten or kindergarten/first grade level, meaning she came into first grade having met kindergarten standards. This strong background may have contributed to her ability to meet first grade standards in personal narrative writing and to exceed them in opinion and realistic fiction writing. Yet again, Isabella’s growth in nonfiction was minimal, and per post-assessment nonfiction score was her lowest of the four post-assessment scores.



Kathia began the year with very minimal writing, telling her story mostly with pictures. This score did not seem to match her overall literacy skills, and her growth in personal narrative seems to show that she quickly caught onto the expectations for writing, moving two grade levels in six weeks, allowing her to meet or exceed first grade standards. In fact, Kathia’s scores on her nonfiction and realistic fiction post-assessments were the highest in the class. Kathia’s scores dropped in nonfiction and opinion writing, which, upon closer look at her writing samples, seems to be related to her choice in topic. For example, Kathia’s published opinion piece received the highest score in the class, but she chose to copy the anchor chart outlining reasons why zoos are bad for animals as her on-demand piece. She seems to lack confidence as a writer, which is puzzling to me because she is a very skilled writer. She just doesn’t seem to know it!

As I analyzed student writing growth, I thought it was important not only to notice upward or downward trends, but to also look more closely at the numbers of points gained or lost between assessments. The rubrics I used suggest point ranges and a correlation to a scaled score that indicates grade level performance. For example, if a student earns 28-33 points out of 44, the student earns a scaled score of three, which is equivalent to meeting grade level expectations for the end of that grade. Students who earn 17-22 points, on the other hand, earn a scaled score of

two, which is equivalent to kindergarten performance. Therefore, students could grow a minimum of six points or a maximum of 16 points to make one grade level of growth. The midpoint of this range is 11 points, so I decided that if a student gains 11 or more points within a genre, he or she is meeting or exceeding growth expectations. To grow one-half of a grade level, students would need to improve their scores by 5.5 points. I decided that growth of 5.5-10.5 points would be considered approaching growth expectations. Any growth of less than 5.5 points, or any loss in points, would be considered not meeting growth expectations. I calculated growth in points for each genre for each case study student.

Change in Points Earned Between Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment				
	Personal Narrative	Nonfiction	Opinion	Realistic Fiction
Ashlee	+3.5	-0.5	+10.5	+8
Angel	+3.5	+7	+6.5	+6
Carlos	+11	+1	+14.5	+8.5
Luis	+10	+0	+6	+9
Isabella	+7	+2	+8.5	+8
Kathia	+20.5	-5.5	-1	+19.5

Growth Level	Point Change	Color Code
Meets or Exceeds	11 points or more	Green
Approaches	5.5-10.5 points	Yellow
Does Not Meet	Less than 5.5 points or any loss in points	Red

In this analysis, Carlos appears to be making the greatest gains, as his scores in two of the four genres indicate he is meeting or exceeding growth expectations. This is particularly notable because he grew an entire grade level in personal narrative and opinion writing in only four to six weeks. Kathia also had two genres in which she met or exceeded growth expectations;

however, she also had two genres in which she did not meet growth expectations. In fact, in both nonfiction and opinion writing, she showed a loss of points. Five of the six case study students either made very minimal gains or lost points in nonfiction writing, with the only exception being Angel, the most struggling writer in the group. I think this minimal gain or loss in points for so many students could be due to many students scoring higher in this genre on the pre-assessment than the other genres, which may be related to a focus on nonfiction writing in kindergaren and across the content areas in first grade. For my struggling writers, Ashlee and Angel, growth was minimal near the beginning of the year (in personal narrative writing, which was complete in September and October), and greater toward the end of the year (as seen in opinion writing, which was completed in March). I wonder if this could be due to developmental gains, as their literacy skills have become stronger recently as the result of intervention programs both students participate in.

I also analyzed the changes in how students responded to particular questions on the writing attitudes and self-reflection survey. The questions I chose to look at in-depth included:

- What do you do well as a writer?
- What do you need to work on as a writer?
- How can you become a better writer?

The students' responses were collected in October, February, and May, and were analyzed for changes in vocabulary usage, naming strategies taught or used, and specificity about their strengths and weaknesses.

Name	What do you do well as a writer?			What do you need to work on as a writer?			How can you become a better writer?		
	Oct. 2013	Feb. 2014	May 2014	Oct. 2013	Feb. 2014	May 2014	Oct. 2013	Feb. 2014	May 2014
Angel (Low)	I right (sic) pictures.	I am a good writer for small moments.	I work on words.	Adding	I need work on books.	An ending for my book	Write more pictures	Work on books.	More words
Ashlee (Low)	Pictures	Our teacher teaches us and that's why we are good	I wrote a lot	Words	Like add details	My endings	More words	From writing more	Write more words to end my story
Luis (Mid-Level)	I spell well a lote (sic)	Edit	I am good at dialogue	Try my best to draw things	Add to my pictures	Drawing what I'm writing of words	Write things more neat	Try my best to write	By working on my problems
Carlos (Mid-Level)	Drawing Angry Birds	I am good at writing books because I put details.	I write places where the story happens.	Tools	I don't like it when I mess up.	I will get more details on my story.	Yes	When I put more words.	I need to get details and words to make it better.
Isabella (High)	Because I write details	I think I do some details as a write and sometimes I am so so so good at writing nonfiction books.	I do well on speaking to my reader and adding quotation marks.	I need to work on labeling and writing words and sounding out words.	I need to work on add (sic) more details and endings.	I need to work on adding more more more details.	I can get better at labeling and sounding out words and writing more words.	I want to add more details.	I can become a better writer by adding more details.
Kathia (High)	Word	Pictures cause I do not mess up the pictures.	The words	Pictures	Words cause I always mess up.	The pictures	More details	Add more information cause I tell just a little.	To write more words.

I noticed that all students except Luis improved in their ability to articular specific areas of writing that can be improved in at least one of the two later surveys. For example, Ashlee’s thoughts on what she needs to work on as a writer changed from “words,” a very basic comment, to “like add details,” which makes me think she’s noticing that her writing tends to be more sparse and that she’d benefit from including more details in her pieces. Kathia’s changes in her thinking about herself as a write changed significantly from October to February. In her first reflection, her responses were simple, one- or two-word answers. In the second administration of the survey, she elaborated, especially in response to how she could become a better writer. (I find

it interesting that she seems to lack confidence in herself as a writer, as she is a very proficient writer and, through observation and conversation, she says she likes to write.) Luis' responses - like his writing - are very brief. I am surprised he continues to dwell on the quality of his pictures, as we discuss often that the pictures at this point are usually secondary to the text. In the beginning of first grade, I teach several lessons on using sketches to plan a story across three or more pages before writing. As the year progresses, we pull back on the emphasis on illustrations, since story meaning should be carried more in words than in pictures as they become stronger writers. (One exception to this is nonfiction writing, in which illustrations and diagrams teach the reader and support text comprehension.)

Conclusion

In summary, the use of writing self-reflection and goal-setting in a first grade classroom appears to help students improve the points earned for narrative and opinion writing.

Improvement was not as noticeable in nonfiction writing, which I believe is due to the large amount of nonfiction writing my students did when they were in kindergarten. This was an area that students entered first grade ready to write well, and initial scores were high. The room for improvement was thus smaller, and I wonder if this may have contributed to minimal growth in the genre. Narrative writing was taught in kindergarten, which makes me puzzled as to why so many students struggled to write personal narratives at the beginning of the year. On the other hand, students did not learn about opinion writing in kindergarten, and five of the six case study students showed reasonable growth in this genre. By our opinion unit in March, students had already self-assessed several times. Were they internalizing how to self-assess by then? Or did they simply latch on to the genre?

I wonder how much of the growth is due to my use of self-assessment and goal setting relative to the overall instruction in that genre. I tried to weave self-assessment and goal-setting into each genre multiple times and through a variety of formats, such as using goal-setting labels and highlighting evidence of work toward these goals, using checklists, comparing student work to determine what makes a piece weak or strong, and scoring anonymous student work before scoring one's own work. But alongside these reflections, students were still learning qualities of

that genre and how to write in the genre through mini-lessons and conferences. Did students improve in their ability to write in a genre because they were self-assessing, setting goals, revising, and assessing again? Or did student writing improve simply because they learned more about how to write?

While it is difficult to determine how helpful self-assessment was in improving writing scores, I believe it has helped students improve their understanding of themselves as writers. This is evidenced in the changing ways in which students describe their strengths and weaknesses in writing, moving from statements like “drawing Angry Birds” as strengths to naming more specific writing strategies, such as including details and adding more information because “I only tell a little.”

I know my students would continue to benefit from strong writing instruction coupled with teaching about how to self-assess, and looking at their writing from a different lens to really improve its quality. This action research has made me hopeful that, over time, my students’ writing will continue to improve as they take more proactive and independent roles in their development as writers.

Policy Recommendations

- School Level
 - By the end of August 2014, I will conduct professional development for all teachers that will outline the self-assessment process. During this time, teachers will work in grade-level teams to create at least 2-3 initial self-assessment lessons to teach students what self-assessment is and age-appropriate ways to demonstrate self-assessment.
 - By September 2014, 100% of classroom will implement some form of self-assessment, either in writing or another content area, based upon material I’ve provided or material created by the individual teacher. All classrooms will continue to teach students to self-assess within each subject area.
 - Create a folder in Google Docs for teachers to place exemplar student self-assessments and assessment tools and resources for teachers to use or modify as needed.

- Throughout the year, teachers will explicitly teach strategies for self-assessment, and will post examples of strong self-assessments and rubrics for students to use as guides.
- Classroom Level
 - Provide time for students to self-assess their work at least two times per writing unit.
 - Hold informal self-assessments about how various lessons or activities went in the classroom to encourage students to become comfortable with the concept and language of self-assessment.

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