

Learning to Describe, Describing to Understand

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As a former elementary school teacher and current advisor and supervisor to undergraduate student teachers, I often think and discuss with student teachers the topic of assessments of students and reflective self-assessment of our teaching practices. One exercise student teachers and I carry out in our weekly reflective seminar is a brainstorm of ways we can and do assess students and the effectiveness of our teaching. We easily fill a chalkboard with a list of the many formal and informal ways we might assess—from the mental and written notes teachers make of “aha!” moments, to noticing which activities seem to engage particular students, to recognizing evidence of confusion and success throughout the day, to having discussions with colleagues and parents, to name just a few informal assessments. Then there are the more formal assessments we might use—including teacher-made quizzes or tests, reading records using leveled books, comparing student work to a rubric, or proctoring and analyzing state-mandated standardized tests. As the list of possible assessments mounts (and I run out of chalkboard space) we discover that the list could go on and on. Moreover, these assessments cannot all be used; teachers must make choices.

In discerning among the assessments, we turn our attention to the limitations of each and notice that they all have limitations. For example, assessing student engagement can be difficult and unreliable since not all students show engagement in the same way. Some students have a tendency to become visibly excited about particular activities, while others are much more subtle in their fascination. There are limits to the short- and long-term memories of teachers, who are trying to analyze and synthesize the

many reactions and interactions they see among their students every day. And the cultural assumptions and preferred learning styles of teachers can affect the way teachers view their students.

Limitations are also associated with the more formal assessments, of course, including a potential lack of clarity and transparency as to what may be on a standardized test, the lag time between tests and results, testing anxiety for many students, substantial amounts of class time used for testing and test preparation, pressure to narrow the curriculum to easily testable items, and the negative consequences of scores and rankings that might be associated with certain tests. How should teachers make decisions about which assessments to use (assuming they have a choice)? Which assessments make the best use of limited time and are the most revealing about students and the effectiveness of our teaching approaches?

This essay is a reflection, from one person's perspective, on a form of assessment not often discussed in the research literature and not widely enough known among teachers but one that I have used for many years, as a teacher and supervisor for student teachers, as a tool for assessment and as a powerful form of professional development. I am referring to the descriptive review processes developed by staff at the Prospect School (now the Prospect Archives and Center for Education and Research) in North Bennington, VT.

What is a descriptive review? In short, it is a way of organizing a discussion among adults around a difficult problem. Most often, there is a presenter and a facilitator, along with peer participants. The facilitator ensures that the basic principles of the process are followed. The presenter generally begins the discussion. First, the presenter offers a framing question to help focus the inquiry. The presenter then describes in vivid detail the person or object of study. If it is a review of a child (as opposed to a review of curricular practice or children's work, among the many other possible topics or processes), the protocol provides a list of questions that the presenter might think about and answer in describing the child, under five headings: physical presence and gesture, disposition and temperament, relationships, interests and passions, and ways of thinking and learning (Himley 2000). A child study can also be focused primarily on a particular aspect of a child, such as his or her artwork or writing (a framing question is not usually used in this case). For example, the presenter might present a work of art or an essay written by the child. At this point, all of the participants of the study will describe aspects of this piece, trying to stay as descriptive as possible, rather than diagnostic or conclusive (e.g., if a participant notices

a shape in a drawing that is round, they might say a “sun-like shape,” rather than that assuming it is a sun). It is also critical that the presenter and participants focus on describing what is there and not what seems to be missing. The chair will then usually summarize the discussion thus far and restate the framing question. At this point, participants are invited to ask questions of the presenter. In my experience, questioning begins with clarifying questions, or questions with short answers, meant to fill in gaps of understanding but that are not critical of the practice of the presenter. Participants are then invited to ask probing questions, or questions that may offer suggestions to the presenter, sometimes beginning with the phrase, “Have you tried? . . .” or “Have you thought about? . . .” Finally, participants are asked to offer suggestions to the presenter, as the presenter listens. The presenter then is given a chance to respond to questions and suggestions. There is often time reserved at the end for participants and presenters to share how the process seemed to work for them, often asking the central question, “Were we respectful of the child and family?”

I have used this process, in one of its forms, in a variety of settings: first, as a teacher at the Mission Hill School in Boston, MA, where we used descriptive review processes during staff meetings to share and receive feedback on critical questions that we, as teachers, were facing. The questions often centered around concern for a particular student’s progress, around an entire curricular unit we were planning to teach, or around the classroom setup that we had developed for the year. I later chose to use descriptive review again in professional development with student teachers, as they gained understanding about their students and planned to teach units for their “takeover” weeks.

As a way to organize a staff meeting, the protocol has many advantages. A descriptive review is often teacher led and draws on the expertise of the teachers who participate, using questions most relevant and “closest” to the teaching and learning of students. This means that the meetings are often focused on curriculum and instruction, as opposed to the school business or administrative tasks that are common to staff meetings in many schools. The protocol offers a way to utilize the immense knowledge that is present when a group of teachers comes together, to be shared with the presenter who has framed a question, as well as with the other participants who might learn from other teachers’ insights about teaching techniques or how others may understand the child at the center (in the case of a descriptive review of the child). Without powerful protocols such as the Prospect Center’s descriptive review I have found that discussions around teaching

and learning, as well as the assessment of particular students, can suffer from serious problems that make meaningful communication difficult. For example, in some instances colleagues can, perhaps unknowingly, dominate discussions and prevent others from sharing important knowledge. Without a protocol participants are sometimes less willing to patiently listen long enough and to offer feedback that is relevant and useful to the presenter, choosing instead to inject responses that are unnecessarily judgmental, for example, or based on a misunderstanding. Without a protocol, teachers can often talk too abstractly about students, or teaching and learning, failing to tie the discussion to particular situations or clearly describing how problems are related to various factors at work in the classroom. Without a protocol, presenters can sometimes find it hard to hear critical feedback, perhaps interpreting recommendations as harsh or judgmental, rather than humble suggestions tied to deep respect for the presenter's thoughtfulness about his or her practice.

The descriptive review protocol wisely begins with an allotted time for the presenter to offer a full description of the child or curriculum at the center of the investigation. However, just as important is the time following the presentation, when participants ask clarifying questions. This essential time allows the group to better understand the "full picture" and any important factors that may be related to the question but to clarify these issues before participants offer probing questions, critical feedback, or suggestions. I have been impressed by how teachers and student teachers, when presenting a child study or curriculum study, have been more open to critique and criticism than in most any circumstance with colleagues, and yet there is a feeling of safety and mutual trust provided by the rules of the process and the knowledge that participants are in good faith trying to understand a difficult issue with the presenter.

The Prospect Center processes are also useful and are more widely associated with the powerful and respectful way they allow teachers to assess children, not as students with "deficits" of understanding but as full human beings making sense of the world. Perhaps the greatest contribution the protocol offers in this regard is the sensitive and specific questions they offer presenters when preparing their framing question and presentation. The presenter is asked to describe the child, how she or he presents herself in various contexts, her connections with adults and others, and specific abiding interests and successes, to name a few. The describing must be specific and personal enough to cut through stereotypes and easy characterizations. As much of the child is "brought into view" as possible. Other

participants in the child study are asked to reflect on the child if they know her or him, perhaps in a different setting from the presenter, and samples of student work are brought and described by participants. Description is the bottom line. Patricia Carini, a founder of the Prospect Center and Archives, and developer of the descriptive review, writes of the importance of description:

Describing I pause, and pausing, attend. Describing requires that I stand back and consider. Describing requires that I not rush to judgment or conclude before I have looked. Describing makes room for something to be fully present. Describing is slow, particular work. I have to set aside familiar categories for classifying and generalizing. I have to stay with the subject of my attention. I have to give it time to speak, to show itself. . . . To describe teaches me that the subject of my attention always exceeds what I can see. . . . I learn that when I see a lot, I am still seeing only a little and partially. I learn that when others join in, the description is always fuller than what I saw alone. (Carini 2001, 163)

With these words I am immediately brought back to the work of John Dewey, who once wrote,

The child is the starting point, the center, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard. To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth. . . . Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within. It is he and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning. (Dewey 1956, 9)

It is this profound respect, the child-centered humility, that allows the descriptive review of the child to reveal to the presenter, often the child's teacher, and to others, the child in a way that perhaps could not have happened in the bustle of leading a classroom with many children. Stepping out and reflecting with the help of colleagues and a powerful protocol can focus reflection to a startling degree.

I once spent a week at the Prospect Center in North Bennington, VT, along with a colleague of mine from Mission Hill School. There we joined one of the workshops led by experienced teachers and facilitators of descriptive review. Among other activities, our workshop group participated in a four-day descriptive review of a single child. It was then that I truly

understood the words Carini wrote, “I learn that when I see a lot, I am still seeing only a little and partially.” Never could I have imagined how deeply and richly I might know the complexity of a student—even one I would never know personally—through the use of a protocol and along with a group of fellow teachers.

The Prospect Center and Archives was once a school. Although the school has closed, the archives remain; they are the collected student works and narrative descriptions by former teachers of the Prospect School. During the workshop, and weeklong descriptive review, the facilitator presented to our group a former Prospect School student’s artwork, poetry, essays, and mathematical problem solving, along with the narrative observations of this student by teachers, each from various times during the student’s matriculation. By looking closely and jointly describing this rich material, marking years of growth, I developed a new appreciation for the integrity and deep, yet limited, knowledge teachers might acquire of students. This particular descriptive review involved the rare power of longitudinal study, something that is not always possible with the students with whom we work in our classrooms, and is perhaps more reminiscent of watching one’s own child grow. Describing a person’s work over the passing of time is a scarce opportunity to notice and appreciate patterns and interests but, perhaps even more striking, to notice the increasing number of questions that remained unanswered about her!

As a supervisor of student teachers, I have tried to bring some of that ability to notice, along with humility about the extent of our knowledge, to the young teachers with whom I work. When we conduct descriptive reviews of children in our reflective seminar, these undergraduates often express surprise at how much they thought they knew about their own students, but were perhaps wrong, or they noticed how they jumped to characterizations before they sat down and really took the time to describe what they saw of a particular student in various situations. A common framing question for our child studies are variations of “How can I make a better connection with this student?” After presenters have detailed what they know about the interests of students, what this child finds fascinating and frustrating, with whom they may work well, and when they tend to find trouble, student teachers return to seminar to report “updates” on how the child is doing in class and in various relationships. The careful descriptions seem to pay off enormously, as student teachers develop new appreciation for their students, and the suggestions they were given for more effective approaches often prove beneficial. Student teachers report that

they discipline particular students less if they have taken the time to prepare and conduct a descriptive review of that child, for example. and many of the ideas and resources for better assessment and teaching exist among our gathering of student teachers, a sometimes empowering discovery.

Like every one of the assessments we list on the chalkboard toward the beginning of the semester, the Prospect Center's descriptive review processes have limitations. For one, they are time consuming. As I mentioned above, it is possible for a descriptive review of one child to continue for many days while still providing important insights. A descriptive review that lasts less than 40 minutes is probably not long enough to be effective. That is a limitation. Teachers' time is short, and topics for exploration must be carefully chosen, as teachers are not always able to come together each time a colleague has a difficult question and could use wise participants. Someone may argue that it is not useful if only one child can be described; will it perhaps lead to favoritism? But it is surprising how much it is possible to notice the unique variations in other individuals by knowing well the characteristics of one person. I believe that is why conducting a descriptive review of one child over four days at the Prospect Center retreat was well worth the time. I will never meet this "child" (whom I later found out is actually older than I am), but I certainly took away a new appreciation for the possibility of "knowing" someone through observation and description alone. The effort it takes to reflect and describe an important topic is another limitation—but when are difficult questions answered without effort? This assessment tool provides a pathway to powerful learning. And another important limitation: the amount and quality of preparation the presenter conducts before the descriptive review can greatly affect the process, for better or for worse. It is important that the presenter follow the guidelines, including answering the specific questions, avoiding easy conclusions or diagnoses. The protocol questions can be found described in Himley (2000), for example, among other publications.

A common exercise, often carried out just before a larger descriptive review takes place, is the practice of describing associations with a chosen word. Taking approximately 15 minutes before a longer descriptive review to ask participants to "reflect on a word" and then share those reflections can lead to surprising discoveries. The purpose of such an exercise is twofold. First, the presenter can help focus the discussion for the longer descriptive review by carefully choosing a word that might be relevant to the topic. For example, I have participated in group reflections on the words "curriculum," "achievement," and "class community." The brainstorming and

sharing of associations with these words in a group has, in my experience, profoundly “troubled” that word or term. It becomes clear that no two people see even one word the same way. Describing associations with words can be an exercise in synonyms, yet it can also be a rich exchange about specific approaches or strategies in operationalizing the word in focus. When it is apparent that the group of participants is coming to the word differently, with disparate assumptions and associations, it helps to set the stage for a longer descriptive review, which likely focuses on a topic much more complex than a word or term.

At the university where I am employed, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, a major emphasis is placed on the importance of multicultural education in our teacher education programs. Indeed, the education faculty at Wisconsin includes some of the luminaries of multicultural research and analysis. The students who attend the teacher education programs hear and read about many culturally sensitive approaches to teaching in the diverse school settings where they are likely to be hired. Yet, when I first encounter the student teachers with whom I work, most often white and female students from smaller towns in Wisconsin, many are confused, and sometimes frustrated, by what they hear as “rhetoric” about multicultural education, rather than specific techniques. These student teachers find it hard to notice when particular curricular or teaching approaches are “culturally relevant” for students, for example, or whether their assessments of students are culturally biased.

It is often these students who find descriptive review, especially when used for a review of the child and focused on a student in their class, most helpful. This protocol allows, or requires, teachers to look very closely at the specific pieces of evidence they might encounter to better understand a child in their class. And, like the reflection on a word, the child study protocol allows the group of gathered teachers to “trouble” those pieces of evidence. If a student appears “fidgety and anxious,” for example, might that be read by the gathered teachers differently than by the presenter? The protocol allows this question to be raised and often forces teachers, both the presenter and participants, to rethink initial assumptions about the behavior of children. The presenter may believe a child is fidgety because he or she chooses to be disobedient, while perhaps another participant reads this as signaling a greater need not being met. Each participant may see different challenges and opportunities to better connect with the student in focus if the presenter describes a child free of judgment, keeping to the protocol.

There is no doubt that culture, and cultural differences, are often in focus during many descriptive reviews. Children and adults are never solitary individuals, immune to the social and cultural forces around them. Gaining understanding of the cultural norms and assumptions we bring as teachers, as well as those brought by each of the students in our classes, is an often difficult task but is essential to providing a learning space that is welcoming and caring and sets up all students for academic and social success. Yet, discussions about these topics, even among colleagues who have known and worked with each other for many years, can be sensitive and at times distressing. On more than one occasion I have been part of tense staff meetings where it is clear that cultural sensibilities have been offended. And in more meetings than I can count, important discussions about race and culture were never had since colleagues were perhaps wary of raising such sensitive topics, even when such topics were critical to solving problems related to teaching and learning. I am not one who believes that sensitive topics should be raised simply to break a taboo. Rather, sensitive topics are often sensitive for a reason and should be raised with sensitivity. A protocol, such as that offered by the descriptive review, is a tool that can create a space for discussion around such issues. When using descriptive review for a child study, pieces of evidence raised in the descriptions and questions can be interrogated for cultural biases or coding. It is in the specificity of life that culture emerges and in the intricacies of description that critical issues can be raised free of harmful stereotypes that may further muddy the waters. However, this topic raises another potential limitation of this protocol. The descriptive review benefits from a diverse group of participants. I have not raised the issue of the number of participants necessary for a descriptive review to take place effectively. In fact, there are no set rules about this. As was mentioned, the time of teachers is limited, and availability can be difficult. For this reason, I have taken part in reviews composed of just three people and others that have included more than 15 people. The enormous benefit of conducting a descriptive review with a large number of people is that a wide diversity of points of view is almost guaranteed. Those items not noticed in the review with three people may be brought to light in a larger group.

In this critical review I have raised many of the limitations I see in the use of descriptive review as a form of assessment or as a tool for professional development. It takes time and effort. The description at the center of the protocol is aimed at deeper understanding and not necessarily breadth of knowledge about more than one person or narrow topic at a time—the

kind of assessment and methodologies that dominate educational research journals, for example. However, I hope I have made it apparent that the limitations of the Prospect Center's descriptive review processes are minor compared with the enormous benefits. A descriptive review grants space to educators to talk about particular children, or other important topics, including our own cultural biases, or a review of curricula, or even of whole-school restructuring, among any number of possible topics, while focusing discussion and reflection to a startling degree and pushing participants to notice more. Pat Carini writes, "To describe teaches me that the subject of my attention always exceeds what I can see" (2001, 163). Although we may have to teach on Monday, taking the time to reflect and listen, with humility, can and must be part of our ongoing growth as educators and perhaps as human beings.

References

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