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Teachers’ reading practices: The interplay of pre-specified assessment criteria and other factors

Claire Wyatt-Smith

Teachers of all subjects spend hours reading student papers. Sometimes the purpose for reading is predominantly to respond to students’ writing and to provide feedback intended to inform further revisions. At these times, the teacher may take on a collaborative role in text production, choosing on occasion to act as co-writer. Also, there are those times when, inevitably, the teacher must don the mantle of assessor, judge and gatekeeper. We know that teachers are well aware of the importance of their assessments and of the need for fair and equitable grading practices. However, as Huot (1990) noted, ‘we have little or no information on what role scoring procedures play in the reading and rating process’ (p. 258).

In the assessment-as-measurement tradition there is a clear emphasis on stated criteria as a-historical, value-free, stable indicators of quality. Essentially, this tradition awards status to wholly pre-specified criteria as providing the template for making rational, objective judgements. In this way it continues to encourage teachers to devalue their own first-hand assessment knowledge as subjective, informal, anecdotal, and as leading to a corrupted or error-ridden failure to discern the objective worth of a piece of writing. It is also this tradition that encourages teachers to ascribe to themselves what Probst (1989) described as ‘a crystalline objectivity’ that he claimed they cannot possess.

This article operates from the position that assessment is an interpretive process. It is about the agency of the teacher in that process. More specifically, it is about the different types of knowledges that teachers have available to them, and the ways in which they draw upon these to open up (and close down) pathways for reading student writing. ‘Reading’ is therefore understood to encompass responding to students’ writing and assessing it. The focus of the discussion is on the interplay that occurs between explicitly defined assessment criteria and other considerations that influence how teachers read and ascribe value to student writing.

The article sheds light on what Phelps (1989) described as ‘the deep structure for [teacher] reading’. It offers encouragement to teachers and researchers to move beyond the traditional distinction between objective and subjective judgements and to reject, the long-held superiority of the former. This move is of fundamental importance if teachers are to stop looking to defined criteria and standards for true or self-evident assessments and bring a critical eye to bear on the complex interplay of knowledges that they rely on to read and appraise student writing.

A model of teachers’ reading practices

The following discussion seeks to raise questions and challenge assumptions about stated criteria rather than provide new certainties. Readers are asked to shift attention away from the constraining, regulatory nature of criteria to consideration of their highly intersubjective, social nature. To this end, a descriptive, explanatory model of teachers’ reading practices is presented. The model sits at the interface between the theoretical and the social in the classroom and provides an explanatory framework for locating criteria within the network of contending influences that shape how teacher readings occur.
The model shown in Figure 1 is data-based rather than speculative, its genesis being in secondary English classrooms. Feedback to date suggests, however, that the model may have relevance to teachers in all learning areas. For this reason readers are invited to consider the model as a working hypothesis that may be examined against their experiences of reading classroom writing at different year levels and in different institutional sites.

The model represents the superstructure of teachers’ reading practices and shows how they involve various elements among which there is potential for considerable interaction and overlap. Insofar as the model is descriptive rather than normative, no claims are made about how a given part of the overall structure should be handled. Further, the model is not intended to be reductive and does not represent a recipe for reading using a prescribed set of steps. Its concern is more with displaying the to-and-fro movement of reflection and flow of knowledge that characterise how the teachers actually read, and not with stages or linear sequences in observable behaviour.

Reading elements as ‘framing possibilities’

Essentially, the model identifies four main elements of reading acts and shows the organisation of the elements, the relationships among them, and the potential pathways for reading that they make available. In this way the model shows the two-way flow of information between reader and text, and represents how they interact with and remain under the mutual influence of one another. The four main elements are:

1. individual teachers’ philosophies of teaching writing coupled with their repertoire of language skills, reading strategies, prior readings etc.;
2. attitudes to and purposes for reading in conjunction with teacher beliefs about their own position or identity in the school and classroom social practices;
3. available knowledge ‘files’; and
4. the colouring or flow-over effect of immediately surrounding texts.

The term ‘framing possibility’ is used throughout the discussion to refer to each of these elements, and indicates their potential to trigger interpretive assumptions, provide cues for reading, and enable the teacher to respond to cues suggested by the writing. Specifically, each element involves the teacher in bringing to student writing and imposing on it different sources of information, whether they be complementary or contradictory. From this perspective, the framing possibilities of the model represent more than just traces of influence on reading but are integral to the processes through which readings are produced. That is, they constitute the essential processes through which the teacher negotiates the meaning of student writing and arrives at an overall impression of its quality. As shown in Figure 1, there are four main kinds of framing possibilities. Each of these is discussed separately.

**Framing 1: Philosophy and repertoire**

The first element of the proposed model, teaching philosophy, is foundational and immediately focuses attention on teachers as the most important agents of assessment. Broadly speaking, teachers have a range of philosophies of how writing is best taught, and, in addition, they carry with them an already well-developed and expanding repertoire of language skills and teaching strategies. These are derived from or based on experiences of a variety of types, including outside-the-classroom life experiences, which Purves and Purves (1986) referred to as ‘experiences with the world, with language, and with the norms of culture’ (p. 178), and inside-the-classroom experiences of the roles of the teacher. While the outside experiences (including those related to moral, literary, religious and work background) contribute to the individual teacher’s cultural construction, the inside experiences (including day-to-day classroom encounters as well as pre- and in-service training) further construct the individual as teacher and assessor.
While investigation is required into how philosophies and repertoires intermesh in individual cases, the point is that both attributes shape or ‘inscribe’ the teacher in particular ways, only some of which are readily observable. A related observation is that, generally speaking, the mix does not readily lend itself to close or detailed scrutiny by other teachers, students, and, except through considerable self-study, even by the teacher concerned. The malleability of the components and their susceptibility to change over time also add to the difficulty of achieving full critical awareness of their make-up and influence.

Framing 2: Attitudes to and purposes for reading

The second framing of the proposed model, reading attitude, is similar to the first in that both influence which elements of repertoire are to be brought into play at any given time. However, reading attitude differs from philosophy in that it tends to be less enduring and can change quite readily (from one paper to the next or even in the course of reading), in accordance with how the teacher understands a given reading situation. Generally speaking, reading attitudes are adopted in response to how the teacher perceives the status of the writing (for example, interim draft or final product), and purposes for reading can be understood as falling into two main categories, namely formative and summative.

Individual teachers may choose to read with a formative or diagnostic attitude, directing attention to the evolving text or the writing-in-process. From this perspective, what assumes
importance is the emerging or developing nature of the writing—its continuity—and its usefulness to disclose writing difficulties that the writer confronts at some point in the composing processes. Reading provides the opportunity for the teacher to check progress on a task-at-hand and to provide the student with feedback intended to improve various aspects of drafts at various stages. This diagnostic concern may concentrate on an individual writer or on a whole class group. It may also extend to the teacher’s interest in reading for signs of the writer’s development and ability to handle the linguistic demands of certain types of writing.

Alternatively, a teacher may adopt a type of reading attitude that Phelps (1989) described as evaluative. According to Phelps, when an evaluative attitude is adopted, the teacher understands student writing as ‘self-contained, completed in itself’ (p. 49), and to be experienced ‘more or less decontextually’ (p. 49). Once an evaluative reading attitude is adopted, contextual information may be perceived as not only irrelevant, but also potentially dangerous insofar as it could lead to possible distortion in teacher judgement. The reader’s task or purpose is to read primarily for awarding a grading that appropriately reflects the overall effectiveness of a piece. The task may also involve looking into the inner workings of the text in order to infer achieved skill and knowledge and, if appropriate, to inform the writer of general writing skills that he/she is thought to already have, lack or need to improve.

Once adopted, reading attitudes set up expectations for reading and can predispose the teacher to adopt certain reading strategies. There is no suggestion here that individual teachers should adopt and maintain a single reading attitude, or that attitudes cannot be combined in various ways. The point is that reading attitudes persist regardless of the stated or implied audience for the writing and once adopted, tend to remain largely beyond the control of the student. Further, reading attitudes seem to be bound up, at least to some extent, with the types of reader–writer interactions that are allowed in the classroom and beyond (and those that are not allowed).

While there is already strong support for the view of writing as social practice, there is no evidence of consensus among teachers about how reader–writer interactions are to properly occur in the classroom. For example, consider how two experienced English teachers view themselves and others as readers of classroom writing. In Classroom A teacher–student and peer conferencing sessions are accepted and required practices. The teacher expects draft assignments, including those items to be used for summative or reporting purposes, to be conferenced with other readers. Also, students are expected to document the text-production process, specifying the use that they made of reader feedback, whether it be from the teacher, peers, and/or other experienced readers. Final submissions must comprise both the final draft and a statement of its production history. While the latter is not actually graded, the teacher regards it as valuable background information and claims to take into account when reading.

In Classroom B the teacher disallows all forms of conferencing on the grounds that students lack the prerequisite linguistic expertise to benefit from talking to one another about their writing. This view is captured in the teacher’s descriptions of conferencing as ‘a pooling of ignorance’ and ‘nothing more than an opportunity for the blind to lead the blind’. In addition, students are required to complete all written assignments during class time and in silence. This practice is motivated by a concern with safeguarding what the teacher referred to as ‘the integrity of the assessment process’, by ensuring that the teacher and other readers maintain a critical detachment from the writing at all stages of its development.

What comes to light here are not just different attitudes to conferencing, but a picture of strikingly different classroom situations for writing. Such differences suggest how unresolved tensions exist about how to enact the institutionalised relationship between teacher–reader and student–writer. In particular, they indicate how both the stated and unstated rules for playing out the relationship are understood to be determined by whether the teacher chooses to be (or not to be) involved in the production of classroom writing, and the nature of any involvement. In
Classroom A, for example, the teacher willingly acted as co-writer, respondent and editor, and yet the Classroom B teacher consistently refused to read draft versions. What is also evident is how certain teacher practices, especially those designed to establish and maintain reader–writer relationships, can have considerable influence on both the shaping of student writing and on how it is read.

**Framing 3: Major knowledge units**

As shown in Figure 1, the third element of the model is labelled 'knowledge files'. Teacher’s knowledge files represent a storehouse of information that teachers carry with them in their heads, as well as other information sourced from other resources such as curriculum policy documents, syllabuses and school work programs. Specifically, the files incorporate knowledge about language and the accepted features of various textual forms (F1), knowledge about the student (F2) and the classroom world (F3), and other knowledge about colleagues reading practices (F4), and curriculum matters that extend beyond the immediate assessment item (F5). This body of knowledge, or more aptly these knowledges, can be thought of as existing ‘in’ a set of files that the teacher can open, close and combine in a multiplicity of ways, as required. While a detailed account of these files and how they work is not possible in this paper, a brief summary of their content and characteristics is presented below.

**F1: Language—how it works**

This file contains teacher knowledge about language and its use in spoken, written, media and multi-media texts. This knowledge is derived from a variety of sources including published and unpublished texts that the teacher has read, written, spoken or viewed. The significance of these texts is that they provide the teacher with recollected exemplars that exhibit the features of the text type being attempted by students. If the exemplars are professionally authored and of a high quality, they can also provide referents or benchmarks against which to gauge the quality of student performance.

**F2: The student—as developing writer and as learner**

In the second file the teacher accrues a substantial body of information that, broadly speaking, could be understood as falling into two main categories or sub-files, namely, the student as a developing writer and the student as learner. The first sub-file contains any information that the teacher has gathered about the pattern of student performance across a range of tasks produced under a range of conditions. The second sub-file stores information about the student’s life experiences outside the classroom as well as first-hand observations of behaviour in the social context of the classroom. For example, a teacher may know those students who consistently seek conferencing time, individual student’s attitudes to writing in general, and their preferences for certain types of writing, in particular. This mix of knowledge is reflected in the following statement from a year 12 English teacher:

> Sometimes students write about very personal matters and you can see that it comes from something that has affected them some time in their life. And sometimes you can see how the student has taken your advice about changes to the writing. And then again you might see that the writing is better or worse than other pieces that you have read before. But you don’t know any of this before you read the piece, but it’s pretty obvious in the writing when you do. So of course you have to be aware, to be sensitive to these things especially when you’re making comments about them.

This comment shows how a distinctive feature of the second file is the knowledge it holds that allows the teacher to view ‘not simply the text but the assumed writer of the text’ (Purves and Purves, 1986: p. 192). Specifically, the file allows the teacher to ‘read’ the student while the text is being read.
F3: The pedagogical context

The third file consists of teacher recollections of selected pedagogical approaches as well as perceptions of the effectiveness of the approaches. In this regard it is similar to F2 in that it contains information about aspects of what Katz (1989) referred to as ‘collective classroom history’ (p. 119), although the emphasis is more on teaching methods than on students. If F3 is called into play during a reading, the individual teacher reads with an awareness that the writing has emerged from a situation that they have largely created. That is, as they read, they can draw on memories of a whole range of teaching approaches, classroom activities and interactions, including the talk that surrounded the use of certain material and human resources. Also included in this file is knowledge and interpretations of set criteria and standards, and how the teacher communicated those interpretations to students. At issue is how within the classroom, exemplars, shared talk and other interactions provide opportunities for the teacher to attribute meaning to criteria statements. In this way, any set of stated criteria assume an historical identity in relation to a large network of associations that sit privately in the teacher’s head.

F4: Colleagues’ views

The fourth file contains information about colleagues’ perceptions of the status of assessable classroom writing and how it should be read. Typically, teachers do not set out deliberately to gather this information but accrue it informally through a number of means. These include casual staffroom talk in which teachers exchange their impressions of students’ drafts or of recently completed assignments and examinations. Other opportunities for gathering knowledge about colleagues’ reading practices occur when cross-marking is required, and when year-level meetings are called to discuss curricula implementation. Exchanges and meetings such as these provide information against which teachers check their own perceptions of what constitutes quality student writing, especially at particular year levels.

F5: Beyond the task—curriculum matters

The fifth file, F5, contains knowledge about curriculum policy as it is communicated in relevant syllabuses and support documents, and school work programs. Knowledge of this type can be as extensive as the teacher cares to make it. For example, some teachers may have extensive knowledge of how the program of study on offer at a particular year level in their school articulates with those offered at other year levels. They may contribute teaching units devised for various year levels, assignment specifications including criteria statements, and exemplars of student work including portfolios. Others may take a keen interest in curriculum initiatives at national and/or state levels, and be involved in the development, implementation of relevant evaluative frameworks. Others may be less interested in and less well informed about these matters. Variations in the extent of knowledge in the files and differential teacher usage of them raises the issue of how the files interact with one another and with other elements for reading including those previously discussed in this paper. This issue is examined briefly in the final section of this paper.

Characteristics of knowledge files

While it is possible to differentiate the model’s five knowledge files in terms of their content, they share three characteristics in common. Firstly, they are comprised of what can be broadly described as classroom world-knowledge of teaching, learning and assessing behaviours. A feature of such knowledge is that it has the potential to expand, even considerably, over time. The malleability of the files and their capacity for expansion means that the knowledge stored there can be altered and reorganised to meet the needs of the teacher. This is one reason that the ‘filing’ metaphor is appropriate: there is an obvious parallel with how information in a complex administrative system is managed.
Secondly, while the model displays how knowledge files can be hypothesised as having their own internal organisation for storing and accessing relevant knowledge as required, they do not represent stable or fixed entities. They are therefore not to be understood as compartmentalised or discrete sources of information, but as cross-indexed data that can be accessed in conjunction with one another. These features enable the teacher to open and close a single file or set of files at will, and to combine them in a multiplicity of ways, as occasion requires.

Thirdly, although the files are always available, they remain closed until the teacher decides to access them. The decision to open a file can be triggered by various considerations including, for example, the need to update existing knowledge as additional or more current information becomes available. These characteristics indicate that knowledge files are not simply a feature of reading but are integral to the processes through which reading actually occurs.

**Framing 4: The influence of surrounding student texts**

The fourth type of framing involves teacher's conceptions of quality and standards, which, according to Sadler (1989), 'exist in some quiescent and pliable form until they are reconstituted by fresh evaluative activity' (p. 127). The model suggests that the reconstituting of conceptions of quality typically occurs as readings of student writing are being generated. The experiences of reading the first few papers on any given occasion is therefore crucially important for two reasons. Firstly, these papers provide concrete referents for the set criteria being used by assisting the teacher to attribute specific meaning to the terms. Secondly, they establish provisional benchmarks for determining the quality of the remaining papers.

This kind of framing involves more than stabilising the meaning of criteria statements and standards. There is the teacher's strategic reading practice of situating a given text into an intertextual history in which any immediately surrounding texts can figure prominently. Also involved is the possible colouring or flow-over effect of one reading to the next as teachers reconstitute their conceptions of quality. From this perspective it is reasonable to expect that teachers make direct inter-text comparisons as they read and use them as a basis for making fine-grained grading distinctions among papers of similar quality.

**The back-wash effect of reading acts**

Whenever teachers read classroom writing, it seems they are inevitably engaged in an ongoing process of subject-production whereby they experience anew what it means to be a teacher-reader. This seems to occur in two ways. Firstly, each reading episode provides the teacher with a potential source of additional information to update existing knowledge files or develop new ones. As teachers read, for example, they may learn something more about how their students use language, the influence of various writing conditions, the effects of certain teaching strategies, and the suitability of the demands of a set task. They are continuously involved, therefore, in a process of confirming or updating what they know about their students as learners, themselves as teachers, and the events that occur in the classroom world.

Secondly, readings of school writing are conceptualised in the model as flowing right back to individual teachers so that they become incorporated into their ongoing history of experiences. In this way, the processes through which readings occur become inseparable from how the teacher learns what it means to be a teacher-reader. This proposition provides a partial explanation for the view of some teachers that their reading practices are both natural and intuitive. To use one teacher's words, 'Learning to be a teacher-reader, well it just happens after a while. You learn how to do it with experience'. 
Conclusion

Until a reconceptualisation of defined criteria for assessing writing occurs, it is probable that, at least in some classrooms, teachers will continue to understand criteria statements as coding the required reading practice for which they will be held institutionally accountable. Similarly, student grades ostensibly based exclusively on criteria statements will be sought as conclusive, objective judgements on the quality of the text and pronouncements of unchallengeable authority.

The model discussed in this paper takes a step towards a fundamental reconceptualisation of criteria as only one among a number of influences that frame how reading and assessing occur. This is not to fuel accusations that bias, whimsy or contamination of teacher judgement are inherent and inevitable features of assessment. Similarly, the model does not devalue the usefulness of criteria statements as tools to communicate teacher expectations of a quality performance and to aid students in learning how to self-assess. Rather, it shows how the provision of stated criteria, of itself, does not deny teachers access to various pathways for reading and assessing and does not preclude other considerations from coming into (and out of) play. From this perspective, questions need to be asked about the feasibility and appropriateness of any procedures intended to regulate the variables affecting assessment practices.

References


