

Rubric for Study of Literacy-Based Lessons

CRITERIA	7 or 8 points	5 or 6 points	3 or 4 points	1 or 2 points
Descriptive Language	Language is consistently used with careful precision and evident respect for learners and their learning activity.	Language is mostly used with careful precision and evident respect for learners and their learning activity.	Language is sometimes used with careful precision and evident respect for learners and their learning activity.	Language is almost never used with careful precision and evident respect for learners and their learning activity.
Description of Context	Description of the context richly frames the discussion and supports the analysis and interpretation of data.	Description of the context helps to frame the discussion and to provides some support for the analysis and interpretation of data.	Description of the context is somewhat disconnected from the discussion and provides limited support for the analysis and interpretation of data.	Description of the context adds little to the discussion and fails to support the analysis and interpretation of data.
Amount of Information	All topics are addressed and all questions answered with enough material and explanation about each.	All topics are addressed and most questions answered with enough material and explanation about each.	All topics are addressed, and most questions answered with some material and explanation about each.	One or more topics were not addressed.
Quality of Analysis	Discussion clearly presents the data and analysis and includes several supporting details and/or examples.	Discussion clearly presents the data and analysis and includes some supporting details and/or examples.	Discussion relates to the data, but gives insufficient analysis or not enough details and/or examples.	Discussion presents inadequate data and analysis.
Concept(s) from Readings	Any Concept from the course reading is fully explained and the application of the concept to the case study is clear.	Any Concept from the course reading is fully explained and the application of the concept to the case study is somewhat clear.	Any Concept from the course reading is somewhat explained but the application of the concept to the case study is somewhat unclear.	Any Concept from the course reading is not well explained and the application of the concept to the case study is unclear.
Reflection	Reflection offers important insights into the process and results of conducting the instruction.	Reflection offers some insights into the process and results of conducting the instruction.	Reflection offers limited insight into the process and results of conducting the instruction.	Reflection offers no insights into the process or results of conducting the instruction.
Organization	Discussion is very well-organized with well-constructed sections and paragraphs.	Discussion is organized with either well-constructed sections or well-constructed paragraphs.	Discussion is organized, but paragraphs are not well-constructed.	The discussion is not well-organized at the section or paragraph level.
Mechanics	No grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.	Almost no grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.	A few grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.	Many grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.

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## Making the Grade: When Learners Learn

### Context of School

K.G. Middle School is located in Providence, Rhode Island. The school was founded in 1929 and is in the heart of the Hartford Avenue Projects, which means that my students' lives are of a fairly low socioeconomic status. K.G. is currently in Corrective Action due to poor academic standing. However, the news is not all bad- K.G. is making great strides. We achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2008 and if our students' collective NECAP scores in Math, Reading, and Writing continue to improve, we will no longer have the taboo of "Corrective Action." The school is comprised of three grades: 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> and houses over 700 students. The students speak primarily Spanish with English as a second language.

I began teaching eighth grade English at K.G. in August of 2007 to kids whom were recently exited from ESL. I came from a "High Performing School" in Johnston, Rhode Island, which consisted of 98 percent Caucasian children. So, as one would imagine, teaching in Providence was certainly a culture shock. How was a Caucasian male from West Cranston, Rhode Island going to relate to the Hispanic? The poor? The blacks? The gang members? "The Hood?" Well, when I first came to K.G., I doubted that I ever would. I said to myself, "What am I going to do?" "How will I succeed?" How will I relate?" How will I...survive? I am happy to say that as I conclude my third year at K.G., I have survived.

## Context of Classroom

My classroom has structure. I remember when I was a Substitute Teacher; my most stressful days were those where I was in rooms where the kids were in groups. Now, I know that being a substitute is different than a regular teacher, but even as a regular Education teacher, I notice that the teachers with the most Disciplinary Referrals are those who have their classrooms arranged in groups. The kids tend to just talk and copy when they are in groups. I'd like to see how each student as an individual can succeed in my room. Therefore, on the first day of school I line up my students against the whiteboard and seat them alphabetically. It shows them that I am the teacher, they are the student, and that relationship is clearly established immediately. The interesting observation I have made over the years is that whenever I do arrange my students in groups for a specific purpose, immediately upon me saying, "Ok folks, that's it, get back in rows" not once has a student complained. They have always taken their desks and slid them back in rows. I believe that subconsciously, the students thrive on that structure.

When one walks into Room 306, this is what they would see:

- An agenda in list form of what students are expected to do from beginning to end of class
- The students are arranged in rows
- The students' books are already on their desks
- All of the students' materials are in their binders (retrieved from shelf)

I begin each class with a "Warm Up" where I set a timer for five minutes on the overhead projector. I randomly choose students' names from a container to share their journal response. I also take volunteers to recite each classroom rule from the chart on the wall. I

do this with my students EVERY day from the first day to the last. The results: better behavior. Students need a reminder on a daily basis of what the classroom rules are because their memory span is about 14 seconds.

After my first year at K.G., I was blessed with a fantastic Resource Teacher. She and I developed instant chemistry as co-teachers and she “showed me the way” as she introduced me to positive rewards in the classroom. We implemented a ticket-reward system. First, I was skeptical because studies have shown that giving mostly extrinsic rewards for behavior becomes Pavlovian and the intrinsic value of learning is less impactful. Despite my hesitation, I embraced it for the sake of teamwork and the results have been mostly good. If a student follows a rule or does a kind act, he or she earns a ticket toward the End of the Week Raffle. On Friday, the students place all of their tickets, with their names on the back, into the container and they can win a prize from the Prize Box. The Prize Box consists of mainly candy and school supplies. I also give a Student of the Week Award which I have always done. Overall, my classroom is strict and structured, but also positive.

After “surviving” my first year, and then “acclimating” to the new system in my second year, this year has been more about me “exploring.” I felt that for the first two years, I was always concentrating on the behavior of my students and if the teaching and learning occurred as well, then it was an even bigger success story. This academic year, I feel that I have established myself as a disciplinarian, and now I have enough confidence to take chances within the classroom. As I end the fourth core class of our two-year Master’s cohort, I decided to look beyond the faces of my students and into their minds. I

## Methods

As I continued to teach on a daily basis, I maintained the basic semblance and structure of the class through their workbook and quizzes. However, what really changed was in the area of Authentic Assessment. I felt that many of my students could identify nouns, verbs, adjectives, and sometimes prepositions, but were they really learning? So, I began assigning more independent projects (see Zwiers' Gradual Release of Responsibility below) and various writing assignments that would allow my students to become more proactive writers and readers. Through various strategies such as Paired Reading, Think Alouds, Motivational Rewards, Class Discussions, and Real-Life Connections, I discovered that many of my students were more engaged in my class rather than on-task. I felt like "Real" learning that pertained to their lives was taking place. Various assignments such as "Analysis of Fast Food," "Dear Editor," "Point of View Stories," "Picture Maps" and "Biographies" came to the forefront. Various Pre-, During, and Post-Reading strategies were also implemented throughout the project.

Most of my methods were in the form of written assignments that would allow students who may not have fared well on multiple choice quizzes to possibly flourish in assessments that were of more meaning to them. Many of my students are extremely unmotivated, so I took this project as an opportunity to see what would motivate them and in the end I would take a look at certain students' binders and hopefully see them grow as learners. .

## Literature Review

In Jeff Zwiers' book, Building Academic Language, Zwiers speaks of Academic Language. Academic Language serves three functions: To describe complexity, higher order thinking, and abstraction. "Languageism" is a big issue in my school. There are many times when I am teaching and some of the simplest words to me tend to be foreign to my students. For example, some of my students, who I studied last semester, are deemed "low" because they were in ESL. However, some of those same "low" students were in the Classical Test Prep Course and displayed brilliance with some analogies and other logic-based problems. The vocabulary section of the exam became problematic; not necessarily because they didn't understand the meanings, but that they had never heard them before. If I gave them a day to study them and have them take a test, then they'd be ok. Unfortunately, even though I know they try extremely hard and know most of the material, it's that delay that resulted in none of them being accepted into Classical (although I'm writing an appeal letter for one student).

In Chapter Three, Zwiers speaks about certain strategies that teachers can use to make students successful. Modeling, Scaffolding, Enabling, Connecting with Metaphors, Examples, and Personifying, Using Controversial Topics, Repetition, Rephrasing, and Paraphrasing are all strategies that I tend to use throughout the year.

As a teacher of ELL Students, the most common strategy that I use is Modeling. I tend to teach more Whole-Class Instruction, so the Motto "I Do, We Do, You Do" seems to be at the core of each lesson. At times, I will walk students through certain stories such as vocabulary, context clues, or figurative language. Then, we as a class will read the questions that they are to consider as they read, then they take turns reading and as they

read I will model the thinking process for them. For example, if a student is reading a paragraph about a character, I would stop him or her and ask,

Me: "So, what do you think of him?"

Stu: like, "He thinks he's all that."

Me: " Ok, so he's confident or perhaps conceited."

Stu: Yeah

Me: "I'm thinking he may be more conceited...Why do you think I'm thinking that?"

Stu: "I don't know, maybe cuz he's not really being true"

Me: "Oh, so maybe because he's lying? Ok, keep going..."

As I read Zwiers book, I came to realize most of my questioning are definitely DISPLAY QUESTIONS. The 5 W's (who, what, when, where, and why?) are at the forefront of most of my classes. My Open Ended Questions and Justification tend to come in the form of written responses. I think that open-ended questions in the middle of class reading takes away from the fluidity of the reading and comprehension, not to mention the fact that it acts as a major tangent! Plus, the demographic that I have doesn't allow for mature, turn-taking discussions and turns into a problem for a controlling teacher like myself. But, the open-ended journal responses (pre-read), predictions (during), and comprehension questions (during and post) are 90% in the form of writing. In fact, many students, if I do ask too many questions, are so used to my routine, that they say, "ok, can we get back to the work/story now?" My favorite page is 110. The first line says, "Questions, in my opinion, are overused in school." That in itself is eye-opening, but the last bullet point "Create learning tasks and assessments that are not so dependent on questions" is great because I LOVE those types of questions. For example, instead of

asking the "questions" sometimes, like recently, I had the students write a letter to a fictitious newspaper from the perspective of the main character and it served three purposes:

1. Learning Point of View
2. Writing rather than talking
3. Grade in the Gradebook



## Outline of Lessons

The following is a look into some of the lessons that I implemented in an attempt to make learning for my students more worthwhile. These six lessons took my students from a world of circling and filling in bubbles to one of making connections to stories and to their own lives. At the conclusion of each lesson, I will discuss my findings regarding the success of these lessons.

**Lesson 1:** Write a Letter to a Newspaper

**Purpose:** To have students take on a perspective of a character from a story

**Finding:** Many students were able to be very successful with this assignment because they could relate to the story, "The Marble Champ." This story was about a girl named Lupe and she felt that even though she was a straight A student, she was uncoordinated as an athlete. The assignment was for the student to write a letter to a fictitious newspaper describing what it is like for a teenage girl to not be good at "ball" sports. Students wrote about dedication, hard work, and perseverance along with what it takes to be good at something- in this case: marbles. I realized that the benefits to this assignment were that there was a structure to the letter that my students could easily follow (such as Heading, Date, Inside Address, Greeting, Body, Close, and signature). Another positive to this was that, unlike a quiz where one would circle options regarding the five w's, this assessment enabled the student to use imagination and comprehension on their way to synthesis and application. Overall, students loved this assignment and I felt as a teacher, that I drew more knowledge out of them than I would have with your typical multiple choice test.

## Lesson 2: Mini-Play: Oral Communication

**Purpose:** Students read and take on roles of characters in a play

**Finding:** What stands out to me is one particular boy from one class. This boy gets poor grades and has a learning disability. He never participates and comes across to me, as needing to be in Special Ed. However, amazingly the switch turned on during this lesson!!! The class read a play called, "Those Shoes of Mine" which was basically about a boy named Manuel who donated his shoes to his brother for a job interview. The object of this assignment was for the class to create questions that they would ask Manuel regarding certain scenes from the play. This particular boy volunteered to play the part of Manuel in front of the class. The students asked him questions as he stood in the front of the room and fielded them. One question after another, he answered them, all along pretending to actually be Manuel. He displayed tremendous comprehension of the play and responded to certain questions that I thought would be too difficult for him to "think outside the box". The success of this lesson did not stop with this one student either, as the taking on the roles of certain characters in the play, along with creating questions allowed for the whole class to learn as a group, not to mention it was fun, which they always desire. The students were also able to relate to the notion of helping others, interviews, and family members. Unlike a basic quiz/test, this served a better overall learning experience in that it covered a wider spectrum of a learning web than a piece of paper would. The particular boy that I mentioned, has been a much better student since this assignment as he has volunteered to read aloud more often since and talks to me with more confidence. This assessment may have had a long-lasting effect on this student.

*Handwritten notes:*  
The boy who volunteered to play Manuel...  
He displayed tremendous comprehension...  
The success of this lesson did not stop with this one student either...

### **Lesson 3: Picture Maps**

**Purpose:** A visual representation of comprehending two stories

**Finding:** Students folded a piece of construction paper to create six boxes. This was a culminating activity covering two stories: Detective Story and Science Fiction. After performing numerous traditional assessments of these stories, I read the stories aloud and then set the timer for two minutes for each square. The object was to have the students visualize the scenes as I read them, and draw a picture of whatever came to their minds. As someone who is a terrible drawer, and hated drawing as a kid, I went outside my comfort zone to allow for strong artists to have a chance to display knowledge. Not only was this assignment fun for the students, but they really showed great artistic abilities and for some students who failed the traditional quizzes during each of these story's units, this assignment was a grade saver! Some students showed tremendous imagination and comprehension of the respective stories.

### **Lesson 4: Five Paragraph Fast Food Essay**

**Purpose:** Students analyzed a National Food Website and two types of snacks in an attempt to write a five-paragraph Persuasive Essay trying to convince others to eat healthy

**Finding:** After analyzing the website, students were given a format to use for the writing of their essay. The format of the essay consisted of an introduction, which was to write 5-7 sentences about the site, Body #1, which was to write about why it is important to eat healthy, Body #2, which was the analysis of an unhealthy snack and its ingredients, Body # 3, which was the healthy snack and its ingredients, and then a conclusion. After watching the movie *Supersize Me* as a Real-Life Documentary prior to the essay,

students were able to skillfully analyze the Food Website. Some of the essays were absolutely outstanding and wise beyond their years. Perhaps the more impressive ones were those that were written by reluctant writers. Again, similar to the “Letter to the Newspaper” mentioned earlier, the structure of the five paragraph essay along with the use of prior knowledge (who hasn’t eaten Burger King or MacDonald’s?) made this assignment quite valuable.

**Lesson 5: The Writing of an Animal Story**

**Purpose:** Students are able to write a creative story displaying more independence than previous writing assignments.

**Finding:** In a unit about family, I had my students read a story about animals and their families. Then, I gave them various choices to choose from pertaining to scenarios involving animals. Most of the stories were very creative and displayed above level thinking. I had the students get into partners and discuss the topics and what each could write about. I also had them fill out a graphic organizer for each person’s story. Then I gave them a half hour to write the story and then hand it in for a grade. Out of the five lessons that I included in this paper, this was the most difficult one to “sell” to them because there was much more autonomy involved. Some of the students complained or did not begin writing right away, but eventually every one that was present that day participated and earned a good grade simply for trying. Overall, this was a fun exercise that allowed the students to get their creative juices flowing without the pressure of a traditional test.

## Lesson 6: Writing of a Biography

**Purpose:** To give students an opportunity to write about someone whom they have a vested interest in, without the pressures of a rubric.

**Finding:** Students wrote freely and grew as writers as they went from a “limited spaced ditto” to a three-page essay.

### Conclusion

The teacher research project that I conducted this semester was a valuable experience. I felt that I brought my students to new levels of learning once I began this project. Some of the limited assessments that I gave during the months of September to December became more challenging, relatable, and worthwhile to my kids. Perhaps the best aspect of this project was that it made me grow as an educator. I stepped out of my tunnel-vision teaching style and took chances that I really did not take the previous two years in Providence. I had always been so afraid to “let loose” that I think I prevented my students from exploring themselves and their own thinking. Through this study I realized that I can let the leash go and I will still get them back.

I also feel that I have a better relationship with my students this year than in the previous two years because I have treated them with more respect and dignity. In the past, I practically didn’t let them breathe but this year, I realized that just because the kids may be behaving, that does not necessarily mean that they are learning. They may be hiding behind the silence or perhaps they are just quiet kids who are afraid to get into trouble. This year, I challenged both them and myself to be a better learner. Now that the two years of our cohort is complete, I feel that I have grown exponentially as an educator and learner since June of 2008. In the following pages, you will see examples of student

work that I believe took my kids from on-task to engaged as it pertains to their level of commitment to each assessment.