

Teacher Commentary Transcript

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PRIOR TO THE LESSON

J: Talk about why you thought that the creative end of this, you could have done this unit and had them write a paper at the end or something. Why did you feel that it was important for them to have that more creative –

P: Because I wanted them to have that information stick with them. I really did. I really feel like when students are given this culminating task at the end of the unit, they'll remember that information. I guarantee if I see these kids two or three years from now, this will be the highlight of their second grade year. I got to make this video and learn all this stuff and we're going to share it tomorrow with another grade that's also learning about weather, and we're sharing it with administrators. I think this will stay with them. That was my goal. I wanted them to have a unit where they felt they had ownership of it, they learned information, and they left feeling like I've accomplished something. I really felt like I firmly believe in that. If you give them a culminating task and you put in a creative outlet, it really does inspire them. There's all sorts of other concepts that can be learned through this – collaboration, participation, listening and speaking skills, just how to get along with each other.

J: Talk a little about assessment for this unit.

P: I already know from teachers asking me questions, they're saying, well how are you assessing? How are you getting a grade for this? And I'm thinking, what they've learned these last ten days is much more valuable than what they just regurgitate on a piece of paper for me. So that plays a role as well. At the end of the day I know I have to give them some sort of grade, but I'm going to make sure it's a true reflection of what they've learned, or my subjective point of view, or what they felt like putting on that paper that day.

J: We so often focus on this one article and finding the main idea or drawing conclusions, and how shallow that is when you compare it to learning over many days, and seeing how one thing doesn't always mean the same as the next, and it's so much richer when they're able to put this altogether over time, and not think that comprehension is just-

P: Repeating what's read.

J: Yes, repeating what's in this one piece of paper. So the richness of it I think is also a very important point.

J: The goals of a unit like this, and really all teaching is much broader than just the specific learning you want them to get today, but really thinking about

P: How am I going to prepare them for years to come. Because if we're really trying to create life-long learners, that's what we need to be asking ourselves, is what am I doing today that's going to help them to grow later down the years, or when there's no more teachers around, when somebody's not there saying think about this, or question this. What are they going to do as adults. I think that's really important that they go through this process in order to get there.

J: And we as teachers have to be farsighted about it and not just check off this standard, check off that one

P: And I know it's very tempting to do that, but I think if you focus too much on the standards, oh I taught them that, I taught them that – I myself have really reflected and thought but did they really get it? I may have taught it, but did they really get it. That's a hard conversation to have with yourself. It

is,

J: Yes, because you're being evaluated on this stuff and your kids test scores and all the rest.

P: Yes

EXPLAINING THE RUBRIC

P: I did know I would have to give some sort of grade attached to this. So upon reflection, I thought I would really like to assess them on their how-to video, because there were a lot of things I was asking them to do in this video. So I would give them a lot of opportunities to shine and show me what they've learned. So I developed a rubric and there were a bunch of different categories. I wanted to make sure they had all of this information in their video. So I broke it up by percentage points and I did the bulk of my percentage, like 20%, did they tell me what the appearance of the severe weather was, the effects it had, and the precautions necessary. And then all my other categories I put into 10% - stating the type of weather, cooperation, participating, and then the entertainment factor. Those were all things, upon reflection, that I realized I wanted my kids to gain from this unit, so this is what I would assess them on.

J: Also it seems that by assessing the video you've honored the fact that this learning is a process. If you were to grade the very first set of notes or something, what would that really mean?

P: It would not be a reflection of what they've learned. Their grades probably, if I were to grade it the way that I would like formal assessment, one they wouldn't be accurate, but 2 they wouldn't be a true reflection of what they've learned through the whole process. So I think it's important to give them that opportunity and several days to go through all of that learning before saying, OK, let's talk about assessment.

J: Because you want to evaluate what's somebody's actually learned,

P: But you want to give them sufficient time to where they have learned enough information where they feel like they can articulate it.

PEER FEEDBACK 2

J: And then you really brought the kids into that – you called it constructive criticism – you called it wishes and greats – so is that something that you've done in various –

P: It is. We do a lot of that. That's a very difficult concept for second graders. When we first started doing that, I had several kids come to me and say I don't think we should do that anymore because it hurts my feelings. We had to have conversations about how that is part of everyday life, that every job you will ever have there will be constructive criticism. And again I kind of threw myself under the bus. I said, when Ms. Wright our principal comes in, she's looking at me and my teaching, she'll give me feedback, she'll tell me things to try differently. And when you say that, their faces are like, What? I think just being honest with kids, and saying I get constructive criticism myself and it helps me grow. That's the purpose. It's not to be mean or hurt your feelings, it's to help you grow as an individual. And I think they really realize that. I didn't see any tears today when people were giving feedback, it was just, OK, I'll try that. Really you could tell they were thinking about it.

J: I thought when you put it back to the kids, what do you think about that, sometimes they had a response that would explain why they did this, that really made a lot of sense. And sometimes they thought about it and they said, yes, I should talk slower, or I should add this point or whatever. So it seemed like they've really been learning how to get past the emotional part of somebody's talking about me to really hearing it.

P: That's the process. That's something we've been doing since the very first day of school. That's not something that I taught and they mastered in a day, it's a process. And we'll continue to work on it for the rest of the year.

Those are skills you have to teach. Behavior is a literacy and you have to teach those behaviors, you can't just assume they know how to do that. And I think as long as you are teaching, you have that approach that behavior is a literacy and you teach this is what you do in this situation, it gets easier over time as well.

SELF/TEACHER ASSESSMENT

When we do this, it would be very easy for me to say, this group did this and this group did this, but even when I had a conversation with them about why I would ask my students why I would ask them to be a part of this grading process with me, and one of my students said, "Because you didn't see us the whole time." And he's absolutely right. I wasn't there every single minute that group was working together. So if we get together and I think I didn't really see you guys cooperating all the time, they can chime in, well we were doing it like this, and we did have this moment where we weren't but then we fixed it. I think it's important to have conversations with kids like that and to have that voice.

P: When you include the kids in the process of actually grading their work, it helps them understand that this isn't a grade my teacher gave me, it's a grade that I earned. I think as teachers if a student comes and asks why did you give me this grade, your automatic response is that's what you earned, they don't really understand why they earned that. But because they'd be a part of the process with me, there'd be no questions about why they earned the grade that they did. So I think that's important for them to have a voice.

UNIT CLOSURE AND REFLECTIONS

J: Kind of sum up what you think some of the most important things that were learned out of this unit are.

P: I definitely I wanted them to learn and I think they accomplished this, that researching is not just answering specific questions that other people have asked. Researching is learning information, you yourself pondering that information, asking questions, having thoughts, conferring with other people about the information and then going through that cyclical process of finding information, asking questions, finding information, asking questions. Through this unit, being able to realize that even when you think you have become an expert on something, there's always room to grow and learn more. I think that's really important for children to learn. I think sometimes they have this image in their heads of my teacher is my teacher so she must know everything. I try to be very honest with my kids, well I don't know the answer to that question, but I know what to do to help you find it. I think it's important for students to understand that, and it's OK if you don't know the answer to something, as long as you take that next step of OK, what can I do to figure it out.

J: So that was really important, and their sense that they might have had some misconceptions at the beginning

P: Yes, and we talked about that wrapping up. I wanted to throw myself under the bus because I think that's easier for students when they realize that my teacher's like this too. Realizing that some information that we have is actually not correct. And when you're researching and you say to yourself, Oh, I thought it was this but all these different resources are telling me otherwise, this is a misconception I have and now I've fixed it. So the process that I grew from that misconception is much more important than me thinking oh I was wrong and leaving it at that. I think that's really important for them to understand as well. And that information is changing. As scientists keep learning new things, new books are going to be published, and some of them – especially some of the number information they learned, like tornadoes spin at 300mph, may not be like that if there's a tornado in another month or two that spins higher. It just depends. So I think they need to be open and flexible

with that. They need to understand that's what research is all about.

J: I also was struck by the depth of the learning that they did, which I think is related to the fact that it happened over time, it wasn't just, read this one passage and get information from it. Was that part of what you saw with the kids?

P: I did. I felt like, especially the first day could be a little rocky because there is so much information, but once they start realizing how the information connects and then over time they start realizing oh, this can happen, or this can happen, or these two things are connected, I think that their knowledge tends to grow with that. So it starts off really small and they're not really sure if they really understand it, and then it expands and they feel like they have more knowledge on the topic.

J: And it seems also they were learning from the other people's topics, even though they didn't go into depth on them, because you kept bringing them back to share and things like that

P: Yes, I think that sharing piece is so important, because when you've learned all this information, your natural instinct is that you want to share it with other people. So it was interesting to see the comments that were made. The tornado group learned that tornadoes actually can form over water, and they're called waterspouts, and from that someone in the group said, I thought when clouds spin over water, that's a hurricane, and so you can see they are making those connections. So that turns into why is this called this and why is it not a hurricane, and then you can look at what type of water did it form over, an ocean, a lake, and so you can see it's that process of learning information, asking questions, learning information, asking questions, a never-ending cycle.

J: And maybe they begin to understand that understanding is like that. It's particularly true when you're researching a topic, but even when I just read anything, there's a lot of stuff I don't know, there's a lot of stuff I might want to know, there's a lot that relates

P: I thought I knew and I don't

J: That relates to other aspects.

P: They've realized that answers are not always black and white, and sometimes when you answer your question it just leads to other questions, and that's what researching is all about. That's OK. I know they're used to being just told that this is the answer and you just move on and don't think about it again, but that's not reality.

J: Such an interesting unit, and really exciting work

P: They had fun doing it too

J: Yes, and you could see that the kids had a really, really great time. I'm sure you did too.