



Describing Students' Work

This description has been adapted by Marylyn Wentworth from many sources: an outline used by Fulton Academy of Geographic and Life Sciences and Fort Pitt Elementary School, Pittsburgh, PA, and passed on through the Summer 1997 CFG Coaches Training by Vinessa Turpin, Trish Rygalski, and Jerone Morris; as well as the input of Steve Hoffman and of the Alternative Community School in Ithaca, NY, and Steven Strull of DuSable High School, Chicago, IL. Pooling our growing knowledge is hopefully making this intriguing protocol more useful and doable within the time constraints of public schools.

The Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research in North Bennington, Vermont, has, over many years, developed the concept of "Descriptive Review of the Child." The work done by these dedicated educators has seeded a dialogue about children's work all across the country that deserves gratitude and acknowledgement. The Describing Students' Work is not the same as a Descriptive Review of the Child, but the purpose stems from the same root. The goal of the Describing Students' Work is to focus on the work of one student as a way to better understand that student's way of knowing.

Time

1 hour (can be as much as 2 hours)

Roles

Presenting Teacher(s)
Facilitator
Review Group

Preparation

- Teacher designated for presentation or teacher volunteers
- Group determined (keep to 10 or less)
- Chairperson/facilitator designated
- Meeting of facilitator and teacher presenter for planning:
 - Choose the work (1 to 6 samples of one child's work).
 - Why has the teacher chosen this work? Is it indicative of what the child does?
 - Are there questions or dilemmas the presenter wishes to explore?
 - How will the work be presented to the group — how much background, etc?

Review Process

1. Chairperson/presenter reviews the descriptive process. (5 minutes)
 - This process is grounded in description, not judgment or evaluation.
 - The major assumption is that all work bears the imprint and signature of the author and so offers important access to the maker's interest, ways of creating order, and point of view. The purpose is to understand this student's way of knowing.
 - The process is formal. The group speaks in go-arounds. You are free to pass. Everyone listens carefully. There is no cross dialogue. Comments are kept short (if you keep hearing yourself say

“and” you’ve said too much).

- Use action words, descriptive words and phrases.
- The chair sets the focus for each round, listens, takes notes for common ground.

2. Setting the Tone for Description. (5-15 minutes)

Since true description is difficult, start with a reflection/description exercise, such as:

- Group is given a word, object, or witnesses an event and responds with free association in a round, i.e., storm — *impending, wet, wind ...* or a doll — *6 inches, dark hair ...*
- A 3-5 minute reflective writing, describing a word, object, event ...

If this is the first time the group has used this process, it may be wise to do several practice rounds with a short paragraph or piece of art work to practice responding descriptively. The skill of the group in being descriptive rather than evaluative dictates how much practice is needed.

3. Teacher/presenter puts the work out for reading by the group. (5-10 minutes)

- Teacher may choose to read some of the work aloud or have someone else do so.
- Amount of time needed depends upon amount of student work, complexity, and number of group members.

4. Teacher/presenter gives a brief introduction to the work. (5 minutes)

- The description tends to be less evaluative if the teacher does not give too much information, as too much pre-knowledge may prejudice the view of the work ... Often NO information is given other than the work itself.
- S/he may give the child’s name, age, time in school, siblings and other pertinent background/context information, as desired or as may help the process. S/he may pose a question or dilemma for the group to consider concerning this student.

5. Rounds begin. (30 to 90 minutes)

- Each round (or rounds if the same focus is used for several rounds) is summarized by the facilitator and the focus for the next round set.
- Facilitator may vary the beginning person for rounds, and change the order from clockwise to counter-clockwise.
- Facilitator may choose to insert a clarifying question round, where group members can ask the presenter(s) clarifying questions — not probing questions.
- A pause for presenter(s) to reflect on what they are learning, either silently or aloud to the group, can be interjected into the rounds.
- There is no absolute order, nor focus for rounds, except for *literal description* rounds which must always be done: “What do you see?” Six colors used; one cloud, two people, one with red pants

Descriptive Rounds

Seventeen rounds is unrealistic, so obviously there is some careful selection that reflects the purpose of the review, and is appropriate to the work. *Literal Description* rounds are always done, as are the *Debrief/Feedback* rounds. The others are selected for appropriateness. Sometimes a particular focus within a round (i.e., “how the student is visible in the work”) may be done more than once.

Literal Description Rounds

- General impressions
- Physical description – what do you see? (likely to be more than one round)

What Student is Working On Rounds

- Elements that seems apparent (style, rhythm, tone, form ...)
- Tasks student is trying to accomplish
- How the student is visible in the work
- What does the student appear to value
- What does s/he know how to do re: skills
- What does the student seem on the verge of understanding
- "I wonder"

Optional Teaching Focus Rounds

(Very difficult as evaluation is hard to avoid)

- Implications for teaching this child
- Changes teacher might make in instruction or curriculum practices, in assessment tools, or in attitude toward student

Debrief/Feedback on Process Rounds

- How did this work, or not
- What did you learn
- Suggestions for facilitation
- Time for presenter to say what was learned about this student