

Redemption

“There is a lot of self-assessment and self-directed learning in portfolios and performance tasks that allow students to experience a process of revision and redemption. I call it redemption because both high-achieving and low-achieving kids, if they have the opportunity to continually revise their work, will make huge gains. And when the work is publicly exhibited, it says to the students that their work is what the school is about. They're proud of it, and it gives them the motivation to want to do this very tough work.” (Darling-Hammond, 'Making Relationships Between Standards, Frameworks, Assessment, Evaluation, Instruction, and Accountability', Asilomar, 2/17/99)

The Mission Hill School is a pilot public school in Boston, started in 1997 by Deborah Meier, a well-known NYC educator. As a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, the school is committed to developing and using portfolio assessment. We have always believed that portfolio presentations not only demonstrate what a student can do, but positively affect both the curriculum and the work of the students. As Deborah Meier says, “If teaching and learning is done well, the assessment is part of the process.”

However, until this spring, when our seventh graders presented for the first two of the six presentations they needed for graduation, I would have said that Linda Darling-Hammond was overstating the benefits of portfolios and performance tasks. Now, though our students and our school have not yet proved themselves in the outside world, I can see why she uses such a strong word as “redemption” to describe these benefits. I tell our school's story, though it is not yet a finished one, for two reasons; to be helpful to others in various stages of initiating or developing this kind of assessment and, more importantly, to demonstrate one successful alternative to the standardized test.

History

The staff spent a retreat in the summer of 1997 creating a draft of our graduation requirements. We decided that our graduation standards would consist of presentations in six subject areas: History, Literature and Writing, Art, Math, Science, and Social Issues (which we later changed to Beyond the Classroom). The presentations were a mix of finished pieces and on-demand tasks, so that we could see not only the students' finished work but also what s/he was capable of without help.

We at the Mission Hill School believe that developing good “habits of mind” is imperative. While choice of subject matter is important, it is learning to be in the habit of thinking that is the most valuable part of schooling. The five habits of mind that we use were first chosen at Central Park East Secondary School in NYC, founded in 1985 by Meier. They are, put succinctly, the habits of asking oneself questions (in whatever situations, conversations, or processes of creating work in which one finds oneself) about evidence, relevance, supposition, connections and alternative points of view. In developing our requirements for graduation, we noted that portfolio work and presentations should show evidence of these habits of mind.

We have since added to our ideas for graduation standards. Each student is given an advisor upon entering middle school. Each staff member, from kindergarten teachers to office administrator, is an advisor. We hope that this will not only create community spirit and a strong schoolwide connection with our older children, but will also ensure that a consciousness of the graduation requirements would be present throughout the school and the curriculum. Each advisor ideally has a trio of students: an eighth grader working on presenting, a seventh grade helper to that eighth grader, and a sixth grader beginning to think about these requirements (though this is not always possible).

Each candidate for graduation presents to her or his own graduation committee in each domain. The committee consists of the student’s advisor, homeroom teacher and parent, and a community member. The student’s peer helper is also present.

The presentations take place through the second half of the seventh grade year and the eighth grade year. In the spring of 2000 thirteen of the fourteen seventh graders presented for their first two domains, History and Literature and Writing.¹ (We did not yet have an eighth grade; this was our first cohort. Our classes are usually about 20 – this group was small because we had made the decision not to add to the class as it moved through the school). This is the story of those presentations.

Portfolio Plan

For History, the students needed to have a portfolio of work that demonstrated the habits of mind. They would also present an on-demand research task, done that morning, which involved finding out what they could about a topic they had not studied (assigned to

¹ One student who was leaving the school did not present.

them randomly), presenting this information in a coherent fashion, and showing that they had used at least three sources. The second history presentation was to be on a topic of interest to them, and would be accompanied by a paper on this topic. We were looking here and in the portfolios of past work for evidence that the students were not simply regurgitating facts but were, as Deborah Meier put it, "thinking like historians" – asking questions, noticing patterns, hypothesizing, looking for evidence, examining alternate viewpoints etc. The History portfolio also asked for evidence of knowledge of historical and geographical facts, and evidence of ability to use an atlas.

The Literature and Writing presentation also consisted of two presentations and a portfolio of work. The first presentation was to be a persuasive essay assigned and written the day before without help. This was to show how the student could write without assistance. The second presentation was to be an oral book comparison, again accompanied by a piece of written work. Again, we were looking not only for a general comfort level with reading skills and vocabulary, but for evidence of the habits of mind. We particularly noted connections drawn to other books, as evidence that the child was a reader. The final piece of this presentation was a portfolio showing work from several different writing genres.

In January, 2000, we asked the students to be ready to present for these two domains by June. Each student was then assigned an advisor and a sixth grade helper.

Because Mission Hill is a new school, and this was our first graduating class, the students began with little idea of what they wanted their work to look like, or what graduation standards were. The teachers, too, were confused; we questioned how these standards would look in practice. We were also worried about asking the students to demonstrate things we were not sure we had taught them, and we had doubts about how well we had taught the habits of mind. We had not yet worked enough with them to have internalized them as a part of our inner consciousness, our core of being. Though they were naturally integral to the way most of us taught, we were not often naming them to ourselves or the children. This was a learning process for us as much as for the students.

As the sixth and seventh grade (in a mixed classroom) Language Arts and Social Studies teacher, I was primarily responsible for helping the students get portfolios and presentations ready for the advisors and for the final presentation. I decided to follow the students as they prepared and presented for these graduation standards. I was most interested in watching how and

whether student standards for themselves changed over the course of preparing for the requirements, and if any of that change could be directly attributed to the graduation standards.

In the Classroom

We began concentrating heavily on the graduation presentations in March, when we were finishing up what had been a whole school Integrated study of 'The Struggle for Justice through the Lens of the African-American Experience'. At that point my Humanities classroom began to become a portfolio preparation classroom.

The atmosphere in the room changed fairly quickly as we began talking about the upcoming presentations and what they meant. A seriousness appeared in most of the students that I had not noticed in their approach to previous work. No matter how much I had harped on the importance of homework, and doing one's best work always, the general class ethos was to turn in work that seemed haphazardly done and uncared for. This was different. Most of the students began very quickly to care – they asked me to look at things again and again, they didn't groan when I handed things back, they even sometimes went beyond the standards I had set for them. I was thrilled the first time I handed something back saying that it was good enough and heard a child reply "No, its not good enough, I want to make it better. I'm going to work on it some more." But this response was not a fluke – I heard it more and more often. As time went on, students began to take more responsibility for their own work. They stayed in for recess and after school voluntarily to work on their portfolios. They were also writing and editing at home and bringing pieces in for me to read.

I quickly realized that if the students were going to have enough finished pieces to work with, each piece would need an average of about six rewrites before it was acceptable as a final copy. This meant a lot of work for the students, and for me. Even I, a poor mathematician, could see that if there were 14 children and each child had about ten pieces, and each was redrafted 6 times, I would be editing 840 pieces of work, on top of my normal course load. I would also need several individual conferences with each child. We moved into an independent work period once or twice a week, during which I would meet and go over portfolio and presentation pieces with one or two students. This went well; I was often interrupted by questions but for the most part the students

knew what they needed to do and were happy to have the time to work on it.

By April, I had met with all the students. I realized that there was even more to be done than I had realized. Some of the work the students and I had assumed was finished turned out to be unusable, for a variety of reasons. Several students had enough pieces, but they showed little evidence of the habits of mind. The history papers were heavily plagiarized and were most often purely factual. Bibliographies were missing or incomplete. Much of this work was from the previous year, but some of it was from the fall term in my class. I realized that my own standards for student work were changing, and that we would need school-wide staff conversations around standards.

By May, Humanities class had changed completely. We had been working on occasion on portfolios – each seventh grade student now began to spend at least an hour of Humanities class each day (a two hour time block) on portfolio work. Some then continued working while I tried to do the curriculum I had planned with the rest of the class. I was lucky enough to have a competent student teacher, who could take over the teaching whenever necessary, but I realized this would not always be the case.

Ayla, the math and science middle school teacher, joined me at this point in preparing the students for presentation work. She met with them when she could, often at recess or lunchtime. Students also began meeting with their advisors whenever possible. Again, this often meant both student and advisor giving up lunch or recess time.

When there were only two weeks left until the first presentations, I decided that the students should work fulltime (two hours daily) on preparing for their exhibitions. The seventh graders met with me in whole groups, small groups, or individually. In addition to working on their portfolios, they practiced the on-demand requirements, did mock presentations for each other, and met with their sixth grade helpers. I at first had some hesitations about giving up the planned curriculum entirely, but I quickly saw the value of the work the students were doing. They concentrated intensely, cared desperately, researched further, polished their work again and again. I saw their written work improving, heard them begin to use the habits of mind naturally, to go deeper intellectually. Though this was probably not the ideal way to prepare for presentations in the future, I had no doubt that this was more valuable to them as learners than amassing more superficial facts in the planned curriculum would have been.

Sixth grade helpers were involved at many different levels. Some did nothing at this stage, and only met with their seventh grader just before the presentation. Some were very involved at this point, taking it all very seriously – they too were gaining from the work. They were helping to edit, create bibliographies, acting as coaches for presenting, helping to organize. Best, they were immersed in the serious work ethic that was almost always present. I watched, and made the conscious choice to allow them to help as much as they were wanted or wanted to.

The Staff

More tasks began emerging for everyone in the school community. We needed community members to sit on committees. Several people on our board of directors volunteered. Teachers and parents offered names. Ayla volunteered to find committee members, and schedule the presentations. We then realized we needed to copy all the work in the portfolios and get it to the committee members before the presentations. This task was delegated to advisors during one of our many staff meetings (most of which were devoted to sorting out different interpretations of how and what the kids were to present). I wrote several letters to advisors, outlining where we were and how they could best help their advisees. Students began having lunch with their advisors often, sometimes daily, going over with them what and how they would present. We realized that though the school had previously developed rubrics for writing, we didn't have rubrics for history or for oral presentation – I volunteered to try to put some together.

We were beginning to get nervous. As Deborah said, "Graduation requirements help make visible to the community the value of the school and the definition of what an educated person should look like." We were not only putting our kids out there for the public to view, we were defining the school and the school's values in this, our first public display. A lot of last minute misunderstandings added to our apprehension. This was a confused time in many ways, partly because I had not been organized enough to foresee all the tasks, and partly as a natural by-product of a first time endeavor. Some advisors had not been at the staff meetings, or their reading of the graduation requirements differed from mine, and the students were getting mixed messages. Even for those of us who felt we were on the same page, there were clearly some problems inherent in the concept of students working on the same piece or presentation with four different people – me, the other seventh

grade teacher, their advisor and their sixth grader. Children were being given conflicting advice.

Several students were also losing work – either their portfolios or their disks. Our computers do not back things up on hard drives, so we realized belatedly that if a disk was lost or trashed, the work was gone. Other classes in the school were nearing the end of term and many students were working on papers, so the computers were in high demand. Even though we tried very hard to keep a calm, concentrated working environment, there was a somewhat frantic atmosphere in the school. Some students seemed miraculously to be able to ignore this, but others could not. In looking back at this time, some of the students complained. One said, “We should have been told before that we were going to have to do all this.” Another said, “If I would have known that we was going to do all this work, my work would have been done in December. We waited too long.”

We also held several staff meetings during this time period that were rife with miscommunications. I had assumed the book comparison to be an oral presentation – Deborah had envisioned it as written, then presented orally. We had not scheduled enough time for the presentations and the committee discussions. There were misunderstandings about student work – advisors went by what their advisees told them I had said, and many things got confused in the reiteration.

We spoke as a staff several times about the expectations for this group of children. This was our first group, and they were not academically strong. They had only been at the school for three years at the most, and because the school was new they had not had the opportunity that future students would have of being immersed in a school culture, a culture which included habits of mind and work. The staff was still struggling with creating this culture, and with the graduation standards. We felt we could not expect as much from this group as we would from future groups – yet we did not want to lower our standards for graduating, or to set standards for the future with the level of work done by this class. We finally decided to see what happened, hoping that our awareness of this as a potential difficulty would help to ensure it would not become one. We also realized we needed to make it very clear to the community that we did not expect most of these students to fully pass these two presentations – rather we were trying to get as much as possible finished, so that next year would be slightly easier.

We also discussed students with special needs. We had several of these students but one concerned me most. He had come to the

school the year before as a special ed. student, recommended for a small self-contained classroom. His mother had chosen to place him instead in a regular classroom in our school. When he came to us he almost never spoke, read on a second grade level, and would not write. Not only did he rarely speak, he never smiled. When he felt criticized, he reacted with fury. Now, at the end of his second year at the school, he was beginning to be socially popular, rarely had temper outbursts, loved writing, and read on a fifth grade level. Though he did not speak much, he talked to both teachers and classmates. His spelling was still terrible, and he often left out words or phrases when writing or reading, but the change in him was extreme – it was one of those changes noticeable to everyone in the school. I felt he was one of our greatest success stories, and I was deeply worried that he would not pass and would have to spend an extra year. (He was already a year older than the rest). I felt he would be ready for high school after eighth grade and that an extra year would hurt him emotionally. Others argued that his skills were improving at our school, and an extra year could benefit him.

We talked about him and other special ed. students and decided that we would not yet put any special accommodations into this process, though we would be open to doing this if we needed to next year. We realized it was preferable, when possible, to keep students for an extra year as early as possible in middle school. We decided to begin immediately to get the message out that middle school may well take four years at our school instead of three, so that as little stigma as possible was attached to that decision.

Presentation Day

By June 1st, the date of the first presentations, the students had pulled together portfolios and had practiced doing research on demand, writing persuasive essays on demand, and presenting their work to an audience. Most still had final editing to do on some work, but they were, on the whole, ready to go. The advisors had sent copies of the work to the committee members, the members knew when they were supposed to come, we had rubrics and rooms, and we felt as prepared as we could be.

The presentations were almost all both moving and impressive. The students were initially nervous but clearly felt very connected to all the work they had done, and were able to speak easily about it. The parents, too, were both nervous and proud. The mother whose son had not spoken the previous year said, with tears in her eyes, “If you had told me a year ago that my son would be doing this, I would never have believed you.” Parents of children who had not seen such

a radical change seemed to feel similarly; some were effusive and some quiet but most of the parents seemed to share a feeling of respect for their children and their children's work. For many it seemed almost a rite of passage; they were seeing a side of their child they had not seen before.

The outside committee members took their jobs very seriously – they were supportive but critical, and they lent a professional air to the meetings. One, who edited a newspaper, not only critiqued the student's paper but offered to meet with him to work with him on it.

Each student presented in both domains, then left the room. The committee talked for about half an hour, deciding what pieces the student had passed and what needed to be re-presented (any rewrites or fails) or shown to a teacher and advisor (minor technicalities, like a missing bibliography). The advisor then went out to give the student their results.

As we had expected, none of the students passed with flying colors, but they did far better than I had projected. Two had very minor changes or additions, to present to their advisor. Six of them needed to rewrite one or two pieces, and re-present. Two students passed very little, and were asked to come back to redo almost all of the presentation. The remaining two had small things to present again, and we felt that we did not need to reconvene their committees, but that they could tack them on to their next presentation.

The students generally felt extremely positive about the experience, tough as it had been. One child, who had only passed on two small pieces and needed to redo the rest, said, rather surprisingly, "My work has improved a lot. I have higher expectations of myself. I used to didn't (sic) have any because I used to think that people were so against me and I couldn't do anything – I felt so dumb, basically. I really stepped up. I still have room for improvements but I have changed a lot from what I used to be".

Some of the other comments made were: "I think it was fun. It's different – in other schools you take tests. They don't help you with outside of school and life."

"You get to show the work you did for yourself."

"I feel I can do better work now. I imagine myself presenting it orally, to my committee".

The three students who had negative comments expressed concerns that were constructive or had some positive spin. One said, "I don't like this at all. I wouldn't like a test either. I know

it's going to help us do very good in the future, but if you think about it, we're still kids."

Another said, "I don't like this at all", but went on to say, "On a scale from 1 to 10 my work used to be a 5 and now it's about a 9... I feel more confident now."

The last child felt her work had not been respected by her committee. She said, "I wasn't happy with the turnout of my portfolio. I should have got a little bit more credit for my work. But I'm proud of myself and that's all that really matters."

The students also talked about how their own standards had changed over the course of working for their presentations. I was most interested in this, for as their teacher I felt that I had seen a noticeable difference both in the students' work habits and in the quality of their work. To my surprise, when they were asked about whether their standards for themselves had changed, half of them replied that they had not.

When I questioned these students more closely most went on to say something which showed that they actually were thinking differently about their work or about themselves as students. Some examples: "My work hasn't really improved but my thoughts have improved."

"I have to sit down and think which are my weaknesses and which are my strengths and work on my weaknesses first."

"I'll be more focussed next year."

"I'm going to take a lot of stuff from this portfolio to the next. Math and Science are going to be my hardest so I'm going to work on that first."

Perhaps these students are not yet aware of the change they have made, or perhaps the question they were asked about standards did not have the same meaning for them as it had for me – this will be something I will continue to look at and document.

Re-Presenting

The students returned to school this year as eighth graders, older, more serious, prepared to work. As a staff we had decided that their mornings this year would mainly be spent on portfolio work; they would be exempt from the whole school designated curriculum but would be expected to spend some of that time learning to become media literate (which would be reflected in one of their portfolios) and some of the time learning some new science. Science and Beyond the Classroom portfolios would be presented in February.

Those that needed to present again for History and /or Literature would do so in November and December.

This work time impressed me even more than the spring had. The students worked independently, coming to me only when they could not figure something out or had an editing question. Whereas in the spring I had felt there was not enough of me, and not enough time, I now felt almost useless. I watched as students researched deeply into subjects they had skimmed the year before, made connections to other things they had studied, explored varying viewpoints, thought about how things might have been different in other circumstances. I handed back the weekly homework essay assignments with editing comments and questions, and watched as over half the class, unasked, redid them and handed them in again.

One student had been asked to add another historical piece to his portfolio – I watched him become deeply immersed in the Tudors and Queen Elizabeth – something we had never touched on and I had never suspected he had any interest in. I saw a student who had done a perfunctory report on Josephine Baker when we studied the Harlem Renaissance become so intrigued by her that she could not stop researching both her and the time period, and adding to her paper. She said, “I would like to meet her. I wish I had lived back then to meet her. I think that she was one of the greatest people to have lived. She showed people that being different is good.”

I listened as one boy, who I was deeply worried about because he could not seem to come up with any ideas of his own, say to me, “I don’t think I can rewrite this piece on the death penalty – I’ve been thinking a lot about it, and about racial profiling, and about how most of the people on death row are black, and I’ve changed my opinion. I don’t believe in the death penalty no more”.

There are many more stories. All were successful in their presentations. All proudly passed. One community committee member summed up the feelings of many; “I was really a critical voice in our last meeting and I was pleasantly surprised. I read this (piece of student work) with a lot of happiness to see that she really had taken the comments to heart and worked on it. This piece is so much more full and rich.”

All the students are now working on their next portfolios. Several of them still have the persuasive essay on demand to do again, and are going to try it in the spring, when they have more writing experience. Several need to produce further proof of reading. But they all passed, and rightfully, on their portfolios and their presentations. Their work is in the school, available for anyone to see. To quote Deborah again, “You want to make standards

explicit, public, available to everybody to show what they mean - and to disagree – people disagree about standards.”

I am confident that this is all work to be proud of, work that proves that our eighth graders will be ready for ninth grade in these domains. I am incredibly proud of these students, and the progress they have made over the past year. The school will be honored by having them as our first graduates.

Thoughts as I Take This Work Forward

Looking back on this experience, there are several things I would change, or would recommend that others do differently. Ideally, students would have input into creating the graduation requirements

(as a brand new school we did not feel able to do this). We have decided as a staff that we need to add self-reflection to the portfolio presentation – we are discussing ways to do this. We also realize we need to develop a handbook of all the steps in these presentations for parents, advisors and sixth grade helpers.

Another thing we need to look at as a staff is the enormous amount of work and time spent by adults in the school helping these fourteen students get ready. The staff believes that this will be less intensive each year, as the entire school adjusts to the demands of the graduation standards, and begins to align curriculum to these standards. Already this year’s sixth graders are in excellent shape for their presentations next year, as they have been doing many of the same assignments as the seventh graders, and have been immersed in the work ethic engendered this year. As one sixth grader said, of his seventh grade presenter, “I’m going to work harder than she did. I’m going to try to get most of the stuff out of the way this year.” These students will have, as this year’s students did not, finished pieces to use as portfolio work. However, even with less to get ready, extra time will always be demanded from advisors and teachers. Our staff has been extraordinary in its commitment to these students. We need to talk as a school about what this means to our lives and our classrooms.

We have decided to change the order of presentations. History and Literature/ Writing portfolios both rely heavily on writing. This year we will ask our seventh graders to attempt History and either Art or Beyond the Classroom, depending on what they are most ready for. We hope this works; we want to be flexible as we design these requirements, but do not want to continually put the students and the community through a lot of change.

I expect this year will bring a new set of problems and joys. The preparation and presentations for next year's domains will, I am sure, have the same kinds of difficulties we had with these domains; though we will be better at the actual presentations we will have the same confusions about the material required. Again, advisors, teachers and students will all be living this for the first time, creating what until now has only been a group vision represented on a piece of paper. What is created will probably not be exactly what any of us envisioned when we wrote the graduation standards two years ago, but it will be something unique and, I am now sure, something wonderful.

The main thing I have come away from this experience with is an enormous respect for these particular students, and a sense of marvel at the people they have become. They began the year as an average group of seventh grade students. By the end of the year, I saw a group of hardworking, self-motivated students, each of whom showed enormous self-possession in presenting her or his work to a committee, and each of whom felt great pride in her or his work. Though I have not yet finished documenting the evidence, and plan to continue to follow these students this year, I have no doubt that the students' standards for their own work and work habits have greatly changed through this process.

There are several possible reasons for this, all of which are intertwined. Clearly these students got a great deal of attention and help. Many of the adults and children in the school were invested in their success; most members of the staff were advisors and each sixth grader was a helper. The standards set were rigorous; work was edited and re-edited by students working alone or with a teacher, with a lot of one-on-one conferencing. Also, it was clear to the students that everybody at the school took these standards very seriously.

But for whatever reasons, these students were outstanding – not necessarily in the skill level they finally reached but in their rate of improvement, and in their development as thinkers, workers and human beings. When I first read Linda Darling-Hammond, I felt she was using a very strong term to describe the effect of portfolio presentations. Now I believe her. This has been a process of “redemption”.