Using Assessment to Activate Student Agency and Advance Equity

Eileen Kogl Camfield
Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning at UC Merced

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Why do narratives matter?

"story is the operating system of human consciousness"
Assessment Narratives:
How do you define “RIGOR”?
Common Narratives About Gen Z

Protected and Privileged: Helicopter/Lawnmower Parents

Tethered: iGen
How might these narratives affect how we respond to student work? Consider this first sentence from a student essay:

“Most people have believed that relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, can be related to particular movies we would watch or from beliefs we have gained while growing up.”
“In order to get into college, I’ve got to have a 4.6 GPA, 800s on my SATs, captain the soccer team, get elected homecoming queen, and start my own successful non-profit....”
I am unsafe...

More than 4 million children endured lockdowns last school year, a groundbreaking *Washington Post* analysis found. The experience left many traumatized (Dec. 2018).
What do the Gen Z narratives have in common?

Each undermine student resilience.
Toxic impact on students

Data drawn from four large, nationally representative surveys of 11 million Americans since the 1960s; since 2011...

- Disconnection/loneliness/isolation
- Adversarial relationships with TIME
- A sense of HELPLESSNESS
- Depression and anxiety
“I find it weird that I hate writing but I love to read... Every time I have an essay assignment for a class, I become very anxious. Before I even start writing down my outline, I stress myself out over what will be good enough. It takes me hours to even write my first sentence... No doubt, I have pressed the backspace button about a million times.”

“I try my best in every assignment, but the outcome never comes out positive... The bad scores I would get from my teachers caused me to doubt myself, lowered my confidence, and caused me to panic every time I would write an essay.”

Meet Natalia
How do we craft counter-narratives about Gen Z that foster resilience?

Rigor That Builds Learning Muscles: standards, curricula, and assessments that provide *right amount of adversity* and support student growth.

- **Growth Mindset** about students *(Dweck, 2007)*
- **Warm Demanders** *(Hammond, 2014)*
- **Empathy and Community**: relationships that create a sense of belonging *(Strayhorn, 2012)*; classroom collaborations
- **Agency**: pedagogy that *empowers* *(Freire, 1970)*; inquiry-based curricula; asset-focused assessment
- **Academic Self-Efficacy** *(Bandura, 2008)*
You Cannot Believe Everything You See and Hear

Most people have believed that relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, can be related to particular movies we would watch or from beliefs we have gained while growing up. We build this fantasy of how life could be with friendships and romantic relationships by witnessing our own family members’ connections, reading books like Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen, and watching movies such as, Beauty and the Beast or Mamma Mia. These examples consist of a giving a false reality by giving us hope that it can be easy to gain the “perfect relationship.” Yet, in the real world, it is not quite exactly the same thing. I believe that most people have imagined the possibility of a perfect life and were faced with disappointments at some point stepping out into reality. We, all, have imagined what we would want to happen in our life. However, this image is mainly based on our safe bubble that we grew up in. Once we step outside our own environment and experience the world for how it truly is, we gain a new
I did not think that these particular matters would happen until I actually experienced it. We create these false expectations by our inexperience of how the outside world truly is and once we see the world for how it truly is, we gain a new perspective and lose the old one.

I want to discuss here certain matters that have made me doubt the idea of friendships being able to last “forever”, just as books and movies generally portray. Prior to graduation, people often say to their friends: “Let’s always talk, even if we do not see each other everyday” or “Do not worry, we will not drift away!”. Most likely, many have heard these sayings from close friends you did not want to lose contact with and strongly believed at the time that it will not happen. In particular, I believed it, because I never wanted to drift away from my close friends. Who would, right? My friends and I have always been together since elementary school.

Comment [4]: Uses the word “we” to make the reader feel connected towards the statement.

Comment [5]: Uses similar writing methods by Mary Midgley, using “Trying Out One’s New Sword”. By using “I want to discuss here certain matters”, goes straight to the point which creates a serious tone.

Comment [6]: Signposting

Comment [7]: Creates a question towards the
trusted and it’s OK. Coming out of my cave I realized the world isn’t a safe place, one must be cautious. Necessarily not everyone is harmful but one can never know. One can’t trust a shadow image of someone. Like my grandma once said *duerme con un ojo abierto*: sleep with one eye open. Growing up, being innocent, gullible me, I began to believe anything people would tell me. Sometimes I still do. Hoping they’ll follow through on what they say. Boy, have I been let down multiple times. Leaving the cave I realized not everyone is as honest or truthful as my family.

My cave was harmless but it wasn’t how the real world worked. Leaving it helped me understand...
Now what do you think about Natalia’s capabilities as a writer?
The UNGRADED margin is a low-stakes space that creates resilient thought patterns:

- It’s safe to take **risks**.
- The **habit of noticing** and thinking about the authors' style choices becomes more important than the content of any single annotation.
- Students feel they **do not have to be PERFECT**, resulting in **reduced writing anxiety**.
Moreover...

It’s good for student learning:
• It slows them down (self-regulation).
• It encourages them to consider their reader (metacognition).
• It encourages them to take responsibility for their writing, instead of passively following directions (agency).
• It helps to make skills salient (transfer).
And this, too!

It’s good for *teachers*: Providing a window into the student’s process/learning, making visible what was previously invisible...

• Created an opportunity for *dialogue* (as opposed to deficit-judgments).
• Activated instructor *empathy*. 
Encoding empathy in program assessment...
Quantitatively

You can count the number of annotations in pre- and post-samples:

• We noted a **46.67% increase** in number of annotations over the year, suggesting students came to notice more about their writing over time.
You can code the quality of the annotations, marking a “+” if students identified a stylistic strategy AND discussed desired impact on reader, an “N” if they did only one, a “-” if they failed to do either.
Correlate:
the most effective writers

...made the most dramatic improvements in their writing performance AND also made striking improvements in their self-annotations.
Infer a definition...

As students develop as writers, they also develop more critical distance from their work and can metacognitively evaluate written communication as a dialogue between a writer and a reader.
Correlate: the least effective writers

Students who struggled with both writing and self-annotation either:

Failed to acknowledge the effect their rhetorical choices could have on readers.

Merely repeated what was already appeared in the text (e.g., “here I quoted James Baldwin”), or
Infer a practice...

Less-developed writers need support to get **critical distance** and establish a sense of **audience**.
Qualitatively: reflective writing on self-annotation process

“What I think has helped me the most [to become a better writer] is when we discuss the different writing styles that different writers use. More often than not, I have not heard of some of the different styles, so by **being exposed to them I can use some of those techniques in my own writing.”**

[value of modeling]
Qualitatively: reflective writing on self-annotation process (con’t.)

“I felt that I was discovering another side of myself. I had never thought about ‘what do I write?’” [agency]

“It made me really think about what I was writing and how it would make sense to the reader. I could give the reader an easier time explaining my essay rather than them having to figure it out.” [metacognition about audience]
A policy of asking students to self-annotate keeps empathy at the forefront of our assessment practice.

Students who have empathy-based relationships with their professors are more
• engaged
• motivated
• resilient
• efficacious

Professors who have empathy-based relationships with their students are more
• engaged
• motivated
• resilient
• efficacious
Questions?