



Getting to Know Students Descriptively, Rather Than Evaluatively

Presentation by
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Andrew

Here is Andrew
at age 14 with
Charger, his
service dog.



Parental Push for Employment Outcomes

- Andrew's parents believed Andrew would be competitively employed after exiting high school and asked for a traditional vocational assessment.

Traditional Assessment Results

- “able to remain focused for approx. 30 minutes”
- “he would say ‘too hard’ and cease work”
- Reading Comp: 1.6 grade level
- SRA non-verbal reasoning test: 4th percentile
- Minn. Clerical test: 1st percentile, timed & un-timed
- WREST: “very poor range in all areas”
- Productivity rate 6%
- On work samples: “accuracy improved very slowly with practice and constant one-one supervision”

The negative impression of testing

Andrew's summary included these statements:

“Relative to all work samples administered, it appeared that Mr. Cosel's performance was best when tasks involved no more than one or two steps.”

“Due to Mr. Cosel's very low level of productivity and his need for constant supervision, traditional employment is not feasible at this time. Training and education which enables him to practice simple manual skills such as packaging and sorting should be explored in the future.”

Another View of Andrew

- Andrew's parents insisted that this assessment did not capture "who Andrew is".
- They pushed for a descriptive view of Andrew, rather than an evaluative view.

Andrew today!

Andrew has been working as a courier at a hospital for over twenty-six years. He works 35 hours per week and his wage in 2014 was \$24.50 per hour. He is a member of the union that organizes the transport workers at his hospital.



How did this happen?

- Rather than testing Andrew, observations in all his life activities were made with descriptiveness being critical.
- Descriptiveness led to evidence of Andrew's skills, his interests and his conditions for success.
- This led to a customized career for Andrew.

The Value of Descriptiveness

- When writing descriptively, we focus solely on the performance of the individual, using action verbs in the active tense. Rich, descriptive notes enhance our ability to see competent performance.
- Writing evaluatively too often focuses on deficits of the person.
- Descriptiveness allows us to see possibilities.

Evaluative Writing

To help understand the distinction between descriptive writing and evaluative writing, consider the following traditional *evaluative* scenario of a young person who is cooking brownies in a transition classroom.

Damian can cook simple items with assistance. He cannot set the oven temperature independently and care should be taken to assure that he does not burn himself. He cannot read the directions on the box. Damian required one-to-one supervision to mix and prepare the brownies and to put them into the oven. He cannot be trusted to cut the brownies with a knife.

Writing Descriptively

When writing descriptively, we focus solely on the **performance** of the individual, using **action verbs** in the active tense. Here is an example of the same scenario written descriptively during the observation:

*Damian selects the brownie mix from the pantry, finds a mixing bowl from the cabinet and removes a mixing spoon from the utensil drawer, after being reminded by a staff person. As the staff person reads the directions Damien opens the box, pours the mix into the bowl and continues to blend in ingredients. When he completes the mixing he pours the mixture in a glass pan following a gesture by the staff person. The staff person says, “What’s next?” and Damian points to the oven thermostat. The staff person says, “Which button is for bake?” and Damian pushes the **Bake** button.*

Descriptive Writing, Continued

Damian then begins to turn the thermostat and the staff person says, “Stop at 375.” As Damian nears 375, the staff person says, “That’s it.” and he stops at a nearby indicator. The staff person says, “One more click.” and Damian completes the setting. The staff person asks, “How long do we cook them?” and Damian says 30 minutes. Damian sets the timer similar to the oven. When the timer goes off, Damian puts an oven mitt on his right hand and opens the oven with his left. As he reaches in the staff person says, “Careful, everything is hot.” Damian grasps the pan and slides it out of the oven, keeping the container level. When the brownies cooled, Damian removed a serving knife from the utility drawer and cut the brownies into small squares with hand-over-hand assistance from the staff person.

Descriptiveness ► Competence

By focusing on a description of the performance of the individual, without the evaluative lens of ourselves and others, we have a chance to begin to see possibilities for competence and skills that might be offered to employers.

This is made possible due to the fact that descriptiveness gets at the concrete actions of the individual. These actions have a direct connection to tasks needed by employer.

Let's Try Descriptive Writing

- You are going to see a video of Will. Will is a high school transition age student who lives in England.
- This video allows us to see Will engaged in one of his home chores: checking for diseases on chickens.

A View of Will

- View the process and try to observe all the actions of Will---no evaluative lens.
- Then try to capture descriptively all the steps in Will's performance. Don't use adverbs—adverbs are almost always evaluative.
- Share your writing with people sitting around you—then we will share a few examples.

Will



Food For Thought

- Can you see the areas of competence?
- Can you see employment in his future?
- Food for thought:
- As teachers, you may have had no clue what Will does at home on his farm.
Observing in all settings of a person's life gives us insight into possibilities.