

Beyond Standardized Truth

IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH INQUIRY-BASED READING ASSESSMENT



SCOTT FILKINS

Principles
in Practice

LITERACY ASSESSMENT

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Principles in Practice

The Principles in Practice imprint offers teachers concrete illustrations of effective classroom practices based in NCTE research briefs and policy statements. Each book discusses the research on a specific topic, links the research to an NCTE brief or policy statement, and then demonstrates how those principles come alive in practice: by showcasing actual classroom practices that demonstrate the policies in action; by talking about research in practical, teacher-friendly language; and by offering teachers possibilities for rethinking their own practices in light of the ideas presented in the books. Books within the imprint are grouped in strands, each strand focused on a significant topic of interest.

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Adolescents and Digital Literacies: Learning Alongside Our Students (2010) Sara Kajder
Adolescent Literacy and the Teaching of Reading: Lessons for Teachers of Literature (2010)
Deborah Appleman

Volumes in the Writing in Today's Classrooms Strand

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Our Better Judgment: Teacher Leadership for Writing Assessment (2012) Chris W. Gallagher
and Eric D. Turley
*Beyond Standardized Truth: Improving Teaching and Learning through Inquiry-Based Reading
Assessment* (2012) Scott Filkins

Developing Content Area Understanding through Reading and Assessment

As part of their study of ancient China, Will and his ninth-grade students were going to be learning about the historical figure of Confucius, using the primary source of the Confucian analects to better understand the era and its dominant persona and philosophy. Will and I began our collaboration by discussing together two questions that would frame the instructional process:

- What’s challenging about reading and interpreting Confucian analects?
- How do you define a successful reading and interpretation of Confucian analects?

By this point, the value of good questions to successful inquiry-based assessment should be clear, but notice that these specific questions are of a slightly different nature from those that prompted other teaching and learning cycles discussed in this book. These are “teacher-facing” questions—questions about the nature of the content under study, not about the students’ current level of performance and not for the students to answer (although it might be useful to share them with students at appropriate moments during instruction). These are not the questions that inquiry-based assessments seek to answer; rather, they’re the questions that help set a teaching context and a vision for what successful achievement of the reading and interpretation task might look like. In Chris Belt’s classroom, the theory of successful summarization pulled from Deborah Dean’s (2011) book, and embedded in his focus lesson described in Figure 3.5, served a purpose similar to this conversation between Will and me.

Will is an extremely thoughtful teacher who has the benefit of working with equally thoughtful colleagues on his course-alike team, so he had ready answers to these questions. He noted that in the past, students had misperceived the brevity of the analects for simplicity and had trouble understanding that they represent a whole persona and cultural philosophy. The vast differences between modern American life and that of ancient China also elicit a range of confounding student prior knowledge, such as conflicting views on the role and value of the individual and gender equality. (I take up the topic of assessing prior knowledge as a tool for aiding comprehension in the next chapter.) Add challenging vocabulary to the mix, and the significance of the task Will faced was clear.

Even clearer, however, was Will’s sense of what a successful interpretation of a Confucian analect involved, a specific description of success tied to an overarching goal for the class. He wanted students to be able to explain what an analect

meant in the context of the Chinese society in which it was created while also applying its message to a modern American situation or problem. We used this goal to create a performance task modeled on the guidelines of Wiggins and McTighe (2005), in which students are given the opportunity to reveal their understandings through an authentic, real-world problem with no clear solution but with clear roles for writer and audience. This prompt, Figure 3.13, became the goal toward which Will's instruction was aimed.

Knowing that success with this task was at this point well beyond the reach of his students, Will prepared a brief background lecture on Confucius and his times and then, as a preassessment of student ability, asked students to interpret and paraphrase four analects:

1. The Master said, "It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of filial and fraternal responsibility to have a taste for defying authority. And it is unheard of for those who have no taste for defying authority to be keen on initiating rebellion. Exemplary persons concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect the root of authoritative conduct."
2. The Master said, "Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves."
3. The Master said, "Exemplary persons understand what is appropriate; petty persons understand what is of personal advantage."
4. The Master said, "Exemplary persons make demands on themselves, while petty persons make demands on others."

An inquiry approach to reading assessment requires flexibility—part of the reason why packaged approaches to formative assessment don't make much sense. I find it useful to have a likely instructional response (e.g., temporarily grouping students by demonstrated proficiency at a given task) in mind when approaching a classroom set of preassessments. If the student work doesn't support your initial planned response, however, you need to determine a different, appropriate response to maintain the validity of the assessment. See the ideas connected to the record-keeping chart in Figure 2.7 for more discussion.

When we met to review the work students produced in response to this preassessment (Figures 3.14–3.16), our goal was to sort students into like-ability groups for guided instruction that used analects of varying difficulty as the mode of differentiation. While the examples of student work suggest the range of student ability at the time of preassessment, Will found that a significantly large portion of the class fell in the "indiscernible middle." We could identify a few students who had some exceptional strength at the task already, but most lacked the background in vocabulary and Confucian thinking—and the

Figure 3.13: Performance task to assess students' ability to comprehend and apply Confucian analects.

You are an advisor to an American politician who is considering a run for the presidency in 2012. The politician has asked you to review influential thinking on government from different cultural and historical figures, and you found this collection of Confucian analects particularly interesting.

Your task is to choose some of the most important or interesting ideas from the analects and write a memo to your candidate explaining what you've learned and how you feel it would be useful advice for a contemporary American national leader.

- First, think through each analect carefully and write a brief paraphrase in the appropriate box on the sheet provided. **Remember to paraphrase the analects from a Confucian perspective;** don't let your modern American point of view influence the ideas the analects express.
- Circle any words you don't know and ask for clarification of their meanings.
- Try to refer to all or parts of all four of the analects in your memo, making note of advice that you think applies to contemporary America. Include references to specific real-world problems and issues to show how the advice is relevant or useful.
- If possible, include discussion of the Five Relationships and/or the Way* to demonstrate your understanding of the analects.

*The Five Relationships refer to specific duties given to the participants of the relationships involving ruler and ruled, father and son, husband and wife, elder to younger sibling, and friend to friend; the Way refers to the absolute moral and philosophical path on which the faithful move.

confidence to try to paraphrase something quite challenging—and thus we had to alter our original plan.

Still, the preassessment was quite useful because it provided a baseline level of performance for each student for comparison at the end of the unit, and it revealed some student misconceptions that Will could address in the think-alouds through the focus lesson with which he began each class period on Confucius. For example, students either ignored or misinterpreted the focus on shame in the second analect, evidence Will interpreted as a cultural mismatch that he would have to address directly to help them understand both the analect itself and the larger worldview it embodies. In a highly routine-driven plan for this unit (which, coming toward the end of the semester, had to be taught rather compactly), Will ended each lesson with students reading and responding to an analect, which allowed him to follow this pattern:

Focus lesson: Interpret a selected analect by thinking aloud, responding to perceived needs of students from preassessment/earlier response, reminding students of the unit's essential question: "To what extent did Confucius impact social order?"

Content lesson: Lecture/discussion or reading on Confucian society, the Five Relationships, the Way.

Wrap up: Students interpret (through discussion or in writing) an analect related to the day's content as an ungraded check for understanding.

The compact nature of this unit didn't allow Will to provide significant written feedback on each student's interpretation, but with the structure of the focus lesson in place, he could note the kinds of challenges students were facing and make those the focus of his feedback. As he continued to see students struggle with challenging vocabulary, for example, he focused a think-aloud on strategies for responding to unfamiliar words, ranging from using context clues to consulting a dictionary or other resource when appropriate. When students continued to misapply their background knowledge and view of the world, he demonstrated his process for thinking through the confusion that comes with approaching life from a stance that is potentially at odds with what seems so natural and familiar to the adolescent learners in his classroom.

After students had been exposed to sufficient background knowledge and had more experience reading and responding to analects, Will used the preassessment information and any new insights he'd gained through reading their daily responses to organize students heterogeneously for some purposeful group work. Given the task of interpreting an analect and applying it to a real-world modern problem,

Figure 3.14: Maria's response to the preassessment.

1. I have no idea.
 2. IF you lead People the right way you'll get Good things in advance?
 3. Some People know whats more important while others dont?
 4. Some People are more selfish than others.
-

Figure 3.15: Elizabeth's response to the preassessment.

usually when someone is kind and is responsible they respect authority so its unusual for the people who respect authority to rebel against it Good people try and start good so it will grow better

2.3 Lead people well and keep them under control so they won't get in trouble. Lead them with excellence and keep them in order ~~and~~ and they will develop to keep order for themselves

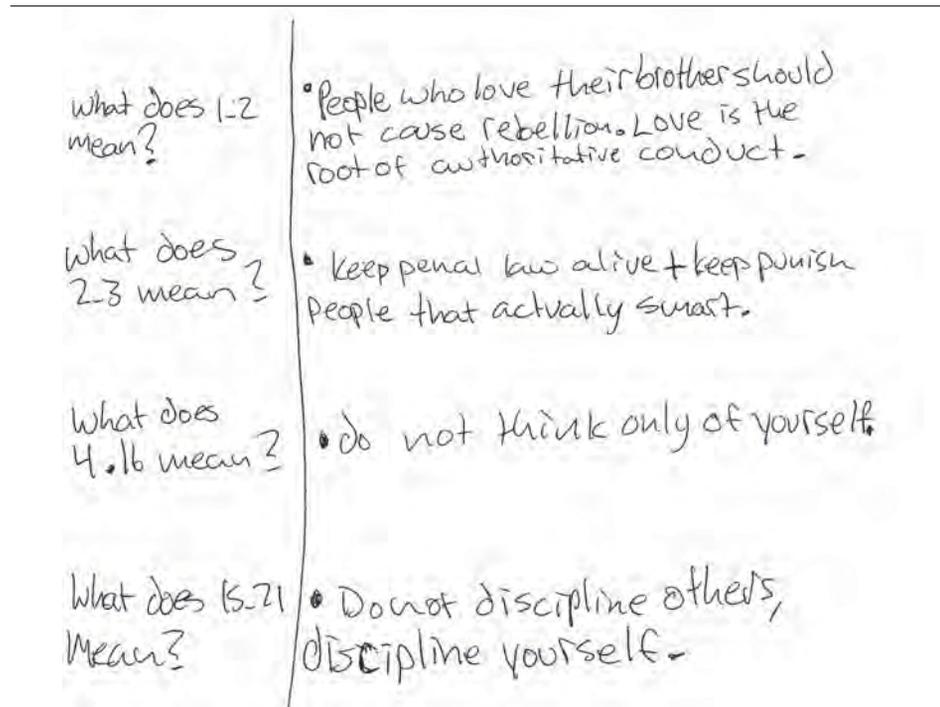
4.16 Good people know how to act. Stuck up people know what they can gain for themselves

15.21 Good people set goals for themselves while stuck up people set goals for others

- It is unlikely that someone with relative responsibility would rebel against authority. It is also unheard of for those who do respect authority to join into the rebellion Model people concentrate on the beginning and grow from there. Relative responsibility is the start of authoritative conduct

groups received a few analects and at first could only *talk* about their responses with one another, though they would each submit a written response at the end of the period. To keep the groups from functioning as independent workers sharing only a table—and to keep stronger students in the group from providing *the* response that everyone else writes down—Will withheld the note card on which students needed to compose their responses until he had met with each group

Figure 3.16: Derron's response to the preassessment.



and provided prompting, cueing, and explaining/modeling support, as Chris had done with summarizing leveled short stories. A key difference was that since Will's groups were more heterogeneous, he had no clear "first" groups to check in with and instead circulated the room, listening in on conversations until the opportunities for asking those first probing questions availed themselves. Each time students met in these groups, Will was prepared with a few questions specific to that day's analects that he could ask as a way to check for understanding, actively trying to move beyond the common default mode of being merely "available help" when students perceived themselves as stuck.

After this five-day cycle of instruction, activity, assessment, and response (including trying to break students of a new pattern Will saw—responding to only one part of an analect if it was lengthy), it was time for students to tackle the performance task. Because he knew that students were still at varying levels of competence, Will built tiers, or leveled checkpoints, into the assessment that allowed students to reveal their current level of development. Students interpreted

the analects one at a time before composing the memo to a politician that applied the analects to a real-world issue (see Figures 3.17–3.19). As you can see from the sample student work, some students got only as far as the interpretation of the individual analects, while others were ready to move on to the written synthesis activity. In either case, increased accuracy, confidence, and sophistication were evident in every student’s work.

Still, there are clear differences in the students’ performances, many of which were predictable based on their work in the preassessment and the short period in which they had to develop new skill and content knowledge related to interpretation of analects. The question of grading, then, immediately comes to the fore. Does Elizabeth deserve a higher grade for her more sophisticated performance on the summative assessment (Figure 3.18), in spite of her more sophisticated performance on the preassessment? Does Maria deserve a low grade for responding to only three of the analects (Figure 3.17), despite the obvious growth since her preassessment—including, importantly, the increased confidence evident in the absence of question marks after every response? And what of Derron (Figure 3.19), who misunderstood the structure of the task but still revealed new understanding?

Initially, Will was prepared to use a rubric to provide both feedback and a grade on this task. The startlingly different ways in which students responded to it—how each in his or her own way demonstrated that he or she was responding significantly to the instruction and feedback Will provided—kept him from doing so. In the late fall semester clamor, Will decided that he was unable at this point to think through sufficiently what the varying levels of student performance on the analects actually meant, so he didn’t use grades on this task to measure students’

This excerpt from the SARW captures in all of its complexity the conflict in Will’s evaluation and grading dilemma. As you read it, reflect on the way you balance institutional needs for succinct feedback in the form of grades with the full knowledge you have about each of your students.

When teachers write report cards [or, I contend, assign a grade to any literacy task], they are faced with difficult language decisions. They must find words to represent a student’s literate development in all its complexity, often within severe time, space, and format constraints. . . . Some teachers are faced with reducing extensive and complex knowledge about each student’s development to a single word or letter. This situation confronts them with very difficult ethical dilemmas.

Indeed, the greater the knowledge the teacher has of the student’s literacy, the more difficult this task becomes. (p. 8)

Add to this the SARW’s acknowledgment that assessment “must take into consideration the differences between basic and academic language [quite pronounced in Will’s assignment] and the length of time students need to become skilled at each” (p. 21) [Will knew this was an issue as well] and you’ll understand why Will chose to abstain from grading this task, despite its appearance to students as a “test.”

Figure 3.17: Maria's work on the performance task.

You are an advisor to an American politician who is considering a run for the Presidency in 2012. The politician has asked you to review influential thinking on government from different cultural and historical figures, and you found this collection of Confucian analects particularly interesting.

Your task is to choose some of the most important or interesting ideas from the analects and write a memo to your candidate explaining what you've learned and how you feel it would be useful advice for a contemporary American national leader.

- First, think through each analect carefully and write a brief paraphrase in the appropriate box on the sheet provided. Remember to paraphrase the analects from a Confucian perspective; don't let your modern American point of view influence the ideas the analects express.
- Circle any words you don't know and ask for clarification on their meanings.
- Try to refer to all or parts of all four of the analects in your memo, making note of advice that you think applies to contemporary America. Include references to specific real-world problems and issues to show how the advice is relevant or useful.
- If possible, include discussion of the five relationships and/or the Way to demonstrate your understanding of the analects.

Analects

A. The Master said, "In ruling a state of a thousand chariots, one is revere in the handling of affairs and shows himself to be trustworthy. One is economical in expenditures loves the people, and uses them only at the proper season."

B. When a country is well governed, poverty and mean conditions are things to be ashamed of. When a country is poorly governed, riches and honor are things to be ashamed of.

C. The Master said, "The art of governing is to keep its affair before the mind without weariness and to practice these affairs with undeviating consistency."

D. Zigong asked about government. The Master said, "Sufficient food, sufficient military force, the confidence of the people." Zigong said, "If one had, unavoidably, to dispense with one of these three, which to them would go first?" The Master said, "Get rid of the military." Zigong said, "If one had, unavoidably, to dispense with one of the remaining two, which should go first?" The Master said, "Dispense with the food. Since ancient time there has always been death, but without confidence a people cannot stand."

Analect A
Be respectful, and be trustworthy. Manage your money well, love people, and only use people ~~to~~ when you really need to.

Analect B
When the country is well governed and you're poor that means that you're not doing enough (trying) when the country isn't well governed and you're rich then you're being selfish and doing too much.

Analect C
You should always follow the way without growing tired of it. If you want good things to happen to you, follow the way.

Analect D

achievement in the "official sense." I respected his decision immensely, as it's a difficult place for teachers to find themselves. He was actively developing his sense of formative assessment and the range of instructional responses it implies, just as the students were developing their sense of how to take up the feedback they got from him in response to the work they produced.

Rather than translating students' performances to a number or letter in the grade book, Will gave himself permission to use the information he gained from the performance task to focus his review instruction for the district-level unit exam and for the semester exam, at this point only days away. The complicated relationships between assessment, instruction, and grades manifested clearly in this scenario, a topic I revisit in the final chapter of the book, where I explore how the vision of assessment embodied in the SARW can drive and inform conversations between multiple partners in the educational process.

Figure 3.18: Elizabeth's work on the performance task.

You are an advisor to an American politician who is considering a run for the Presidency in 2012. The politician has asked you to review influential thinking on government from different cultural and historical figures, and you found this collection of Confucian analects particularly interesting.

Your task is to choose some of the most important or interesting ideas from the analects and write a memo to your candidate explaining what you've learned and how you feel it would be useful advice for a contemporary American national leader.

- First, think through each analect carefully and write a brief paraphrase in the appropriate box on the sheet provided. Remember to **paraphrase the analects from a Confucian perspective**; don't let your modern American point of view influence the ideas the analects express.
- Circle any words you don't know and ask for clarification on their meanings.
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- If possible, include discussion of the five relationships and/or the Way to demonstrate your understanding of the analects.

Analects

- A. The Master said, "In ruling a state of a thousand chariots, one is reverent in the handling of affairs and shows himself to be trustworthy. One is economical in expenditures, loves the people, and uses them only at the proper season."
- B. When a country is well governed, poverty and mean conditions are things to be ashamed of. When a country is poorly governed, riches and honor are things to be ashamed of.
- C. The Master said, "The art of governing is to keep its affairs before the mind without weariness, and to practice these affairs with understanding consistency."
- D. Zigong asked about government. The Master said, "Sufficient food, sufficient military force, the confidence of the people." Zigong said, "If one had, unavoidably, to dispense with one of these three, which to them would go first?" The Master said, "Get rid of the military." Zigong said, "If one had, unavoidably, to dispense with one of the remaining two, which should go first?" The Master said, "Dispense with the food. Since ancient time there has hallways been death, but without confidence a people cannot stand."

Dear Candidate,

I have been studying Confucius and his knowledge on ruling and I think you will find some of the information very useful.

When ruling many people you need to think more for the people than for yourself. If your government is thriving but there are still homeless people and people with needs than you should be ashamed and try harder to give all people benefits and/or it is important to gain the peoples trust. You want a good army to protect your people, you want plenty of food so they don't starve, but the most important thing when ruling a nation is knowing that the people you rule trust you. Sending more troops to Iraq and Vietnam is not helping you gain trust.

I hope you find this information useful and have a good run

Good luck

Analect A

When you rule alot of people, you respect their problems and show they can trust you. You save money, love your people, and only use what you saved at an appropriate time

Analect B

If you have a good government but there is still poverty in the country then you should be ashamed. If you have a bad government and some people are rich, they should be ashamed for not trying to help their country

All have to do with ruler - ruled relationship

Analect C

The key to ruling is keeping the peoples problems before your own without struggling and to practice putting their problems before your own without letting your problems come before theirs at all

Analect D

In the government, you want plenty of food for the people, a good military, and the peoples confidence. When asked in what order would he get rid of these three things the ruler said first the military because he'd rather have food for his people and their confidence and next he would take the food because confidence in your ruler is like a stable ground

Figure 3.19: Derron's work on the performance task.

You are an advisor to an American politician who is considering a run for the Presidency in 2012. The politician has asked you to review influential thinking on government from different cultural and historical figures, and you found this collection of Confucian analects particularly interesting.

Your task is to choose some of the most important or interesting ideas from the analects and write a memo to your candidate explaining what you've learned and how you feel it would be useful advice for a contemporary American national leader.

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- If possible, include discussion of the five relationships and/or the Way to demonstrate your understanding of the analects.

Analects

- A. The Master said, "In ruling a state of a thousand chariots, one is reverent in the handling of affairs and shows himself to be trustworthy. One is economical in expenditures, loves the people, and uses them only at the proper season."
- B. When a country is well governed, poverty and mean conditions are things to be ashamed of. When a country is poorly governed, riches and honor are things to be ashamed of. *Do not brag about riches; try to reduce poverty.*
- C. The Master said, "The art of governing is to keep its affairs before the mind without weariness, and to practice these affairs with undeviating consistency."
- D. Zigong asked about government. The Master said, "Sufficient food, sufficient military force, the confidence of the people." Zigong said, "If one had, unavoidably, to dispense with one of these three, which to them would go first?" The Master said, "Get rid of the military." Zigong said, "If one had, unavoidably, to dispense with one of the remaining two, which should go first?" The Master said, "Dispense with the food. Since ancient time there has hallways been death, but without confidence a people cannot stand."

Government is based on confidence in people

Analect A To _____
 One can learn a lot from Master Confucius. According to Analect A, you should always use money carefully. I'm sure you already know this. Respect the Presidency it's the most important job.

Analect B to _____
 The most important point about ruling a country is to keep the country out of depression + reduce poverty. Ignore the modern studies of the economy's. Instead study the economy of the great depression. They are proven to work.

Analect C TO _____
 Ruling the United States is not a tiny job. You will feel like quitting. Keep working it's important.

Analect D TO _____
 Try to educate the people, and listen to the polls. Democracies do not work if you lose trust in you, your political career is over.

The Common Core State Standards call for students to read and comprehend increasingly complex text as they move through middle and high school. While this is a worthy goal, how will teachers know what kinds of text students are ready for, or how to support students as they develop the necessary skills, habits, and stances to grow as readers?

This book in the Principles in Practice imprint is the result of the author's own efforts to bridge the gap between valuing reading and being able to respond with appropriate instruction or evaluate growth in reading. Scott Filkins brings us into his classroom and the classrooms of his colleagues to demonstrate how high school teachers across the disciplines can engage in inquiry-based reading assessment to support student learning. Based in the IRA–NCTE *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*, Revised Edition, the classroom portraits highlight the importance of incorporating genuinely formative assessment into our instruction.

Filkins unpacks his own history with assessment through engaging “confessions” of his early practices and eventual growth toward a framework that situates reading assessment in an inquiry model. Throughout the book, he showcases his colleagues’ attempts to use an inquiry framework, including the various tools and documentation methods that help them inquire into their students’ habits and thoughts as readers, use formative assessment to fuel the gradual release of responsibility framework, and use reading assessment as a means of professional reflection. Finally, Filkins challenges us to broaden the conversation about assessment to a wider range of stakeholders and offers a vision of assessment as an expression of care for the students in our charge.

Scott Filkins has worked as an educator in the Champaign (Illinois) Unit 4 schools in a variety of roles, including English teacher and department chair, reading teacher, instructional coach, and curriculum coordinator for English language arts and social studies, grades 6–12.