

Understanding Kristin's Resistance (ELA Example)

This story is excerpted from [Culturally Responsive Formative Assessment: ELA and Math Examples](#), one of the resources provided on Slide 23 of [SGG Module 6: Formative and Summative Assessment](#).

This story is also presented in video format as two SGG conversations embedded in SGG Module 6 (Formative and Summative Assessment) on slides 21-22: [Student Growth Goal Conversation #1 Before the Unit: choosing a class, focus, and essential standard](#); and [Student Growth Goal Conversation #2 After the Unit: sharing evidence and artifacts of growth](#).

Teaching Situation

At the beginning of an 11th grade writing course, Maja explains that she never grades first drafts. Instead, first drafts are opportunities for students to gather feedback, which they can use to revise as many times as they like until both they and Maja are ready to grade their drafts. Maja is confident that growth follows the writing process, so she guarantees students a grade of B or above if they follow this process, which includes using feedback to revise.

When class breaks for lunch, Kristin approaches Maja. "I never revise," she asserts. "And I never listen to feedback from other people. Just wanted to let you know."

Culturally Responsive Formative Assessment

When Kristin asserts that she never revises and doesn't listen to feedback, Maja decides it is time to start an inquiry into Kristin's relationship with writing, feedback, and the decision-making strategies Kristin employs when she writes. Maja's goal isn't to find a way to convince Kristin to accept feedback and revise; at this point, she simply wants to understand Kristin's experiences and relationship with writing, feedback, and revision.

To start this inquiry, Maja says, "Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences with writing? How do you feel about it?"

Kristin looks sideways at Maja and says, "In school or out of school?"

Maja chuckles, "Whatever means the most to you."

Kristin tells Maja that she loves to write *out of school*. Emphasis on *out of school*. She pulls a well-worn journal from her backpack that she writes in it all the time. *During* class but not *for* class, she clarifies. Kristin explains that her mother is a writer who publishes several novels a year, and Kristin has watched her mother rail against her editor's suggestions. Kristin explains that her mother takes suggestions she doesn't like all the time because writing pays the bills. Kristin doesn't want to do that. Writing is for *her*, and she wants to keep it that way.

Maja asks what Kristin likes to write (vignettes, scenes, sometimes poetry). They bond over the experience of writer's block and trade ideas for how to get over it.

Then, Maja asks Kristin what writing has been like for Kristin in school. Her sideways glance returns. "Well, I clearly don't like being told what to do. So, you can imagine how it has gone."

Lunch is nearly done, so Maja needs to wrap it up. She says, "Kristin, it sounds like you've worked hard to protect writing as something you do *for you*. I'd be happy if all my students were as fiercely protective of their love of writing as you. I'm not sure what that will mean, but I'll think about it. You think about it, too."

Many students in the past have been resistant to feedback, but Maja has never explored their experiences to understand why. So, Maja views what Kristin has shared with her as a gift. While Kristin's story is unique, she knows the dynamics involved in Kristin's story are not. If she can address this in a way that benefits Kristin, she suspects it will benefit all students.

Maja revisits her teaching intentions. What had been the point of insisting on feedback and revision in the first place? First, she'd wanted to avoid the negative effects of grades on students' intrinsic motivation to write. She'd seen negative effects of extrinsic motivation. Many students who earned high grades were afraid to take risks, resulting in polished but boring essays. Many students who got low grades were convinced they couldn't write.

When Maja made small adjustments to her grading policy in the past (such as completion grades for daily journals) she'd seen students take risks that resulted in powerful writing with voice and perspective. After reading scholars such as [Peter Elbow](#) and learning about networks of teachers interested in "[ungrading](#)," she slowly made more adjustments.

Maja wanted her students to experience writing not as something you do to avoid the punishment of a bad grade or earn the reward of a good grade, but as something you do because writing is interesting and helps you make sense of yourself and the world. She knows that writing well will require students to write outside of her class for their own purposes. If her class makes them avoid writing for themselves, they aren't going to improve over time.

Secondly, she'd wanted to create a classroom community where students are fellow writers who explore writing together and grow in the process of that exploration. A good writing partner isn't someone who is waiting to judge you; a good writing partner is someone whose own ideas and explorations with language inspire you, and who responds to your writing with curiosity and interest. The focus in Maja's class on feedback and revision is one way to accomplish that. Instead of a non-stop cycle of "assign and correct," she wants her class to be a non-stop cycle of "working on stuff together because it feels interesting and important."

Maja is still committed to these goals. However, if Kristin just goes through the motions of feedback and revision to get a better grade, isn't that just another version of the extrinsic motivation that Maja wants to avoid? If Maja wants to treat Kristin as a fellow writer, won't she need to allow Kristin some space to assert what she needs for herself?

Maja can relate to Kristin's resistance to feedback. Maja always evaluates feedback for its ability to accomplish her intentions. If feedback helps her accomplish her intentions, she takes it. If it doesn't, she rejects it. Often, in the process of rejecting a suggestion, she'll reflect on the reason a reader might have made the suggestion in the first place. If the suggestion doesn't resonate but the reason does, Maja will find a different way to address the reason. It's a complex process, but it puts her in charge and often leads to revisions that she didn't anticipate. It's all about considering her intentions and the reader's experience at the same time.

In Kristin's experience, feedback pits her mother's intentions against her editor's suggestions – and the editor always wins. Maja can now understand Kristin's resistance as an affirmation of her relationship with writing. It's truly an asset, not a deficit to be overcome.

But what to do next? How to act on this new understanding of Kristin's asset? Maybe Maja can reframe feedback and change the process by which writers evaluate and use feedback in her classroom. Not just for Kristin, but for all her students.

Acting on the Inquiry: Affirming Kristin's Relationship with Her Intentions by Reframing Feedback

Maja wants to emphasize that writers should always evaluate feedback for its potential to help them accomplish their intentions. They should never just make a change because someone suggests it, even if that someone is herself, the teacher.

This new emphasis will have ripple effects. It will affect how writers *interpret* feedback in addition to how students *give* feedback. Instead of presenting feedback as "a suggestion for change," she wants students to present their feedback as "a description of how I, the reader, experience the writing and make sense of it." Then, the writer will then need to ask themselves, "Why is the reader having this experience? Is it the result of something in my text, or something in the reader's background, or some combination? What can I learn from this reader's experience? Is this the experience I want the reader to have? If not, what am I going to do about it?"

In addition to putting the writer's intention more clearly at the center of the revision process, this approach to feedback can help students understand how texts *work*. Texts are not good or bad in comparison to some external, objective standard. Instead, texts are effective in so far as they produce experiences that readers value. To make revisions that matter, students will need to understand the experiences that readers have of their texts, understand why readers have those experiences, compare these experiences to their intentions, and then decide what to do.

This leads to four teaching ideas that Maja hopes will benefit Kristin and all her students.

1. Maja designs a mini lesson on the role of disagreement between readers. She knows that disagreement between readers is a given. In fact, reader disagreement is one of the "facts of life" that makes reliability and validity in writing assessment so difficult.

In her lesson, Maja will share something she wrote along with opposite suggestions from two different readers she respected. The first reader recommended cutting her introductory story, while second reader recommended keeping it. To make sense of the conflicting feedback, she considered the two readers' backgrounds. The first reader was very knowledgeable about the topic. In fact, he was an expert. She realized that the expert had been thinking about the topic for decades, so he probably didn't need to be eased into it by the introductory story. He probably just wanted her to get to the point. The second reader didn't know very much about the topic, so he probably appreciated the way in which the introductory story set him up for it. Since Maja wasn't writing for experts, she decided to reject the expert's suggestion. Instead, she followed the second reader's suggestion to keep the story, because the second reader represented her intended audience.

After Maja shares this story with her students, she explains that they, too, are always in charge of accepting or rejecting feedback. Feedback is simply a way to know *why* readers experience a text in different ways. The writer must decide what to do next.

2. Maja makes the concept of reader disagreement and reader experiences central in her instructions for peer revision. They won't comment on whether some aspect of the essay is good or bad and then suggest a way to make it better. Instead, they will narrate the effects of the writer's decisions on their reading experience. Then they'll hypothesize why they had that experience. ("I zoned out during this explanation. By this seventh sentence, I was thinking, *I get it already!* And then I stopped paying attention. I think that happened because the seventh sentence repeated what was in the first six sentences.") She hopes that students will hear conflicting experiences from each other, because this will prompt an investigation the differences in the readers' backgrounds and interpretations. This will allow them to make better decisions about what to do next.
3. Maja will stop writing comments on papers. Instead, she'll schedule quick conversations throughout the writing process. In the past, Maja spent lots of time writing feedback because she wants students to know that there is no one right way to write. But this meant she ended up writing even more because she didn't want to give just one suggestion. Instead, she'd write, "Well, if you're trying to accomplish A, you could try B. Or, if you're trying to accomplish B, you could try X. Or, if you're trying to accomplish D, you could try F." She is happy with the meta-message this sent to students, but she is NOT HAPPY with the amount of time it takes. (She capitalizes every letter of NOT HAPPY even though she hates all caps to emphasize how NOT HAPPY she is to devote her free time to writing feedback!)

Maja plans to have quick conversations with students as they write. She'll start by asking students about their intentions. She'll only offer suggestions if students ask for them, and by that time, she'll know their intentions, and can tailor suggestions accordingly. She'll strive to be an ally of their intentions. In addition, she'll consider changing the writing assignment for individual students if it gets in the way of students investing their intentions in the writing.
4. Maja will add a question to the "draft note" students attach to final drafts. She'll ask them to explain feedback they rejected and accepted and to cite their intentions to explain why. Maybe, by emphasizing their intentions as equal to a reader's feedback, she can introduce intention as a decision-making strategy and assuage some of Kristin's concerns.

Reflection on Kristin's Story

This story illustrates several important aspects of culturally responsive formative assessment. Maja's primary goal is to understand Kristin's experiences, relationships, and engagement in the writing process. Maja views these experiences not as good or bad, but as the asset of "fund of knowledge" that Kristin brings to writing. She uses what she learns to reflect on the nature of the writing process and to think about how Kristin's experiences can be engaged more deeply to benefit Kristin and the entire class. She changes her practice to incorporate these understandings, making room for Kristin's personal experiences while weaving more nuanced understandings of the writing process into her instruction and grading policy for all students.