Tracking Fluency - The Handwriting Connection to Language Arts Skills

Gains in handwriting skill can be hard to judge when product (replication accuracy) is your focus. The fact is that a rather wide range of shapes can be read easily. If you must grade handwriting progress, it becomes a huge challenge to decide on the level of success. For that reason many teachers are never confident that efforts to teach are making a difference for their students. There is a better assessment and it does not demand a huge investment of time from your schedule.

You will have students who can duplicate very accurately, the models provided for handwriting instruction. But often that is only true when the student carefully attends to the handwriting task and takes for ever to finish a writing assignment. The production rate is far from fluent and automatic. Conversely, many students who work fluently on composition tasks, forget legibility goals entirely and you wind up struggling to read the writing. Fluent legibility should be the real goal of handwriting instruction and it is fluency that has been connected to development of all language arts skills. It makes sense to track fluency as your primary measure and include legibility as part of the equation. Your assessment of handwriting skills becomes totally different - much easier.

The strategy to track fluency is quite simple. Use the chart included here to collect fluency data periodically. You could actually do this frequently because it does not demand a lot of time. Spelling or vocabulary words offer an excellent opportunity for a quick timed exercise during practice that usually occurs anyway. If each student keeps a copy of the chart he or she can add data after each exercise that provides an objective indicator of fluency over time. The goal is to express fluency in letters per minute - a fluency quotient.

The Data Collection Process
Choose a target word (or more than one as fluency increases) to be written multiple times during a timed exercise. Have students start to write and stop on your command. Allow one minute before you call stop. Depending upon skill levels, attention span and your schedule, you can allow as little as 20 seconds for writing. Twenty seconds is one-third of a minute. Multiply the number of letters by three to convert the number to letters per minute.

When one minute is allowed for writing, expression of fluency quotient is easy. Simply count the number of letters written or count the number of words and multiply by the number of letters in the word. To include legibility employ the letter tops evaluation. Disqualify letters or words that are too difficult to read. You can adjust "legibility qualifications" as student skills improve over time.

It is a good idea to periodically collect papers and fluency data sheets to handle the assessment personally. But, a cooperative learning process can also be valuable and employed when time is available. Have pupils exchange papers after the writing. The peer partner does the letter tops evaluation and data conversion. Once your students know the drill, the process does not demand a lot of time and the fluency data accumulated gives you and the student an objective record of handwriting progress.

In Application
Writing one word multiple times is not a challenging as multiple words in a sequence or actual composition. A fluency quotient for composition would be the most telling. More of your time is necessary but three or four assessments during the year would be a good idea. Ask students to write definitions for vocabulary words. Note the start time and allow five or ten minutes for the activity noting the time allotment. Collect the papers to process the fluency data. Have students add the data on their fluency chart when you return the papers. The chart provided has a place for activity identification. Activity codes below are listed on the form.

SW = Single Word, SP = Signature Practice, MWS = Multiple Words, AW = Applied Work.

Individual Fluency Data Record

_____
Student Name

Our goal for handwriting instruction is to increase fluency and legibility as the year progresses.The fluency quotient (L/M) is an objective measure of writing fluency. The L/M number shows the number of legible letters written per minute during a timed exercise. The type of timed activity and the level of processing difficulty increases from SW to AW.

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Date	Activity	L/M	Date	Activity	L/M