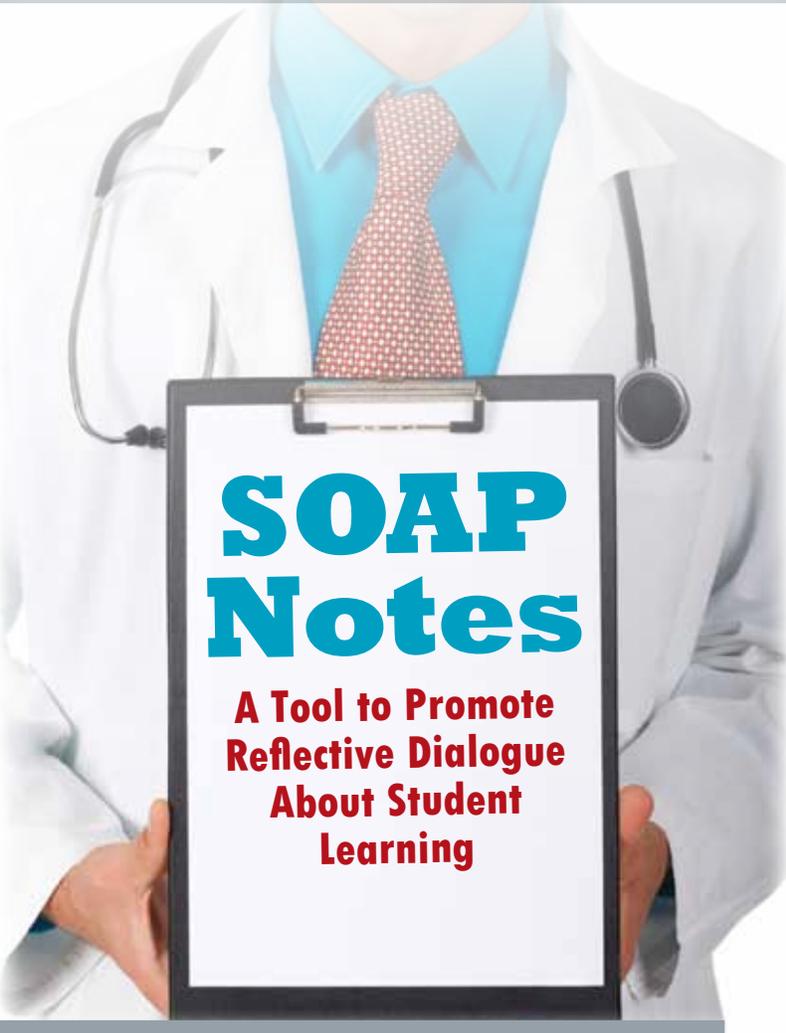


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Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D. and Benjamin Thomas Many



SOAP noting is a simple yet comprehensive technique developed by the medical profession in the late 1960s. Doctors use SOAP notes to document a patient's symptoms, observations, assessments and treatment plans. According to the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), one of the major benefits of SOAP noting is that it organizes extremely complex problems into simpler tasks that are more easily tracked and solved. The use of SOAP notes has also been shown to improve communication between those responsible for the well being of a patient. Today, the practice of SOAP noting is used around the world by nurses, pharmacists, occupational and physical therapists, dieticians, social workers, psychiatrists and physicians.

SOAP notes can provide similar benefits in schools. In education, much like in medicine, improving student learning is an extremely complex process involving many variables that are difficult to track and resolve. Likewise, improving communication between the teachers responsible for improving student learning will lead to higher levels of collaboration. Teams that adopt the SOAP noting technique as one of their primary methods of documenting and reflecting on assessment data could improve their communication, documentation and planning for student learning.

Benefits of SOAP Noting

The practice of SOAP noting is a data driven process that emphasizes the natural progression from collection of relevant data, to the assessment of the learning problem, to development of a plan of how to proceed. There are a number of benefits to regularly using SOAP notes.

The SOAP noting process provides teachers with a consistent method of compiling relevant information about how students are progressing through the curriculum. SOAP notes improve communication, help teachers identify obstacles and provide a structure for developing plans to assist students in achieving their goals. SOAP noting also provides an efficient, standardized method for reflecting on student progress that is simple, concise and compatible with data from common assessments.

SOAP notes provide teachers with a tool for managing the progress of all students, not just special populations. Teachers can customize their SOAP notes and use them as a way to track interventions or any factor that directly or indirectly impacts student learning. Finally, SOAP notes capture concrete evidence of progress that teachers can share with other teachers, administrators, parents and students. These notes provide a longitudinal record of teachers' collective efforts to improve student learning.

How do you write a SOAP note?

The SOAP acronym stands for Subjective, Objective, Assessment and Plan. The written comments within a SOAP note can vary from teacher to teacher, but the

general principle remains the same: to record the progress of the student(s).

Subjective: Subjective description of student progress as reported by the teacher.

This first section of the SOAP note calls for teachers to describe the progress students are making based on their observation of students. The most common mistake teachers make in this section is moving from description to judgment (student was too tired to test well) or adding irrelevant information (room was too hot during testing period).

An example of what teachers write in the Subjective section might be, “Based on what I see when I check for understanding using the white boards, most of the students understand the concept of adding fractions with like denominators. A handful of students are still struggling, but overall, it would appear that the majority of students are proficient in adding fractions with like denominators.”

Objective: An objective account of the student’s performance based on data.

Teacher judgement is usually accurate, but information in this section should be objective and contain limited analysis and/or judgment by the teacher. When done well, the Objective section is data driven, provides a measurable description of the students’ progress, and should align with the teacher’s Subjective observations. The most common mistakes teachers make in this section are being too global and failing to provide enough detail to define the learning issues students are experiencing.

For the Objective section a teacher might write, “In my class, 25 of 32 students scored 80% or higher on the last common assessment which tested their understanding of adding fractions with like denominators. All seven non-proficient students scored less than 50% on the assessment. Three of the seven students who were not proficient did not show their work and made basic arithmetic mistakes when adding the numerators. The remaining four students who did not demonstrate mastery added *both* the numerator and denominator.”

Assessment: Clearly articulate your understanding of the student(s) needs.

For this section, the teacher combines the subjective description as observed in the classroom with the objective data gathered from a common assessment and consolidates them into a short, concise and factual appraisal of the situation. The most common mistake teachers make here is being too vague when describing the evidence upon which their appraisal of the student(s) needs is based.

As an examples for this section, a teacher might write, “With the exception of the seven students who were not

proficient, the class is ready to move on to adding fractions with unlike denominators.”

Plan: What you plan to do next to ensure all students master the learning target.

This section can include specific interventions, homework assignments or plans for using a new approach or teaching technique. When writing this section, teachers should ask themselves, “In order to reach mastery, what do I want to do with these students?” or “What do I want to cover with them next week?” The most common mistake teachers make in this section is failing to be specific when describing the recommended interventiuous. For example, writing “the student should continue to practice adding fractions” would not be sufficient.

An example of what teachers write in this section of the SOAP note might look something like, “The three students who had difficulty with addition would probably have gotten the correct answer had they shown their work and reviewed it before turning in the assessment. These students will redo the problems they missed while verbally explaining the steps taken to solve the problem. The remaining four who were not proficient will review the algorithm for adding fractions with like denominators using manipulatives. After reviewing and reteaching the concept of adding fractions with like denominators, each non-proficient students will be given an opportunity to retake an alternate form of the assessment.”

SOAP notes are not meant to be as detailed as a Progress Report and should fit on a single page. The length of a SOAP note will differ from teacher to teacher but a short, precise SOAP note is always preferred over one that is too long. Abbreviations and partial sentences are acceptable assuming the abbreviations and shorthand notations are understood and can be easily interpreted by other members of the faculty and staff. In the beginning, SOAP notes may be a little longer but they typically become more concise as teachers gain more experience with the technique.

A Well-Written SOAP Note Tells a Story

When done well, the SOAP noting technique is a simple and effective way to promote reflective dialogue about student progress. SOAP notes improve communication, encourage the effective use of data and document our collective efforts to help all students learn to high levels. ■



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