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Strategies to Implement Effective Writing Practices

Good writing skills are essential for today's students. We can all agree that communication is an important component of education, livelihood and for all basic functions in society. There are two ways to communicate: verbally and written. Most students speak well, but how many can truly write? **If a student does not know how to express themselves in writing they will not be able to communicate well with professors, employers, peers, or just about anyone else effectively.**

With the new SAT requirements for writing, the message is getting through with teenagers and parents that "good writing is a bedrock for future success," according to a new national survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and the National Commission on Writing. Most teenagers – eighty-seven percent - use some kind of electronic personal communication and yet sixty percent of twelve to seventeen years-olds said they do not think of these forms of communication as "writing." Eighty-two percent of teens said that they would like to write better but feel disadvantaged because their teachers did not spend enough time on sharpening writing skills. African-American and those from lower-income household were the most ardent believers in the value of writing and the likely payoff of more class time devoted to it. This problem should be addressed in the child's early educational years.

With time, more teachers are growing defensive of this criticism of them in the area of writing, citing ever-increasing teaching loads at all levels of education. Some of them see creative and increased reliance on technology and argue for more teaching assistance in the classroom. Even though most students write everyday, they are very short, usually a paragraph or two. Educators are now questioning the importance of writing with the rapid advent of technology penmanship. The argument is that spelling and grammar are all things of the past. Since the computer never misses a spelling error, why is it important to have good spelling? Likewise, if your computer is checking for these mistakes and guides you on how to correct these mistakes, then why do we need grammar? However there is still a need for good written communication. We communicate by e-mail, we read blogs, and regardless of the technology taking away the need to be excellent spellers, the computer is only as good as their writers. It takes human knowledge to write these programs for grammar and spell check.

Review of Literature

Author Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee, in *How Writing Shapes Thinking*, include some sobering conclusions about students' writing abilities, (Gallager, 2006). **Among their findings were :**

- **Students' writing were superficial, and 'even better responses' show little evidence of well-developed problem-solving strategies or critical thinking skills.**
- **A major conclusion to draw from assessment of students' writing at all grade levels is that "students are deficient in higher order thinking skills." They have difficulty performing adequately on analytic writing tasks, as well as persuasive writing tasks.**
- **"Because writing and thinking are so deeply intertwined, appropriate writing assignments provide an ideal way to increase student experience with such type of thinking". As a result students need a broad-based experiences in which reading and writing tasks are integrated with their work throughout**

assignments provide an ideal way to increase student experience with such type of thinking". As a result students need a broad-based experiences in which reading and writing tasks are integrated with their work throughout the curriculum.

Convincing students of all grades that writing is necessary for future success is futile, because writing is important at all levels. Educators have to make writing fun for students and stress free and manageable for themselves. Drawn from a larger study involving sixteen children and seven classrooms at a New Hampshire elementary school, a case study was done on students' growth in writing during third and fourth grade. From the inception of the writing workshop in one classroom, there was partnership between the researcher implementing the workshop and the classroom teacher. The teacher edited at the end of the writing process rather than sooner, and the teacher's role effected student writing as she took over a child-centered workshop in an otherwise traditional classroom curriculum. The second research focused on the writing development of one student, including the child's gradual grasp of the revision process, her development of the writer's "executive" or reader's function, and her mastery of writing and revision strategies. The third section dealt with the writing classroom as a context for growth, specifically how a different classroom teacher approached the workshop model with an emphasis on peer interaction during the writing process, how the child's writing reflected her changing concept of what good writing was, and how reading and writing can be integrated to further children's writing development (Calkins, 1983). Student's writing developed at a faster pace when there was peer interaction during the writing process because the student was open to peer criticism and guidance.

Method and Implementation

As a fourth grade teacher in Texas, where students are state tested on their writing skills, I have come to a realization that the majority of our students do not express themselves well in writing. A key reason is that we are not spending enough time teaching our students to write effectively. My purpose for this presentation is to develop a quick reference for teachers who need help with certain aspects of writer's workshop, or who are looking for new ideas to light a spark to something already in place. I will incorporate ideas that have worked well for me. These include fun and hands-on activities for writing. It will raise the teachers' consciousness to the difficulty of writing and suggest some activities that make writing fun with more focus on ideas than form.

Several works were consulted. My findings overall showed that the most effective method of teaching writing is through Scaffolding Writing Instruction: Guiding Writers. "Guided writing allows a teacher to work closely with a small group of students based on a common need. During a guided writing lesson, a teacher might gather a small group and model writing, or maybe they will complete a shared writing experience together. Guided writing lessons give teachers the opportunity to bring together students who are struggling with similar skills for a mini-lesson, or a re-teaching session" (Lisa Fras). Research has shown that guided writing, similar to guided reading and guided math, takes students individual writing skills and helps them grow as writers. Guided writing affords a chance to model peer critiquing by turning the small group into a critique circle. The possibilities are endless, and the best part is guided writing fits neatly into a writing workshop.

Another strategy to increase student motivation was implemented by a former statewide trainer from the University of California's Puente Project. Kelly Gallagher, who suggests using articles from a site called 'Article of the Week.' Most students have a distinctive lack of background knowledge which makes it hard for them to write at times. Writing based on Article of the Week gives the students an opportunity to broaden their horizons and expand their schema. Once a week students are handed out a new article; most of the time they are related to current events, but they can also be editorials, opinions, information nonfiction, and even reviews. These articles try to focus on topics they might not otherwise learn about.

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Moving Forward With Literature Circles, states that “writing helps students become more aware of their responses and think more deeply about what they are reading.... Writing allows to students to reflect on their own experiences within literature discussions. Writing and talking also support one another: by writing, students talk more, and by talking: students write more” (**Jeni Pollack Day, 2002**).

A writing workshop does not have to be an ‘everyday activity.’ Most teachers are intimidated by the thought of incorporating writing everyday. In my experience, the best strategy has been to set a purpose for writing for the students. This can be done in a variety of ways, using a reading selection as a platform, borrowing from other content areas for cross-curricular writing, etc. After a brief discussion on the genre of writing expected, assign the students to write a rough draft. They should be given at least two days to work on it, at home or in school. In the beginning of the year, the teacher could model and scaffold the writing process. As the students get proficient in their work, they should be able to edit their pieces. This can be accomplished through one-on-one conferences. The most manageable method is to have students place their finished paper in a ‘bin.’ When the teacher gets the opportunity, he/she should confer with the student. No more than three conferences should be scheduled per day. This gives ample time and opportunity to cover all students in a week’s time without overwhelming the teacher. By mid-year, the teacher should identify four to six students who are proficient writers. These students should be trained to be ‘first responders’ for peer editing and should critique positively. They will review the rough drafts, and have the initial conference with the student on a one –on-one basis. The essays will then be edited and the next conference should be with the teacher. In my experience, the students respond much more to their peer criticism versus the teacher.

Writing can also be reinforced through the medium of Literature Circles. This is a strong classroom strategy for writing because of the way it couples collaborative learning with student centered inquiry. Students take responsibility for their own learning. After discussions from the passages read from assigned novels, they engage the text by incorporating writing in their reflection. Each selected reading is followed by extensive research. From research in my own personal experience, it is a great way to get students excited about writing. A great way is to incorporate technology into this writing process. My students are excited about doing research on-line and writing their explanatory section of the assignment. It is imperative that if using this strategy, writing should be kept informal so students are more willing to take risks. Emphasis, therefore, should be to let them know that this writing will be primarily assessed for ideas rather than grammar and mechanics. If this writing is graded for grammar and mechanics, students may begin to care more about the form of their writing rather than the ideas involved and will not see it as something helpful, which defeats the purpose. Published work is important, but for other parts of the curriculum.

For maximum impact of their writing, as teachers, we must respond to their work on a regular basis. When teachers talk to their students about their writing or put responses in the margin, student motivation increases. This leads to discussion between student and teacher without the teacher taking over. Also, this communication increases the relationship with students that the teacher does not have time for during the busy school day.

During my research, teachers have praised the use of Article of the Week writing assignment noting the writing development with the students. It is not enough to simply teach students to recognize a theme and write from a given novel, as in structured writing. Analyzing the Article of Week gives them an opportunity to be creative. It helps them become literate, and broadens their reading and writing experiences into the real-world text. Each week students are responsible for a close reading that shows evidence of reading the text; highlighting, writing in the margins, underlining, or otherwise marking up the article. Then, they respond to a critical thinking/opinion question by writing an essay responding to the article based on the notes they took. This gives an opportunity for them to have a creative essay versus a structured one.

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Creativity in writing is also encouraged through 'blogging.' It is a useful tool for a research writing project. The ability to publish and share text on the web quickly, simply, and with a minimum of computer knowledge opens up a number of new possibilities for the classroom as well. Students do not tend to write unless they have to. Blogs are one way to change that. Asking students to keep a blog gets them in the habit of writing regularly; what's more, it gets them in the habit of writing regularly in the kind of electronic environments they will be asked to work in outside the school setting. From experience I can say the only way to develop the habit of blogging is to conscientiously blog for a few weeks. After that, the blog becomes a familiar resource, one which students may turn to even when the class is over, creating a regular habit of communicating through writing. My fifth graders started their research on a given topic by blogging, which led to a great and creative writing assignment they felt they had control over and took great pride in publishing. Blogging also records the process of collaboration, allowing teachers to observe, comment, and intervene as needed while allowing students to reflect on the process at the end of the assignment.

In implementing the writer's workshop in upper elementary, students can produce articles for a class or school newspaper. Over the course of a month, students have a chance to write articles for the newspaper. Above and beyond this, students will have more of an interest to write on what interests them, and they take pride in editing and submitting their work. A good way to start is to **model each of the types of articles in a whole class lesson**. Each month discuss the articles that each child in the group will be doing and tell them they have a month to put their article together, no exceptions. All writers work under deadlines and this is a good notion to highlight for them. This is a great way to encourage journalism. Educational research shows that students write more and better when they are writing regularly for a real audience. School or class newspapers offer kids wonderful writing opportunities for real audiences.

Measuring Success

Performance-based assessments effective for measuring student learning is important for evaluating higher-order thinking. **A research study found that three to five essays were required to evaluate and make a reliable judgment of student writing performance (Eva Chen, 2008).** I ask all students to turn in portfolios of six to twelve pieces they have written over the quarter. They organize their portfolios with an introductory essay that provides their rationale for selecting those pieces to represent their thinking, learning and writing in the course. I turned to this method of assessment in my writing courses when I discovered the power of students' own insights into their writing. Students became reflective about their writing when I asked them to think about the disciplinary assumptions that shape their thinking. In addition, their responses to self-assessment questions for individual essays often generated insights into issues-what we typically call "problems"-in their writing that provided us a meaningful basis for productive conversations about writing. I recognized the potential for learning in the reflections students articulated in these individual exercises about specific pieces, and I began to consider what we might gain from reflecting on the writing they had done in the course as a whole.

In asking students to create portfolios organized by reflective essays, it gives the teacher an opportunity to see inside their thinking, to learn how they think about writing and learning, how they see themselves as participants in the writing/thinking process in general and in a disciplinary discourse in particular, and how these perceptions develop or change over the course of the quarter. This way, students make their understandings conscious and explicit and the teacher gains insights into the way students learn in interaction. The teacher and student both benefit in a successful writing workshop.

Writing can also be measured through the use of state tests scores. Students in Texas have to take the writing test in fourth and eighth grade. Analyzing the scores will lead to improvements in teaching and learning. Educators should use these results to follow student progress, identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in curriculum and instruction. They should then fine tune the curriculum alignment with the statewide

lead to improvements in teaching and learning. Educators should use these results to follow student progress, identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in curriculum and instruction. They should then fine tune the curriculum alignment with the statewide standards. It is important to also identify students who may need additional help. In addition, teachers should grade the students' work regularly using the state's 1-4 scoring scale.

Assessment rubrics are one way of ensuring that students understand expectations in advance of completing an assignment, and teachers maintain a fair standard of assessment. An assessment rubric includes a list of **standards** that a student must meet in order to earn a perfect score. Each item on the list is assigned a value based on its importance. When evaluating a student project, writing assignment, or other product, the teacher will deduct points from the possible total for items that do not meet the stated standard. Students can thus identify specific areas of strength or weakness on the graded task. When creating a rubric for a writing task, teachers must be very aware of student ability and the course objectives. Since writing is a process and several drafts may be written and evaluated prior to a final draft, the teacher may even want to create separate rubrics for each step in the writing process.

Measuring success should be individualized, thus writing conferences are ideal for assessing where students are in their writing progress. When teachers conduct short but regular writing conferences with their students, they can keep close track of their students' writing needs and adapt their instruction accordingly. Notes on writing conferences for individual students can be kept and reviewed to see progress over time. Recurring issues can be noted and addressed (you can tell if the conferences are beneficial if students are not repeating organizational and grammatical mistakes). Writing conferences are especially useful in tracking a student's progress within a particular writing project because they ensure that students are following through on writing projects to completion and engaging in the entire writing process, which will naturally make students better writers. Conferences are also quite valuable to see a student's progression through various drafts of a piece of writing, providing insights into the writer's thinking process.

Teachers can introduce elements of Writer's Workshop at any elementary grade. Ideally, however, the process begins in kindergarten. Writer's Workshop strategies should be implemented in whole or in part, depending on the class and individual circumstances. In any case, the goal is to create students with confidence and fluency in the writing skills that will be necessary for secondary and post-secondary education.

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