Developing a Meaningful Writing Curriculum

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With so many variables facing us in the classroom—the writing process, writing traits, writing rubrics, writing standards, writing workshops—how can we begin to put writing instruction in its proper perspective? I contend there is a missing link—a unifying structure—that is needed to help all writing teachers know what they should teach and why.

Establishing a unifying structure helped us develop an effective writing curriculum in our own classrooms, as well as to create the *Write Source* handbooks and text series. We came to this structure through our own teaching experiences, our research into writing instruction, our discussions with other instructors, and our own writing. Once we had this structure in place, everything we did from planning to implementation fit easily—and meaningfully—within it.

Our unifying structure consists of three major components. Essentially, all strategies, activities, and approaches in a well-conceived writing curriculum must promote:

» **Fluency:** opportunities for students to practice the act of writing

» **Content:** opportunities to develop meaningful writing

» **Accuracy:** opportunities to provide purposeful skills instruction

When these three elements serve as the unifying structure of a curriculum, good things are going to happen.

A Closer Look at Fluency

Simply put, fluency enables students to feel comfortable with the physical act of writing. Unless students feel at ease with putting pen to paper, or fingers to the keyboard, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for them to develop their other writing abilities. Writer and teacher Dan Kirby says, "Fluency is the first consideration. It is the basis for all that follows." Almost all professional writers live by the words *nulla dies sine linea* ("no day without a line") because they know how important fluency and regular writing are to their craft. Our student writers should live by these words as well.

Fortunately, promoting fluency is one of the most satisfying aspects of writing instruction for students because they can see real improvement after a fairly short period of time—that is, if they extend just a little effort. Teachers simply must make exploratory, free writing a regular classroom activity. I would have my students write nonstop in their writer's notebooks every other day for 5–10 minutes. On the off day, students would exchange their notebooks and count the number of words in each other's entry.

This running word count from week to week would show students if they were becoming more fluent as writers. By the end of a few months, I had some students writing up to 800 words per entry. Students also had to comment on at least one thing they liked in their partner's work. This helped build a community of writers in my classroom and set the foundation for conducting writing workshops.

To remind students about the importance of fluency, I would display quotes like this one by Ralph Fletcher—"Keeping a notebook is the single best way I know to survive as a writer"—and this one by Joan Aiken—"Try to write a few pages every day. Never write anything that bores you."

Additional Approaches

» Address writing as a process, rather than as end product

» Provide varied free-writing activities in the classroom—to explore possible writing ideas, to reflect on coursework, etc.

» Expect students to use other exploratory strategies such as mapping, listing, dialoging, and so on

» Provide regular practice for responding to writing prompts

» Implement writing-to-learn activities, such as Stop 'n' Writes

» Encourage students to keep reader-response journals

» Encourage them to maintain a personal journal and/or a personal blog

In the *Write Source* series, we discuss the importance of regular writing in a writer's notebook or journal, and we encourage exploratory, free writing, listing, or clustering during the initial planning for each writing activity.

A Closer Look at Content

In addition to promoting fluency, a well-conceived writing program must help students develop thoughtful writing that reflects the development of engaging ideas. Writer and educator Donald Murray captures the importance of content in these words: "A writer writes with information, and if there is no information there will be no effective writing."

To help students develop thoughtful compositions, a writing program should have them think and write in varied ways. Students should write to recall their past experiences, to reflect on issues and events, and to analyze complex ideas. To ensure that our students had varied thinking and writing experiences, we followed James Moffett's "Universe of Discourse"—a sequence of writing activities that moves from very personal forms, such as writing personal narratives, to activities that become progressively more reflective and challenging, such as writing about causes and effects.

Providing students with opportunities to practice the different modes of writing is another way to help them address different types of thinking in writing—modes such as description, narration, exposition, and persuasion. Most district and state writing tests focus on these modes.

Additional Approaches

» Involve students in authentic writing experiences, with the expectation of publishing their work

» Share models of effective writing, pointing out key content-related features

» Help students appreciate that effective writing forms a meaningful whole, with fully developed beginning, middle, and closing parts

» Encourage students to select writing topics they truly care about

» Focus instruction on the types of thinking associated with different forms of writing

» Discuss different types of details (facts, statistics, examples, reasons, anecdotes, definitions, and reflections) used to develop or support ideas

» Promote the use of collecting strategies (using the 5 W's, using graphic organizers, answering questions, etc.)

» Integrate the traits of writing into instruction

» Stress the importance of prewriting and revising when it comes to the development of ideas

A Closer Look at Accuracy

Writing instructors have a responsibility to help their students understand and follow the conventions of Standard English. Today, that responsibility has become more pronounced than ever before, with testing demands and with students facing the challenges of the 21st century in terms of ongoing education and career choices.

No component has come under more scrutiny. At one time, skills instruction was the primary focus of writing instruction. Then, during the early days of the writing process, it fell far out of favor with many writing teachers. Fortunately, today's instructors have a much better handle on accuracy; skills work has become an important part of an effective writing program, but in an integrated, rather than isolated, way. As grammar authority Constance Weaver says, "Smart teachers will teach grammar intertwined with writing." She adds that they teach grammar "to enhance writing."

The *Write Source* authors conducted writing workshops in their classrooms, an approach that lent itself to integrated grammar instruction. During a typical workshop, daily skills instruction came in

the form of mini-lessons. In addition, one complete class period per week was devoted to skills instruction, in which students worked at their own pace to develop their mastery of Standard English. And of course, students were also expected to edit and proofread their writing before publishing it.

Additional Approaches

» Involve students in authentic writing experiences, with the expectation of publishing their work

» Make editing and proofreading, including peer editing, key classroom activities

» Help students understand the differences between Standard English and non-standard dialects

» Display key grammar issues on wall charts

» Implement ongoing sentence-combining and -modeling activities

» Focus part of instruction on one of the lists of common errors (these types of errors are often found on state and standardized tests)

» Reteach skills throughout the year to ensure understanding

» Access to enrichment activities, especially those that are online, to help struggling learners

Mini-lessons, integrated grammar and usage activities, and editing and proofreading for accuracy are all cornerstones of skills instruction in the *Write Source* series

A Note About Differentiated Instruction

Working with the unifying structure described in this paper makes planning for differentiated instruction that much easier. For example, the main point with fluency is for each student to become more comfortable with the physical act of writing, not that they all gain the ability to write 800 words in 10–15 minutes. Teachers can easily differ expectations from student to student, yet still expect each one to show improvement with fluency. (I never had a student who didn't show significant improvement with just a little effort.)

In terms of content development, teachers who work with a sequence such as Moffett's "Universe

of Discourse" can differentiate the types of writing and thinking each student carries out. Students who struggle with content development could focus on the more accessible forms of writing, such as the personal narrative and basic informational pieces, and on more immediate levels of thinking, such as remembering and understanding. Students who are better prepared could work with the more complex forms of writing, such as analyzing and synthesizing.

To address accuracy, teachers can easily differentiate instruction by noting the types of errors that students make in their writing and adjusting instruction accordingly. Students who are struggling with the language could work at one pace while students who have more mastery with the language could work at another pace. Having access to enrichment activities helps significantly when it comes to differentiated skills instruction. As all students become more fluent with the language and gain more experience with content development, their understanding and appreciation of accuracy will naturally increase.

Important Resources for Instructional Planning

These are many of the important planning resources that have guided us during our years at *Write Source.*

Atwell, Nancie. 1998. *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning,* 2/ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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Zinsser, William. 1988. *Writing to Learn.* New York: Harper & Row.
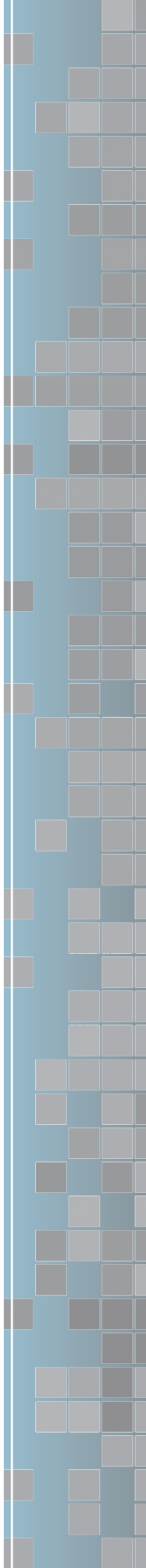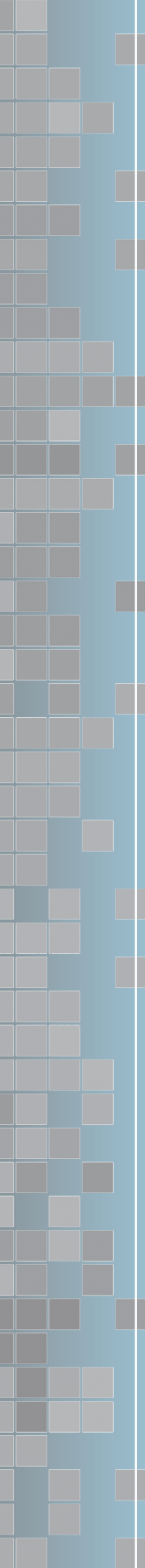
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