Wanted: Engaged Writers and Practical Writing Experiences

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Abstract

This Practitioner Perspective discusses literacy as a vital skill that empowers users. After an initial discussion of the twin aspects of literacy, I present a student teacher's overly complex seventh-grade lesson, which served as a springboard for reflection about alignment of assignments with student interest. The transformative classroom experience yielded a powerful insight—that effective pedagogy contributes to writer confidence.

Introduction

There may be no other skill as fundamental to future success in school and life than literacy, the ability to read and write with understanding, ease, and confidence. For K-12 students, school success is highly dependent upon literacy skills, for reading across subject areas and writing for different purposes drives the curriculum, especially at the middle school and secondary levels. Accordingly, reading and writing, the literacy twins studied and discussed by scholars, advocates, and practitioners, serve as the core disciplines in the early elementary grades. Of the two language arts, reading tends to receive more focus, especially in first- and second-grade classrooms where teachers are introducing the alphabetic principle (Lomax & McGee, 1987; McGee & Morrow, 2005). Teaching sound-symbol correspondences, common letter patterns, and generalizations that govern English language structure requires explicit, systematic instruction because unlike learning to speak, learning to read and write are not automatic or innate skills (Fisher et al., 2023; Heilman, 2006). Children have to be taught *how* to read and write. As students move through the grades, they consolidate their language learning to become more skilled users. Yet, writing demands more because as generative language arts skill, it requires the user to produce text, not simply process it (Norton, 2004).

Teaching writing is hard work (Fletcher, 2013; Spandel, 2012). Even though students may say they dislike writing, lack confidence, or struggle with translating what is in their heads to paper or keyboard, most children learn to write, with varying degrees of sophistication (Gallagher, 2011). According to Fletcher, while students absorb the structure of language from reading, they learn to write from their teachers. Classroom practitioners understand that knowing students and tailoring a lesson to them can produce better results than simply assigning an exercise from a teaching book or website. Many experts and authors provide the nuts and bolts of writing, but it comes down to the essential truth that teachers must know how to teach writing and understand the fundamental elements of good writing (Graham et al., 2007). Teachers find themselves in a "unique position to be mentors and key influencers" who help students understand how language functions and encourage risk-taking with words forged out of everyday experiences (Fletcher, p. 10).

Students learn to write by writing. However, completing a series of worksheets or other artificial exercises fails to advance higher-level thinking and writing competency. Such a segmented, compartmentalized approach isolates writing as a separate subject. Decontextualized lessons, counterproductive to authentic writing experiences and devoid of relevance, can contribute to student apathy (Langer, 2001). In contrast, students learn to write by grappling with real topics that matter to them. Additionally, cognitive work that poses a moderate challenge develops thinking, and negative outcomes such as students failing to understand what they are to do can be avoided with intentional lesson scaffolding (Willingham, 2009). The form, or genre, also needs to have utility for the user. In comparing two assignments—for example, a five-paragraph essay with an op-ed letter about a salient issue—young adolescents would likely consider the latter to be more relevant. Without their engagement and commitment to the task, the results might be underwhelming (Willingham). A final critical aspect to the writing classroom involves an emotionally safe space that encourages risk taking and exploration of

meaning-making and purpose-finding. Collectively, these elements honor the learner.

While teachers study the curriculum and State standards, they also understand their students in ways that no outsider can. At times, this praxis makes teaching fraught, for no one-size-fits-all approach works as students bring diverse skills and background knowledge to the classroom (Keiffer & Lesaux, 2010). The variables are many. Some learners may be experiencing English as an additional language, come from difficult family situations, or simply find words and written language to be challenging. A complex host of factors can be messy or chaotic for teachers who try to deliver impactful instruction that meets individuals' learning needs (Fletcher, 2013). However, framing that diversity as an opportunity to meet the challenge can motivate practitioners to do their best work (Hoyt, 2011; Lazar, 2012). Keeping in sharp focus the importance of helping all learners negotiate the world of print to become critical, reflective, and empowered individuals can be both the starting point and target goal of lesson planning.

The middle school years are a time of change. As students transition from elementary classrooms, the instructional focus shifts from directly teaching reading and writing skills to an assign and assess model (Gallagher, 2011, Norton, 2004). Oftentimes, teachers expect students to have the basics and build their lessons on this expectation (Norton). However, not all young adolescents exhibit that level of readiness, which equips them to respond to various communication tasks (Gallagher). For example, a comparison paper, book critique, or research project may be assigned, collected, and then evaluated. Many educators expect students to know how to analyze and compare, evaluate a text, or complete multiple steps investigating a topic. When students fall short of delivering a finished product, teachers may experience disappointment, discouragement, and even frustration. Learners, too, may become disheartened.

A Classroom Observation

As a former middle school teacher who now supervises student teachers earning their initial K-8 teacher licensure, I find the assign and assess practice ubiquitous in classrooms. Recently, after an observed seventh-grade English Language Arts lesson, my student teacher and I explored the nature of writing and critiqued student engagement with the lesson she had just presented. Frustrated with student responses to writing a multi-paragraph character analysis, "Brenda" reviewed the assignment, wondering where things had gone amiss. She admitted to not fully considering students' background knowledge of core story elements, sharing that Jack London's *To Build a Fire* had always been one of her favorites and that she assumed her students, too, would find it an exciting short story. Brenda reflected on the lesson sequence: the lesson unfolded with some shared but mostly independent reading of the selection, teacher-led class analysis of the plot, and a discussion of conflict—with an emphasis on character against nature. In seeking an explanation for why the lesson was such a disappointment, we explored students' writing readiness for a cognitively demanding assignment that required deep comprehension of the short story and the writing skills to deliver a character analysis. Returning to what was familiar in her own formative years, Brenda explained that she had relied on an assign and assess approach, believing that a class discussion served as sufficient scaffolding.

Through our conversation, she came to realize that working through the elements of a character analysis with students and using explicit modeling of the writing task might have yielded different results. Borrowing an idea from Hoyt (2011), I offered suggestions for explicit teaching with clear demonstrations of how to introduce the opening paragraph, what essential information to include in a character analysis, and how to frame a conclusion. My student teacher realized that this approach might have changed the lesson outcome. In reflecting more critically, Brenda admitted that the writing task was a stretch for her students, especially as some of her students had trouble just reading the short story. In brainstorming what a more effective post-reading assignment might have looked like, we identified a class-generated summary with the teacher providing a framed paragraph where students could insert missing words to complete sentences. Working on such an assignment as a class would have supported student understanding and built the crucial knowledge that might have otherwise been missed (Gallagher, 2011). Further, we determined that an engaging lesson design would motivate students and help advance their written communication. As we weighed other instructional options, Brenda projected the level

of student buy-in with each alternative. Powerful learning occurred from this post-lesson conversation as she reflected on her new understandings.

Effective teachers first teach students and then content. This tenet guided our post-lesson conversation when Brenda and I explored how to cultivate and sustain a classroom environment that fosters a community of writers where learners are engaged risk-takers. Perhaps a writing form already familiar to students would be a good starting place. In considering how to maximize 48-minute classes, I suggested a short, practical writing idea, which I had used with middle schoolers that generated a high-level of enthusiasm: email communication. Writing emails to different individuals challenged young adolescents to explore language, form, and tone and invited them to be inventive and playful with content. Brenda asked clarifying questions and we outlined how explicit instruction guides writers from start to finish. A bonus was the brief nature of the writing task, something that could be completed in one class period.

In thinking about intentionally framing the lesson, Brenda and I realized that we needed to pause, think about her seventh graders, and avoid making assumptions about their prior knowledge. For starters, we needed to challenge the idea that middle schoolers are digital natives. According to Kruse (2017), "Email etiquette is a skill in which students should find value…should see the direct connection to their lives and understand how much it will benefit them" (n.p.). If students find a purpose in what they write, they are more likely to pay attention and use what has been taught. Moreover, when explicit teacher modeling frames the lesson, students are more apt to understand the process of creating an email for a particular audience. Working with an engaging assignment has a greater chance for success.

A Practical Assignment: Writing an Email

Nowadays tweens and adolescents use technology continuously, so it might be easy to project that they can communicate appropriately with different online platforms. Texts, emails, and other virtual communication saturate users' lives. Students bring varying degrees of proficiency with digital literacy (ByBee & Luszeck, 2023). The constant use of SMS language, emojis, and social media lingo might even hinder how students communicate in certain settings because casual, informal language dominates the nature of their communication. Nonetheless, emails often deliver first impressions. According to Stahl (2022), "How you use email will leave an impression with who [sic] you send your messages to, especially if you have yet to meet the recipient in person" (n.p.). Writing a suitable email appropriate for the intended receiver with its implied formatting conventions has importance in this digital age (Gallagher, 2011). A lesson in email etiquette that capitalizes on student interest and targets specific communication skills is presented below.

The Subject Line

The subject line matters. If left empty, it fails to alert the reader what the email is about. Other times, an incomplete message in the subject line can start the communication off on a wrong note. To be effective, the subject line should be brief and to the point.

- Instead of "homework," write "English homework assignment for May 10." Instead of "dogsitting," write "Dogsitting availability for the first week of July."

Greeting

Generally, when students send emails, they know with whom they are communicating, so there is no need for a greeting. Unfortunately, accustomed to typing abbreviated conversations spills over into other types of communication, which may not be suitable for a more formal message, such as writing to a teacher. Educating students with options to start an email seems almost trivial, yet it makes a difference. In addition, when the writer starts with a greeting, it establishes a respectful tone. Likewise, when to use casual communication styles can be addressed, so students understand that "hey" might be appropriate for only certain contexts. A personal greeting establishes a positive tone.

- Good afternoon, Ms. Lopez.

Body of an Email

With fast-paced messaging, middle graders might need to be reminded that a polite introduction is a good idea before launching into the topic. Manners make a difference in online and face-to-face interactions. Sending emails

that appear hurried or careless result when writers overlook these simple tips. Word choice also adds to the overall quality of the conversation. Without body language, voice inflection, and facial expressions, words can be misconstrued. An example of a considerate, polite email follows.

- Happy Wednesday, Ms. Wong. I hope you are having a good week. I noticed that my character analysis for Jack London's short story still shows a zero in Power School. When you get a few minutes, could you please update the grade book? Thank you.

Young adolescents can be single-minded and may still be in that developmental stage of primarily thinking about their wants. This tends to be reflected in their writing with the belief that the recipient automatically knows the background of the situation, who the sender is, and what they are referencing. Students accustomed to texting and other quick digital communication can be reminded that communication styles vary, depending on the audience. Typing emails the same way they text might, in some instances, be counterproductive. Options for communication that "offer immediacy and convenience may lack the personal touch that a thoughtfully written email can provide" (Hurleywrite.com, n.d.).

Closing

The conclusion of an email is as important as its beginning. Students may not realize that including their name is necessary. As well, in certain contexts, an acknowledgement to the recipient is a courteous way to conclude the correspondence.

Final Tips

Middle school presents an opportune time to have important conversations about creating an email address that will serve in the years ahead. An email address is another way to establish a positive first impression. When employers are looking for applicants, an email address that reads "hotchicks4me@gmail.com" may have unintended consequences. Alternatively, "janedavis@gmail.com" is straightforward. Since school emails expire upon graduation, a longstanding email that can serve beyond the school years is advisable.

Unlike the ever-changing communication apps that claim to wipe the conversation clean, emails endure. Users need to be careful. For example, when a student contacts a friend, using a school email address, and the contents include inappropriate language, they may be in violation of the technology contract signed at the beginning of the year. This can result in loss of privileges, and much more.

Discussion

Why does attention to email writing matter, especially for middle school students? First of all, it is a brief writing form. For young adolescents who bring varying degrees of writing proficiency to the classroom, success with one assignment that is smaller in scope can generate interest in subsequent tasks. Additionally, middle grade educators work to prepare students for the next academic level—high school. In many secondary schools, students are placed in job-shadowing or work venues. As adolescents transition to new schools or learning environments, their writing facility should match the context and expectations of that new community. Fast forward and eventually these email skills may serve to inquire about employment or to ask for a letter of recommendation. If students are not introduced to the expectations that others outside of their sphere of familiarity hold, their potential for advancement—be it employment, a scholarship, or entrance into the workforce—might be affected. Just as educators desire students' reading skills to evolve, they wish the same for writing sophistication across forms.

Conclusion

In teaching writing to middle grade students, putting the learner at the center of the lesson is the first step. When Brenda taught *To Build a Fire*, her own fondness for the story and enthusiasm for a rigorous writing exercise resulted in disappointment. She learned that the assign-and-assess approach rendered poor results. Instead, starting small with tasks that students find engaging and that include ample explicit instruction is a more defendable pedagogical approach. Malcom X (1964) observed that "education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it" (n.p.). In an increasingly digital world, while the delivery systems may be changing, the quality of the interaction remains important. Writing is not the same for all

contexts. Whether it be an update about a meeting time, inquiring about a job, or introducing oneself, not all writing ranks the same. Specifics need to be taught for particular circumstances. Under the broad umbrella of communication, writing, and computer skills, teaching students how to ace an email contributes to users' potential success. As blossoming writers find success in small assignments, they can be encouraged to take risks. Risk takers are more inclined to be curious and understand that persistence results in striving for loftier goals.

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