

St. Paul's Writing in the Content Areas

by

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As teachers on special assignment for Writing in Content Areas in St. Paul's junior high schools, we *can* help our fellow teachers use writing activities in their classrooms. Before we try to do so, however, we always find out if we *may* help: our concern is to help teachers who *want* us to assist them in ways they believe would make them more effective. Teacher input is vital.

Writing in Content Areas, a cost-effective, innovative project, began in St. Paul in 1982-83 with funding from the Minnesota Council on Quality Education. The extension of this project from its original site at Central High School to the junior high schools in ISD 625 was made possible by Board of Education funding to pay our salaries and to provide release time so teachers could attend workshops.

Our aim is to implement the recommendations of Arthur Applebee in *Writing in the Secondary School* (NCTE: Urbana, IL, 1982). Applebee recommends that teachers use writing as a tool for learning and that they learn to use the composing process. The theoretical basis for our work is the research of James Britton, who described student writing on the basis of its function as transactional, expressive, or poetic, the research of persons like Linda Flower and Janet Emig, and the practice advocated by the National Writing Project.

First, and always, we help teachers develop writing activities for their classes, activities designed to help students learn content material, to require them to think critically, and to involve them in generating language about what they are learning. Many such writing strategies have been collected and published in the two project manuals, *Learning and Writing I and II*, and some of those strategies are presented in our accompanying article, "ADAPT"

Second, we have developed and implemented an inservice program. Implementing any educational innovation has two aspects: getting underway and sustaining the motion. Because of recent emphasis on basic skills and because writing is a current concern, the first aspect of implementation has been relatively easy, though not without problems. Sustaining the program is the challenge now facing us.

Getting Underway—Solving Scheduling Difficulties

Like many inservice programs, the staff development component in this project has had to overcome scheduling difficulties and teacher resistance. Scheduling involves costs for substitutes necessary to hold workshops during the school day. After-school sessions are cheap, but they create problems: teachers are tired or have competing obligations, and bad weather or activities like parent conferences can force rescheduling. In 1983, an after-school schedule did work for us at Central when the school had a

staff development grant from an outside foundation. The principal invited anyone to attend and requested that each department 'elect' one participant. Over half of the staff participated. Teachers could choose inservice credit through a local college or a \$100 stipend and re-certification units.

Although some teachers resent being taken out of class, inservice sessions conducted during regular contract time are advantageous. We have tried two school-day schedules. In 1984-85, we presented workshops at three different schools using rotating substitutes to cover teachers for two hour blocs during the school day. This model required the workshop leader to present each workshop three times during the day, but it allowed for small workshop groups. It is easier for teachers to write and to share their writing in such small groups. Small groups also foster conversation as teachers share their experiences about the activities they have tried. Although the sub schedule presented problems, some teachers felt their students stayed on task when they knew their regular teachers were in the building. In one school where the principal required all staff to participate, a happy side effect was that teachers who seldom talked with one another had a chance to do so. The major problem with this two hour, in-school schedule was that it did not allow for enough interaction among the teachers. Time pressures were intense: teachers tended to come in, grab goodies and coffee, and take notes madly while presenters "laid it on."

In the fall of 1985, we implemented the most successful schedule for workshop sessions. Having all day sessions at two week intervals enabled us to overcome many difficulties. Teachers who participated called it "The teacher as adult" model. Sharing our writings and experiences was meaningful for all of us. Since the teachers came from five schools but all taught the same subjects, they could talk about common professional concerns such as textbook selection, learner outcomes, and the District's Effective Schools program. Many of the assistant directors for curriculum and instruction attended sessions and became better acquainted with their teachers.

Getting Underway— Overcoming Teacher Hostility

During 1984-85, some building principals' required 'teachers to attend the two hour workshops in their building. Frankly, this caused many difficulties for us, and we had to spend much time defusing teacher anger. We have always asked that teachers participate in workshops and in this project voluntarily. We have found that more people want to experience and use writing in their classes than we three can help and we can ignore the 'reluctant dragons.'

Please don't think that this is all the resistance we've encountered. Many who have appeared at workshops have come reluctantly. The classroom is a teacher's domain. Teachers naturally resist any interference with their classroom activities. The concept of writing in a content area class may be perceived by teachers as an intrusion or as an attempt to manipulate them into doing the English teacher's job. Teachers may question the relevance of writing to learning in their content area and will almost certainly foresee an increase in the already heavy paperwork burden.

Our challenge was to persuade experienced teachers that writing is relevant to their subjects and will indeed help their students learn. Evidence for its value is found in a California study, *Writing in High School Science*, which showed that frequent, short, content-centered writings do enhance long term retention of material taught. Our own project's evaluation showed that such writing activities have a positive effect on the fluency with which students write, on their competency in communicating learned concepts, and on their retention of subject material, both short term and long term.

Teachers will most often see the relevance of writing to learning if they experience it themselves. Our workshops have two essential requirements: each teacher must experience the kinds of writing we advocate for students, and each teacher must develop and use writing activities with a class currently being taught. Most teachers, however have done little, or no, writing since they left college. The prospect of writing makes many acutely uncomfortable. We work to establish a nonthreatening atmosphere in the workshops by writing and sharing writing with the participants, by reminding them that we are classroom teachers, and by listening sensitively to their concerns.

Most of all, we try very hard to make the workshops as useful to the teacher participants and as relevant to their daily professional concerns as we possibly can. That's the best way to overcome hostility or reluctance. We want the teachers to leave and to use what they've experienced the next day in their own classrooms. We want them to feel a part of an ongoing, sharing, caring group. And we want the workshops to be fun: if the experience is unpleasant, no matter how professionally relevant, the participants will be reluctant and hostile.

Throughout each of the four workshop days, teachers use many of the strategies we suggest in our manuals and the accompanying article. Briefly, the workshop days involve these kinds of activities.

Day 1: Experiencing the Writing Process

Teachers are led through a series of four writing experiences including a visual and verbal representation of the day. Much of this activity is based on material in *The Writing Project*, (Heinemann, 1985) a recommended book.

Day 2: Developing Writing Activities

Using subject specific materials, teachers first experience and then develop short, content-centered writing activities in their subject area. With help of the presenters, they develop activities to use with their own classes during the next two weeks.

Day 3: Exploring the Connections between Writing and Thinking

After reporting on their teaching experiences, teachers try writing activities that are relevant to their subject area and are intended to foster identified critical thinking skills. Then again, they develop activities for their own classes, this time focusing on critical thinking skills.

Day 4: Responding to Student Writing

After reporting on their second experiences using writing, teachers discuss ways to 'handle' all that writing; they use holistic/primary trait scoring with a guide based on criteria for evaluating an assignment with actual student papers. For this activity, we leaned on *Teaching and Assessing Writing* by E.M. White (Josey Bass, 1985)

Sustaining the Motion - Providing Support

The willingness of the St. Paul Board of Education to pay for substitutes so that we can hold workshop sessions during the school day is crucial to teacher acceptance and participation. This funding is equally crucial in enhancing the long term effect of the teacher training because it provides for our work as resource teachers.

One of the problems with workshops is that once the workshop is over, so is the impact. All of us have gone to workshops that were exciting and returned to our classrooms with great intentions. Then other responsibilities intervene and we set the materials aside. The district has tried to increase the long term effects of this project by assigning us to work in junior high schools as resource teachers. Our jobs are to be on the spot to make suggestions, to nag and to provide special assistance to individual teachers. We try to provide content area teachers with meaningful help with both large, formal projects, and small, informal, content-centered writing. We also work with small groups of students on special projects and publish student writing. We have learned that we must get acquainted with each staff member and be able to convey an attitude of concern and helpfulness.

James Moffett has recommended that teachers "post-print-publish" student writings. No matter how we do it, displaying students' writings creates excitement that both motivates students and convinces teachers who still question the relevance of writing. For junior high schools, newspapers published every six to eight weeks featuring student writing have been very effective. Writing for the newspaper gives students a real writing task for a real audience. For reluctant writers, who are often very concrete thinkers, this is a rewarding activity. It is, however, very demanding for the resource teacher involved. Computer software and volunteer parental help can ease the burden.

Helping You

Our project is now in the replication phase: this means that our jobs have expanded to provide assistance where possible, when asked. We hope that this description of our activities is helpful to those of you who are thinking of developing a program for writing to learn in your school. If you would like further assistance, or to order materials we have prepared, please contact us c/o Minnesota Council on Quality Education, Capitol Square Building, St. Paul, MN 55101, or c/o The Department of Curriculum and Instruction, ISD 625, 360 Colborne Street, St. Paul, MN 55102.