



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Teaching Adolescent Writers*

Writing Well

In the executive summary of *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools – A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*, Graham and Perin state,

“Writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy. Yet every year in the United States large numbers of adolescents graduate from high school unable to write at the basic levels required by colleges or employers. In addition, every school day 7,000 young people drop out of high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006), many of them because they lack the basic literacy skills to meet the growing demands of high school curriculum (Kamil, 2003; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003)” (2007, p. 3).

Understanding Writing as a Process

Literacy includes both reading and writing skills, thus meager writing proficiency is an intrinsic part of our national literacy crisis. The reciprocity of reading and writing development is intrinsic to the learning processes. Reading gives purpose to writing. Writing gives purpose to reading.

Understanding writing as a process can benefit both student and teacher (Zinsser, 2001). To begin, a process is steps that are taken, or actions that occur, while making sense of something. These steps, or actions, are recursive and work together while reading and writing. To envision this reciprocal relationship, consider the working systems of reading as a process likened to working systems exercised in writing as a process. In both, four main activities emerge:

- Thinking (predicting and anticipating)
- Executing (taking action)
- Rethinking (searching further)

- Adjusting (self-correcting)

These strategic activities illustrate the interrelationship of these dynamic systems across the content area (Puig & Froelich, 2007).

Learning as a Process across Content Areas

Thinking (predicting and anticipating)

Reading: Forming meaningful predictions
Writing: Forming/composing meaningful text
Math: Forming meaningful estimations
Science: Forming meaningful hypothesis

Executing (confirming or rejecting)

Reading: Checking meaningful predictions
Writing: Constructing meaningful text
Math: Constructing meaningful equations
Science: Constructing meaningful experiments

Rethinking (searching further)

Reading: Revisioning/searching further to maintain meaning
Writing: Revisioning to maintain or elaborate text intentions
Math: Revisioning to match estimation
Science: Revisioning hypothesis based on results/experiment

Adjusting (self-correcting)

Reading: Self-correcting to maintain meaning
Writing: Self-correcting/editing to maintain text intentions or outcomes
Math: Self-correcting to align estimation
Science: Self-correcting/adjusting to form a meaningful conclusion

Puig & Froelich, 2007, p. 31

There are varying levels of understanding and layers of sophistication within each strategic activity, unique to each learner. Understanding this relationship between the learner and these strategic activities may support the instructor in making sound instructional practice decisions (Puig & Froelich, 2007).

The literacy working systems are known as the graphophonic, lexical, schematic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic systems (Puig & Froelich, 2007). Basically, the graphophonic working system

is the ability to use textual codes to understand print. The lexical working system draws upon words the writer knows and feels comfortable using. Meanwhile, the schematic working system of the writer uses background knowledge to make meaning or to adopt, even temporarily, the role of the learner constructing understanding. The syntactic working system enables the writer to use language structures that will best fit the purpose of the writing, thereby enhancing the meaning of the text generated. Making meaning in new ways with the semantic working system utilizes words and phrases that enhance and expand meaning or refine it in explicit terms. The pragmatic working system is what brings it all together within a specific context, writing situation, or rhetorical situation. All of these working systems interact within a context (Weaver, 2002). This reciprocity is adolescent literacy development, in essence, literacy learning.

Effective Adolescent Writing Instruction

Reading is often viewed as an invisible process; writing can provide a window into this process. How can this occur? There are many writing processes and not all writers follow the same steps or order (Atwell, 1998; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). A good start is employing strategic writing activities. These could include the following:

Predicting and anticipating (prewriting) activities for students involve interpreting the writing situation and analyzing the audience in order to identify the purpose for writing. As adolescent writers begin collecting ideas for the writing, they may identify what details need to be included. Decisions regarding the appropriateness or sufficiency of details in the writing situation are ascertained through understanding of the *audience*. Without audience analysis, there is no particular reason to decide to include one detail or another (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Writing as a process must be demystified for developing writers. Successful writers usually have some audience in mind throughout their writing process. “We comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of the reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves” (Somers, 1982, p. 148).

During writing, choices of what words to use and how to structure sentences are made by constantly reflecting on the needs of the *audience* within the

writing situation. When the audience is hidden, then the writer does not have guidance to make word choices. Another challenge when the audience is not explicit or analyzed, the default audience becomes the teacher, who changes every hour or so for most adolescents. What is the best word choice in science class is not always the best word choice in language arts. The language arts teacher appreciates long, complex sentences, while the science teacher looks for short, direct statements of fact. The strongest message the adolescent writer may get is fear, because mystification makes every decision a guess. This could be avoided by scaffolding the students through the process of analyzing their audience for their writing pieces (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Lauer et al., 2000; Spandel, 2005).

Instruction after writing provides the very best opportunity for teaching. Instead of grading first drafts and expecting students to somehow know something more, students should engage in discussions of the writing decisions with other writers, preferably experienced writers. Responses need to optimize choice and recognize that the adolescent made a decision, and can make better writing decisions with more information. Drafts should not be graded. They should be treated as a work in progress that can be used to develop the writer’s strengths. An instructional reader’s response to the writing is most effective in helping adolescent writers grow into their many roles as writers (Atwell, 1998; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Spandel, 2005; White, Lutz, & Kamusikiri, 1996).

Using an instructional response method, the teacher must recognize and restate the focus. Restating the focus means not only identifying the topic, but the overall assertion the writer is making about the topic. Once the focus is described, the teacher must assist the adolescent writer in assessing the focus: is it clear and maintained? The adolescent writer works with the teacher to diagnose the strengths and needs of the focus. Finally, the teacher directs the adolescent writer on ways to make the focus more effective in the specific writing context (Lauer et al., 2000).

When working through an instructional reader’s response, begin with focus, because a paper without focus often needs the greatest amount of revision. Logically, advice in development and organization will be moot if the paper has no focus. Second, the teacher works with the student to *describe* how the

paper is developed—actually identify the details, examples, proofs that are used to clarify the focus. The purpose of those details is to develop the focus. To *diagnose* the use of details, the adolescent writer and the teacher ask: is this detail appropriate for the audience? Will the audience be able to use this detail to better understand the focus? The teacher can then direct the adolescent writer in ways to improve the details to achieve a specific purpose, recognizing the decisions that were made while working through the processes. Revising development means including more details or support, or doing more research (Lauer et al., 2000; Spandel, 2005).

On first draft, it is often sufficient to work through focus, development, and organization using an instructional reader's response. Look at the organization and *describe* the organizational pattern the adolescent writer has used. It is at this stage that one can see the logical flow of ideas. Logical flow is accomplished through the use of transitions to connect ideas. Logical flow of ideas is also dependent upon the purpose for the writing: focus often appears at the end of a narrative, while it may appear at the beginning of an expository writing with the purpose of explaining. *Diagnose* the places in the essay where the ideas do not flow logically. *Direct* the adolescent writer in ways to clarify ideas that do not seem to flow (Lauer et al., 2000).

Conventions and mechanics are often an issue in first drafts. Teachers should look for overall patterns that indicate a lack of understanding of conventional structures rather than quantifying every error in a draft. Students who work through writing as a process often edit their own mistakes (Shaughnessy, 1977; Spandel, 2005). Keep each draft adolescent writers generate because writing growth is much more evident in multiple drafts of the same paper. It is also easier to recognize student misunderstandings of conventional patterns when the same errors are maintained through several writing samples.

Understanding and utilizing these strategic activities and instructional practices will establish effective instruction for adolescent writers.

Summary

In *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* – A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York (Graham & Perin, 2007) researchers identified

eleven elements of writing instruction that have been found to be effective for supporting adolescent students to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning (Lindemann & Anderson, 2001). These include:

- **Strategic Activities** – Involves modeling strategic activities for students to use when planning, revising, and editing their compositions.
- **Summarization** – Involves intentionally teaching students how to summarize texts.
- **Collaborative Writing** – Uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions.
- **Special Product Goals** – Assign students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete.
- **Technology** – Use computers as instructional supports for writing assignments.
- **Sentence Combining** – Involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences.
- **Predicting and Anticipating** – Engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition.
- **Inquiry Activities** – Engages students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task.
- **Writing Workshop (Process Writing Approach)** – Interweaves a number of *writing* instructional practices in a workshop environment that stresses extended *writing* opportunities, *writing* for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycle of *writing*.
- **Study of Models** – Provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing.
- **Writing for Content Learning** – Uses writing as a tool for learning content material.

As we recognize and assess the key qualities of writing products, we must caution ourselves that these products are not an end in themselves. Writing instruction for adolescents creates a safe environment that validates the taking of risks by guiding students through in-the-head strategic activities that are not easily measured (Shaughnessy, 1977).

REFERENCES

- Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading, and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools – A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Fountas, I., & Pinnell, G. (2006). *Teaching for comprehending and fluency: Thinking, talking, and writing about reading, K-8*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lauer, J., Lundsford, A., Atwill, J., Clemens, T., Hart-Davidson, W., Jacobs, D., et al. (2000). *Four worlds of writing* (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Lindemann, E., & Anderson, D. (2001). *A rhetoric for writing teachers*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Lyons, C., & Pinnell, G. (2001). *Systems for change in literacy education: A guide to professional development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Puig, E. A., & Froelich, K. (2007). *The literacy coach: Guiding in the right direction*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Shaughnessy, M. (1979). *Errors and expectations: A guide for the teacher of basic writing*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Somers, N. (1982). Responding to student writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 33(2), 148-156.
- Spandel, V. (2005). *The 9 writes of every writer: A guide for teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Weaver, C. (2002). *Reading process and practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- White, E., Lutz, W. D. & Kamusikiri, S. (1996). *Assessment of writing: Politics, policies, practices (Research and scholarship in Composition 4)*. NY: Modern Language Association.
- Zinsser, W. (2001). *On writing well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction*. NY: HarperCollins.

FLaRE Center
Teaching Academy – Suite 403
University of Central Florida
4000 Central Florida Blvd
Orlando, FL 32816-1250

Phone: 407-823-4785 FAX: 407-823-4682

<http://flare.ucf.edu>

FLaRE is a Project of the University of Central Florida College of Education and administered under a grant from the Florida Department of Education and Just Read, Florida!

