Walking and Writing

"…. [L]earning to write is not that unique to learning to walk. Both, developmental in nature, involve readiness, modeling, learning from trial and error, and repetition."

By Christi Pace

"I can't write. I'm no good at it. I'm just not a writer!" Whether you teach younger students, middle graders, or high school students, as teachers I'm sure we can recount the numerous times we've all heard these words. Most certainly there were times during my greenhorn days of teaching that I would sigh, furl my brows, and for a brief moment, wear a befuddled look on my face. After all, I taught my students the writing process and how to write a thesis statement. We used t-charts, lists, and other sophisticated looking charts to brainstorm and organize students' ideas before they wrote. Yet, none of this seemed to help my reluctant writers. Perhaps like many teachers, I thought my students avoided writing because they despised it, and that they were using these catch phrases to get out of having to do their assignments. That is, until I thought about it from the students' point of view.

When I thought about the tone they used, the inflection in their voices, and their body language, I made a stark realization. They were right. My assumptions of what I thought they were telling me were wrong. They were not telling me they didn't want to write. No, their reaction was a resounding frustration of not having the skill set to do so. From their vantage point, writing was something to dread because they didn't know how to do it. This, in turn, did nothing to bolster their self-confidence as writers. They were not the problem; my teaching style simply wasn't meeting their needs. They required more time to write, exemplars, breaking the writing into smaller steps, and strategic, directed instruction.

Determined to introduce a new paradigm for these struggling writers, I developed an analogy that learning to write is not that unique to learning to walk.

Both developmental in nature involve readiness, support, learning from trial and error, and repetition. After all, we're not born knowing how to walk and we're not born knowing how to write, but by applying researched based strategies effectively, we can learn to do both.

Background

Over the past few decades researchers have attempted to identify "best practice" strategies for teaching students how to write. However, the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress ([NAEP] 2008) report on student writing achievement indicates that eighth and twelfth graders have shown little improvement since the 1998 writing assessment. Santangelo and Olinghouse (2009) state, "assessment data indicate that we are not yet highly effective at helping students gain the critical knowledge and skills required for competent narrative, expository, and persuasive prose" (p. 1). In fact, over a nine year period (1998- 2007), eighth grade writing scores increased by only six points, while seniors' scores showed a mere five point improvement (NAEP, 2008). So, why are students not achieving at a faster rate given that research has identified which strategies work best to improve writing?

To answer the question we first must acknowledge that the teaching of writing is an intricate, complicated task (Hillocks, 1987; Marchisan & Alber, 2001), and writing well demands that writers learn many skills (Steineger, 1996, p.1 in Smith, 2003). However, given today's emphasis on high stakes assessments, little class time is available to teach these skills and teach them well. Stapler (2005) suggests that the time spent on writing instruction not only be doubled but used more effectively (as cited in Simmons, 2009, p. 40). To that end, students frequently may experiment with a type of writing only once in a given school year. Furthermore, the body of literature concerning research in writing instruction recommends providing students ample time learning,

rehearsing, and applying writing skills and strategies to their own work (Soiferman, Boyd, & Straw, 2010).

One way for teachers to achieve this is by spending time teaching clear, precise writing skills and strategies, allowing ample time for writing practice, and differentiating instruction for struggling writers (Santangelo & Olinghouse, 2009). The National Institute for Literacy (2007) suggests "direct, explicit, and systematic instruction" as a means for delivering the kind of instruction student writers need in order to write well (p. 32). So, how do teachers effectively incorporate research-based strategies to teach students how to become effective writers? The institute recommends the following four strategies as methods for delivering this kind of instruction.

1. Explain the writing skill or strategy and model how to apply it in writing in a manner that is similar to what students will be asked to do,

2. Guide students in using the skills and strategies in their writing assignments and provide corrective feedback,

3. Provide time and opportunities for independent practice with the writing skills and strategies, and

4. Repeat these instructional steps until students are able to use them independently in their writing. (p. 32)

Though comprehensive, research on writing infrequently provides a step-by-step plan for classroom application of "best practice" strategies, or how they work in tandem with the writing process. The following steps outline a detailed approach to writing instruction for teachers to implement in their own classrooms and are intended for use with the writing process. They are based upon the research of many, including this practitioner's more than 20 years of personal experience teaching writing.

READINESS
Setting Purpose, Determining Audience, and Defining Genre

Before your students begin, help them gain a strong understanding of what they will be writing. Do this first by taking time to introduce them to the type of writing they will be doing. Will it be narrative, expository, persuasive? Or, maybe it will be a poem, letter, short story. Since writing is developmental, it's not too early to begin teaching young students about the different writing genres. Tapping into their prior experiences will help (Read, 2010). Even the youngest of writers needs to begin learning that there are different types of writing and that each of these uses a different organizational structure. According to Graham and Perin (2007), "Excellent instruction in writing... instills in writers the command of a wide

variety of forms, genres, styles, and tones, and the ability to adapt to different contexts and purposes" (p. 22). And, though your grade level standards will dictate the type of writing to some degree, don't be afraid to allow your students to experiment with various writing genres. Give assignments appeal by making them real-world applicable. For instance, a second grader might write a letter to the principal convincing him/ her to give extra recess. High school students might write a letter to their town's mayor persuading him/her to lift an imposed curfew. In doing so, you are establishing a purpose and audience for your students to write. Marchisan and Alber (2001) call this "helping students find personal meaning" (p. 2) and suggest connecting students with their interests. Many students passively approach writing because they do not see the value of it. Purposeful writing connects students with their subject, assigns ownership, and motivates them. Moreover, giving them a reason to write and identifying their audience writing readiness and gears students toward a starting point.

Preparing to Write: Visualizing and Pre-Writing
Writing can be such an abstract task that those who struggle often find it helpful if they can first grasp the layout of a piece, as this helps them establish a concrete picture of how the piece will look, both in form and style. According to Marzano (2010) creating a picture in the mind's eye or a graphic representation is a type of nonlinguistic representation that helps learners conceptualize new information.

The same concept applies to the use of graphic organizers, lists, thinking maps, charts, and such strategies that help students organize their ideas

during pre-writing. If writing a paragraph, explain or remind students about topic and concluding sentences, transitions, and detail sentences. When writing longer pieces, teach an essay's organizational arrangement of paragraphs depending upon the writing genre. Explicitly teaching students these skills has been linked to improved writing performance (Santangelo & Olinghouse, 2009).

SUPPORT
Modeling, Mini-Lessons, and Gradual Release
Once students have conceptualized the format and organization of a mode of writing, it's time to move into what the National Institute for Literacy calls "direct, explicit, and systematic instruction," providing support until students are capable of performing the task on their own. Begin by introducing an exemplar, or model, of the same genre that you expect students to write. It need not be the same topic, but if it is, it will give students a better idea of what they are to do in their own writing. For example, if you want your students to write a compare/contrast piece, the example paper should be in that mode. This is also a good time to build upon what you taught during the readiness phase about format and organization.

Engage students in a careful examination of the model piece, identifying what works or doesn't to make the writing effective. Discuss the strategies the author used to achieve a certain effect, teaching students how to identify strong/ weak points in the writing. A helpful tip is to save strong and weak papers from students of the year before by creating a file of sample papers, or place them wherever you put the other activities for the lesson. This way, you will have easy access to them.

The use of models, first reported by Hillocks (1987) and more recently by Education Northwest as part of its 6 + 1 Traits of Effective Writing, has been shown to have a positive result on student writing. The premise is that students analyze the writing for its positive and negative qualities, for what the author did that is or is not working in the piece, thus allowing them to model a similar approach (Graham & Perin, 2007).

However, students applying the skills to their own writing involves separating the writing into doable "steps or parts" and giving students practice using the skills at each juncture, thereby bridging the acquisition gap between declarative and procedural knowledge (Hillocks, 1987, p. 76). To this end, after students have had practice identifying the effective/ ineffective qualities, it's time to directly teach students how to use the strategies to achieve the same or similar effect as the author of the modeled piece. This

is easily done through mini-lessons geared toward specific strategies.

Mini-lessons separate the writing into manageable parts. For example, if the above mentioned exemplar uses an effective thesis statement, guide students in identifying it in the exemplar, following it up with direct instruction on ways to achieve the same effect. Practice the strategy by developing several examples together. Then allow students to practice the strategy on their own, thus gradually releasing responsibility of the task until students have learned to apply it to their own work.

Teaching students how to use strategies can first be done in isolation, but for strategy instruction to be most effective, students must apply the newly learned strategies to their own writing. Throughout the year, continue building on this process by introducing new strategies and having students apply them to their own writing during the drafting phase.

Writing Workshop and trait-based approaches have successfully used mini-lessons as a method for teaching writing. Furthermore, research has yielded positive effects for all writers when they are taught to use these strategies, but it is shown to be a highly effective approach for struggling writers (Graham & Perin, 2007). By the end of the school year, you will have taught numerous strategies that students simultaneously apply to their writing. So, not only are you scaffolding each writing lesson, you are scaffolding an entire year's worth of writing.

Drafting
The drafting phase can be the most difficult step in the writing process for students, especially reluctant writers. This is because they often do not know how to begin or cannot think of what to write. A strategy to try is to engage students in a quick talk. The student verbalizes to the teacher what he/she is thinking in terms of what should be written. An activator of sorts, it gets them articulating their thoughts. Once they have verbalized what they want to say, have them write these thoughts on paper, reinforcing that as a rough draft, they can always change what they've written during revision. Many times, once students begin writing, they are able to continue with little assistance of this type. However, for those who do not, you could repeat the above process or try a peer assisted strategy, pairing a stronger writer with the reluctant writer. The stronger writer offers support and suggestive feedback to the other.

Breaking the draft into manageable sections makes drafting less daunting. A useful strategy for students who might be writing longer pieces, such as essays or research reports, is to divide the paper into sections, guiding students through each, again using modeling and scaffolded strategy instruction. A key factor during drafting is realizing that it is a recursive process and that students must be given ample time to compose and rewrite.

TRIAL AND ERROR
Guided Revision and Editing
One of the most powerful stages in the writing process, revising, tends to also be one of the most unattended by teachers. Students need to distinguishing revision from editing, as they are two very different tasks. Try showing students that even published authors create many drafts, revising and editing, before they get that "just right" copy.

It is during the revision stage that students make changes to their rough drafts in purpose, content, style, wording, and even form. These changes may be through adding, changing, or deleting from the writing (Hillocks, 1987). But, without teacher guided instruction, students are apt to simply recopy or reprint from their word processers an exact replica of their rough draft, passing it off as the final copy.

During guided revision, engage students in a sort of reciprocal teaching activity where they become the teacher, offering critique of their peers' writing. Begin modeling this process by allowing volunteers to read aloud their piece to the class. You can determine how many students get to read their piece depending on the amount of time allocated. Then, provide constructive feedback, beginning with at least two positive qualities about the piece. Next, move into providing helpful suggestions for improving the piece. Once students realize the feedback helps to improve their piece, they volunteer more readily! This activity also allows other students to hear what students their own age do to create effective writing. After going through this process a few times with students, release to them the task of offering corrective feedback solutions during student read alouds.

Once they can successfully offer effective peer feedback as a class, it's time to continue releasing the task so students can learn to use this strategy independently. Allow partners or groups of three to work together to critique each others' paper. Each author reads aloud his/ her piece to the others in the group. The other two students listen carefully, taking note of what the writer did that is or is not working.

This is similar to what students did when looking at the models, except now they are applying this same strategy of identifying strengths and weaknesses to their own and others' writing. Younger students may simply express their comments verbally, while older students are encouraged to take written notes whenever they hear the author using effective/ ineffective strategies. Once the author is finished reading the piece, the other two group members take turns offering their critique and their suggestions for improvement. Continue this process until each student has read and received feedback. Using this approach to revision gives students an opportunity to recognize effective writing strategies in their peers' work while at the same time identify ways to improve their own writing. During this time, the teacher acts as facilitator, stopping to listen in on each group and offer feedback.

Realizing the nature of students, ground rules for this type of activity must be well- established beforehand. From this point, students may move back into the drafting phase or proceed to editing. Important to note is the powerful potential for teaching and learning at this stage because students developing schemata that allow them to move from a descriptive to a procedural knowledge base.

As stated earlier, from here students may move back into drafting or on to editing. Teach students that editing involves looking at and correcting the author's grammar, usage, and punctuation. Many strategies exist to help students edit their work, but this can also be a powerful time to teach students how to use grammar and punctuation for stylistic effect, encouraging them to take risks in their writing. However, research has shown that teaching grammar in isolation does not improve writing effectiveness; in fact it may have adverse effects (Hillocks, 1987). Instead, encourage students to simultaneously use in

their writing the grammatical skills they are learning.

During editing, remember that students must learn to correct their own grammatical mistakes. A word of caution is warranted here. As teachers, we often want to correct students' grammatical errors, but if students are to improve, they have to learn what they did wrong and then a strategy to remedy it. Use the same partners/groups for editing that you used during revision. This time, allow students to exchange papers with each other. Give students a set list of items to look for in their peers' writing. Checklists work well for this. Each student in the group (or partnership) takes a turn reading the paper, identifying, and marking errors. Afterward, the students may collaborate to get help correcting their errors. Once again, the teacher is facilitating, answering questions from individual groups.

From here, students create a final, polished draft. Their work culminates in a time set aside for students to "publish" their work by sharing it aloud, posting it on the wall, or if writing a more authentic piece such as a letter, sharing it with the one to whom it is addressed.

Conclusion

According to Hillocks (1987), "young writers must learn that effective writing involves a complex process that includes prewriting, drafting, feedback from audiences, and revising" (p. 80). Teaching students to write effectively takes time, but given the strict adherence to prescribed protocols of teaching and preparing students to pass standardized tests, the teaching of writing often takes a back seat in the classroom. If we are to move students along the writing achievement continuum, we must invest adequate time using highly effective teaching strategies and policymakers must make sure that time is available. I am reminded of a truism offered by Amy, an art teacher and friend with whom I worked for many years. She explained that we are not all born artists, but we all have the potential to acquire and grow the skills we need to make us artists. As a middle grades language arts teacher, I applied this truth to the teaching of writing. I figured that if I could help students master the techniques of writing, like their artist counterparts, they could grow as writers. After all, we're not born scientists, mathematicians, historians, or a host of other things, and though some students may be more linguistically predisposed than their counterparts, it doesn't mean they cannot learn to write. And learning to write well takes time- probably even more time than learning to walk.

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