The Necessary Shift in Writing Instruction: Implementing Authentic Tasks While Meeting Learning Standards

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Abstract

This article focuses on writing instruction and the necessity for this instruction to be modified regarding the use of literacy in everyday life. Reviewing literature about standards, motivation, and writing instruction makes the implementation of authentic writing tasks evident as a necessity for increasing student motivation and allowing for students' individuality. Each lesson taught in the classroom, regardless of expected outcomes, should foster student engagement, curiosity, and eagerness to learn. With respect to writing instruction, teachers must approach learning with student individuality in mind and create writing experiences that are engaging, allow for creativity, and have meaning for students so that practicality to real life is present in writing tasks. Within the article, implementation ideas are provided for incorporating authentic writing instruction while also teaching learning standards.

Keywords: *authentic, literacy, motivation, standards, writing instruction*

While teaching fourth grade in North Carolina, my grade level team planned many activities, including writing tasks for students to express what they had learned about in science and social studies. Focusing on North Carolina history, students created brochures to highlight various high interest places for tourists, presented slide shows using images, text, and voice to share information learned about lighthouses, compared regions using posters, and wrote expository essays explaining possibilities for the disappearance of the Lost Colony. All of these activities included literacy practices, which gave students a way to express in writing what they had read about and learned in social studies. Because we all lived in North Carolina and the state has such a rich and interesting history, students were able to connect and get excited about their learning. Moving on from this writing lesson, our team prepared for the next state-required expository paper with the topic of explaining three important nutrients for the human body. Materials for this science unit were difficult as far

as reading and comprehension, and students did not seem as interested. The concepts were difficult to grasp, and hands-on learning was difficult to incorporate. As students began writing these expository essays, they were not nearly as well developed as the essays on the Lost Colony, and I felt that most students had listed facts but could not provide a verbal explanation for anything in their papers. Not only were the nutrient papers not as well developed as the earlier social studies papers, the students did not seem engaged or interested in what they were learning or writing. I remember thinking that this way of assessing writing was not authentic nor did it allow for individuality and expression using highly engaging materials and incorporating the interests of students.

Literature Review

Although student motivation increases with student interest, the interests of students are not always what drives classroom instruction. A stronger push for national standards in the field of public education is evident in the increasing amount of states adopting Common Core. As of the 2013-2014 school year, 45 out of 50 states had adopted Common Core (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015). The push for teaching strictly to the standards and intensely focusing on student achievement measurable through standardized testing has placed an increased amount of stress on teachers (Turner, Applegate, & Applegate, 2011) and may not be conducive to teaching writing skills applicable and most necessary in today's society. When standards are used by teachers as a "how-to-teach" instead of a "what-to-teach" document, student individuality can be limited. Often, teaching in this manner results in all students being given the same prompt and going through the writing process as a whole class, with little attention given to the needs of individuals becoming better writers.

In this article, I will focus on writing instruction and the necessity for this instruction to be modified regarding the use of literacy in everyday life. I appreciate the need for learning standards; however, the implementation of these standards when using a universal teaching approach deprives students of individuality and often threatens students' motivation. Motivation for academic tasks can be gained in many ways, one of which is the use of real-world or authentic activities (Anderman & Anderman, 2010).

Each lesson taught in the classroom, regardless of expected outcomes, should foster student engagement, curiosity, and eagerness to learn. In order for learning to be perceived as meaningful to students, teachers should take into consideration the students' backgrounds including aspects such as culture, socioeconomic status, and academic ability (Anderman & Anderman, 2010). Background knowledge of topics, genres, and strategies influences a student's ability to make sense of a new text or assignment (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). As part of these meaningful lessons, the goal of writing instruction for teachers should be for students to be overwhelmingly excited about the possibilities of expression made possible by written work. Writing should be seen by students as a way to express what they learned and incorporate their evaluation and opinions

of that knowledge to make it personal.

When I was a teacher, my students were most engaged in writing when it was not in the form of a structured essay or long process in which students were expected to work on the same piece of writing for multiple days or weeks and write draft after draft. A shift toward more authentic writing tasks with appropriate format and audience for the content and standards being addressed could increase students' engagement in writing.

Standardized Learning: Teaching Toward Standards

As teachers work to create the learning environment within their classroom, student interest, relevance to daily life, and other aspects of motivation — as discussed in the article — should be taken into account when determining lesson objectives. On the other hand, state legislation also determines what and when certain learning objectives are taught. All states have learning standards to be used as a guide for teachers. Common Core standards for writing are broken down into domains: (a) text type and purposes; (b) production and distribution of writing; (c) research to build on present knowledge; and (d) range of writing (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015). The downfalls of teaching to the standards when looking particularly at writing instruction are similar to those expressed by Kamler and Thomson's (2008) discussion of systematic approaches to doctoral writing, stating that this "how-to" approach for writing diminishes the work and oversimplifies the process. Although our elementary students are not writing dissertations, the extreme structure of the writing process could place constraints on students and force them to conform to a writing norm that may not best express their ideas. Assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) place constraints on student writing by assigning prompt choices (Driscoll, 2010). An example prompt given in Driscoll's article for fourth grade narrative writing asked students to write about discovering a castle with strange sounds coming from it and a creaking door as they stepped inside.

This writing prompt will assess the NAEP excellent writing descriptors; however, it does not have real life implications for students. Students are able to be creative with the above prompt and write a narrative that will assess achievement of mastering learning standards for writing, but narratives can be personal and directly related to a student's own life experiences. When having students write, such restrictions as a prompt are unnecessary and demote individuality and engagement created by allowing students to choose their own writing topics. Prompts such as this also lack the acknowledgment of differences in students' vocabularies, previous experiences, and backgrounds that may limit a student who is not familiar with the words castle, strange, discovers, or creaks. These limitations in writing prompts and state-regulated learning standards may not always allow teachers the flexibility of developing writing lessons unique to the individuals within their classrooms.

Standardized Learning: Before Standards

In reading studies and peer-reviewed articles about writing instruction, the most intriguing article I

found was quite outdated. Dawson (1946) wrote an article outlining many ways to incorporate writing activities in the elementary classroom in meaningful ways that allowed for individuality. Dawson also touched on ways of integrating writing into the subject areas to make writing more meaningful and provide a way for students to share knowledge through written expression. With so many great examples of authentic writing instruction coming from an article dated 1946, I began to wonder how writing instruction had been affected with the implementation of learning standards. An example from Dawson's writing instruction ideas is explained later in the discussion for using authentic approaches within narrative writing.

Standardized Learning: Motivation

Increased motivation and engagement of students could also be an outcome of planning more authentic tasks for writing instruction. Authentic tasks strive to include real-life situations within the educational environment. Hopefully, this will increase student engagement due to motivation. Many researchers have studied the expectancy theory in relation to motivation, which includes student perception of success and the value of a lesson according to the student (Applegate & Applegate, 2010). The latter of these two components within the expectancy theory would be increased by using authentic tasks because the teacher is directly helping students to increase the usefulness of a lesson due to inclusion of real-life application possibilities. The MUSIC Model of Academic Motivation developed by Jones (2009) also explains the multiple constructs of educational motivation including usefulness, success, interest, and caring. The implementation of authentic tasks would increase motivation by addressing many of the components within this theory calling for tasks "that are perceived as being important, interesting, useful, and worthy of a time commitment" (Anderman & Anderman, 2010, p.15). In the next section, examples are given for authentic writing instruction with the hopes of achieving these motivational goals.

Authentic Writing Instruction

The differences between authentic writing instruction and teaching toward standards make obvious the need for change in how writing instruction is approached in the classroom. Students in the 21st century are quite different from students of past generations. One of the main differences is their exposure and use of computers from a much younger age. Computers, tablets, etc., have also been imcorporated into many classrooms and paved the way for technology standards (Swain & Pearson, 2002). Our students are immersed in a computer savvy world and rely on these types of technological devices for social, cultural, entertainment, and hopefully academic purposes — many of which require literacy skills. Since the mid-1990s, growth of technological devices such as computers within education has expanded, including the technologies discussed previously, and are referred to as "digital literacies," "twenty-first century literacies," or "new literacies" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Within this article, I use the term virtual literacy and have included research articles using the virtual literacy label for their activities. Literacy also surrounds us every day in the form of supermarket signs, road

signs, daily newspapers, etc. With this high presence of literacy in our environment, it is surprising that 14%, approximately 32,000,000 people, in the United States are labeled illiterate (Statistic Brain Research Institute, 2015). Another difference necessary in writing tasks is the need for encouraging and developing critical thinking skills students can apply to everyday life (Noddings, 2013). It is not surprising that application or exposure to everyday writing tasks are not often included in literacy instruction because of the stress placed on tested standards. As noted by Mo, Kopke, Hawkins, Troia, and Olinghouse (2014), learning standards such as Common Core do not include writing tasks that are "highly relevant to civic life (e.g., letters, e-mails) and personal growth (e.g., diaries, reflections, poetry)" (p.449). Skills addressed in standards could be taught with a more authentic approach if teachers would utilize everyday writing practices to achieve students' proficiency of learning objectives.

Virtual Literacy

I remember setting up a discussion board online to use for literacy talks during centers. While working with students in small groups, students in one center were able to log onto the computer and contribute to the weekly discussion. These discussions were started by a guiding question posted by me and then elaborated on by students in the class. Classmates could pose further questions and respond to one another throughout the week. By reading comments on the discussion board, I was able to incorporate some of their ideas and questions into literacy talks within reading groups to enrich discussions, show interest in student comments, and let students know that I was monitoring the online discussion. Student engagement and excitement for being a part of the online discussion was incredible. This type of literacy activity allowed time for students to process their thoughts before sharing along with not having to speak in front of others in order to express their opinions or thoughts. Also, this type of literacy activity is similar to what students are doing in everyday life with social media outlets, such as Facebook and Twitter. Looking ahead at students' futures in higher education, this could also help prepare them for discussion boards often utilized in distance or online learning courses.

The extensive amount of literacy exposure and writing composition students can interact with and become a part of is visible in the virtual world of Schome Park used in Gillen's study (2009). Within this virtual world, students were consistently involved in dialogue shown through their engagement in wikis and chat logs. Participants also created literacy within the community and navigated through the use of reading and writing within this online environment. By participating in the virtual space of Schome Park, students were highly motivated as they encountered literacy experiences in an authentic way similar to that of the literacy experiences one would encounter in a real-life environment. The high level of student motivation, opportunity for collaboration, and use of a dictionary log to increase knowledge and understanding illustrated the effectiveness in using virtual literacy within the classroom (Gillen, 2009).

There are also many studies

concerned with the use of technological devices such as computers within the classroom. For example, a fifth grade teacher in Buffalo, New York achieved an increase in student engagement and motivation in literacy discussions through the implementation of online discussion threads (Ikpeze, 2009). These online discussion boards allowed students to respond to questions posed by the teacher and respond to one another along with posing questions of their own. The teacher then used items from the thread to guide classroom discussion and give purpose to the prior online participation. Using this type of exercise also allows for many students to participate in the conversation at once and for reflection and building of ideas over time. This type of activity relates to students' real lives by connecting to the use of literacy through dialogue, often a large part of social media interactions. For example, the use of Facebook and Twitter along with other social media networks, include this same idea of constant dialogue and a building of conversation.

These types of activities and this approach to increased literacy engagement do not necessarily require computer use. Teachers can make literacy assignments relevant to social media by relating the structure created through these online resources similar to the structure of pencil and paper assignments in class. Creating a written dialogue between a vein and an artery to determine contributions within a bodily system instead of the general essay was one example of this type of assignment given in Rosen's (1990) article. With this activity, students are engaging in a conversation just as the conversations they would encounter with social media but with an interesting academic twist. This approach to teaching literacy is relevant to students' daily lives and will in turn increase student motivation by producing engaging writing lessons with student interest and personal lives in mind.

Implementation of this type of writing instruction could occur in classrooms through teachers planning tasks such as the online literacy discussion boards described earlier. Teachers could also create a Twitter feed in the classroom in an easily accessible place such as the back of the door. The Twitter feed could allow students to make personal comments about literature encounters, including the now popular hashtags, and create an ongoing written dialogue among students about the aesthetic literacy experiences. Integrating virtual literacy into classrooms is crucial in creating authentic literacy experiences for students as our environment becomes increasingly reliant on technological devices.

Narrative Writing

The need for both creative and practical writing (Dawson, 1946) is still prevalent in school and real life, but again may need to be modified in terms of classroom instruction. Narrative writing should allow students to be creative and expressive. I participated in a journal writing activity as part of my staff development one year in which all teachers were to create a list of the top five events in their life up to that point. Between each monthly session, we were to turn one of those events into a narrative story. Looking back at one of my writing pieces, I saw how I went through the steps expected of my

students. I had chosen my wedding day to journal about from my list of top five events; however, I could not possibly journal about the entirety of that day in one entry. I decided to write only about the moment downstairs in the church just before my wedding started instead of trying to give an account for the entire day. This was exactly what I was expecting my students to do as they attempted to develop small moment stories by focusing on one seed within a large watermelon as explained through Lucy Calkin's metaphor (Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003). Taking part in the activities expected of students is a way for teachers to truly model and serve as a guide during the process. It is important for teachers to write along with their students, allowing both teacher and students to experience the process and struggles of writing (Atwell, 1998). This expectation of teachers modeling lifelong learning and literacy engagement is already present in the idea of teachers reading along with students during independent reading time (Turner, Applegate, & Applegate, 2011) and should carry over into writing instruction as well. Again with narrative writing just like virtual literacies, teachers should allow students' individuality and life experiences to be incorporated in lesson planning.

Implementation ideas for revising and editing. The following paragraph explains implementation ideas for a more authentic approach to revising and editing. Another change to the writing process must occur in the area of editing and revising. Writing instruction includes editing and revising multiple times, often requiring students to create multiple copies or drafts of their writing pieces. Because we generally use computers to type papers now, this type of revision seems outdated. To take this previous writing process idea of recreating a draft would mean to print the original for editing purposes. After self-editing, peer editing, and any other types of editing completed, a person would open a blank word processing document and begin typing the next draft from scratch, making revisions along the way. Obviously, this form of editing and revising is outdated and needs modification. The revision techniques explained in *The Craft of Revision* authored by Lucy Calkins and Pat Bleichman (2003) offers suggestions for this part of the writing process, including ideas such as inserting a flap in children's writing when they decide to insert additional information. This type of revising goes along with real life editing and revising, although it may not look neat and follow the previous ideas of the writing process. Cutting and pasting to edit and revise a paper is the general procedure with word processing documents; therefore, allowing students to cut and paste their written papers with the same approach using scissors and glue can later be applied to real life. To implement this, the teacher might model wanting to elaborate on a section of her draft and writing the new sentences on a clean sheet of paper. The draft would then be cut at the place in which the elaboration was to be inserted and the teacher would tape the new sentences into the existing draft. This may not lead to the most presentable paper in terms of appearance; however, it better replicates the authentic writing process and reinforces the idea of the working draft. Of course, if computers were

available for all students, written composition could take place on the computer, making even this technique outdated. With funding being an issue for technological devices such as computers and tablets in the classroom, presenting students with these types of editing techniques at least attempts to use the same strategies that would be used on a computer but with pencil and paper. Again with the activities related to revising and editing in this paragraph, the goal is to make these skills relevant and transferable to students' daily lives.

Implementation ideas for teaching conventions. The way in which teachers plan and teach conventions can also be modified to include a more authentic approach. Teaching technical aspects of writing such as grammar and punctuation is still a must for developing proficient writers. Real life application of this type of instruction is also possible and hopefully presents the information in a more engaging and meaningful way for students. Dawson (1946) suggests developing short technical lessons focusing on the needs of the class or a small group of students in which an exemplar is presented along with two other examples in need of correction. Students make the necessary corrections as a class or group effort and then further their understanding of "good" writing by creating standards that outline these expectations and which can then be used to make corrections within their own work. By learning technical writing skills in this manner, students will hopefully attach meaning to the instruction and view the conventional writing techniques as ways to strengthen their own writing. It is interesting that this activity had students create standards instead of our current approach of having standards set for students to follow. This approach is often used by elementary teachers at the start of a school year to establish classroom rules, allowing students to take ownership. The same practice can be used in writing instruction, allowing students to again take ownership as they develop the standards for 'good' writing in terms of conventions. To assess instruction related to conventions, the teacher could allow students to self-assess along with being assessed by the teacher based on the student-created standards from the group or class activity explained earlier. These ideas about narrative writing and implementation examples provide avenues for authentic writing experiences in the classroom.

Nonfiction Writing

Practicality of literacy instruction must also take the form of nonfiction writing within the classroom and is an expectation in the upper elementary grades. Calkins and Pessah (2003) give examples of student work in this area within their *Introducing All-About Book* chapter. Within this chapter, they gear choosing a topic toward student interest, including examples such as skateboarding or teaching dog tricks. These tasks incorporating students' interests require students to read about a topic, get acquainted with experts in the topic, and possibly even watch these events on television. Students are immersing themselves in information and literacy about a topic of their choosing and using writing as a means of information collection. With this form of writing as with others discussed in this article, it is important that teachers relate

this form of literacy to daily life and imbed purpose and motivational components in each assignment.

Another way of implementing authentic practices in writing is focusing the writing tasks assigned around informal learning environments. Puttman and Walker (2010) found an increase in student motivation when incorporating nontraditional or informal learning environments as part of literacy instruction. Learning in these informal settings, such as museums, allowed students to link real-world experiences and literacy skills (Putman & Walker, 2010). Again, this suggests the necessary shift in writing instruction to more authentic tasks in which educators plan literacy experiences students may view as meaningful in real life. By viewing and recreating similar document formats to those found in informal learning environments, students are exposed to concrete examples of literacy in the real world. Relating back to the usefulness construct of motivation (Anderman & Anderman, 2010; Jones, 2009), if students perceive a task as worthy of their time and helpful in becoming proficient at a skill that will be useful at a later time, motivation is increased. Viewing literacy in informal learning environments would hopefully help students to perceive writing tasks as useful and having purpose.

Implementation ideas for nonfiction writing. Relating to student interests is the first step in making this type of writing authentic. One example of a constant interest, especially among my male students, was the interest in sharks during Shark Week on the Discovery Channel. Students would come in talking about facts or incidents from shows they had seen on television the night before. Students also wanted to check out books from the library in the weeks to come related to sharks. Having students use writing to record and share this information can allow students to view writing as a communication tool for sharing information. This would also allow for teaching students about citing where they found their information and the importance of using reliable sources. While planning this activity, the teacher could create a rubric outlining expectations for students such as how many facts are to be included and the amount of references necessary.

Another implementation suggestion is having students write up a business proposal for an invention they create either individually or with a partner. Students could work to create a product or service they feel is related to a personal interest or solves a current problem they are facing. In creating the business plan, students can practice persuasive writing and be required to do background research necessary in setting up an argument for why their product or service is needed. Thinking through the creation and reasoning for the product or service could also encourage students to use critical thinking skills. The teacher could again create a rubric during the planning stages of this activity outlining how students will be assessed. The rubric would provide a document for the teacher, students, and parents, explaining the expectations for students such as product name, expected consumers, and purpose. Creating the rubric would allow the teacher to think critically about expected student outcomes while also providing students with a guide for the assignment and transparency in how they

will be assessed.

These implementation ideas presented for non-fiction are examples for shifting to an authentic focus for writing instruction. Relating to student interest could increase motivation and engagement (Jones, 2009). Using students' interests within the assignments described above offer an example for incorporating authentic writing tasks while covering the writing standards for teaching informational and persuasive writing.

Conclusions

As we move forward in the 21st century, teachers are faced with complex expectations from policymakers, parents, and politicians (Turner, Applegate, & Applegate, 2011). Activities that promote authentic instruction have occurred in the past as noted in the references to Dawson's 1946 publication of Guiding Writing Activities in the Elementary School. Since that time in education, standards have become forefront but must be balanced with our teaching philosophies and educational epistemologies that define and possibly give reason to why teachers enter the field of education. With respect to writing instruction, teachers must approach learning with student individuality in mind and create writing experiences that are engaging, allow for creativity, and have meaning for students so that practicality to real life is present in writing tasks. Authentic writing instruction in which teachers provide meaningful practice while also teaching learning standards must take place. Teachers must remember that standards are to be used as a guide. Completing authentic writing assignments should be the goal of the class, and standards are the tools to make sure those assignments are of superior quality.

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