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Using the Media to Stimulate Writing

Honré Frank Gitelman

How do magazines and newspapers inspire students to write? They are timely, familiar, readily available, imaginative, and touch their lives in personal ways. Advertising in particular fires students' imaginations. Students can be encouraged to write by responding to a wide variety of familiar images having high visual and verbal impact and appeal. In addition to the advertisements, illustrations and photographs enhance comprehension and help students formulate mental imagery for written descriptions.

Using stimuli from the media, fourth and fifth graders wrote extensively in structured sessions conducted by the reading/writing teacher, and supported by classroom teachers. Prior to the writing sessions, the teachers met to discuss the topics, goals, and special materials needed. The classroom teacher prepared the class for each session, listened to discussions, and circulated among the students to offer additional help when they were writing, and provided extra time for students to complete their writing assignments later in the day.

Topics inspired by ads and pictures included food, sports, pets and gifts. A newspaper feature was the basis for writing about environmental pollution. Each theme was designed to increase students' ability to create original compositions from familiar material using persuasive, narrative or descriptive techniques. Initially, detailed guidelines were provided as frameworks for students' writing, but the specificity of the

directions was decreased as students became more proficient.

In one assignment, in order to motivate students to write about improving their immediate environment, a newspaper feature titled "Ugly Spot of the Week" was displayed and discussed. Some of the issues raised were the discarding of unsightly and dangerous items, and methods of enforcement of safety and environmental rules. Students were then given these directions:

- Describe an ugly place such as a house, building, store, car lot, field, woods, alley or roadside, so that the reader can picture it clearly.
- Tell why the ugly place bothers you, your family or neighbors. Explain why it is dangerous.
- Describe what needs to be cleaned up to make the place look appealing.
- Do not write about a place which may embarrass others. Use good judgement.

Structuring the writing sessions

Activities during the writing sessions, based on current practices for teaching the writing process (Fuller, 1983; Graves, 1982; Hansen, Newkirk and Graves, 1985; Kirby and Liner, 1981; Simmons, 1988), included discussion, rough drafts, sentence lifting, editing, revision, and publication. Illustrating the compositions added a broader dimension to the written assignments. The lessons were conducted every other day; the time between sessions provided students with extra time to complete their compositions. Students kept their writing assignments in pocketed, laminated writing folders.

During an initial writing session, students wrote a composition in class and a composition for homework, based on a

variation of the theme. The purpose of the additional assignment was to provide a choice. In a later session, the students selected the one composition they thought could be revised successfully. During the rough draft process, students were encouraged to write their ideas on paper quickly, telling enough to make an interesting detailed story which a classmate would understand. Emphasis was on communication. Students were told not to concern themselves with perfect handwriting or grammar. They were encouraged to spell words the way they thought the words should be spelled and to circle words when they were unsure of the spelling (Sowers, 1988). The students were also instructed to write on every other line to make space for future additions and corrections. They were encouraged to select titles which would give the reader a clue about the entire story and make the reader eager to read it.

The purpose of the second session, sentence lifting (McCrary, 1984), was to discuss and correct common errors found in the rough drafts. Seven to ten anonymous sentences were printed in black ink on acetate sheets for use with an overhead projector. A blue pen was used for contrast. Students were directed to discuss positive aspects of each sentence, such as subject, predicate, punctuation and capitalization. Next, they were assisted in explaining reasons for correcting errors. This lesson provided students with a natural purpose for clear communication, rather than an artificial drill session. The session was also designed to heighten awareness of various ways of expression. It was not designed to correct all the mistakes encountered in the themes.

The next session built on previous progress. Students were helped to improve the content of their compositions and

to proofread for errors. Each segment of the lesson was timed for intense concentration on a specific task. First the students revised their titles to tell just enough to captivate a person's interest to read the story through to its completion. Next, they checked for capitalization and ending punctuation. Finally, they were encouraged to add and improve adjectives throughout the compositions, and to substitute vivid adjectives and verbs for bland ones. A *bad* child might be changed to a *mischievous* child; a *nice* surprise might become an *unexpected* surprise; *ran* might be changed to *fled* or *raced*.

Toward the end of the session, students concentrated on correcting circled words they did not know how to spell. Direct assistance was given to students who needed it; the writing teacher wrote the beginning two or three letters on their papers to enable them to use the dictionary with greater ease. Students were then given proofreading checklists, and finally checklists and compositions were given to nearby peers for examination and discussion. The signatures of both students indicated that the students were satisfied with the completed compositions. The writing teacher corrected only items discussed during the editing session. The compositions were not perfect, but they did reflect the students' careful efforts.

For the next session, illustrating, students were taught some techniques for graphic art work to use in printing the title and drawing a picture which best represented the main idea of their compositions. A variety of type styles were displayed from magazines, newspapers, textbooks, library books, and advertisements.

Student presentations

The final session was the oral presentation. Before students volunteered to read their compositions aloud, guide-

lines for audience and speaker were established. The responsibilities of the audience were to keep hands free of distractions, and to focus attention on the presentation. The responsibilities of the speaker were to speak loudly and clearly at an unhurried pace, and to hold the composition below mouth level. Questions and comments were encouraged after each presentation to promote feedback and interchange among peers.

The final activity was selecting the overall title for the compositions. Approximately five to seven suggestions were written on the chalkboard, and students voted for their favorite choice. This was a valuable experience for students because it encouraged decision making, and provided a natural method for generating the main idea of the stories.

Student compositions and illustrations were displayed in hallways and classrooms, placed at children's eye level so that all students benefited from viewing the work. Students' work was also published in a booklet which was exhibited in the media center.

Student and teacher evaluations

Toward the end of the school year, students and teachers evaluated the writing program by completing questionnaires. The students were encouraged to sign their names, so that they would respond in a serious manner, and to enable the writing teacher to contact a student if further clarification of a statement was needed. Students responded positively to the survey. Their comments about the process included "gave me confidence," "helped me be more creative," "helped me be more detailed," "helped me think and write faster," "made writing easier for me." Suggestions for future writing topics included My Favorite Sport, Funny Things We Did When We

Were Very Little, Our Teachers' Lives At Home, An Embarrassing Situation, Our Worst Nightmare, Places We've Studied in Social Studies, and Inventing Something New.

There was strong positive response to the illustration session, suggesting that even in the intermediate grades, students need the visual to support their text, and demonstrating that students are eager to express themselves through what they know. The response further indicated a need to collaborate with the art teacher, whose specialized skills could refine students' design concepts.

There was high interest in oral reports. Almost every student enjoyed the special attention and the opportunity to discuss compositions with classmates. Responses also showed that students are eager to share their interest and understanding of various academic subjects through writing. This was indicated by their favorable comments regarding social studies, science, book reports, and poetry. On the negative side, it was evident from the questionnaires that some students did not regard the sentence lifting sessions as beneficial. Perhaps these sessions were unpleasant because they were similar to English lessons.

How will student comments affect future teaching methods? Students will initially select writing topics from the list of suggestions and later on, plan their own topics. Students will be provided with more frequent opportunities during class time to write about the exciting books they have read and the topics they have studied. In regard to sentence lifting, the session will be directed toward correcting errors through individual student conferences.

The teachers regarded the writing program as an extension of their own programs. They believed that the additional

writing lessons improved the students' compositions. In contrast to students, teachers requested the continuation of the sentence lifting sessions because the sessions reinforced skills students acquire and refine in the intermediate grades.

In summary, media techniques evoke imaginative responses. Capitalizing on the media's expressive characteristics is one natural and important way to inspire students to write. Once students understand how to write about pictures, they can write about topics which are not so obvious. Every student has something important to say. Students write more effectively when they have a choice, when they have input, and when they have a purpose for writing.

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