Desirable Teaching Behaviors for Writing

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Interest in the teaching of writing has dramatically increased in the last few years. Teachers who have often had little formal training in writing education find themselves searching for ways to assist their students to become better writers. The Desirable Teaching Behaviors described below were identified by the Parent Education Follow Through Program (Ware, 1980). They can help teachers provide effective instruction in writing and deal with all three stages of the composing process: precomposing (prewriting or planning), composing, and post-composing activities (revising and editing).

1. Before starting an activity, explain what you are going to do.

Too often, teachers have children sit down and write simply because it's Friday afternoon or because their curriculum guide suggests that children should receive writing instruction for 60 minutes a week. In such cases, writing may be perceived by both the teacher and the children as an activity one does in order to fill a particular time slot. Smith warns that such an approach to writing may reduce this process to "ritual and triviality" (Smith, 1983, p. 566).

DTB 1 can help both the children and the teacher develop a more productive view of writing and the writing process. The "you" in DTB 1 is the children and what they are going to do is develop a polished piece of writing for an audience of their own choosing.

Before beginning any writing activity, the teacher should explore with the children just what "writing" is going to involve. First, the children need to come to the

awareness that writing is not a "one-shot deal" but an effort that will most likely extend across more than one day and will involve an extensive time commitment. The students should begin to understand the recursive nature of the writing process (Flower & Hayes, 1979; Tierney & Pearson, 1983). Writing is not something that is finished when an individual has made one try at it but a task that will often require reworking. That reworking must be perceived as a natural, integral part of the writing process.

Second, the children must understand that writing is not trivial and automatic but is a purposeful act of communication. An author has something to say to a particular audience and is writing to communicate those thoughts, not just because the teacher said "Write." This sense of audience is one factor that differentiates good writers from poor writers (Stallard, 1974). Unfortunately, even at the college freshman level, many writers still consider the teacher the only audience (Crowley, 1977). Such individuals are writing only because someone told them to.

The importance of DTB 1 is related to the power of purposeful reading. Just as having a purpose and a sense of the overall task enhances comprehension, having a purpose and sense of audience enhances writing.

2. Before starting an activity, give the learner time to familiarize himself or herself with the materials.

This precomposing step is probably the most important part of writing, just as it is for reading. And, as with reading, this introductory step has several features.

Before beginning to write, the novice needs to be familiar with the materials of writing. In this case "materials" does not mean the physical materials with which the writer will write. Rather, in DTB 2 materials should be interpreted as the ideas about which the author intends to write and the words with which to express these ideas. As part of his or her familiarization with these materials, the writer should also begin thinking about ways of organizing these materials before trying to begin to write. This familiarization with the concepts and words to express those concepts, before any attempt to begin writing, will help ensure that the writer has a fluent, thorough, and somewhat organized fund of information with which to start the task.

Murray (1978) has found that this prewriting familiarization stage is especially important for experienced writers. He describes four stages of pre-writing through which experienced writers travel: 1) resistance to writing; 2) concern about having enough information or ideas about the topic; 3) awareness of audience and of any time constraints; and 4) rehearsal. Only after going through these four stages do experienced writers then write. Similarly, Stallard (1974) found that good writers spend more time in contemplation and other prewriting activities than do poor writers.

There are many ways in which the teacher can familiarize the child with the concepts and the vocabulary necessary to communicate those ideas to others. The language experience method is one way. The language of the writing is based on a common experience and the children write or dictate their writing after they have participated in and discussed their shared experience fully.

For already familiar topics, brainstorming activities may be sufficient for bringing to the students' awareness what they already know about the topic and for getting them to explore the topic fully, not cursorily. Regardless of the familiarity of the topic, it is imperative that the relevant vocabulary be highlighted. Words that the children suggest or use during the discussion should be placed on semi-permanent visual display. This display serves two purposes: It relieves later spelling anxiety and, more importantly, it serves as a device for retrieving ideas later while the child is actually writing.

Once the ideas and the associated vocabulary have been brought to the children's awareness, they should spend time organizing the ideas. Experienced adult writers are aware of the need to "tame" their mass of information before attempting to write, and they spend more time organizing their thoughts than do beginning adult writers (Atlas, 1979). Tyros of all ages need to learn the value of time spent in pre-writing organization. This organizational step also aids the writer in judging if enough information is available to begin writing (Murray's second stage).

One activity that can assist children in organizing their thoughts and thinking about related vocabulary before writing is Hanf's (1971) Mapping technique. Hanf introduced Mapping as a reading technique, but it is equally

appropriate as an approach to pre-composition. Mapping taps all three aspects of the pre-composition stage; concepts, vocabulary, and organization. To use Mapping as a pre-writing exercise, place the topic of the composition in the center of the chalkboard (or the center of the page). Identify sub-topics next, and extend a spoke from the topic box for each sub-topic. Vocabulary that might be used to convey information about each sub-topic on lines radiating from that sub-topic, related words clustered. When the map is complete, it serves as an outline for the writer and a visual organization of the ideas and words with which to express the ideas.

Another effective way is to use the time-honored notecard technique. A small topic is identified and the children put one brainstormed idea on each card (which can be 3" x 4" pieces of excess construction paper, or a paper product which has a band of "restickable" adhesive at the top of each sheet). The children then move the cards around until they like the organization of the ideas. The use of cards reduces the amount of writing needed at this stage. Thus, the children will be more likely to complete this stage. Furthermore, the use of easily movable ideas means that each attempt at organization is temporary and easy to change. Therefore, the children will learn to be more flexible and explore a variety of organizations.

These "pre"-composing familiarization activities are not, of course, limited to preparing for the first draft. Given the recursive nature of the writing process, these activities might indeed be used before revisions as well.

3. Ask questions which have more than one correct answer.

On occasion, the teacher may wish for a class of children all to write about the same topic. At these times, DTB 3 can have three important effects on writing. It can promote creativity, increase risk-taking behavior, and encourage revision.

Asking questions that have more than one right answer releases children from the burden of creating (and the teacher from seeking) the one right way to convey an idea. The emphasis should not be on what is the right way to approach a particular piece of writing, but on what are reasonable ways. Instead of wasing emotional and physical energy on trying to match someone else's prescription of

how a topic should be approached, children should be using this energy to explore their own creative instincts.

A related outcome of DTB 3 may be increased risk-taking behavior. When children are not likely to be penalized for diverging from the suggested or usual model, they will be more likely to try new strategies, new words, new genre, and even new ideas. When the teacher does have one right answer in mind, only the most confident (or blithely unaware) child will risk the penalties of divergence.

One way to promote creativity and risk-taking in writing is also borrowed from a reading technique; Semantic Webbing (Freedman & Reynolds, 1980). In Semantic Webbing a story or even a piece of expository writing is read up to the point at which several different endings might be possible. For example, with Keats' Peter's Chair, the children would read or listen to the story of Peter's dismay as he discovers that his cradle, high chair, and crib have been usurped for the new baby and painted pink, but that his chair has yet to suffer that fate. At that point, reading stops and the children are asked "What might Peter do next?" All remotely reasonable suggestions are written on the board around that question. (For Peter's Chair the answers might range from "sit in it", "break it", "run away", "give the baby away" to "paint it for the baby himself" or "ask his parents not to paint it.")

The children's responses are then categorized in some way, such as in Peter's case, "nice things to do", "so-so things to do" and "nasty things to do." At last, the rest of the story is read and the children compare their ideas to the way the author has chosen to end the story.

Semantic Webbing might be used as a reading activity until the children gain confidence in their ability to produce good ideas. At that point Semantic Webbing could become a writing activity, with each child choosing one suggested middle and/or ending to the story (or making up an original element) and finishing the piece of writing.

A third important but very different reason for asking questions which have more than one right answer is that it encourages revision. Writing is not seen as producing the correct piece of writing but as making an effort at composing and communicating one's thoughts and then seeing if one can do it even better. Simply because there

is not a right way, the task can be seen as always "under way" or "in progress."

Revision should be viewed as an activity of improvement rather than of correction. With this focus in mind, teachers can encourage the "in progress" approach to writing by having children concentrate on just one aspect of their writing to improve upon for a particular lesson. That aspect (such as producing more interesting sentences or using more descriptive words) becomes the topic of a group lesson. After the teacher-directed lesson, each child can take his or her own current piece of writing and apply the just-taught techniques to improve it.

A final reason for asking questions which have more than one right answer is that it is certainly more interesting for the teacher, who may have to read 35 pieces of writing on the same topic.

4. Ask questions which require multiple-word answers.

This DTB will aid the teacher in helping children to select topics which are broad enough and interesting enough to ensure that there is something to write about that is worth writing about. There is something to say, to convey. In the absence of a topic of sufficient breadth and interest, young writers (and others who failed to do sufficient research) may resort to filler-- "...and then...and then..." When this happens, the writer has lost a sense of audience, has abandoned any intent to communicate a message, and has begun to view this writing task only in quantitative terms. Pre-writing activities such as Mapping will help the student determine is there is anything worth saying about the chosen topic.

A second aspect of "multiple word answers" is that of richness in the language used. A writer may have a wealth of information to tell about a topic but may lack the skill to express those thoughts other than in short, dull, adjectiveless sentences. A vigorous vocabulary development program, with special emphasis on adjectives and adverbs, is essential for enriching students' writing vocabularies. To improve the ability to produce more sophisticated sentence structures, sentence-combining exercises have been found effective (Daiker, Kerek, & Morenberg, 1978). Word and phrase cards can be used by students at their desks to explore various ways of combining and expanding

sentences. Using cards rather than having the students write their efforts on paper has at least three advantages; First, the manipulation of the cards is more physically involving simply writing. Second, it is more novel and more interesting. And third, and most importantly, the students will be able to explore and practice a great deal more in the same amount of time with the movable cards than if required to write everything.

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