

How can I improve my teaching practice so that my students produce more descriptive writing?

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Biography



Deana Gates currently teaches Grade 6 at Lynndale Heights Public School in Simcoe, Ontario. This is her third year teaching and also her third year at Lynndale Heights. Deana has an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Wilfrid Laurier University. Deana came to the teaching profession after switching her focus from working with the elderly and maintaining a family business. She received her Bachelor of Education from Brock University. This is Deana's first Action Research project.

Abstract

After identifying a need to improve the writing skills of the students in my Grade 6 class, I set out to improve my teaching practice so that my students produce writing that is more descriptive and detailed. Through specific activities that were tried I found that teacher modelling, visual cues, immediate feedback, sharing student work, whole group editing, limited publishing, and assigning activities that are of value to students, helped improve the length, quality and descriptiveness of student work.

Background

For the last two years, I have been very fortunate to work with, and learn from my mentor and friend, Diane Clark. We both teach at Lynndale Heights (actually, right across the hall from one another), and often spend time planning, discussing, and examining our current teaching practice, in order to grow as educators and improve the academic skills of our students. The one area that has often been a topic of discussion is how to improve student writing, and more specifically, how can we get our students to add the detail and description that is necessary when writing something as small as the answer to a short question, or as large as a narrative writing assignment? When the letter came around asking teachers to sign up for Action Research in the area of writing, Diane and I decided that this would be beneficial. I hope that this Action Research project will help me learn more effective strategies and techniques for teaching and improving the writing skills of my students.

Finding a Question

When I started to think about "writing" as a topic for Action Research, I thought that this wouldn't be too difficult a topic to approach, but the more thought that I gave it, the more I came to realize that "writing" is a huge topic and that my focus was too broad. My initial focus was, "How to improve student editing" because the whole editing process is a continual struggle. I have tried peer editing and self editing, but the only thing that seems to get students to work, is if I set aside a large period of time and as a class we go through each individual step and students edit their own writing. Then, I decided that I should look at "changing my way of presenting a lesson (teacher modeling), as a way to improve student writing." These are both important areas that would be ideal to look at for the purpose of this project, but I decided to take a different approach. In my Grade 6 classroom, I am always trying to stress the importance of "showing all of your work", and adding as much "detail and description" to answers and writing activities as possible, so that the reader clearly understands what the writer is trying to say. This is the area

that I felt I needed to focus on. Another reason that I changed my focus is because each year our Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) scores consistently show that writing scores need to be improved, as they are always the lowest of the three areas tested. It made me wonder if student writing scores resulted from a lack of motivation toward writing and/or if students just feel unsuccessful in the area of writing. Would improving my teaching practice so that my students produce more descriptive writing, increase student initiative toward writing, and also help them add the description and detail that is needed to their writing activities in EQAO? EQAO only captures a small picture of a student's academic performance, so I don't feel that I need to focus this project on improving student EQAO writing scores. Rather, it is my hope that through this Action Research process, I will be able to teach students how to show more detail in their writing, show their thinking in their writing, and improve the overall quality of their writing. My main focus in this Action Research project is to "improve my teaching practice so that my students produce more descriptive writing."

The Process

Initially, a questionnaire was given to all students in my class. This was done to determine how students felt about different aspects of writing and what types of writers they considered themselves to be. The results of the questionnaire are shown in the following table:

Writing about writing . . .

I consider myself to be a good writer.	52%	I don't consider myself to be a good writer.	48%
I like to write short stories.	48%	I like to write lengthy stories.	52%
I like to self-edit.	43%	I like peer-editing.	57%
I like to write my story by hand.	24%	I like to write my story on the computer.	76%
I like to choose my own topic.	95%	I like being told what topic to write about.	5%
I like to share my writing with others.	33%	I like keeping my writing to myself.	67%

This questionnaire was given to my students before I narrowed my research question down. Although none of the results pertain directly to making writing more descriptive, I found the results quite interesting and worth recording. As a teacher, the findings helped give me insight into how to motivate my students, and hopefully this motivation will then make my students want to improve the quality of their writing.

Routman (2000) describes using your senses to make writing descriptive as "capturing the moment" and says that, "...capturing the moment writing turned out to be an incredibly powerful tool for teaching students to write well in all genres." I decided to follow Routman's idea of using the senses to improve student writing. I planned a progressive writing activity and set aside a week to complete it. I hoped that this writing activity would teach my students to use their senses (It looks like..., It smells like..., I hear...) when describing a scene. On the first day, I put up a scenic picture on the blackboard and had students make a list of twenty words that they thought of when they looked at the picture. Together, we then wrote a descriptive paragraph about the scene. We wrote it sentence by sentence, changing words (with the help of dictionaries and thesauruses) as we went. Students did a thorough job and some students that don't normally excel at writing were offering descriptive words to add to our paragraph. Evan described the water in the picture as, "brilliant sapphire blue", while Jennifer saw the huge pine trees as, "towering."

The next day, students selected a scenic picture of their choice and worked with a partner of their choice to write a descriptive paragraph. This went relatively well, but I found that my weak writers tended to pair up with another weak writer, and they accomplished very little with this exercise. My strong writers also paired up with each other,

and wrote some wonderful paragraphs. I think that the next time that I try this exercise, I would try to pair students up myself, so that more students find this activity beneficial.

The following day, each student selected a scenic picture and wrote their own individual descriptive paragraphs. In my opinion, this was a productive activity. I selected three samples of student writing to discuss why I felt this activity was successful. Jennifer normally has a hard time putting her pencil to paper, but by the end of the week, she wrote a short paragraph that contained several adjectives and even an adverb!

She wrote:

“I stood amazed and watched the adorable little black and white kitten. He sat quietly on the fluffy bright purple cushion and stared at me with his frightened eyes. I smiled down at him as he continued to stare. He put his head down, closed his eyes, and went to sleep. He was very warm and cozy.”

Evan, is a very bright student, but does not like writing, and does not like writing anything descriptive. He completed each of the writing activities, and I found that the length of his sentences increased in length, but he added very few adjectives to his work. Ashley is the writer in my class. She loves to sit and write, and I could tell that she enjoyed these writing activities. The big improvement that I saw with her writing is that she wrote her descriptive paragraph and then independently went and got a thesaurus and substituted more advanced words in for simple descriptive words. I was excited to see her take the initiative, without my constant reminders and suggestions to always use dictionaries and thesauruses. I was quite pleased with the progression of student writing with these activities. From here, I hoped to try some other writing activities that hopefully students would find interesting and help improve their writing.

My next step involved having students complete a writing activity called “Showing vs. Telling.” This writing activity comes from a book titled, 25 Quick Mini-Lessons to Teach Narrative Writing, by Dave Leochko(2000). This activity asks students to show the reader what is happening instead of just telling something. An example would be to take the sentence, “The day was very hot,” and show that the day was hot instead of telling the reader this. With some practice my students came up with some great descriptive sentences and they also enjoyed the activity. Ashley changed the above sentence to, “My double fudge ice cream with sprinkles and caramel topping, that I had only bought five minutes ago, quickly dripped down the large waffle cone making my sweaty hand sticky and wet.” This was a very successful lesson that helped students develop their ability to add detail and description to individual sentences. I hoped that students would eventually be able to take what they learned from this activity and apply it to longer writing activities.

Next, I wanted to connect the last two writing activities(scenic writing and “Showing vs. Telling) together to see if student writing had improved. It was while students were completing the “Showing vs. Telling” activities that I asked them to bring in a picture of their choice, preferably one that they liked, or had a special meaning to them. I asked students to bring in their own picture hoping that they would be more motivated to write about something that had special meaning to them, rather than selecting from the assortment of pictures that I had to offer them. On the selected writing day, many students brought in a favourite picture, family photo, or their own selection from a magazine. It was interesting to listen to the stories and explanations that they expressed about why they brought in their particular picture. I could tell that they were excited about the picture that they brought in from the lengthy discussions that we shared.

Students followed the same writing process as they did previously. They made a list of descriptive words that came to mind when they looked at their picture and then they wrote a descriptive paragraph about their picture. I wasn't sure how this writing activity would go, but as students began the writing process and I made my way around

the classroom, I was excited to see how engaged they were. Evan even asked me, “Can you tell me what the exact shade of the vehicle in his picture is?” and he added the descriptive words that we discussed to his writing (dark mustard yellow convertible). A large percentage of my class was actively engaged in their writing activity and I hoped that the quality of their writing would reflect the attention that they were giving to the activity.

I decided to compare the writing samples that Jennifer, Evan, and Ashley completed prior to the writing activity that they just completed, to see if their writing showed an improvement and if they were adding more detail and description to their writing. Jennifer’s writing showed similar results to the independent writing activity that students completed on a scenic picture. Compared to previous writing assignments, Jennifer increased the length of her sentences and added several descriptive words to her writing. Evan showed an overall improvement in his writing. He added more advanced descriptive words to his writing, and added some detail about the picture that he chose to describe. The only thing that did not change with his writing was the length of the paragraph that he produced. Ashley continued to excel and show improvement. The final writing piece that she produced was excellent in that she was able to combine advanced descriptive words with the “Showing vs. Telling” writing activity. Her writing used her senses to “capture the moment” and “showed” the reader what it was like to ride on the picture of the roller-coaster that she brought in. She wrote:

As I sit in the extended orange roller coaster, I notice the reddish yellow colour shining brightly. I throw my hands in the air as the roller coaster takes me upside down. I see a large lightbulb sign outlined in brilliant blue metal that reads ‘Turbo’. I start to feel sick to my stomach, so I turn my head so that I don’t have to stare down at all of the bumps. The blue sky looks like an ocean calm and comforting, but noises continue to ring in my ears. The bumps and drops are breathtaking, and then as the roller coaster whirls everyone’s hands drop and the ride becomes terrifying. I glance back and notice that all of the people are smiling, making me realize that the ride is more fun than scary. The wind rushes past us and gives me a chill. Suddenly the courageous ride comes to a stop. I look down and wonder how the grey track bars had held me in. I stand up and exit the ride knowing that I just had the time of my life.

Based on the three students that I observed for the purpose of this Action Research project, I think that the writing activities were successful in improving student initiative and ability to produce writing that is more detailed and descriptive. Did they show more interest in their writing because they could tell that I was possibly showing more attention to the description and detail that they showed? Were students more motivated to write about a picture that was of value and meaning to them, and that resulted in their improved writing results in the last writing activity? These may be some of many factors that contributed to the improvement of the writing abilities of the three selected students. I feel that the lessons taught and the experience of each writing activity, developed, and helped students produce writing that contained more description and detail.

The final task that I completed with my class involved giving students the initial writing questionnaire to fill out to see if their views on writing had changed as a result of the writing activities that they completed. I compared the results from the first questionnaire to the results from the second questionnaire to see if their attitudes about writing had changed. While many of the results were consistent, two significant results stood out.

Writing about writing...

	<i>Initial Questionnaire</i>	<i>Final Questionnaire</i>
I consider myself to be a good writer.	52%	66%
I like to share my writing with others.	33%	42%

The results of the questionnaire show a significant increase in the number of students who now consider themselves to be good writers. The results seem to suggest that they also have an increased level of confidence about their writing because more of them are now willing to share their writing with other students. Improving my teaching practice so students produce more descriptive and detailed writing has increased student confidence and initiative toward writing.

Findings

As I tried the different writing activities that I have described with my students, I also continued to monitor (reflective notes in my day plans, jot notes on specific activities, journaling) specific teaching techniques that I use when I teach the skills that I wanted students to follow and develop, in their writing activities. In my teaching practice, I have always been concerned with finding and developing the best ways to teach, to optimize student learning. I know that reflecting on my teaching practice will assist my teaching in the future and will impact my students significantly. The following list outlines specific findings from this project, as well as fundamental teaching techniques that I find useful and have developed throughout my teaching career and this Action Research project:

- **Teacher Modelling/Teacher Sharing** - Students need to see samples of good writing in order to develop their own writing skills. Students also need to be taken through the stages of writing one step at a time, so that they can see and experience how a piece of quality writing develops. Often, I share a published piece of writing, or write a sample myself so that students can see and understand how their writing can develop.
- **Provide Visual Cues** - Students need to have a clear outline of what they are expected to complete. After modelling the writing process for a specific activity, I always try to make sure that I have an outline of the activity written on the board or chart paper that clearly explains the number of paragraphs students are required to write, the length of each paragraph, and any other requirements relevant to the activity.
- **Provide Students With Immediate Feedback** - Providing students with immediate feedback about their writing helps make students more aware of their strengths and the areas that need to be improved in their writing. I often provide students with writing opportunities that they complete independently, and then bring to me for conferencing. After we have finished conferencing, students go back to their desks, make corrections, and add more detail and description to their work. Then, they bring their work back up when they feel that they are finished. We continue this process until students have completed the activity and they have produced a piece of writing that is clear and descriptive. I feel that providing immediate feedback increases students motivation toward writing because at the end of this process, they have been successful in producing a piece of good quality writing.
- **Don't Publish Everything** - Students do not need to take every piece of writing that they complete to the final stage of writing. In my class, I find that it is more important that students are given ample opportunities to write in different genres, without having to produce a polished copy of every piece of writing. I often get students to write their rough copy and then complete their editing in a different colour, so that I can see the changes that they have made. It is this copy that I mark, so that students do not become indifferent to the writing process, and we can move on to another topic of interest.
- **Whole Class Editing** - The editing process is more productive in my class when we complete it as a whole class, one step at a time. This can be long and drawn out, but I have tried self editing and peer editing, and I continue to find whole class editing to be more successful. Completing whole class editing allows me to point out the grammar and spelling errors that are often overlooked, and ensures that students are on task.

- Share Student Work - Students cannot write in isolation. Instead, they need the opportunity to learn from other students. Often, I will select a piece of student writing and share it with the class. This gives students the opportunity to explore other students' writing, so that they can see how grades are achieved, and what they can do to improve their writing. Students can also use this sharing time to develop their ideas and borrow ideas from others.
- Students Need to See the Value of What they Are Doing - Students are motivated to write about topics that are of value and meaning to them. This Action Research process has shown me that when students are motivated to write about a topic, they are more engaged, and will usually produce a piece of writing that is more descriptive and detailed. This was evident in the writing activity that students completed using a picture or photo that they selected themselves. This made the writing experience personal for my students and increased their involvement, success, and motivation.

Next Steps

As I reflect back on the year, and this Action Research project, helping my students improve the quality of their writing has been an interesting process. I am sure that teaching and helping students develop their writing skills will continue to be a challenge throughout my teaching career. I am excited to know that I have seen an improvement in the writing skills of my students. It is my goal to continue with writing activities like the ones completed and discussed in this Action Research project, in order to continue to increase the quality and quantity of student writing. I think that it would be beneficial to focus on improving student editing skills, or to look at motivation and engagement of students to improve writing for a future Action Research project.

References

Books

Leochko, Dave. (2000). 25 Quick Mini-Lessons to Teach Narrative Writing. Toronto: Scholastic Professional Books.

Routman, Regie. (2000). Conversations: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.