How Can I Use Feedback to Improve the Writing Skills of My Students?

Biography

Jeff Senior has completed his fourth year of teaching. He currently teaches Grade 7& 8 at St. George-German School in St. George, Ontario. Jeff has a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Philosophy and Religion & Culture from Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. He completed a Master of Science Degree in Education at D'Youville College, Buffalo, New York. Jeff holds Specialist qualifications in Drama, and has completed Part 1 of Special Education and Reading. This is his second Action Research project.

Abstract

Stemming from his failure to discover a program in which to provide students with authentic and meaningful feedback about their work, a teacher seeks out a process in which he can connect with students and their writing on a regular basis. This project explores the growth of a program in which students submit their work on a weekly basis regardless of their level of completion. Through an in-depth discussion about a student's work, attention is given to the need to have students embrace the writing process rather than focus on a final product.

A Question of Failure

Last year, I completed my first attempt at Action Research. I had not been happy with the way my students were performing in Writing. Upon reflection, I realized that I was actually disappointed in the way I was teaching writing. I was convinced that I could be doing something more to help my students write to their potential. I was convinced that their lack of success was in large part due to something lacking in my program. I was convinced that if I could just figure out what was missing, my students would write magically. I was thoroughly excited when I reflected upon my program and realized the problem was in the editing stage. Simply put, I was not giving students enough quality feedback about their work. You can imagine my elation. I had discovered the problem. I had a solution. All I needed to do was put it into practice. This would fix everything. Sadly, it was not the magical solution I had hoped, *"I found myself slightly disappointed in the results . . ." (Passion in Professional Practice, 2004).* I had been sure I was about to solve the problems in my program, and felt quite deflated when this did not occur, but had resolved to get into action early in the next school year, *". . . as I will tell my students, there is always a chance to make it better – and that's just what I will do." (Passion in Professional Practice, 2004).*

New Year, New Hopes

I moved to a new school, and grade, over the summer. Rather than teaching Grade 8 in a core school, I was moving to Grade 7 in a rural community. With so many changes, I found I relied on my old way of assigning writing tasks. I would choose an assignment, discuss the writing process with my students, assign the task, give them time to work on it, and then collect and mark it. Great! All done, move onto the next one! This had not been a very successful approach at Grandview, and was not terribly

successful in St. George.

At the end of last school year, I had promised myself I would implement the Nahrgang Approach (based on the pedagogy of my OAC English teacher, Jack Nahrgang). In Mr. Nahrgang's class, you were given the option to rework and resubmit assignments. They would be reevaluated without penalty. I had claimed I would do the same this year, but did not do so.

I was, once again, disappointed. The writing I was receiving from my students was average. It was OK, but nothing jumped out. I was sure they were capable of more, and again, I was sure their lack of success had something to do with my leadership. My teaching partner, Cecila Vrugteman, was equally disappointed, and, as we planned and implemented lessons together, we agreed to seek out a better model for our classrooms.

A New Approach

In early December, we met with Janet Rubas, our Vice-Principal and half-time Grade 8 teacher, to discuss an approach she was using in her class. Janet based her program on Nancie Atwell's In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents. From our discussion with Janet we were able to devise a program we were sure was going to meet our needs.

> Our language period is one hour and usually runs from 10:45 to 11:45. The one-hour block was to be divided into 3 sections. The first was a teacher-led read-a-loud. Through the read-a-loud, we felt we would be able to get students interested about literature by exploring books beyond their reading level, but not necessarily beyond their comprehension. The second block, lasting about 10 minutes, was to be devoted to mini-lessons. These lessons were to be short and focused. For example, a quick introduction to metaphor one day, a reading passage containing metaphor for students to identify the next day. Lessons would focus on literary skills we wanted addressed in their reading responses or writing activities. The final block would last for 30 - 40 minutes and was set aside for students to read or write, their choice.

The new approach also did away with due dates. We assigned each student a day of the cycle. Tyler, Arthur, Brandon, and Devin for example, were assigned to Day 1. Each Day 1, these four students were expected to hand in their Reading Response Journal and the piece they were currently writing, no matter what stages of the writing process had been completed. This way, we would be able to see their work progress. The emphasis was to be pulled away from a final product, and in turn focus on what the students were doing from day to day.

> We were excited about the potential our new approach held, and very happy about the manageability of seeing four students' work daily, rather than rushing to mark 23 final products in a night or two!

Enter Action Research

> I really enjoyed the Action Research process last year, and had been trying to decide on a topic to focus on this year. It wasn't until Cecilia and I had started to adapt Janet's program that I realized I had the perfect Action Research topic. That is, the perfect continuation of last year's examination. Seeing as I was unhappy with my results, and seeing that our new program

would have students handing in writing on an ongoing "work-in-progress" basis, I decided to revisit the idea of enhancing student writing through feedback. I was elated, and resolved to introduce the new approach and action research project in January.

The 6+1 Traits of Writing

Having a structure for the English program was nice, but we still needed the "meat" of our program. Through searching for ideas in resources we each had, as well as the internet, we discovered the 6+1 Traits of Writing. At first we used ideas and rubrics from online sites, but later we discovered a book by Ruth Culham. From the minute I began reading the introduction I fell in love with the program. Culham begins by writing:

> The 6+1 TRAIT model is more than an approach to teaching and assessing writing. It is a vocabulary teachers use to describe their vision of what good writing looks like – any kind of writing . . . Using the language of traits in our assessment gives us a shared vocabulary for speaking about and working with the texts that students create. (Culham, 2003)

Essentially the traits are a fresh way to look at the writing process. Although it is a progressive continuum, one can look at each of the traits individually, and pinpoint exactly where a student excels, or struggles. Culham explains that there are 6 main traits, and one "extra":

> 1. Ideas: Ideas make up the content of the piece of writing – the heart of the message.
> 2. Organization: Organization is the internal structure of the piece, the thread of meaning, the logical pattern of the ideas.
> 3. Voice: Voice is the soul of the piece. It's what makes the writer's style singular, as his or her feelings and convictions come out through the words.
> 4. Word Choice: Word Choice is at its best when it includes the use of rich, colourful, precise language that moves and enlightens the reader.
> 5. Sentence Fluency: Sentence Fluency is the flow of the language, the sound of word patterns – the way the writing plays to the ear, not just to the eye.
> 6. Conventions: Conventions represent the piece's level of correctness – the extent to which the writer uses grammar and mechanics with precision.
>
> +1. Presentation: Presentation zeros in on the form and layout – how pleasing the piece is to the eye.

So, we had a structure. We had content. All that was left was to put our plan into action, right after the Christmas break.

The Introduction

When we returned after the Christmas break, I was excited to share the new language program with my students. We had called it The Grade 7 Reading & Writing Program, and had created a full duo-tang for each individual student. Everything the student needed to know about the program was contained in this resource. We began with a personalized letter to each student explaining the Reading Response Journal (see Appendix). The letter gave an overview of the new program. Also contained in the duo-tang were sections entitled: Traits of an Effective Reader, 6 Traits of Writing, Rubrics (for

the six traits), Leveled Writing Samples, Writing Samples, Writing Prompts, Published Works.

That first day back, I gave an overview of the new program. I especially stressed the "day of the week due date" and explained to the students that they would not have final due dates in English anymore, but needed to submit their work each cycle on their assigned day. I explained that I wanted to see their writing, no matter what stage they had completed. It did not matter to me if it was just ideas jotted down on paper, or an outline, or a full draft. They were to hand it in, and I would provide feedback, in the form of notes attached to their paper by post-it notes. Students were also told we would meet for a conference the day after they submitted their work. So, if they were a Day 3 student, we would meet during the work period on Day 4 to conference about their work. This way, the students would receive verbal as well as written feedback.

One of the most important parts of this program is the aspect of choice. On each day, students were given the choice of what they wanted to work on, reading or writing. They did not have to have it approved by me, they just chose what to work on. As I was explaining the program, Devin raised his hand.

"Mr. Senior, I just wanted to say that this is so much better than what we did first term."
"How can you know that Devin? We haven't started yet."
"Even so. It's just better." (Personal Journal, January, 2005).

That seemed to be the general feeling of the class. This was a better English program than first terms.

I didn't realize how horrible my first term programming was until I shared this new program. I had intended this to be a positive introduction, but in many ways it turned into a bashing of the old. The enthusiasm in the classroom for this new program is exciting. Now, I just hope it works. (Personal Journal, January, 2005)

The Implementation

The first set of mini-lessons I conducted focused around each of the 6 TRAITS. We discussed the rubrics for the trait we were studying that day. I then directed the students to read 3 short passages of student work, focusing on the trait-of-the-day, and, using the rubric, evaluate the piece. The challenge that faced the students in these first lessons was evaluating the piece on a specific trait. Many students wanted to assign a lower level because of conventional errors, but had to be reminded that we were only looking at *Ideas*. However, the students started to get the hang of it, and we began our writing.

For the period from January to March Break, students were expected to publish a minimum of 3 pieces: one narrative, one expository, one persuasive. Order and topics were up to the choice of the student. I explained to the student, that I, acting as a type of "editor" was the one who had the power to decide if a piece was published. We would work together, through conferencing and written guidance, to improve each draft, until it was ready to be published. Our criterion for publishing was that it be written to the student's full potential. Through this explanation, we discussed the need to submit writing every cycle.

I tried to stress to the students how important the ongoing process was . . . "We are no longer looking a final product. Now, we want to focus on revising. Professional writers often write draft after draft after draft. You might have to, as well. Write lots, hand it in every cycle, and

you will get it published in time. But, don't expect to hand all three in at the end of the term, and have them accepted." I think they understood. (Personal Journal, January, 2005).

We had some growing pains in the first few weeks. Kinks that had to be worked out. Many students got the hang of handing in their writing each week, with their reading responses. Some perpetually handed in one, or the other, and there were two students who rarely submitted work. Each week I would conference with each student (sometimes just asking the student to produce a piece of work, other times in big discussion over an introduction). In general, I was feeling that we were getting somewhere. The students seemed more motivated, their writing seemed to be improving, and the whole program was feeling like a success.

I love this new program. Janet had told me that I would know my students' writing inside and out, and she's right. It is hard to believe how much better this method is compared to the traditional "brainstorming - draft - revise - edit - good copy method".
(Personal Journal, February 2005).

An Example of Success

I truly felt, that as I watched my students work evolve, we were seeing success. Students who had written well in term 1 continued to write well, and even better than before. Where they once felt they were finished, I could now use guiding questions to help them take their papers further than they would have on their own. I was starting to get the feeling that many of the students would see a full grade change on their report cards.

I think my level 3s are becoming level 4s, and my level 2s are becoming level 3s. The best part of it is that it is still their own work, I am just a voice in the back of their heads making a few subtle suggestions.
(Personal Journal, February 2005).

One student who most comes to mind as an example of success, is Amber G. Amber is a pleasant, quiet, but generally hardworking student. She rarely missed a deadline, but her work usually received marks of Level 1 and low Level 2's. Her first term report card mark in Writing was: 66%. Amber chose as her first writing choice, a persuasive piece: "It's better to be a kid". She handed it to me on January 28. In my writing conference record (see appendix) I listed her strengths, "some solid ideas, follows paragraph form." As weaknesses, I recorded, "support for points to solidify evidence needed." I felt she would do better if she used one of the graphic organizers I had provided, and gave her the following advice on a post-it note attached to her piece, "This is beginning of a good piece, but you need to go back and fill out a Graphic Organizer (sic) to get your ideas in order." Within a couple of days, Amber returned with a completed graphic organizer.

By the time I saw her next draft on February 1, I was listing "better detail and support" under strengths, and "needs introduction and stronger conclusion" under weaknesses. Amber had introduced her paper as follows:

> "Its better to be a child because you get almost every thing that you want. You get away with every thing. You get nap time. You don't have to walk every were. We don't have to worry about a job or kids. All we have to worry about it having fun." (Amber, Feb. 1 2005)

On a post-it I wrote: "Needs an introduction, how can you introduce your topic?" In our conference, Amber and I discussed introductions. We talked about how a writer needs to grab the attention of the audience, and let the reader know what's to come in the rest of the paper. We discussed that to persuade someone, you have to get that person to read your full paper.

> Amber and I discussed the need for strong introductions. I let her know that she is just jumping into the first support and needs to do something to grab the reader's attention. I asked her to think about what it is she is REALLY trying to say, and how she could use that to introduce her topic.

The following week, I received this introduction from Amber:

"I think every kid in the world now should stay the way they are. We will get older, you would stop ageing at the age of 17 (like you wont get any older) you will grow taller untill you are 17. I think this because. . . "

Wow. What a difference. Of course, there were still improvements to be made, but I was thrilled with the fact that this piece now had an introduction, and it was good. One of the week's post-it notes this time said, "Great intro sentence!" Over the next couple of weeks we worked on other issues, such as choosing "we" or "they" and keeping it consistent throughout the paper. We continued to work on the introduction, and the conclusion. We discussed topic sentences and supporting detail, and this paper really began to develop. By February 25 her paper began like this:

"I think every kid in the world now should stay the way they are, because right now things are really sweet. We would get older and then stop growing/aging at the age of 17."

She ended her paper with the following paragraph:

"So if we do not act our age then we cannot have fun. I mean, you can act younger than you age but do not act older than your age. If you act older then your mom or dad will give you more responsibilities and you not know what to do (about it). The sooner you grow up, the sooner you have to stop goofing off and having fun. Things are really sweet now, so why give it up so soon? Please do not take it away from us." (Amber, February 2005).

I was excited about where we had taken this paper. In its early stages we had no introduction, little conclusion. The paper was written in more of a list form, with little supporting evidence. Amber's voice did not come through very well, and it full of conventional errors. By this draft, we had what I thought was a solid introduction, there were clear ideas supported by examples, and the conclusion summed up much of what was stated in the paper. All in all, this paper had come a long way. The only thing missing, I felt, was the presentation. I asked Amber to type it up, and consider how best to present it. I was pleasantly surprised by how she decided to proceed.

The following week, when I received Amber's paper for publishing, it was typed. She had chosen an interesting font, and attached to the front of it her own post-it note. The post-it simply read, "It's better to be a kid. It is like a little kid wrote it." When I looked more closely at her paper, I saw what she meant. A week earlier, her paper had been edited, had few spelling or grammatical errors, and was ready to be typed. Now, words were intentionally misspelled, capitals had been removed, and

some of the grammar errors were back . . . just as if a "little kid wrote it." I had to smile. This one was published.

What Contributed to Success?

Amber's success, and the increase in her report grade from a level 2 to a level 3 was experienced by nine members of the class. Six students' grades remained roughly the same, while seven experienced a drop in level. What was it that those fifteen students who saw an increase or remained constant did that the other seven did not? As I looked closely at the data in front of me, it became clear. The 64% of students who experienced success all bought into the process. They were students who submitted their writing every, or almost every, week. They responded positively to suggestions given to them, and they made solid attempts to put those suggestions into practice. Each of these students published the minimum three pieces, and eight even published more than three. Through their commitment to the process, these students were, in many cases, able to take their writing to new heights.

What About the Other Seven?

My epiphany about the reason for some students being so successful begged the question, "What about the other seven?" It seemed to me the process was beautifully simple, and should have resulted in a higher percentage of success.

> "As I am getting reports together, I am shocked at the number of students whose marks ACTUALLY DROPPED! Tyler, Ashley and Mike only handed their work in twice. I don't understand why, if a teacher says, "hand it in and together we'll make it better," a student would not hand in their work. This wasn't a problem for them in term 1, why is it a problem now?" (Personal Journal, March 2005).

It's true, it was not a problem in term one. I did receive work more regularly from each of these students. I decided to ask Mike why he did not submit his work.

> "I don't know . . . I guess it's because you said we had all term to get them done. Then the term was over." (Personal Interview, March 10, 2005).

I really had not expected that. In conversations with other students who had not seen success, Mike's comments were echoed.

> "It surprises me that so many people found the "no due date" approach to be a problem. But, most of the students whose marks went down, and even some that stayed the same, said the same thing. It's hard when there is no due date." (Personal Journal, March 2005).

This gave me some ideas about how to change things for term three.

Concept Revisited

In conversations with my teaching partner, we decided to address the "no due date" issue that seemed to be causing some problems for some of our students. In term two we had stated that students must publish three pieces: a narrative, a persuasive, and an expository. The order in which they were

completed was up to the student, as long as all three were published by the end of the term. We still believed in the element of choice. We felt it was important to let the students choose which piece they would work on, and when they would do that. We also still believed in the "day-of-the-cycle due dates". So, to help focus our students, we set three "soft due dates". In term three our students would again be expected to complete three pieces: a poem, a report, and an advertisement. When students returned from March Break they received the following note:

You'll notice a couple of changes to the Reading and Writing Workshop as you come back this term. First of all, let us remind you that many of the expectations remain the same. You are still expected to hand in your reading response AND your writing on your assigned day of the cycle. Don't forget about this, meeting of cyclic goals is an important part of getting a good mark!
Changes:

•   You will now be expected to publish one writing piece per month
•   Your first piece must be published no later than April 15
•   Your second piece must be published no later than May 11
•   Your third piece must be published by June 7
•   This still allows 2 full cycles to publish a fourth piece. (Student handout, March 2005).

Although we had set due dates, I did not give a penalty for submitting the work late, I simply used it as a tool to focus those students who needed a target date. And, as in the previous term, students were permitted to attack these tasks in any order they preferred.

More Success

I was pleased with how term three turned out. All but two students handed in their work on a consistent basis. Most students were successful in publishing a minimum of three pieces, however it is interesting to note that in term two, eight students published extra work, whereas in term three, once the due dates were in place, only two students published more than the required pieces.

Report card marks for term three were also positive. Of the twenty-two students in the class, only three saw a drop in their mark over the previous term. And of those three, two were only a drop of 2%. On the other side, eleven of the nineteen students remaining improved their marks by 5% or more, and the overall class average rose 5%.

In a discussion with my class near the end of the year (June 13, 2005) I asked them to report on our Reading & Writing Workshop. The tone of conversation was mostly positive. The most negative comments I received were in regard to the reading portion of the workshop (perhaps that is a topic for research next year). Students reported a liking of the "day-of-the-cycle due dates." Many claimed the feedback was the most positive part of the program. As Jaclyn commented:

"I liked handing my work in every week, because then I knew I would get it back and you would have told me how to make it better. I liked that you didn't tell us what to do, but usually gave us questions so we had to figure it out ourselves." (Class discussion, June 2005).

Other students reported similar feelings, the only truly negative comment being about the choices in the third term. Chantelle claimed:

"I liked it better in term two when we could pick from a long list of ideas or do our own. This term you made the assignments too specific and I didn't like that as much." (Class discussion, June 2005).

When I asked if I should do the same program next year, the class overwhelmingly responded, "Yes!". Now that is success, and it felt good.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This has been an ongoing battle for me. After four years of teaching, and through two action research projects, I have finally found a model I think will work in my classroom. Writing is a tricky skill for students to learn, they have to think about the ideas they are trying to express, and the right words to express them, and we expect them to do this fluently and with voice. When you receive a group of students in September, they are at so many different ability levels when it comes to writing, and as a teacher you have to somehow balance the needs of the class with the needs of the individual student. For me, this process worked. I was able to see, and read, and speak to my students' writing on a weekly basis. I was able to watch closely as they followed the writing process, and with a little bit of facilitating on my part I was able to watch them take their writing pieces as far as they wanted. By the time we had published a student's work, both the student and I were pleased with it.

I enjoyed this process, because I truly felt connected to my student's writing. I enjoyed how everyone in the class was able to be successful. I enjoyed how this process showed students that they may have to attack an assignment a number of different times, but if they persevered, they would find success. I enjoyed how students were shown the benefits of writing over time, rather than the night before an assignment is due.

Where do I go from here? While I am pleased with this program, I know it is not finished yet. Will we keep the day-of-the-week due date? Absolutely. Will I continue to conference closely with my students? For sure. Is it going to be the same next year? Not at all. Just as I have tried to teach my students that you need to keep on improving what you have written, draft after draft after draft, so too, will I, seek to improve this process. How many drafts will it take me? Well, if Amber was willing to rewrite Why it's better to be a kid eight times, surely I can take a few more stabs at creating the "perfect writing program". Who knows, maybe I'll be able to bump myself up a full grade level.

References

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Culham, R. (2003). 6+1 Traits of Writing. Scholastic Professional Books.

Rubas, J. (2004). Personal Interview regarding reading and writing workshop. December 7, 2004.

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Appendices

January 3, 2005

Dear Tyler,

Your response log is a place for you to talk about books, reading, authors, and writing. You will think about what you are reading and write me letters. I'll write letters back to you. Our letters will become a record of the thinking, learning, and reading we did together.

Your letters should be at least one to two paragraphs long. In your letters tell me what you felt when you read a book and why. Tell what you noticed about how the author wrote. Tell why you think he or she wrote this way. Tell what you liked and didn't like and why. Tell how you read a book and why. Tell what a book said and meant to you. Tell what it reminded you of – what other books or experiences from your own like. Tell what surprised you. Ask questions for help, and, write back about your ideas, feelings, experiences, and questions.

As a bare minimum, you must write a letter to me in your reading response log at least once a cycle. You must hand in your response journal on Mondays. You must also hand in your response log when you complete a book or when you decide to abandon a book. These guidelines are only the minimum. I will respond to your letter as quickly as possible.

When you finish writing an entry in your log, put it in the "7S IN" bin. If the reason you are handing in the log is because you have completed, or in some cases abandoned, a book, make sure to list the book on your Student Reading Record pasted into the back of the log.

You may write and respond to letters both during and outside of Reading/Writing Workshop.

Number the pages of your reading response log, as in a book. Date your letters in the upper right-hand corner. Under the date, write the name of the book and the author. Underline the title and use capitals when required. Use a greeting and a closing, just as you would in any friendly letter.
I look forward to hearing how you respond to the books you are reading!

Respectfully,

Mr. Senior

September 19, 2005
Night by
Elie Wiesel
Dear Mr. Senior,

Write your Response

Sincerely,

Reading Conference Record   Name: _____

Date	Conference Notes	Oral Reading	Next Steps/Comments
	Book:_____ Current Page: _____ Retell:	substitutions mispronunciations insertions omissions repetitions self-corrections expression ignored punctuation	
	Book:_____ Current Page: _____ Retell:	substitutions mispronunciations insertions omissions repetitions self-corrections expression ignored punctuation	
	Book:_____ Current Page: _____ Retell:	substitutions mispronunciations insertions omissions repetitions self-corrections expression ignored punctuation	
	Book:_____ Current Page: _____ Retell:	substitutions mispronunciations insertions omissions repetitions self-corrections expression ignored punctuation	
	Book:_____ Current Page: _____ Retell:	substitutions mispronunciations insertions omissions repetitions self-corrections expression ignored punctuation	
	Book:_____ Current Page: _____ Retell:	substitutions mispronunciations insertions omissions repetitions self-corrections expression ignored punctuation	

Writing Conference Record

Name: _____

Date	Story Title / Content	Comments (Strengths & Weaknesses)	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Fluency	Conventions	Next Steps