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Point of View

Krag R. Sanford

Transition to the New Writing Proficiency Test

I began teaching in 1987 in a self-contained elementary classroom. Since that time I have made extensive revisions to my reading and language arts curriculum and assessment for the purpose of increasing my students' success. My literacy program has been updated to reflect the whole language, writer's workshop, and integrated curriculum philosophies, and to include holistic measures of assessing children's literacy development.

While all of these curricular revisions reflected sound literacy practices, I did not know if they would prepare my students for the 5th Grade Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) Writing Test. The new Writing MEAP Test was designed to address a student's ability to use many parts of writing process and practice including, prewriting, conferencing, revision, and editing. In addition, the test required that students stay focused over the three-day duration of the test to produce a final copy for submission to holistic scoring by the state.

Throughout last year I gathered data as my students prepared for and took the 5th Grade Writing MEAP. My research consisted of student interviews, surveys, and a journal of my observations and reflections. The discussion of the data will illustrate student perceptions about writing at the beginning of the year, the differences they perceived between the writing process and previous writing experiences, and their final perceptions about the writing process and the Writing MEAP.

The Writing Process: In the Beginning

During the first week of class I presented the students with a three-question writing prompt: 1) What did you need to know to become a good writer? 2) When did you first realize that you were a writer? 3) How would you rate your abilities as

a reader and writer? Interestingly, I found many of the students did not think of themselves as writers.

In response to question one, they informed me that to become a good writer a person had to know his or her alphabet, have good handwriting, and have some stories to tell. As for realizing when he or she became a writer, one child said, "I haven't been able to write a good story since second grade when I could draw a picture first." He went on to say that he learned to tell stories when he was just old enough to hold a crayon. He drew pictures for his mom and dad, and then he had to describe what he had drawn because they didn't know what his picture was. As he got older, he began learning to read and write. His parents and teachers insisted that the pictures had to be replaced by words.

Some of the students believed that they hadn't become writers because real writers had their work made into books. "My stories are only read by a teacher or my friend, if I think that they are good enough," remarked one girl.

Her friend said that, "I have tons of stories at home. I love to write just before I go to sleep or when I play in my tree house, but they're not school writing. I'm sure that I wouldn't get a good grade on them."

This thought about having different standards applied to their writing followed through in

the answers for the third question. Every student interviewed thought that there had to be at least two sets of criteria when it came to writing abilities. One standard was for writing for fun, and one standard for school. They all felt that they were good to excellent writers for fun, and with one or two exceptions, they were very poor writers for school. "I never really understand what the teacher wants me to write about. If I can't understand the story how can I write about it?" questioned one boy.

All of the students were nervous as I described Writers' Workshop—the way we would do English and writing in our room. This was the first time they were asked to think about writing as a process and as a specific subject, and many students were reluctant to write. They did not think any of their work was worth saving. Their portfolios would have been completely empty if I had not collected the pieces for them. They lost or left their journals at home, trying to avoid our twenty minutes of silent, daily writing. They referred to the whole class editing and vocabulary lessons as stupid and tried to disrupt the entire class in an effort to cause me so much frustration that I would give up. Some brought notes in from home describing how excessive writing was causing hand and wrist injuries.

Amazingly, the accomplished writers had many of the same negative behaviors. They were unsettled when I asked them to spend a great deal of time on one piece of writing. They had always been able to produce the first, and only, draft with a high degree of success. Making them revise a piece of work made them think that the piece of writing was somehow bad. Their frustration often elicited the same outward behavior as I saw with the reluctant writers. Leaving journals at home or misplacing them was common for a few of them. Parents called or sent notes complaining that too much pressure was being applied to the children because of process writing. Daily writing was difficult for them because they felt they were running out of ideas to write about. They found themselves unable to force themselves to write when they didn't have anything more to share or they didn't like the topic that I had given them as a prompt. In the beginning, both reluctant and

accomplished writers struggled to understand the how and why of process writing.

Product vs. Process: Going Beyond the First Draft

As the year went on the students struggled with revision. I realized that the students had to unlearn the first draft mentality and had to be shown the benefit of process writing. I knew it was going to take some time to deprogram them from the one-draft writing mindset. There was a product to be identified; however, it would come at the end of the process and not at the beginning. Time was a critical part of this evolution. For some students the process took too long; for others there never seemed to be enough time, as the following student described:

I can't finish anything when I try to write this way. I like the brainstorming and sharing my writing with a friend, but by the time I get to the end I hate the story and I want to throw it away or just not finish it. I have only been able to get two stories done. Last year I had ten or twelve finished by now.

This accomplished writer had always been complemented on her writing and had been selected to attend the county-wide Young Authors' Celebration one or two times in her school career. She always received high grades on her stories and was very proud that she could compose a five- or six-page story in one sitting. She was definitely a "one draft" only writer.

One of her friends, on the other hand, did not feel as confident in her writing. She told me that she only liked a few parts of the writing process because it made her have to do too much work. "I hate to write my own stories. I never have a good idea for a story, and so I usually write something that sounds like a book that I like, or my friend's story. I could never think of anything good myself." This student approached a writing assignment as a chore that had to be done in order to get a grade. She always asked how much time she had to write, or how long the piece had to be. She never wrote any more than one draft. When asked to revise, conference, or edit, she told me that she was happy with the way it was the first time, and I should accept it that way.

Unlike the two girls who resisted revision, one of the boys told me that he liked this new approach to writing. He said:

I have never been comfortable turning in my first draft. I never feel that it is done, or that it is the best that I can do. Many times I forget to bring it in when it is due so I can work longer on it at home. This usually gives me a slightly lower grade, but I don't care, it is worth it to turn in a better story. I'll just risk the poor grade.

In addition to the students' preconceptions about how long writing should take, they also had the idea that all writing should have a specific length and no writing piece should ever exceed one page. I attributed the length requirement to their fear of not knowing their capabilities when writing a multi-paged document. Never having to write in this format before caused them to question the boundaries of when I thought a piece was long enough. The ability to develop fluency in writing was very difficult in the beginning. Many students were unable to prolong a thought for more than five minutes. At the end, they would sit there and complain that they were done, and there was nothing that they could do about it. After the daily, silent writing program, all of the students looked forward to that time when he or she could be lost in his or her thoughts for twenty minutes. This also became important to them when practicing for and taking the MEAP Test. They were very confident that they would be able to generate enough of a rough draft on whatever topic was given them in order to produce a quality product.

After mastering the daily, silent writing exercises, the next problems were revision and editing. Only through modeling, practice, and more practice did the students become familiar with these specific parts of the process. Once they understood some of the many strategies available to them, they were able to apply the strategies in many types of writing assignments.

Assessing the Process: Students' Perceptions of Writing and the Writing MEAP

After months of daily writing, and after having taken the Writing MEAP, I asked my students to

respond to three questions about preparing for and taking the new writing proficiency test: A) What have you learned about becoming a writer using the writing process? B) What is your impression of the Writing MEAP Test? C) How will you use your writing abilities in the future? After a year in which the students often struggled with the process, their answers provided me with a very hopeful outlook on the future of this type of testing and instruction, as well as the impact in the students' lives outside of the classroom. Here are a few of their answers:

Question 1: What have you learned about becoming a writer using the writing process?

What I have learned is that I am a good writer. When I lived in _____ and _____ I didn't write well. I mean, my stories were just a mess! I didn't know how to express my feelings on paper. I didn't have descriptive writing skills, and my sentences didn't make any sense at all. I had run-on sentences most of the time, and I forgot to capitalize letters. I'm just glad that we could learn process writing it has really helped me a lot.

I have learned how to write better. I can spell better. I feel more confident about writing and reading my stories to other people. I can write about my feelings sometimes. I know (sic) I like to write more. Sometimes I write in the van, the truck and in my house. I learned about the different parts of writing. I also know that writing is a talent and that people should use it more often. When I write I learn about writing skills.

I have learned the power of writing. I have increased my vocabulary higher than normal. It has changed the way I think of books that I read and has made me want to read harder books. I have tried writing plays, expert studies, and poetry. The process works on all types of writing.

What I have learned in writing is that the music we listen to helps me think. Also where the punctuation marks go, how to indent, and how to correct a friend's paper.

Question 2: What is your impression of the Writing MEAP Test

I think this new kind of test was a good challenge for me and my class. I think you should do this for the years to come. It would be a good idea to change the subject each year so that our brothers and sisters can't cheat.

I really liked the three day schedule. I liked the third day the best. I liked it because we had 40 minutes to write our final copy. I felt nervous at first but soon I got excited and looked forward to each day and writing. I'm glad we were the first ones to do this.

My opinion on the writing proficiency test is that it was a good experience. I would make a few changes like; I would give students an hour instead of 45 minutes. I would allow them more time for the peer editing process. I think this is a great test to continue in the future.

Some of the ways I liked this test are brainstorming. The ways I liked brainstorming is that it gives you time by yourself for awhile and then with the class. I didn't like the topic, because firsts cover so much. I would like a smaller topic.

Rereading I liked because it was not very hard and there was enough time for us to do it. The revision I didn't like because, there was not enough time. On the final copy I did not have enough time to finish. When I was first informed about having to take this test, I didn't really feel anything. I knew that this was the first year that our elementary had taken it, and that we were the "guinea pigs," but I also knew that I had to take the test and try to do my best.

I liked the idea about having the test in three, 45 min. periods, instead of all in one day. If the test was in one day I would get tired and bored. The only part I didn't like is that you only have 45 min. to make sure that you have everything done on your revision and then write your final copy.

When I took the test I felt anxious to get done with the test. I felt ambivalent because I didn't care what happened. I just wrote what ever I thought of because that's what I usually have done on my writing assignments and I do good on them. I don't like taking tests, so I just want to get it over with. Even though it was the big one, and I was one of the

first to take it, I didn't feel nervous. Well, maybe a bit. I liked the schedule because it gave time for you to think. I liked the topic because I knew a lot about it. The peer editing was long enough for me, I had time left. I was frustrated when there was only a couple of minutes left. I think we should have skipped the revision and went straight to the final copy. When we were able to choose a first, instead of having to write about a certain one, I was glad. I picked my first time I spent the night at a friend's house. I was very excited when I got done. I was positive I did well when I handed it in. When we were all done my teacher said mine was good, very good.

I feel we should keep the writing proficiency test even if people don't like it. I think this because it can improve your writing abilities. The writing proficiency test is a test that tests you on the level you write at.

When the second day came we had to do our revision in seventeen minutes. I didn't think that that was enough time because the piece that I had written was very long. I needed more time.

I think the three days was a good choice because it gave me time to think what I was going to write next. If I had to do all the steps in three hours I wouldn't have got them done.

Question 3: How will you use your writing abilities in the future?

I have always wanted to be a writer. I have written thousands of stories over the years but could never finish them good enough to publish them. After this year I know the process that every writer goes through and I can become successful in publishing my books.

I have an older brother in the Middle School and I know that he has had to do a lot more writing than he did in fifth grade, but not as much as I have. Some times when he is working on a paper he will ask me to help revise and edit it. I am looking forward to the Middle School and the chance to show my new teachers how I can write.

I once thought that writing stories was boring cause I could never think of anything to write about. I enjoyed the expert studies writing

because I could choose something that I wanted to learn about and then write about it. I could use the writing process in expert studies like I did in creative writing. I hope to be a scientist or archeologist and I know that my journal writing and expert studies writing will be very helpful.

Conclusion

The students surprised me with the positive attitudes they shared about the writing process and the Writing MEAP. From their frustrated beginnings of not feeling like writers to the ongoing struggles with revision and editing, the students did come to know and use the process. While they often cited being nervous about the test, they were not intimidated by it, and they felt they did perform well. These are students, then, who have clearly taken ownership of the process

writing strategies and, I believe, will continue to improve.

In the beginning of the year I worried that I would not be able to do enough to teach my students to become better writers. I worried that even if I could do that, they would not be writers who could demonstrate their abilities on the MEAP. After this year I know that if I do a thorough job of teaching my students the writing process, they will not only become good writers but ones who can perform well and, perhaps most importantly, perceive themselves as good writers.

About the Author

Krag Sanford, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant and former elementary school teacher, is teaching 9th grade English at Saranac High School.