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Assumptions, Frustrations, and Beliefs: One Teacher's Struggle to Teach Writing

Margy Dewey

After six years of teaching sixth grade, this past year found me with a new teaching assignment, a fourth grade class. I looked forward to a refreshing change of younger students, different attitudes, and new beginnings. I began the year with the highest of expectations. This year would be different. This year all the frustrations I experienced with writing instruction in the past would disappear. After all, didn't fourth graders still have that zest for learning? Weren't they untarnished by the attitudes that some sixth graders develop?

I fully expected my past experience with sixth graders to be of great value in working with fourth graders. I had an idea of the weak areas the sixth graders typically had and could work at addressing them at an earlier age. I made many assumptions about the differences I would find in fourth graders. I expected the fourth graders to be much more focused on school with their social activities causing only a minimal distraction. I assumed since they used the writing process regularly in their primary experience, they would be much more cooperative and willing to participate in a writers' workshop. They would have a wealth of ideas and be uninhibited in sharing their ideas and their writing. I expected that all the difficulties and frustrations I had encountered in working with the writing process with sixth graders would be eliminated in fourth grade. I soon discovered that these assumptions were wrong.

I was not seeing the quality I expected, and I sensed a general willingness to be satisfied with less than a best effort.

Having been inspired by Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle*, I had attempted a writers' workshop for several years. While I began each year with high hopes, I was quickly frustrated with both the place for teaching skills within writing instruction and management difficulties. The conference corners often turned into social gatherings. I often heard "I don't know what to write about." I found that many students had difficulty with editing, and many pieces were filled with mechanical errors. Most students were unwilling to revise. I found it difficult to spend adequate time to meet individually with students. I was not seeing the quality I expected, and I sensed a general willingness to be satisfied with less than a best effort. I continually questioned whether my struggling students were learning and improving. At the same time I doubted whether my competent writers were being challenged. I saw that the carry-over of skill instruction into finished pieces of writing was minimal. Most frustrating of all was the resistance and constant effort it took to get minimal production.

I hoped my work with my fourth grade students would be different. I was both surprised and disillusioned when my announcement that we would be beginning a writers' workshop was met with groans. Where were my blossoming fourth graders untainted by poor attitudes about writing? Where were my budding authors filled with stories ready to spill forth to be stored in the waiting folders and be published into books? Where were those uninhibited children who fell over each other to share their ideas and their writing? I couldn't believe this response. Maybe this had nothing to do with age, attitudes, or hormones!

Determined to work towards giving my students a positive writing experience, I tried a variety of strategies. Sometimes the writing grew out of an activity in class. One such activity was a "Me" bag. In an effort to get to know one another better, we each brought home a lunch bag in which we put five items that were special to us. The items were shared with the class. Then each student wrote a paragraph about himself/herself explaining what was in the "Me" bag. The activity proved to be a good introduction to paragraph writing because the contents of the bag gave a framework for the assignment. The students enjoyed sharing their bags and their paragraphs, and the accompanying "Me" posters made a nice hall display. Exhilarated by this success, I forged ahead.

One of our most successful experiences was the one issue of the school-wide newspaper we published. Ideas for the articles were generated by the class, and students selected which articles they wrote. Most students worked in pairs or trios. Students set up and conducted interviews, did surveys in the cafeteria, and in general reported on school events.

The Michigan Museum was our final project of the school year and was our study of the state of Michigan. The students generated topics of interest about Michigan such as colleges and universities, explorers, pioneers, major cities, The Great Lakes, and Henry Ford and the assembly line. Students worked in groups to research their topics, wrote informational pieces, and then made displays to go along with the writing. We opened our museum to classes in the school who were led

on tours where each display was explained by its creators. We also held an open house for parents one evening.

Even though several individual projects were successful, I continually questioned what my students were learning. The quality of the work was inconsistent. One piece of writing could have me elated with the growth and progress and the next looking like we learned nothing.

In retrospect, I realized my personal struggle over knowing how much time to spend on skills, as well as how to assess how my students were progressing, was influenced by the controversy of skill instruction versus whole language which waged furiously both in the newspapers and in our curriculum meetings. As fifth and sixth grade teachers vented their frustrations that their students could not write a decent paragraph, my own self-doubts deepened.

I began to internalize what I'd read and heard before: skill instruction is merely a means to an end, the end being the improvement of writing.

One particular curriculum meeting finally helped clarify the issues for me. Several teachers voiced their concerns that more writing skills needed to be taught. But these shared concerns over the teaching of capitalization, punctuation, and grammar, soon grew into something different. Teachers began to argue that we needed to teach the students to diagram sentences, not because it helped them become better writers, but because that was the expectation of the seventh grade teachers in the junior high.

I could clearly see through this argument that they saw the skill as **the** end product, not as something that would help students improve their writing. It was during this meeting that I began to clarify where I believed the teaching of skills fit into writing instruction. As the other teachers argued about the importance of sentence diagramming, I began to internalize what I'd read and heard before: skill instruction is merely a means to an end, the end being the improve-

ment of writing. I began to feel the liberation of knowing with some confidence the role skills could play in my writing instruction. I knew I could teach the skills I deemed necessary, while I could discard the ones I thought were not helpful to my students.

Even though I was able to clarify my beliefs about writing instruction and the teaching of skills, I still have many questions and self-doubts. There is no guarantee that this next year is the year I will finally get it all together. However, I have now internalized several related beliefs. First, I see my periods of self doubt and the questioning of my practices as positive. When I truly believe that I finally have it right and stop reflecting, I will be doing an injustice to my students. Second, I realize that a variety of writing experiences enhances the program and that variety has to be adapted to the class for that year. Third, I have found that there is room for student choice and expression within the parameters I have set and that some students are more comfortable with these parameters. Too little structure can some-

times be as inhibiting as too much structure. Fourth, I have found that when writing is relevant to the student with the goal being publication, the engagement in the activity is high, and the quality of the finished product is improved. Fifth, I have learned that there is not one right way or one perfect program. Rather, my students and I together, must find our way and discover what works best for us.

Lastly, I have discovered that the validation of my instructional decisions cannot come from the teacher who will be receiving my students since he/she will usually find them lacking in skills. Instead, the validation must come from the students themselves through their growth and their attitudes, and from the knowledge that I am acting on what I believe is the best for them.

My journey into whole language and the writing process will continue. My learning, like that of my students, will be punctuated with periods of growth and times of regression. I will experience the successes and the near misses and thrive upon the challenges that lay ahead.