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ABSTRACT

Of poor academic skills, perhaps the most prevalent among at-risk students is the lack of ability to compose--to develop ideas in print. Providing opportunities to learn that skill opens a whole new world for young people who believe they are incapable of learning. This paper describes writing instruction that was provided over a 4-year period in language arts classes for at-risk students in a rural high school in Forgan, Oklahoma. Students in the classes had scored in the lower 50 percent on a state-mandated achievement test. Students had learning disabilities, were unmotivated, came from dysfunctional homes, or had been in trouble with the court system. Nearly all were boys. Classes were limited to 10-12 students. In the initial diagnostic writing assessment, many students could not write even one sentence. Teaching methods included having students use note cards to jot down ideas, brainstorming, minilessons on plot development and dialogue, cooperative story writing and proofreading, use of computers for final composition, presentation of stories to kindergarten students, and development and self-evaluation of portfolios. Students consistently improved their ability to write over the 4-year period, and learned to find information in the library, through interviews, and through computer searches. Their self-esteem improved because they knew they were learning to write, and this new skill helped them in their other classes. This paper includes sample writing assignments. (SV)

TEACHING WRITING TO AT RISK STUDENTS IN A RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

BY
V. PAULINE HODGES

TEACHING WRITING TO AT RISK STUDENTS IN A RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

Students may be less at risk in rural schools than in urban areas. Teachers have more opportunity to know their students on a personal level, and, therefore, to provide support and assistance these students would not receive in a high school of a thousand students in a city setting. Teachers are more likely to know the parents or at least to know who they are. Students then are less likely to get "lost in the system." However, this does not mean their academic needs are being met any more effectively. In the rural areas, the very cause of students being at risk is often their poor academic skills when they reach high school. My observetions of at risk students over the past forty years in education (although of course in earlier years we had not coined that term!) is that lack of academic skills is the most prevalent cause of students failing, dropping out of high school, and having poor self-esteem. We would like to blame society, parents, drugs, and love of jobs and cars when, in fact, one of the most common factors is the one we control. It is not that the other causes are not to blame. They are.

Of poor academic skills, the one I have observed as the most prevalent among at risk students is their lack of ability to compose, to get words on paper, to develop ideas in print. Not that these students can't think. Not that they have learning disabilities (although many do), not that they are incapable; the problem is that they cannot express what they do, indeed, know. Providing opportunities to learn that skill opens a whole new world for these young people who believe they are stupid and incapable of learning. Not that acquiring the ability to write will cure the other problems outside of the school environment, but it does

provide a measure of accomplishment these students have not had before, and then the inability to write becomes one less factor in the at risk syndrome.

When I returned to my home in rural Oklahoma after retiring from teaching at the university setting and administering a language arts program in an urban area in Colorado, I chose to teach the at risk students in the local rural high school for one year while someone took a maternity leave. That one year has turned out to be four! At the initial planning meeting four years ago, I offered to take a combination of English I and English II students who had performed in the lower 50% on the Test of Achievement Proficiency (a state-mandated assessment), as well as another combination of English III and English IV students,and teach them while the students who had scored above the 50% in language arts and reading were placed in regular or Advanced Placement classes. In addition to these two combined classes, I had all these students the following periods in two reading classes back-to-back with the English classes. The combined classes were made up of students who have learning disabilities, who are unmotivated, who are leisure learners . (You know those; they intend to learn sometime but they haven't decided yet to do so!). Some had been in trouble in the courts system for stealing or for alcohol related offenses. Many came from highly dysfunctional homes. Five came from no-parent living situations. I divided the sections so I had no more than ten to twelve students in any one class, even though that meant that I had to teach one more class during the day. Nearly all the students were boys and have been each year, a fact that merits some research for lower grade levels.

Although I expected to have low scores on my first diagnostic writing assessment, the actual performance came as a shock to me . I had been working with schools in Colorado for several years, using in-house writing assessments to improve instruction. Never before anywhere had I encountered so many in one group who could not get anything on paper, not even one sentence.

I began my English classes by putting the students into writing groups of three and using note cards to get ideas down in writing. The procedure is as follows:

I read a short story aloud to the students. Then I review the basic literary elements they have heard before: characters, setting, plot, conflict. I try not to get much more complicated at first. I then have students go to the elementary section of our school library and peruse children's books, looking at conflicts as well as format. Next, back in the classroom, I brainstorm with the group about problems (conflict) that children in kindergarten would like to read. Each group is then given twenty minutes to talk about a problem they could write about for our local kindergarten class. At the end of the time period, they write the conflict on the pink note card I have given each one. (Each person in a group has the same conflict as the others in the group.) Now I ask them to turn the cards over and brainstorm how they could resolve the conflict. After ten to fifteen minutes, I ask them to write the resolution on their note cards.

I proceed through each of the other literary elements, working with groups and having students write on different colored cards until they have covered all the elements. With each new element, I give a mini-lesson; for example, what we

mean by round and flat characters; why they should have only one or two main or round characters; and how to develop the plot. I save the plot until the last, at which time I separate the students and have them write the plot individually on white cards. They may use both sides of the card but no other paper. Students are then ready to write their stories. I give mini-lesson reviews on how to write dialogue before they begin.

I have found using cards less threatening than using paper. It helps students organize their thinking and plan out the story. It also keeps the few prolific from rambling on for twenty-five pages without getting to the end.

Once students have a plot written down, they return to their groups of three to tell the story (or read from their cards) to the other members. This gives them a chance to see if it make sense and to get feedback from the rest of the group. In the meantime, I walk around from group to group listening and occasionally making suggestions or comments.

Finally, each student returns to his seat and writes his own story. (In the four years I have been using this method with these students. I have not had a student who could not write a story.) The others in the group then listen to the story read aloud to the group, then they take turns proof-reading each other's work. Once the student hands the rough draft to me (for which the student receives a grade), I proof read it, using green ink, and return it for the student to make a final copy.

Our classes have access to a full computer lab in which students may write their final copies. I also have two computers in my room which they may use. They do not have to use them, but most choose to. For those with learning disabilities, the computer makes the task much easier.

Once all the stories have been completed, the students then practice reading their stories aloud to each other in preparation for reading them aloud to the kindergarten class. Then I make an appointment with the kindergarten teacher for the class to go to their room and read their stories. I was amazed to see my big high school boys suffer stage fright at the task! But the kindergarten children loved the stories and were properly impressed with all the hard work that went into them. My students then make library cards and donate their books to the library. Several refused to give up their originals and made copies for the library! Later in the year the kindergarten class wrote stories for the high school students and read them aloud.

As a follow-up and to integrate instruction, I had students read short stories in the reading classes and identify the same literary elements. During the second semester, I had them write another story, this time for an older audience. At that time I emphasized point of view, audience, and theme. But I try not to do it all at once. Learning and mastering the use of a few elements at a time is more effective with this group.

The next step in improving the writing skills of these at-risk students now that they knew they *could* write was to move on to other types of writing. I started portfolios for them, then used note cards to help them brainstorm and plan

their other assignments. I used mini-lessons often and tried to keep the assignments straight forward and simple. I read examples of the types of writing aloud before each assignment and talked about what made it meet a specific purpose, explaining, describing, changing behavior or beliefs, entertaining, or informing. I explained the concept of audience and made them select a specific person within the general audience for whom they were writing. They had to write the name of that person at the top of the note card.

Another big problem I observed with these at risk students was that in content area classes or with English assignments where they had to choose a topic, they never had anything to write about. I decided to get them started by giving them situations to which they could respond. This helped them realize that they did, in fact, have some ideas about which they could write, and later in their classes were able to generate their own. I asked them to turn every topic into a question which they would then answer as they wrote. As much as possible, I generated topics from other teachers' content area classes where my students were also enrolled. Some sample writing assignments follow:

Description

1. Your car has broken down on a lonely road. Write about what you see, hear, and smell.

2. You have just found out that you are moving to another town with your parents. Describe how you feel.

3. You have just come home to find that a water pipe has broken in your bathroom. What do you see?

4. You have been told you may have a new dog for a pet. What does your ideal dog look like?

5. Describe your own Beaver County Desert, the sand hills north of Beaver City. Use the same kind of imagery Steinbeck used in "The Mojave" which we read this week.

6. Write a description of your best friend. Use examples to prove that your statements about him or her are accurate. Tell what she or he looks like, what kind of person she or he is, and what makes him or her your best friend.

Expository

1. You are to explain a process to your science teacher. (He is your audience.)

Your purpose is to make him know that you know exactly how to do something. You might explain how to ride a bike, mix a cake, put on make-up, wash and iron your jeans, or fix your bike. You might explain how a laser works in surgery,how a CD works, how the micro wave works, how to grill hamburgers, how to keep from getting food poisoning if you are in charge of cooking.

You must have at least three paragraphs with an introduction and a conclusion.

Audience: your science teacher

Purpose: to convince him that you know a process

2. Explain who were the first settlers in Beaver County when it was still No Man's Land or the Neutral Strip. Tell where these people came from, what they were like, why they came. (You may find information by talking to older people in the community and from the history books in our library).

3. You are to explain to your readers (Mrs. Nichols and Dr. Hodges , as well as your classmates) why one member of your family has been an important influence in your life. You will need examples of how this person has been important to you. You will need an introductory paragraph with a topic sentences, as well as a concluding paragraph in which you summarize.

Audience: your teachers and classmates

Purpose: to show us how important a family member is to you

Persuasive

1. You are to write a letter to the president of the Board of Education to convince the Board to keep competitive sports in the junior high school. They have announced that they will suspend all competitive games because of poor grades among these students and because of lack of funds.

Audience: local Board of Education

Purpose: to change the action of the Board

2. You want to get a job and work in the afternoon instead of attending classes.

You have discovered that you have enough credits to graduate if you just attend classes until 12:30. You must convince the principal that this is a good idea and to give you permission.

Audience: our high school principal

Purpose: to be allowed to work in the afternoons instead of attend school

This year for the first time I worked with the Career Specialist from the area vo-tech school to incorporate a career development unit into the writing program. I was especially interested in doing so since these students seemed to have no focus or purpose for the future. This unit included having the students write to two colleges or vo-tech schools for catalogs, using the Complete Career and Educational Opportunities Information System from the Oklahoma Department of Vocational and Technical Education which is on the computer in our library, as well as using the Occupational Abstracts to Career Information, and writing a paper about their career plans. They also had to use the catalogs they received to plan a course of study at one of the colleges or vo -tech schools. This unit counted as a major writing assignment.

I am now finishing the fourth year of using this approach with the at risk students in my rural school. Some of my students have been with me all four years, others for three, two or one. Those who have been with me three or four years are amazed at the size of their portfolios. Each semester students have had to review the contents of their portfolios and write an essay about the progress they have made. Each student had to analyze his progress in four areas: originality of ideas, development of ideas, style of writing, and use of conventions of language. This exercise forced the student to take a critical look at the language he used, as well as pointed out his success and development as a writer. The portfolios have gone with the student upon "graduation" to the regular class when that occurred or upon graduation from high school.

On-going writing assessment has been a part of the program. Every semester I have given students a writing prompt, using the mode of discourse they have been studying most recently. I have had students write within the forty minute class period, then scored the papers analytically to determine the areas I needed to emphasize and provide for more practice. Our school, as a part of the state mandated assessment program, also gives the Stanford Writing Assessment every spring. I add to that the Stanford Writing Assessment Practice Test in the fall. When I began the program, students were scoring a 1 or 2 on a 4 point scale both when scored in house and when scored by the Psychological Corporation. However, the past two years the same students have scored 2 or 3, with an occasional 4 score. There are no dramatic changes in scores or proficiency. However, the students

are improving, and, more importantly, they can see the improvement themselves.

Using these assessments has been most helpful in determining what kinds of instruction need to be provided. Students have consistently scored lowest in the area of development of ideas; this has also been true for the regular classes, however, so the problem is not unique to the at risk students. In both groups students have scored best in the areas of mechanics and usage, the areas that we have traditionally over-emphasized.

The benefits of the writing program at the Forgan School for our at risk students have been two fold: students have consistently improved their ability to write over the four year period and have learned to find information in the library, through interviews, and through computer searches; and, they have had an improvement in self-esteem because they now know they can learn to write and they are doing better in other classes with this new skill. Does this mean these students are no longer at risk? No, probably not. However, they have a better chance to succeed in school and in the work place because of the program.