Teaching *Talented* *Writers* *in the* Regular Classroom

*R*esearch shows that at almost any grade, two students given the same writing assignment can engage in completely different writing processes as they bring their pieces to fruition.

BY KENNETH SMITH

Protocol analyses in research on writing (e.g., Berkenhotter, 1983; Bereiter, Burtis, & Scardamalia, 1988; Smith, 1995) reveal that throughout the composing process talented writers direct a tremendous amount of mental effort toward integrating and pursuing complex goals such as developing and following overriding themes, elaborating main points, clarifying content for a particular audience, and integrating genre features. Novice writers, on the other hand, regardless of age or knowledge base, have a much more local writing process in which they focus primarily on their next thought (McCutchen, 1986; Smith, 1995). Their writing protocols suggest that they tend to take cues from the last sentence written to produce the next one. Moreover, they spend minimal effort on setting the overriding goals that characterize better writers.

This article will detail these contrasting processes of expert and novice writers. It also will present an instructional unit that is designed not only to help typical writers shift to the more complex model but also to nurture the abilities of the more talented student writers.

Research

Based on several studies that reveal how novice and expert writers can represent and pursue different goals when given the same assignment, Bereiter, Scardamalia, and their colleagues (Bereiter, Burtis, & Scardamalia, 1988; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Bryson, Bereiter, Scardamalia, & Joram, 1991) and Smith (1995) have presented two different theoretical models of the composing process: the *knowledge telling* and *knowledge transformation* models. The former explains the "think it/ say it" features of the novice or immature writers' processing and the latter

explains the complex problem solving of expert writers.

The knowledge telling model can be seen as primarily local. Students begin by taking cues from the assignment or an understanding of the relevant genre to generate their first sentences. These sentences then provide cues for the next segment. The linking of text segments continues throughout the entire text construction process. This localized linking of text components, coupled with some understanding of the broader task at hand, tends to continue until the writer runs out of ideas or the page is full—thus the "how long should it be" focus often seen in young writers.

Novice writers, according to the knowledge telling model, tend to create oversimplified, shallow problem representations of the writing task at hand (Kozma, 1991) In constructing their representations, novices spend more time on lower level goals (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Johnstone, Ashbaugh, & Warfield, 2002), give themselves few guidelines, and do little self-monitoring (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) or advanced planning (Perl, 1979).

Expert writers, in contrast, develop plans around rhetorical and genre schemata that they instantiate with content unique to the assignment. Such schemata are used for restructuring of the content, for maintaining an overall focus (a sense of reader), and for developing a single main point in depth. Thus, in contrast to the linear production of knowledge telling, the knowledge transformation model posits an iterative process in which text is generated through constraints that influence an interaction between the writer's content and genre knowledge. These writers use the constraints to define and integrate subgoals such as reveal and maintain characters' personalities, establish a mood, and detail

a setting that illustrates a character's personality. As the text takes shape, subgoals become more refined.

If the teacher's task were to make students efficient writers, then the novice model would be sufficient. Schools simply could train students to become efficient at applying this model and assume that better writers will, given their talents, shift to the expert model through repeated writing challenges. However, "language arts instruction for gifted must provide students with the techniques and sources that fully engage their analytical minds and imaginative talents" (Smutny, 2001, Conclusion section, ¶ 1). Therefore, the following sections will advocate for direct instruction that will foster metacognitive awareness of the knowledge of the transformation model. This will potentially benefit all students in the classroom.

Knowledge Transformation and Characteristics of Gifted Learners

According to the Rhode Island State Advisory Committee on Gifted and Talented Education (2006), and Van Tassel-Baska (2003), many gifted students learn basic skills quickly and with less practice than their age peers. They also have well-developed powers of conceptualization, synthesis, and abstract complexities. Because of this early ability to master rudimentary skills, complemented by an ability to grasp abstractions, linguistically gifted students often are able to implement knowledge transformation procedures at a young age.

To respond to the needs of talented writers in our district, we have developed a program that encourages these writers to transition into the knowl-

edge transformation model at a young age. Beginning in second grade, students are guided to develop characters' personalities before beginning to compose their fables and then to use this understanding as an ongoing, executive constraint on their writing process. Furthermore, each year previously experienced constraints (e.g., develop a setting that reflects a mood) are reinforced and others, such as point of view, are introduced. Throughout the grades, students are encouraged to see writing as a set of interrelated subproblems that continually affect each other. Usually this model is presented to the entire class, although at times, talented writers work in smaller, pullout groups. (See Smith and Weitz [2003] for a presentation of the fifth-grade fantasy unit that incorporates this instructional design.) One should note that there is a small body of research suggesting that gifted writers respond well to specific instruction in advanced writing strategies (e.g., Albertson & Billingsley, 2001).

The remainder of this article details a mystery project that is assigned during the first quarter of sixth grade. In general, the daily lessons are designed to encourage students to develop overriding goals that influence the establishing and pursuing of interactive genre and content goals—a foundation of the knowledge transformation model. The focus of this unit is on developing strong personalities for the main characters. These personalities are well established before students attend to plot. Thus, the goal becomes to use this personality to define (or constrain) how the characters will behave as they deal with the events of the story. Surprisingly, some students who usually are not recognized as strong writers, but have an innate insight into interpersonal behaviors, often blossom in this unit

because it is driven, not by plot, but by characters' interactions.

Developing Characters

Some writers will claim that setting drives their writing. For them, decisions about actions depend on where the characters are. For Ken Smith, the author of this article and a published short story writer, character drives his writing. With an in-depth understanding of characters' personalities, decisions about actions, responses, and even possessions fall into place. He begins his writing with character profiles so he will know how they will respond to events, what their surroundings will look like, and how they will interact with each other. If students can develop such an understanding, then an overriding goal becomes maintaining and showing characters' personalities throughout the mystery. Thus, this unit begins with students developing multifaceted characters and Ken Smith modeling his writing process. The following sections of this article describe the daily lessons of the unit.

Day 1: Characteristics of Characters

The teacher explains that the class is about to begin a unit on mystery and that it will build on what they have learned in their fifth-grade fantasy unit. Moreover, it will lay the groundwork for major writing projects in junior high. The first activity is storytelling. Ken Smith comes into the classroom wearing a stained raincoat with broken buttons. To begin, he tells a mystery in first person, acting as the main character. The classroom teacher first asks students to list at least three things they already know about the story just by the fact that

it is a mystery. Responses generally fall into three categories: (a) "I don't know anything"; (b) general literature responses such as "it will have a plot or a problem"; and (c) genre specific responses such as "it will have a crime, a detective, or clues." After students discuss their responses, the teacher explains that this unit will stress character. Therefore, while listening to the story, students are encouraged to take notes about how the storyteller lets them know what the characters' personalities are like and how the main character solves the crime.

The story is a modernized and localized version of Arthur Conan Doyle's (1960) "The Red-Headed League." The main character, Jake Jones, is disorganized about daily details, but quite bright about important events. For example, when he opens his filing cabinet in search of a file, he finds an umbrella that has been missing since the last rainfall. Jake later observes Sam Spaulding, the anal-retentive criminal who brings his own silverware to restaurants. Matthew Merriweather, the owner of the bank being broken into, is so arrogant he doesn't even bother to shake hands when he meets new people; his windows are reverse tinted so people can see into his limo, but he does not have to look out at them.

Once the story is completed, the children discuss all of the personality traits and how they were recognizable. Children are asked to give words that summarize the personality of specific characters and to illustrate these with specific examples from the story. For example, Matthew Merriweather is a snob because he doesn't shake Jake's hand when it is offered. In short, character traits are revealed though what the character *says* and *thinks* ("You didn't need to yell at her, she was just doing her job!"), what the character *does* ("I took my umbrella, even though I knew it wasn't going

to rain."), and what the character *has* (one black sock and one blue).

Day 2: Show, Don't Tell

One goal of this unit is to have students "show" personality through what a person says, does, or has instead of summarizing or telling it. Beginning writers "cheat" by expressing personality through summary words: "Joe is *nice*," or "Sally is *mean.*" Instead of writing that a character is mean (i.e., using a summary word), better writers will create a scene showing the character's mean qualities. An example of this "showing, not telling" that characters are mean is seen in the contrasting ways in which the Dursleys treat Harry and Dudley when Harry enters the room on page 26 of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000).

Better writers understand that certain personality aspects will influence a character's reaction to a given situation. Therefore, in students' stories, every sequence of events should reveal the same core personality trait unless someone is changed by a significant incident. Students then work in small groups to compile their examples from the day before. Students label their examples as "say/thinks," "does," or "has."

To reinforce this concept of showing, not telling, students read the description of Harry Potter's room on page 38 of *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* (2005) and discuss why the author does

not need to conclude with a statement that the room is sloppy.

For homework, students are to choose one character from the story and write a paragraph or two about where that character ate dinner the night before the crime. This assignment is a character sketch and students are not to focus on plot. Nor are they to specifically name the character. Instead, the writing should be based on personality. Students are to write where the character ate, what he said or did while there, and how he reacted to the people and climate around him. The goal is to have students show the personality of the character through what the character does, says, and has. Students are to use and label at least one of each option. They may add one-dimensional characters that were not in the original story. This means they can create a scene with a waitress to show how the character would treat her. For example, Matthew Merriweather would never be seen in a fast food joint or in a restaurant that was too crowded. He may not even look at the waitress while she takes his order.

Day 3: Jackets Have Personalities and No One Drives Just a Car

The restaurant paragraphs are discussed on this day. Following is an excerpt from one student's work:

. . . I noticed that his hair was combed to the side perfectly so

no one could see the bald spot on top of his head. When we had finished, he didn't offer to pay. I said, "Well, that was nice. Maybe we could do it again." He then said, "Well, I don't know because I'm very busy and I have more important things to do than socialize." And then he walked away without even saying good-bye. (Lindsay M.)

The teacher lays out several different jackets: a worn leather biker jacket, a black Burberry-style trench coat, and a leather dress coat with a large fur collar. Students discuss the different personalities that can be shown through what someone wears, ad-libbing what the owner of the jacket might say, what other things he might own or what he might do for a living. This is a good time to discuss that some characters are complex and might own two or even three of the jackets, but for the purposes of a short story, students will focus on a narrower personality type.

In a similar fashion, the teacher points out that not every character would drive the same car. Sam would drive a beat-up older car, caring primarily about its performance. Matthew, in contrast, would ride in the back of a daily washed limo with the partition raised.

For their homework, the teacher writes on the board, "No one drives just a car." He explains that this means students should avoid generic nouns and choose items that symbolize personality. Students are to start thinking about the characters and plots of their mysteries and they should complete the following story.

S/He was late for a job interview and the job was important. S/he rushed into the _____

*W*ith an in-depth understanding of characters' personalities, decisions about actions, responses, and even possessions fall into place.

(car) and, without looking, side-swiped a dog.

Students are told that they should have some storyline that shows a personality consistent with the car. Or, as David B., one of the students, put it, "keep the story going while you show the character."

Day 4: Mary Gorney

On this day, students shared their car stories. An example follows:

He got into his semi-truck that was littered with empty Cheetos bags and had a dent right in the middle of the grill. He was late for the job interview. He wasn't paying attention and he side-swiped a dog. He bounced up in his seat not knowing what had happened, but he was late and the Cheetos were giving him a headache. He just kept on driving. (Sean F.)

Students are told that a *symbolic object* represents an aspect of a person's life or personality. During class, they read the beginning of a short story that Kenneth Smith has published (Smith, 2000; see Appendix A.) The story, entitled "Mary Gorney," is about a young boy who lives in a blue-collar neighborhood. His next-door neighbor is a seemingly introverted older woman. The students find several symbolic objects in the story and discuss what the objects suggested about the character's personality. One student, for example, was able to make the connection that, based on the house's description, the story takes place in a poorer neighborhood because, as stated in the introduction of the story, "the street was lined with rectangular, brown-bricked duplexes."

In the story, the woman who lives next door to the boy keeps all of her windows closed on hot summer evenings when all of the other neighbors kept theirs open to catch a summer breeze. Another student said, "Mary kept her windows closed in the summer time. This was symbolic for her wanting to keep people out of her house, or maybe she was closed to making new friends." The class was able to analyze the story and explain the relationship between the two characters based on what the characters said, had, and did. Throughout the lessons, Ken Smith, following suggestions made by Nancy Peterson (2006), tried to model his writing processes.

Each student then made a bubble map of Mary Gorney's personality. Her name was in the center of the map with three secondary bubbles labeled "Has," "Says," and "Does." Tertiary bubbles gave specific examples of these. Students then worked independently to make bubble maps for their own main characters. Under the character's name, students wrote the central personality trait. Some students chose to write a second central trait, as well.

For homework, using the same format as they did for Mary Gorney, students create a bubble map for their main character, and then use these personality traits to write a paragraph that describes the bedroom of this character. This paragraph can be integrated into their final mystery. Examples are shown below.

He went over to his dresser and reached into his third drawer, "the blue drawer." He put on his blue "book" pajamas and went to bed. He fell asleep solving math equations in his head. (JT T.)

Beauty Nelsie walked into her bedroom and sat on her silver monogrammed bedspread. She traced the B with her hand and said, "Beautiful, just beautiful." (Mary L.)

My closet has a space for everything. I hang all my clothes except for my socks . . . each type of clothing is organized in rainbow order with red on the left and black on the right. (Jordon B.)

Day 5: A Summary Day

On Day 5, several students read their paragraphs aloud. From these read-alouds, other students have to state the summary word that the authors were striving to show. The problem that teachers noticed with this assignment was that some of the students were listing creative items, but the items didn't reflect anything specific about the character. One student, for example, read a paragraph that included such items as a ripped backpack, a blue bike, a winter coat with a broken zipper, and a lunch bag that didn't fit in his backpack. Although these were things that a sixth grader would own, they didn't have a unifying theme. In redoing the assignment, he came up with the following objects: encyclopedias that he has read from A–Z, thousands of medals for his academic achievement, all A's on his report card, a Harvard sweatshirt, and a watch with 20 functions. Upon hearing this revised paragraph, classmates surmised that the character is smart.

In class, students have the option to rewrite their descriptions or to write a three-paragraph summary of their plot. Plots should focus on situations and characters that are familiar to them; therefore, no diamond thefts or kidnappings are accepted.

For homework, students should finish their summaries.

Days 6–9:
Caught in a Draft

The objective for this class was to start writing the first draft of the mystery. The class began with a lesson about following four rules for writing a mystery. These rules were developed based on stumbling blocks that students had faced in previous years.

1. *Sustain the character throughout the whole story.*
2. *No "lucking out."* The character can't just "get lucky" and find something that moves the plot forward (e.g., the key to the locked door).
3. *No gaps.* The story can't suddenly move from the grocery store to the police station; there needs to be an explanation of how the plot transitioned to another place.
4. *Show, don't tell* the characters' personalities.

The first rule needed the most discussion. The problem had not been that students change character traits, but rather that some students establish a personality early on, then drop any signs of that character trait throughout the rest of the story. Thus, for this assignment we stressed the idea of sustaining the character throughout the whole story. For example, if the character in the story starts out as a messy person, he can't lose the trait halfway through the story.

After the lesson about the rules, the class broke into small groups. These groups met with their advisor, a teacher or teacher associate, to discuss the appropriate steps for writing the mystery. The group leaders checked for a clearly detailed bubble map and a complete plot summary that followed the four rules. Once the group leader approved the assignments, the students were able to start typing their rough drafts. Students were given 3 days to type. Students were given a critique sheet showing point values and topics for grading. This changes each year depending on the strengths of the class and the foci of the instructions.

Days 10 and 11:
Peer Editing

Students worked with partners in their groups to review and comment on each other's drafts. Partners are encouraged to say something specific and positive and to make a suggestion. Students then have one night to make corrections before turning in the drafts. On the next day, group leaders correct the drafts and students have one night to make final corrections.

Day 12:
Share and Share Alike

Students select an excerpt to share with the whole class. Peer feedback has to go beyond such generic statements as "I liked it" or "It was good" to explain what was likeable or good about the reading.

Conclusion

In contrast to the linear production of the knowledge telling model, the knowledge transformation model posits an interactive process in which writers develop overriding constraints that act as filters, guiding an interaction between content and genre goals. For example, assuming a student understands that mysteries often contain such genre elements as a crime, suspects, real and red herring clues, and motives, goals would be to establish these at appropriate parts of the story. To substantiate these goals, the students would use content knowl-edge to decide the specific suspects, clues, and the like. Ideally, characters' personalities would act as an overriding or executive filter, influencing all decisions. It is important to note that specific substantiations are established iteratively throughout the writing process with each decision having the potential to influence or restructure both previously established (albeit tentative) and upcoming text segments.

Students generally fall into three categories. At the highest level are those whose text and writing process reveal a complete integration of the knowledge transformation model. These students sustain and continue to reveal characters' personalities throughout the story as they move the plot forward. This is the smallest segment of the class, and although it includes many of the students who had previously been identified as talented writers, it often includes students whose writing suddenly shines with this assignment. David, for example, a student who had long been identified as talented in areas such as math and science, but not writing, fell into this category. An excerpt from his writing follows:

It was Monday morning, one hour before school when Danny Armston rolled out of his bed and onto the floor, taking the fluffy cotton comforter with him. He awoke with a startled clump and dived back into bed as the clock struck 7:00. As he glanced up at the plain old white walls, he saw all of his 4th, 5th, and 6th grade report cards hanging from the ceiling which reminded him of Show-and-Tell Day. Danny knew exactly what to bring. He got out of bed and walked over to his shelves that held every project,

test, and homework assignment that he had ever completed. He grabbed something out of the first grade folder. In was his Invention Convention certificate that he received for having the best Pine Wood Derby car in the first grade.

After grabbing his certificate, he hurried over to the right side of his dresser that held his light colored clothes, unlike the left side that held the dark. Finally, he grabbed his science textbook, which was, of course, on his little desk tucked away in the back corner of his room. . . .

Danny took out his white journal and jotted him down as a suspect. When he got home, he would rip out the page with the clues and put it in his detective folder on his shelf. Before he put it in the folder, he would cut off the hanging edges with a scissors. (David B.)

The second, and largest, category appeared to be a transitional one between the two models. Students in this category seem to be attempting to develop characters' personalities, but it appears as if they are interrupting the plot to tell a particular character detail rather than having the characters carry out actions in ways that are in keeping with their personalities.

Finally, students in the third category seem unready to shift from knowledge telling to knowledge transformation. Although these students seem able to establish a character's personality in the beginning of the story, they soon drop any aspects of personality and reduce the character to a one-dimensional one whose purpose is to move the action forward.

In eighth grade, about a third of the class is engaged in a Freudian analysis of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

(1954) and keeping blogs as characters on the island. It is rewarding to see how many of these students have shifted into the knowledge transition model, coordinating several overriding goals at once. Still, it remains our district's goal to help all students become competent writers whose processes are grounded in knowledge transformation and not simply proficient at knowledge telling. **GCT**

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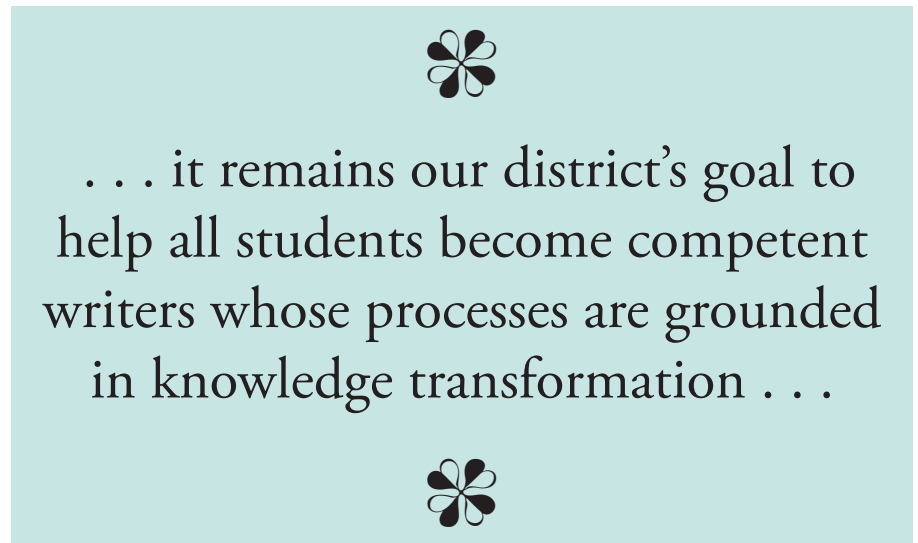
Appendix A
Opening Pages of Mary Gorney by Kenneth J. Smith

Mary Gorney

Our street was lined with rectangular, brown-bricked duplexes. Two joined houses, a driveway, two joined houses, a driveway, from one corner to the next. The homes on the right had stoops on the front. The ones on the left had stoops on the side.

On the other side of our driveway lived Mary Gorney. She was unlike everyone else on the street. The rest of us knew the history of all the families that came out of hibernation within the same few early spring days to set up webbed aluminum chairs around their stoops. But Mary Gorney kept to herself. On summer evenings, when all the windows and doors on the block were opened to catch the night breezes, hers were closed. It seemed as if no one else on the block even knew that she lived there.

She worked nights as a nurse. She was thin and tall, too tall for a woman. I hardly ever saw her except when I left late for school and she was coming home from work. Even so, if I heard her car as I was going out the door, I'd wait until she was inside before I'd leave. Figuring being late was not nearly as bad as having Mary Gorney looking at me.

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I spent my summers in the park at the end of the block next to the McMann's house—a small playground that I had outgrown and a large field. There were always kids there for a pick-up softball game in the afternoon or a basketball game after dinner.

One hot late-summer day there was no breeze. The tree outside my bedroom was wilted and still. The clouds were stacked in the sky. I began heading down the side stairs when my mother called me back into the house.

"Mary Gorney has been sick for a few days. Stop in and see if she needs anything before you go to the park."

"You want me to go inside old lady Gorney's house? No way."

"Don't argue with me. She's alone and has no one to help her. It won't kill you to help her."

"It might," I yelled back as I slammed the screen door. I looked over at her door. White, like ours. After crossing the driveways, I knocked, but got no answer. I knocked again and thought that I heard her say, "Come in." Opening the door slowly, I called out.

"Come in," she said again. I could hear a strain in her voice.

I walked through the kitchen and TV room into the living room. She was sitting in one of two low wooden chairs with blue-striped cushions. She was wearing a green robe that looked like it was made from a quilt. It was buttoned to the neck. She looked pale, even in her colored robe.

Looking around the room, I thought that everything was odd. The floors were not carpeted but shining wood. There were rugs with small blue and red patterns in front of the sofa and chairs. They looked like the ones in my book about Aladdin. None of the furniture had square corners. The tables were shaped like kidney beans.

"Your mother said that you'd come to help me. I'm sorry to keep you in on a nice day. I need my books packed up. They are coming to take them away and I can't pack them myself. I can pay you. You can have some of them, if you like."

I was sure my mother wouldn't let me take any money, especially from a lady who couldn't afford carpeting.