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Integrating reading and writing strategies using an alternating teacher-led/student-selected instructional pattern

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Over the past decade we have witnessed a profound change in writing instruction. Moving from a teacher-centered, skills-based curriculum, many teachers now employ the writing process based on student choice of topics and instruction based on individual needs. Likewise, a change is occurring in reading instruction from a basal-centered, skills-based curriculum to a literature-based program, with more student choice of reading materials.

I applaud this increase in what I call “singular text”—individual student-choice of writing topics and reading selections. The role of ownership is critical in supporting developing readers and writers (Calkins, 1986). As Harste (1986) put it, “students change from tenants of our text to owners of their own text.”

However, when I adapted my sixth-grade language arts instruction to the student-centered “writers’ and readers’ workshop,” the results were mixed. I was dissatisfied with the lack of variety of choice in selection; the loss of a regular, effective means of exposing students to authors, genres, and writing modes not likely to be self-selected; the diffi-

culty of modeling key comprehension and composing strategies to individuals through periodic conferences or journal correspondence; the few opportunities for making connections about shared literary pieces; the lack of “shared strategizing”—the revelation of how other class members deal with the problems encountered in composing the same topic or comprehending the same text; and, most important, the absence of hearing alternative interpretations of the same literary piece.

These needs had been addressed when I used the “shared-text” model—the teacher-assigned whole-class or small-group instruction on a common writing topic or a jointly read literature selection.

A balance of text choices

Clearly, both teacher-led and student-selected classroom instructional patterns have benefits. Recently, Hiebert and Colt (1989) have presented a comprehensive program of literature-based instruction that provides a balance between the two instructional groupings. They have devised a continuum of three instructional patterns that progress from teacher-led instruction/selection, to shared teacher- and student-led interaction/selection, finally leading to independent student application/selection. Their work was very helpful to me in formulating a balance between teacher guidance and independent reading.

Elaborating on their model, I have synthesized a balanced shared-text/singular-text instructional pattern that (a) goes beyond literature study to integrating reading and writing instruction, (b) teaches young readers and writers a process approach based on key problem-solving strategies used by expert readers and professional authors, and (c) alternates shared-text units with singular-text blocks of time rather than progressing from teacher-led to student-led. By alternating teacher-assigned and student-choice literacy experiences, novice readers and writers can build expertise over the school year by applying what is learned during a shared-text unit to a following independent singular-text choice.

Integrating reading and writing with strategy instruction

Reading and writing are taught simultaneously in my classroom because they both follow a process for constructing meaning

(Squires, 1983; Tierney & Pearson, 1983). While there are various models representing the common features of the reading and writing processes, they generally include these steps: preparing, drafting, repairing, and sharing.

Preparing is the prewriting or prereading stage where the writer or reader plans at the beginning. Drafting is the “first dare,” the first try by a writer to put ideas down on paper or by a reader to interpret an author’s message. The third stage, repairing, sometimes known as rewriting, editing, revising, and rereading, involves the reconsideration of one’s first draft to find out if “I wrote what I intended to say”

As children do recursive writing about self- and teacher-selected books, they learn to reconsider both what they’ve read and what they’ve written. Photo by Robert Finken



Menu of key strategies employed by successful readers and writers

“What does a good reader or writer routinely and knowingly do that makes her/him successful at reading and writing?”

Recursive strategies often applied in more than one stage:

Prepare

Tapping my prior knowledge of a topic before reading and writing
Determining my purpose for reading and writing
Predicting how a piece I'm about to write or a story I'm about to read will turn out
Self-selecting topics I want to write about and books I want to read

1st dare

Self-monitoring my understanding of my own and others' text
Self-monitoring my reactions to text
Relating new information in my reading and writing to what I already know
Expanding my vocabulary during or after my first-draft reading or writing
Knowing where to get help when I experience “writer's or reader's block”
Distinguishing important ideas from less important ones when I write my text or when I read someone else's text

Repair

Reconsidering the original first-draft meaning I constructed in my own writing or in reading
Repairing text to improve its meaning by rewriting or rereading
Appreciating an author's craft and expanding my own writing craft
Considering alternative interpretations from a group of readers of my writing or another author's writing (both student and professional)

Share

Sharing with others my reactions to my own text and to others' text
Applying newly acquired information

or “I really understood what the author's intended message was.” Last, the sharing stage is when the writer publishes her piece for an audience or when a reader shares the new information he gained from reading.

Whatever labels are given to the various stages, one must remember that in practice the process is recursive; readers and writers do not necessarily apply the stages in a linear, step-by-step fashion, but rather tend to move back and forth through them.

Whether engaged in composing their own text or in comprehending someone else's text, my students are taught to apply selected strategies that help them overcome the inevitable problems that arise during the demanding processes of reading or writing. Because the reading and writing processes are similar, the same strategies are useful for both. This allows me to integrate reading and writing instruction.

For example, successful authors employ the strategy of tapping prior knowledge before beginning to write. They brainstorm, mind map, or discuss with others what they already

know about their topic. Similarly, skilled readers access their prior knowledge before reading a text. In both cases, this strategy greatly assists the process of “making meaning” with text.

I have formulated a menu of key strategies appropriate for students who are able to read and write with some fluency (i.e., Grades 3-8) that now constitutes my reading and writing curriculum (see Figure). Rather than teaching students isolated skills in broken pieces of text, instruction shows students how to become strategic readers and writers of whole texts. I want my students to become literate people who have “plans [to] use flexibly and adaptively, depending upon the situation” (Duffy & Roehler, 1987, p. 415).

The teacher-led shared-text pattern

Shared text is an efficient, effective means of teaching developing readers and writers how to proceed through the difficult process of making meaning with text, either composing their own or comprehending someone else's.

The purpose of shared text is not only to stimulate appreciation and pleasure of reading and writing, but also to use a common writing topic and reading selection as means to model the techniques, routines, and strategies that promote a general process of reading and writing. The goal is to teach the process by showing students a predictable, regular model common to both reading and writing text: preparing, drafting, repairing, and sharing.

The teacher must decide which key reading and writing strategies to model during any shared-text unit. Then students are given shared-text experiences to apply the strategies.

For example, a recent shared-text unit for sixth graders was designed for a basal short story about an Arctic adventure. Selected by the teacher for its literary pleasure (interesting subject, unusual setting, and the author's engaging language), this text was also used to teach students five of the reading and writing strategies chosen from the menu of key strategies.

The following five strategies were selected because they are best learned using a common text. During the course of the school year, other strategies were selected for other units.

Tapping prior knowledge. To reinforce the importance of using "the known" to help learn the "new," the teacher introduced the Arctic as the story's setting. The whole class brainstormed a semantic map of familiar aspects of the Arctic. Of course, this prereading mapping activity could be accomplished independently, but the shared brainstorming expanded students' knowledge base of the setting. This is "schema activation," a powerful and important comprehension strategy (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson 1985, p. 10).

Predicting. The teacher then demonstrated the effectiveness of predicting what an author might do with a subject by assigning a shared-text writing topic. He provided the students with a list of "story impressions" (McGinley & Denner, 1987). Six to 10 key ingredients from the story they would soon read (Arctic, 2 lost kids, cracked ice, polar bear, etc.) are used to write a story. Writing a story similar to the author's version engaged students in not only predicting how the author would proceed, but also in authoring—making

choices to create fiction.

Vocabulary expansion. Because a command of various strategies for learning new vocabulary is essential for successful reading and writing, the teacher asked students to record on self-sticking notes any word they came across during their first reading that they didn't know. After the story was independently read, cooperative groups met to compare these notes and create a group list of unknown words. Group members then were asked to help each other acquire word meanings by employing a four-columned worksheet: structural analysis, context clues, a group member's definition, and/or a dictionary.

The teacher led the class back to the text to find the same words in their context, so they could evaluate whether the acquired meaning made sense. Students appreciated self-selecting unknown words and were surprised that referring to the dictionary was the teacher's last choice of method because of the relative ease of the other three methods.

Appreciating author's craft and reconsidering meaning. The shared-text story was loaded with figurative language. After the class read the story, the teacher asked what they thought of the author's use of language. Responses varied, but were generally vague and superficial. The teacher asked if anyone remembered what a simile was. After establishing an understanding of this writing technique, the teacher reconvened the small groups and assigned a "simile search." Each group was responsible for hunting (rereading) a part of the story for similes.

The cooperative activity revealed many clever and unique similes which the groups shared with the whole class. The result was not only an increased understanding of similes, but also an appreciation for the author's craft of writing. Most important, the teacher successfully demonstrated the strategy of reconsidering text for increased understanding and appreciation.

Reconsidering meaning and rewriting text. To reinforce the essential strategy of reconsidering one's own text, the teacher asked the class to brainstorm their own similes out loud. Then the students retrieved their "story impressions" drafts from their writing folders and inserted one or two similes. One student improved her description of a fire her charac-

ters started by adding the simile "the fire was as warm as their mom's cookies just coming out of the oven."

This rewriting activity was very well received; any tendency to bemoan the task of revising was reduced because of a very clear purpose and strong connection to the reading. The teacher used the benefit of shared text to urge students to imitate a successful writer.

The above strategies, employed by successful readers and writers, were revealed to the sixth-grade students. Of course, other equally vital strategies would be taught in a later shared-text unit. Strategies learned during shared text are often reinforced and practiced when students read or write on their own.

The student-selected singular-text pattern

Singular text is a means of releasing developing readers and writers to proceed more independently. In singular-text instruction, the student individually chooses what text to read and what text (topic and mode) to write. The results are still shared, but without the same basis of comparison as in the shared-text format. The focus in a singular-text unit is on self-examination of individual tastes, strengths, styles, and preferences that reflect a personal-process approach to reading and writing. The goal is to experiment and adapt the generic process of preparing, drafting, repairing, and sharing in order to cultivate a more individualized style.

Since the objectives are different from shared text, the teacher's role changes from teaching/modeling to that of a facilitator who promotes student awareness of how to read and write effectively. The teacher becomes a "metacognitive nudger."

Like shared text, singular text provides excellent opportunities to learn important reading and writing strategies. For example, a fourth-grade teacher designed a singular-text unit for her class by selecting five strategies that are best learned when students are working on individual, self-selected texts.

Self-selection of books and writing topics. To help students select books, the teacher stapled a Future Reading List into their portfolios. Simply a series of blank lines, the list was referred to periodically for updating and

reference. For example, during an earlier shared-text unit, the class became excited about Beverly Cleary's writing. The teacher took that opportunity to ask if anyone wanted to record any Cleary books on their "future" lists. She reminded students throughout the year to update their lists, so that they were ready to self-select when another singular-text unit arrived.

Likewise, students were encouraged to keep a Future Writing Topics list in their writing folders or journals. Again, the teacher regularly reminded them to update the list until they became accustomed to doing it independently. As they considered topics to write on, the teacher conducted mini-lessons on the various modes (descriptive, narrative, persuasive, expository, imaginative) and forms (story, report, poem, article, play).

Self-monitoring understanding of a text. To be independent, one must assume control over comprehending and composing. To foster independence, the teacher provided her students with self-monitoring devices, such as a generic "story map" to track the story grammar of a chapter in a self-selected novel. If a student were to discover, for example, that she didn't know the problem of the story (or the characters or setting), she would have to decide whether she had missed it or hadn't yet encountered it. Rereading or proceeding cautiously are two possible paths. The key, says their teacher, is the awareness of a problem and the available options for correcting it. This is metacognitive training: teaching students to track their decision-making as they read and write.

Self-monitoring reactions to a text. Another strategy employed by successful readers and writers is awareness of one's responses, reflections, and ponderings while reading. Since students are reading individual rather than shared texts, their reactions can be more privately recorded. The teacher told her fourth graders to record their reactions periodically in their literature logs (spiral notebooks of some type, sometimes called "response journals," "readers' diaries," or just "lit. logs"). Reactions to the author's writing, a character's behavior, or an event in their selected book that triggers a personal experience are all examples of the reflective thinking of active, engaged readers.

Teachers of all grade levels have had great

success using lit. logs not only as a means of stimulating student thinking but also for individualized monitoring of student progress in reading. Teachers and students “engage in literary talk” when the teacher reads students’ entries and responds, comments, questions, “affirms, challenges, gossips, jokes, recommends, and even nudges” her students to new thoughts (Atwell, 1987, p. 165).

Appreciation of author’s craft. Concurrent with the self-selected reading, students were writing papers on topics of their own choosing. Their teacher set aside 40 minutes 3 days each week for self-directed writing. She employed the “writer’s bookshop” model of instruction, which begins each session with a minilesson. She presented the key literary strategy of characterization to her class, describing how authors reveal characters not only through actions, but also by revealing their thoughts. This technique was modeled with examples of the main character’s thoughts in an excerpt from *The Courage of Sarah Noble*, a shared-text assignment read last month from the reading basal. She concluded the minilesson by urging students to keep an eye out for this technique in their reading and to consider trying it in their writing.

Getting assistance and sharing reactions to student text. To help students reconsider whether the intended meaning of their own texts was communicated to an audience, the teacher reconvened “group thinking conferences” (Fitzgerald, 1989). This cooperative activity was used earlier in a shared-text unit as a means of encouraging students to reconsider the meaning of a short story they all had read. In the current lesson, the teacher provided each member with a photocopied student draft. Students met in a small group to confer on three questions: What is the text about? What parts do you especially like? What suggestions, questions, or comments would you have for the author?

This allowed the group to confer over each other’s writing, which enabled the student authors to receive feedback from a potential audience and to discover whether their intended meaning had been communicated.

These “group thinking conferences” not only stimulate rereading and rewriting, they

also demonstrate effectively to students that text is text: The books they read and the stories they write are both created in the same ways. It merges the reading and writing processes.

Conclusion

The pattern of alternating shared and singular text provides teachers of student literacy with a format for showing students how to generate meaning in text by employing key strategies. Some of these reading and writing strategies are best presented when the class is sharing a common text to read or write; others are more appropriately taught when students are involved with self-selected, individual text. In both cases, the goal is student self-awareness of how best to independently proceed through any text.

The shared-text/singular-text pattern also reveals to developing readers and writers that both reading and writing are process-based thinking, and that by mastering the processes they will mature into accomplished readers and writers.

The benefits of both shared text and singular text are obvious; neither should be rejected due to dominance of the other. When it comes to literacy instruction, our students deserve the best of both worlds.

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