

action RESEARCH Insights

Sponsored by the Barrie Region MISA Professional Network Centre

Exploring the Power of Non-Fiction Writing

Our research project, *Teaching and Learning About Non-Fiction Writing Across the Curriculum in the Junior Grades*, was based on initial junior teacher conversations around writing. We had these intense conversations in the library of St. Francis of Assisi school in the fall of 2007. The junior teachers Angela Reddy, Paul LaPlume, Maria Guzzo, Theresa Villani, Ann Green, Christine Hildebrandt, Amy Mottershall, and the vice principal, Victoria Northcott, met to write an application for a project that would allow us to meet the needs of our students in the area of writing and our needs as a professional learning community.

Our project was completed in May of 2008.

We had three main goals for this project. Our main goal was to improve student achievement in the area of writing as our student report card marks and other assessments indicated low achievement; we wanted to improve our own ability and skills in the area of teaching writing; and we wanted to do this as a collaborative professional learning community that would motivate students and teachers.

We talked about the students in our school and saw a real need to focus on the area of non-fiction writing. We decided that by narrowing our focus to non-fiction



Junior students from St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School pose in front of a bulletin board featuring their artist biography projects. Teachers and students from the school's junior division participated in an action research project aimed at improving student's non-fiction writing skills.

writing, the impact on student writing would be the greatest across the curriculum. Our students' daily encounters with being asked to read and write are predominantly non-fiction.

Our research project is supported by the writings of researcher, writer, and professional development leader for the Ministry of Education, Douglas Reeves, whose work is founded by the belief that that when students are exposed to a wide variety of informational texts they

develop an understanding of how texts and features work to convey meaning. By focusing on our three goals in relation to non-fiction as a community of junior teachers, we decided that our own learning and our students' learning would be focused on how to better deconstruct text, how text forms are created, how to improve their comprehension of non-fiction and how to motivate them. We wanted to know what would make all of us – teachers and students – get excited about writing well!

Project Q & A

Why non-fiction writing?

Non-fiction writing is an overarching term that means writing to inform. Research cited by Doug Reeves indicates that as more time is devoted to non-fiction writing in every subject area, overall student achievement increases. When students write, they are engaged in thinking, reasoning, and analysis. When students engage in more non-fiction writing that includes editing, collaborative rubrics, constructive teacher feedback, and rewriting, student achievement improves.

What is a First Steps Developmental Writing Continuum?

First Steps provides a framework for linking assessment with teaching and learning. It was researched and developed by the Education Department of Western Australia. The Writing Developmental Continua have been developed to provide teachers with a way of looking at what children can actually do and how they can do it order to inform planning for further writing development.

What is CASI?

CASI (2nd Edition), is the acronym for Comprehension, Attitudes, Strategies and Interest assessments for students in Grades 4 to 8. The CASI helps to identify student comprehension and fluency levels through age-appropriate field-validated reading passages. The CASI identifies each students' strengths and learning needs and provides suggestions for appropriate programming.

What is a student learning profile?

In response to a concern about a particular student's writing difficulties, the teacher can create a student learning profile focusing specifically on that student's writing. After completing the data-gathering process, the teacher designs instruction for the student that takes into account the need of the students and capitalizes on his or her strengths. Essentially the learning profile performs a "gap analysis" to determine where the child's abilities are relative to the age-appropriate stage of development.



Sampling and Instruments

- The focus of the project was to highlight students who were strugglers, but not students who were on individual learning plans.
- For data collection and analysis, each team member selected three students from each class who were struggling (but not students who were on individualized learning plans). This made the strategizing focused and the talk about students manageable.
- The team decided that by focusing closely and observing the practices that changed the experiences of these three students, that they would find out what would be lead to the practices that would affect all students.
- We collected data from the First Steps Development Writing Continuum, as well as Term 1, Term 2 and Term 3 report card grades in language (writing).



How Great Thou Art

Junior students were involved in writing artist biographies as part of the division's non-fiction writing project. Students also had the opportunity to paint or sketch in the style of their chosen artist, leading them to new insights and connections with the artist's work and life.

Observations on Teacher Capacity Building

This was not a large scale project. Each of the seven teachers involved selected three students who were achieving at a level 1 or 2 in their written work. The scale of this project allowed us to assess and focus on three students so that when we came together to discuss our observations on student learning it was very focused on what these few were learning.

Our conversations centered on student achievement in relation to non-fiction writing. This approach influenced and built on the teacher capacity and collaboration in our school. This project mobilized our thinking about our own accountability and the ways we can work together as a school team to build capacity for all of us in positive ways. It involved developing new abilities, skills, knowledge, motivation, and resources, all in relation to the teaching of writing.

We now have many new ideas and resources that will enable this group to continue to move forward to bring about positive changes in our writing programs. The capacities this project influenced are:

- First, we realized that this project offered us a chance to meet regularly to focus on being open, sharing new ideas and views within a structured format over a year long period with teachers who were beginning teachers to veterans.
- Second, this offered us a chance to ask questions openly as we worked our way through the complex processes and strategies each of us used in our teaching of non-fiction. We were all learning from each other while living in

the context of the research. This provided us with pressure and support. Where some of the teachers used strategies that were successful in getting students to reach new levels of understanding, others struggled with where to go next.

- Third, this demonstrated the need for explicit, focused teaching in our classrooms. This does not mean that this is sustainable at the present time. This means that our awareness was raised about the power of explicit focused teaching. The importance of setting key criteria for student learning and creating rubrics related to these key criteria was a large part of several of our discussions at the meetings as we planned how to focus our teaching in the classroom. The teachers discussed how to create rubrics that are meaningful to the students and that helped the students understand what is expected of them and being asked of them.
- Fourth, we learned to value at a deeper level the true effectiveness of modeled, shared and guided reading lessons as being necessary in our classrooms. With these few students in mind we had to be thinking about how to group students for reaching their present needs. We had to focus on each child's strengths and needs and where to go next.
- Fifth, this lead us to conversation about what it was that we really wanted to assess and be accountable for teaching. We talked about how to better embed assessment in the process of teaching rather than waiting until

the end. We asked ourselves, is this directly related to the knowledge and understanding that we are teaching and that we want our students to learn?

This project supported our professional learning community in deep and valuable ways. We pulled all resources together to see what the Board and the research communities offered us in terms of non-fiction. Working as a community of learners on a monthly basis, we came to be known in the school as "The MISA Group."

"Who are the snacks for?"
 "The MISA Group"
 "Who are the books for?"
 "The MISA Group."

If you wanted a chance to have a conversation with others about your students that came with food - join "The MISA Group."

"The MISA Group" was often seen in the library on their own time working together finding materials and developing plans for their students. The collaboration and networking with "The MISA Group" increased as we got deeper into the project where the end result was a broad project that exemplified Douglas Reeves words.

The second large non-fiction project was a student-written biography. These biographies stretched right across the curriculum just as Reeves predicts. The Grade 4 biographies were religious, Grade 5 biographies musicians, Grade 4/5 biographies artists, and the Grade 6 biographies, explorers and artists. It was truly a display of integrated curriculum that spanned the interests of all students.

TEACHER OBSERVATIONS OF STUDENTS...

By Victoria Northcott (VP)

Fullan (2006) says collaborative learning communities “transform knowledge, share inquiries, engage in continuous learning, and build communities of practice” (p. 9).

I returned to think of the project goals: focus on student achievement in the non-fiction writing, improve our own skills in the teaching of writing, and work as a collaborative community that would both motivate us and our students. I reviewed the notes I had taken at each of our meetings. I grouped my notes from these sessions under these three categories of our goals and what I report here is from my perspective (and my notes) which means that given time and another viewpoint these thoughts may change or be written differently. We do transform knowledge and engage in continuous learning and our practices may be viewed differently.

ACHIEVEMENT

Overall, the teachers observed that the students involved in developing the skill of non-fiction writing were well on their way to improving achievement in content areas of curriculum. This was demonstrated very well in the final projects which integrated all areas of curriculum. Many students on their final independent research project received high level marks. I have grouped the areas of achievement noticed by all teachers into two main areas: the process of writing and the actual details of writing in non-fiction pieces of writing.

In general, teachers felt that the student understanding of the writing

process increased. Several of the Grade 4 students understood the process much better even though their application of the writing process is not equal to their knowledge and understanding of the process. They found the physical act of writing laborious which slowed the process down for the teacher in terms of how much and how often writing could be taught. It was important to honour this for the younger junior students. They found the process of being engaged in real inquiries, in physical deconstructions of newspaper articles, assisted them in their understanding of the specific characteristics of text. They found that the process of developing anchor charts, visuals, power paragraphs, and templates for the students to use in their writing aided them in their gradual release from teacher-directed lessons to peer-created to more independent pieces of writing. By repeating the same gradual release model with different genres of non-fiction, the teachers found that most students, with some exceptions among the Grade 4s, improved in the four areas of knowledge, understanding, communicating and application of writing non-fiction pieces.

The act of using mentor texts, e.g. newspaper articles from many different sources, was valuable. This allowed students to hear the voice of different authors and to know which perspective to write their article from. This experience also gave all junior grades a real sense of how to deconstruct one article and to put it back together again. During the early teaching of the project, teachers came to realize the importance of modeling details for students. This modeling and direct teaching of what form to write, demonstrated through other

mentor texts, illustrated to the students the richness of writing for details and impact. A few modeled and direct lessons that brought this to life for the students were, for example, transition words in paragraphs and how to write transitions in articles. Once they did these lessons, teachers ensured that class-created anchor charts and templates were available so students could receive visual or oral feedback on the use of these transition words. After student's use of this feedback, they were able to read aloud their pieces to their class audience and this became very empowering and satisfying for them. This taught students how to develop a style of their own.

As far as achievement in details, teachers felt that deconstruction aided the students the most. By doing deconstructions over and over with several articles, with partners, and independently, students learned what makes writing effective. With the originals in front of them they received instant feedback that assisted them over and over how to form and reform an article or a biography. The finer details were achieved with many modeled lessons in the writing conventions needed for the genre being taught. For example, all students were taught power paragraphing and in specific grades they would have added criteria, e.g. quotes. In one teacher's case she said, “I realized they needed more direct teaching, more modeling, and absolutely more help with editing!” To this point, she also said that she had great success with student peer editors. Students were taught how to revise with one focus in mind. For example, one student would focus on introductory sentences in each

...AND THEIR OWN PRACTICES RELATED TO PROJECT GOALS

paragraph. Having a direct focus for revision, students got very motivated to do a great job at their task because they had been taught and understood specifically what a good introductory sentence looked like and sounded like.

The students, the teachers, and the parents of these students were beginning to see the results of their collaborative efforts in learning new forms of non-fiction. Similarly, the importance of giving each other peer feedback was increasing student's motivation substantially.

TEACHER LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

Contexts for writing are contexts for learning. Collaborating and building knowledge about writing and all its complexities helped us to build a strong community of collaborative learners.

The teachers in this community achieved most of what they wanted to and more importantly collaborated to form a strong community of learners. Our School Improvement Plan for the junior division is now based on this project where we as a group decided what we wanted to focus on and we as a group planned and revised things as we needed to reach our goals. The teachers expressed gratitude amongst themselves for the opportunity to work and grow together as they had not done this in a while. One of the teachers expressed what many teachers feel – great isolation for years – and she was not shy to admit it. “Please come and get me if you are meeting. Please share with me. I have been working in isolation for years.”

At the end of this all this short

expression of what they achieved does not say what we experienced as a group of educators. Between the initial rubrics and initial projects that the students did to the final rubrics and the final projects that the students created, I saw huge differences. I saw differences in the student and the teacher interest. I saw differences in the amount of time people were talking about writing. The project existed outside the classroom doors. I saw huge pieces of writing in the halls that were a part of this project where classes had joined together to create a collage.

I saw differences in how teachers viewed their role in teaching and learning in terms of how to meet the needs of students. When they came to the table to discuss not meeting the needs of the students, they decided to narrow the teaching focus, design new assessments. They cut some expectations out, realized things had gotten too big. They supported each other in their frustrations and supported each other in changing practices. They collaborated on how to inform their practices, not only of how to teach non-fiction, but how to make a bank of resources that they built during this project so that they could use them next year. They talked about anchor charts for all genres and about developing them as a team to be put on our school web site. They talked about how we can sustain his collaborative community for next year.

During this research, teachers read and learned ways to teach students how to write non-fiction more effectively. But they collaborated on so much more. They saw that these skills were transferable to new content areas and that they could be

life-long. They saw the extreme importance of explicit teaching of the writing process and they saw the need to immerse students in each genre and as many genres as possible. They saw that regular immediate feedback is needed from peers, teachers, administrators, and parents and as many people as possible to help students improve their writing. Finally, they saw that contexts for writing are contexts for learning – collaboratively.

Students Said...

What advice would you give to help other students with their writing?

I would tell students to use APE and power paragraphs. (William, Gr. 6)

Have a word bank in your agenda (words you can't spell) and look them up in the dictionary. (Kordell, Gr. 6)

Well, don't end the story until your last idea is gone. (Kevin, Gr. 6)

I would tell another student to write, write, write, and if you are not comfortable with what you are writing, write something else! (Alana, Gr. 6)

If you find another story that you like, then write another story like it. (Jacob, Gr. 4)

They should always edit the writing twice and have a friend edit with you. (Olivia, Gr. 6)

Always check your work twice before printing it out. (Kayla, Gr. 6)

I think you should find a quotation to improve your writing. (Heather, Gr. 6)

Students and Teachers Said...

What have you learned about writing?

I learned that planning with the end in mind is vital to success. Near the end of the project I valued the in-depth learning I had done by planning backwards. I learned that when my students aren't quite ready for learning something I need to slow it down, be flexible so that the focus is on ensuring their learning and understanding. (M. Guzzo, Teacher)

I learned how to write a power paragraph. It gives you a full paragraph with openings and conclusion statements and specific details. We learned to apply to all of our writing and how to get started with our writing. We also learned how to write a newspaper article. We learned where everything goes in a framework and it has to be written from third person perspective. (Stewart, Grade 6)

I learned that you have to be precise about what you want to write. You have to activate your prior knowledge. You should use the 5 Ws when you write newspaper articles. (Emily, Grade 6)

I learned that you need to use important facts to write the paragraphs. You can use the power paragraphs or the backward C method to write a good paragraph. (Kayla, Grade 6)

We learned how to interview people. We thought of probing questions to ask and made sure they were good questions. We interviewed people who were doing speeches and other people in our school. We tested out our questions to see if they were good ones. (Amy, Grade 6)

I have learned from books that it depends on what kind of books, like little kids books, to A, B, C's to my research on Jacques Cartier that the books you chose are important (anchor books). (Alana, Grade 6)

Summary of Student Achievement Data Analysis

First Steps Writing Continuum and report card data was tracked and analyzed for 20 students throughout the project. Sign tests were used to assess the group differences in achievement between successive tracking periods. A sign test is a statistical test that can be used to determine whether or not two "matched pair" sets of ordinal numbers are significantly different, either negatively (to the left of, or lower) or positively (to the right of, or higher). Sign tests were carried out to compare, for 20 students:

- First Steps Writing Continuum scores in Term 2 vs. Term 3;
- Writing report card marks in Term 1 vs. Term 2 and Term 2 vs. Term 3.

Assessing Changes in First Steps Writing Continuum Scores (sample size, n = 20 students)

- **10** students scored **one full level higher** on the second assessment of writing than the initial assessment;
- **6** students scored **one half level higher** on the second assessment of writing than the initial assessment;
- **3** students scored **the same** on the second assessment of writing as the initial assessment;
- **1** student scored **one half level lower** on the second assessment of writing than the initial assessment.
- Overall **16 positive differences in student achievement** produced a significant test statistic ($Z = -3.543$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$) for the sign test.

Assessing Changes in Writing Report Card Marks (sample size, n = 20 students)

Writing Marks Term 1 vs. Term 2	Positive Differences	10	$Z = -2.126$ $p\text{-value} = 0.034$
	Negative Differences	2	
	No Difference (Ties)	8	
Writing Marks Term 2 vs. Term 3	Positive Differences	9	$Z = -1.915$ $p\text{-value} = 0.056$
	Negative Differences	3	
	No Difference (Ties)	8	
Writing Marks Term 1 vs. Term 3	Positive Differences	13	$Z = -2.764$ $p\text{-value} = 0.006^*$
	Negative Differences	3	
	No Difference (Ties)	4	

* Overall the positive differences in student achievement produced a significant test statistic for the sign test when comparing Term 1 vs. Term 3 report card marks in writing ($Z = -1.915$, $p\text{-value} = 0.006$).

Conclusion: These findings support the anecdotal comments from project participants that suggest improvements in writing were observed.