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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between learning to write and learning to teach. Three beginning teachers implementing writing workshop for the first time were observed over a 5-month period to see how they met with the demands of learning to teach and try innovative ideas in a school district that mandates traditional skills-based instruction. It was found that: (1) talking is an integral part of learning to write and teach; (2) skills can be successfully taught in the context of authentic writing situations; (3) student choice and autonomy seems to result in more enthusiasm for writing and fewer management issues; (4) innovative teaching ideas may be stymied by schools that mandate specific pedagogical methods or create an environment where only traditional methods are validated; and (5) the growth and development of beginning teachers can be enhanced by creating an environment where they are free to experiment, make mistakes, and engage in reflective dialogue. It concludes with five recommendations for teacher training based on the data. (Contains 21 references. An appendix contains interview questions.) (Author/RS)

Writing Workshop and Beginning Teachers.

by Andrew P. Johnson

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between learning to write and learning to teach. Three beginning teachers implementing writing workshop for the first time were observed over a five-month period to see how they met with the demands of learning to teach and try innovative ideas in a school district that mandates traditional skills-based instruction. It was found that (a) talking is an integral part of learning to write and teach, (b) skills can be successfully taught in the context of authentic writing situations, (c) student choice and autonomy seems to result in more enthusiasm for writing and fewer management issues, (d) innovative teaching ideas may be stymied by schools that mandate specific pedagogical methods or create an environment where only traditional methods are validated, and (e) the growth and development of beginning teachers can be enhanced by creating an environment where they are free to experiment, make mistakes, and engage in reflective dialogue. I have made five recommendations for teacher training based on the data.

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Writing Workshop and Beginning Teachers

“Growth in writing requires risk taking, experimentation, and an environment that supports such exploration” (Dyson & Freeman, 1991).

Risk taking, experimentation, and a supportive environment might also be thought to support one's growth as a teacher. And like writing, teaching is a constantly developing skill that is enhanced by practice, reflection, feedback, and dialogue with peers. This paper examines the relationship between learning to write and learning to teach.

Purpose

In November of 1996, I set out to observe three beginning teachers who were all students in my graduate class. They had indicated that they were experimenting with writing workshop in their classrooms. Since they all worked in the same building, I felt this was a good chance to see how beginning teachers deal with the demands of setting up and maintaining a writing workshop. They were observed over the course of five months, during which, I began to notice many parallels between their students learning to write and these three learning to teach. Whether consciously or not, the same ideas these teachers used to develop students' writing skills were being used to help them develop their skills as teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected by means of interviews, class observations, and video taping. Each teacher was interviewed at the beginning of the study. The same 19 questions were asked of each (see Appendix). Interviews took approximately 60 minutes to complete and were recorded on audio tape. Also, six separate classroom observations totaling approximately 12 hours were made. Here, extensive field notes were taken to record relevant dialogue, the behaviors of students and teachers, and the classroom dynamics. Finally, three classroom sessions lasting approximately 50 minutes each were video taped.

Data were analyzed using analytic induction (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). As I reviewed the data, the following categories begin to emerge: writing, talk, skills, management issues, and forces affecting literacy instruction. The data were coded and put into each category. What I have included here is a representative sample of the data for each category.

The Setting

Stacy, Kathy, and Linda (not their real names), taught in a school district where all teachers were required to use a very structured skills-based approach to literacy instruction. As I observed them, they were experimenting with writing workshop, first to enhance and then to replace the required skills-based curriculum. Writing workshop is a student-centered approach to writing where students choose their own topics and assume ownership of their writing (Atwell, 1998). The teacher's role becomes one of a provider and facilitator instead of an evaluator (Tompkins, 1997). Here, skills instruction is not based on a predetermined scope and sequence; rather, by observing students engaged in the act of writing in order to see what skills they need and are ready to learn (Graves, 1983, Hansen, 1987).

There were slight differences in the structure of each teacher's writing workshops. Only those

elements that were common to all are described here.

Findings

Writing

Writing was taught as a process consisting of five stages: pre-writing, first draft, revising, editing, and publication. Student choice was integral to this process. Kathy found that allowing students to choose their own writing topics seemed to result in a better quality of writing. Linda said that “once I gave my students the freedom to come up with their own topics, I didn’t have to pull writing from them.” Students’ writing often reflected events going on in their lives, thus increasing feelings of ownership and emotional attachment. All reported that their students were eager to share their ideas and experiences in writing.

Talk

Conversation was an integral part of each writing workshop. Students talked about possible writing topics and about their current writing projects. More formal conversations related directly to students’ writing occurred in individual and group conferences with the teacher and in large group sharing sessions.

Skills

Skills identified in the language arts manuals and unit tests were taught using explicit instruction in short mini-lessons lasting five to ten minutes. After each skill was presented, students moved into small groups to create examples of that skill. This allowed students to help each other generate ideas and hear the thinking processes of others. For documentation, checklists were created which listed each skill and the date it was taught. Students’ work was also used to determine those skills used in mini-lessons. When unit tests were given, it was found that these students performed just as well as students in other grades on tests of basic skills. Thus, it appeared that students in writing workshop were learning literacy skills using far less instructional time than other classes, while more time was spent writing and composing.

Management Issues

All three teachers reported that management was going better than they had expected. Stacy said that putting more responsibility on students for correcting tests, organizing the classroom, and choosing writing topics made the room more student-centered and resulted in her having fewer behavior problems. Kathy felt that the time spent teaching routines and procedures led to fewer distractions and helped her workshops to run smoothly. Linda noted that creating writing experiences that tapped into students’ interests and valued their ideas seemed to contribute to much of her success with classroom management. My observations showed there to be few incidents of off-task behavior during writing workshops. All teachers created structure while giving students choices and a sense of autonomy within this structure.

Forces Affecting Literacy Instruction

Because of the district requirements, Stacy, Kathy, and Linda began the year using an approach to literacy instruction they found to be ineffective. This approach was not best suited to their teaching styles and did little to address the needs or interests of their students. Grateful to have jobs in a tight teaching market and feeling the pressure of being untenured, they initially designed literacy lessons which were in direct contrast to their own literacy philosophies. During this time, traditional

ideas were reinforced while innovation, creativity, and experimentation were extinguished.

Experienced teachers also affected their initial literacy practices. Peers who had become entrenched in the district's skills-based approach to literacy advised them to abandon their whole language ideas. New ideas which conflicted with the old paradigm were seen as bad. Instead, they were told to use a skills-based approach until they were tenured. At this point, meaningful dialogue between new and experienced teachers was curtailed.

The most powerful influence here, seemed to be the interaction with other whole language teachers in my evening graduate class. Here, all ideas were validated, mistakes as well as triumphs were shared, and a variety approaches to effective literacy instruction were discussed. Also, because all were teaching in the same building, they were able to engage in reflective dialogue with each other each day. All said they valued the feedback and the free exchange of ideas here. Stacy described it as "having safe, non-judgmental people to bounce ideas off of." Kathy wondered what it would be like to be the only teacher with a whole language philosophy in a building. Linda said that having the other two to talk to gave her the confidence to try writing workshop. The opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue with peers appeared to have been the most important variable in these teachers' willingness to trying new ideas.

Conclusions

1. Talking is an integral part of learning to write as well as learning to teach.
2. Literacy skills can be successfully taught in the context of authentic writing situations using short mini-lessons thus freeing up more time for writing and composing.
3. Allowing students choices and creating a sense of autonomy within a well-defined structure seems to result in more enthusiasm for writing and fewer management issues.
4. Innovative teaching ideas may be stymied by schools that mandate specific pedagogical methods or create an environment where only traditional methods are validated.
5. The growth and development of beginning teachers can be enhanced by creating an environment where they are free to experiment, make mistakes, and engage in reflective dialogue.

Implications

The follow ideas can be used to inform practice in regards to developing the pedagogical skills of teachers:

1. Like writing, teaching is a skill that develops holistically over time through practice, reflection, instruction, and feedback (Hollingsworth, Teel, & Minarik, 1992; Lanier & Little, 1990; Watts & Johnson, 1995). Teaching skills are best learned by engaging in authentic teaching experiences (Metcalf, Hammer, & Kahlich, 1996). Teaching is a complex endeavor involving knowledgeable planning, specific pedagogical skills, and a myriad of decisions which must be made instantly (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Parker & Jarolimek, 1997). It is unrealistic to think that two years of undergraduate instruction will produce a master teacher. At best, undergraduate training prepares students to begin to learn the art and science of teaching. Thus, support and mentorship are essential during the first two years of teaching.

2. Permitting teachers to make choices in their teaching style, pedagogy, and content allows them to find the methods best suited to their strengths and teaching philosophies and to best meet the specific needs of their students (Book, 1996; Duffy, 1993). Standards, curriculum, and prescribed

pedagogy should be viewed as flexible guidelines (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Eisner, 1995; Nelson, 1998; Reigeluth, 1997). By resisting the urge to teacher-proof the curriculum, schools will empower teachers to make the best choices about what is taught and how to go about it, in other words, to be a professional (Darling-Hammond, 1993; Kuzmic, 1994).

3. This study suggests that a workshop approach might be used in training preservice teachers. Instead of the traditional assembly line paradigm where preservice teachers are taught a set of skills and concepts before sending them out into field setting, they would be first be immersed in authentic teaching situations (Duffy, 1993; Hollingsworth, et al., 1992; Metcalf, et al., 1997). One way to do this would be to put two preservice teachers in an apprenticeship setting in a classroom at the start of their junior year before methods courses are typically begun. These preservice teachers would work with a classroom teacher and provide instruction to students for half a day the entire school year. The other half day would be used for methods instruction at the school site. Here a university instructor would teach a pre-determined set of skills and concepts as students are ready for them. This would provide preservice teachers a context for helping them assimilate and apply new knowledge.

4. This study illustrates the importance of reflective dialogue among teachers in order to foster growth, creativity, innovation, and a sense of professionalism (Hensen, 1996; Watts & Johnson, 1995). Schools and experienced teachers can nurture this reflective dialogue by validating new ideas and encouraging experimentation by teachers of all levels of experience.

5. Creativity and innovation are fostered when teachers are empowered to make decision best suited for their students (Hollingsworth, et al., 1992). Just like the students in writing workshops, teachers will produce better quality and quantity of innovative teaching ideas if they have choice and ownership in the curriculum and methodology (Kuzmic, 1994). Creativity is hampered by mandates which become intrusive or overlay prescriptive.

Reflections

Risk taking and experimentation is instrumental to a teacher's growth. In this study, many of these teachers' initial attempts did not work. But as in the writing process; reflection, feedback, and revision were used to refine and create some exemplary teaching practices. If teachers engage only in safe, predictable teaching practices, there will be little growth and far less innovation; both of which are desperately needed if education is to evolve to meet the changing needs of a complex society.

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Appendix. Interview questions.

Interview Questions

1. What were your literacy beliefs prior to starting this first year? How have they changed?
2. What literacy perspective did you leave college with?
3. What have you learning about teaching?
4. What have you learning about literacy?
5. What have you learned about schools and school systems?
6. What would have liked to have known prior to this first year of teaching?
7. What have you learned about classroom management?
8. What have you learned about classroom management?
9. How has peer acceptance or support affected the way you teach?
10. How have school requirements affected the way you teach?
11. What has been your greatest joy or triumph this year?
12. What has been your biggest disappointment this year?
13. What things related to literacy instruction do you do well?
14. What things related to literacy instruction do you want to get better at?
15. How do children learn to write?
16. What district requirements related to literacy seem to work well?
17. What district requirements related to literacy seem to be distracting?
18. How do you teach children to write in your classroom?
19. How do you teach children to read in your classroom?



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