

Write Away: Writing Across the Curriculum and Beyond

Kamshia R. Childs, Ed.D.
Texas A&M University - Commerce

Abstract

Writing often serves as a medium for students to express their feelings as well as share their perspectives gained. Students can benefit from learning to articulate through authentic and relevant writing. Writing can be beneficial in all core subjects (not just English Language Arts) as well as special programs (such as Fine Arts and Physical Education). This article shares the importance of writing to learn, with discussion about integrating writing in core subjects at school and beyond the classroom (at home). In order to further engage students, insight will be shared on how to teach the major purposes for writing in a way that is more applicable and relevant to students' lives.

Keywords: *Writing, Integrated Writing, Curriculum, Engagement, Writing Instruction*

Writing is a skill that is necessary and relevant in many settings. Students benefit from writing tasks in every subject area (core and elective). This should be done with creative, culturally relevant, and engaging curriculum and instruction and open-ended prompts that allow students to fully develop responses. Writing can be a subject that transforms instruction across subjects and grows a students' literacy skill. However, students usually only have the opportunity to be exposed to writing instruction during English Language Arts.

Writing allows students to express, reason, and share their knowledge—which could serve as a form of assessment. There is an urgent need for educators to work to integrate core and elective subjects and let students articulate their knowledge in multiple facets—writing is the gateway to making this possible.

Effective Writing Instruction

In order for students to get quality writing experiences in other subjects, they need to be taught how to write effectively. Effective writing instruction involves assigning authentic tasks and teaching engaging lessons. First, students need time to write daily in various settings (Graham, et. al., 2012)—not as an optional or extra activity. Students also need to be taught the writing process to write to learn, to write for informative purposes, and to learn the elements of various genres. Learning the technicalities of writing is also important—from the physical aspects as a young writer (holding a pencil, spelling, word processing, etc), to learning about typing and conventions. Finally, it is important to create a sense of community (Graham, et. al, 2012) among writers, and ensure that they are engaged.

Authentic and Engaging Writing

Creating an engaging writing community involves several efforts. Time, resources, and the method in which writing is presented and evaluated plays a factor. Writing should not be an afterthought in any classroom, nor just reserved for literacy block time on campus. “Empowered individuals can consider varied perspectives, negotiate with others, amend policies as needed as they can think independently, make their own decisions thoughtfully and with reference to relevant information, and act on that knowledge” (Broom, 2015, p. 81). Writing should be a tool used for learning as well as a tool to empower students to use their voices in school and throughout their community.

Students often struggle with writing when it is not personal to them or their experiences. Depending on their age, students interact with writing via social media and texting, however, this is not seen as writing, as it is not done in an academic tone. More should be done for students to see the connection between their informal language experiences and what is required of them in the classroom. In regards to urban students, Johnson and Mongo (2008) state that, “Using a thematic approach that incorporates culturally relevant literature, artifacts, graphic organizers, and other media to activate and build on urban students’ background knowledge is vital” (p. 3). What makes writing engaging to students is the opportunity to share their own thoughts and knowing their own perspectives will be received. Students often become more vocal when they know they are not being judged or pressured on having the correct answers. This involves the building of trust and moments of vulnerability. It also involves knowing the population of students and their interests, capabilities, likes and dislikes. This is not something that happens overnight, and it takes time and several attempts to use writing as a means of assessment and refuge in the classroom.

Students also struggle when writing does not serve a purpose for them. “Writing is both an individual performance and a social practice” (p. 280). Authentic and meaningful writing tasks are those that show students the intentions behind the assigned tasks and are those assignments that expose various aspects of voice (point of view and emotions) and exploration of written genres. Writing instruction can be disconnected from reality. Deane (2018) speaks of the “...disconnect between the sociocultural environment typical of most U.S. schools and the environments that demand skilled writing later in life” (Deane, 2018, p. 280). Though writing is used in real-world scenarios, students often do not connect their experiences with that of authors or well-known writers, even though they are exposed to writing with television, music, and movies daily.

Authentic writing allows students to utilize their writing skills across subjects and topics, and it allows students to become more comfortable with the processes that writing involves. Students need explicit instruction on the processes of composing texts for different purposes and different audiences (Behizadeh, 2019). In school settings, students are frequently asked to write and respond to set topics, and little time is spent on giving students the chance to develop their own topics. Authentic writing involves more than just reactions and rehashing or summarizing. Authentic writing tasks allow students to create, question, explain, and even challenge their environments. Writing tasks that involve students’ daily lives (such as relationships with friends, their favorites, their environment, etc.), sets them up to be more comfortable with the idea that the purpose of writing is not simply to convey a “right” answer. Students must learn and trust this process to feel connected to their curriculum in any classroom.

Integrating Writing Across Curriculum

Writing is a subject that is usually limited to the English Language Arts classroom. It is an authentic task that provides students a voice. However, for the benefit of students, the more

exposure to writing, the better the potential of turning out more dynamic readers and thinkers. Unfortunately, research (Nils, 2019) has shown that “when teacher groups are composed of teachers of different subjects...there is little room for discussion of how literacy strategies may be used meaningfully in specific school subjects” (p. 381). Writing across the curriculum is not a new concept. Schools would benefit from ensuring that teachers are comfortable implementing writing tasks, prompts, and exercises across grade levels. No matter the grade level, students will benefit from reflective writing and writing to open-ended prompts. These types of writing allow students to create, question, explain, and even challenge their environments.

It is possible to implement writing in core and elective subject areas. Essentially, it takes some creativity, common planning meetings, and customization of content on the behalf of the classroom teachers. It also involves all educators in their building to understand the standards and curriculums from subjects other than their own area of expertise, but most importantly all educators need to be familiar with the ELA standards and benchmarks within their school district and state, as English and writing skills serve as a foundational subject.

Writing across the curriculum has been thought to improve the literacy experience and content area literacy (Cantrell et al., 2008). To successfully integrate writing into other subject areas, Anaheim Union High School District (a 7-12 school district in Southern California) decided “rather than starting with a focus on *how* to get more writing in the classrooms, teachers were asked to consider *why* writing is crucial to students' literacy development” (Gallagher, 2017). Getting on one accord as a staff, as a grade level, and as a district are crucial when making curriculum decisions. There must be staff buy in, for the greatest student benefit. The task of integrating writing across the curriculum does take effort and some level of creativity and innovative ideas. The following are suggested prompts or ways to

weave writing into subject areas (can be modified for younger or older students):

Writing and Math (Writing for information)

Use flash cards to have students write word problems. Within the word problems, use key math vocabulary, and incorporate everyday problems that might occur (grocery trips, playing outside, etc.). Have the students include themselves or people that they know in their math problem. Once the word problems are created, have students write the steps needed in order to solve the problem. Do not just have the students write equations but have them answer (in words) to solve the problems.

Writing and Science (Writing for persuasion)

Have students think of a scientific problem that they would like to solve. This allows students to become more familiar with the scientific method in a more personal manner by choosing problems they have observed or encountered (which might resonate more with them). Give the students the opportunity to write detailed questions and steps as to how they could solve the identified scientific problem (Ex. Why do Mentos and soda cause a reaction similar to a volcano?).

Writing and Social Studies (Writing for persuasion)

Using brochures, maps, etc. or electronic devices (possibly Google Earth), students can create a list of towns, cities, states, countries, and continents that they would like to visit. For a few minutes, have the students free write the reasons as to why they would want to go to the places they selected. This activity serves as a prewriting activity, and the list can frequently be revisited. This could be a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly activity.

Writing and Electives (Writing for all purposes)

Physical Education. Students can write about their favorite athlete, sport, or game. This is an opportunity to write in various genres. Students could write biographies about a popular or historic athlete, write directions on how-to play a sport, or compose descriptive paragraphs on certain leagues or types of sports.

Art. Students can write about their artwork or the work of other artists. This is a great opportunity to explore mood, tone, and comparison/contrast.

Music. Students must know that music originates from emotions or inspiration. Songs begin as a written language before they become a sound. Have students explore song lyrics or create their own.

Foreign Language. Have students write down new vocabulary they find, and compare the look of written languages (This provides students with the opportunity to look at the roots and origins of languages, as well as the breakdown of words and parts of speech).

Writing A.W.A.Y (Authentic Writing Awaits You) and Beyond

There are challenges that are faced when writing is integrated into a curriculum that it was is not

traditionally a part of—such as the time needed to grade (and determining how to grade), knowing how to differentiate assignments for students with special needs or accommodations, and allowing students the time and care needed to develop their writing and thought process in general—however, the benefits outweigh the inconveniences.

Jones (2015) states, “An authentic writing pedagogy supports children’s evolving identities” (p. 76). Incorporating writing across the curriculum allows students and teachers to engage in rich and authentic conversations about standards in a manner that is relevant, allows for choice and more open-ended questioning (allows for higher-order thinking), as well as allows teachers and students to see their development in thought and abilities over time. Writing across the curriculum also allows for teachers grow in their teaching practices.

Writing is a skill needed for communication throughout life, and providing students with quality writing instruction involves working as a team across subjects. Writing influences and educates beyond the classroom. Writers take a stance. Why not equip students in multimodal ways to take on their social and academic journeys through writing?

References

- Behizadeh, N. (2019). Aiming for authenticity: Successes and struggles of an attempt to increase authenticity in writing. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 62(4), 411–419. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.911>
- Broom, C. (2015). Empowering students: Pedagogy that benefits educators and learners. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, 14(2), 79–86.
- Cantrell, S. C., Burns, L. D., & Callaway, P. (2008). Middle- and high-school content area teachers’ perceptions about literacy teaching and learning. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 48(1), 76–94.
- Deane, P. (2018) The Challenges of writing in school: Conceptualizing writing development within a sociocognitive framework. *Educational Psychologist*, 53 (4), 280-300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2018.1513844>
- Gallagher, K. (2017). The writing journey. *Literacy in Every Classroom*, 74(5), 24–29.

- <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb17/vol174/num05/The-Writing-Journey.aspx>
- Graham, S., Bollinger, A., Booth Olson, C., D'Aoust, C., MacArthur, C., McCutchen, D., & Olinghouse, N. (2012). Teaching elementary school students to be effective writers: A practice guide (NCEE 2012- 4058). *Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.*
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED533112.pdf>
- Johnson, V.G., Mongo, J.A. (2008). Literacy across the curriculum in urban schools. *Leadership Compass*. 5(3), 1-3.
https://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/resources/2/Leadership_Compass/2008/LC2008v5n3a2.pdf
- Jones, S. K. (2015). Authenticity and children's engagement with writing. *Language and Literacy*, 17, 63–82. doi:10.20360/G22C7J
- Nils, K. (2019). Improving literacy and content learning across the curriculum? How teachers relate literacy teaching to school subjects in cross-curricular professional development. *Education Inquiry*, 10(4), 368-384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2019.1580983>