Knowing, Thinking, and Writing

Using Writing for Understanding to Help All Students
Joey Hawkins 2006
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It was a beautiful spring afternoon in 2002 in Vermont, and my teaching colleague, Julie, and I had just finished assessing our seventh and eighth grade students’ research papers. We should have been delighted. The 45 papers were completed; our red pen work was done; we were ready to listen to the students’ culminating projects - their posters showing what they had learned about their topic.

We were not, however, delighted; in fact, we were dismayed. True, the papers did show that students knew how to use and cite multiple sources, how to use their own words, how to write a bibliography.

Unfortunately, they did not show much understanding of their subject.

What had gone wrong? we asked ourselves. As teachers, we thought we had done everything right. We had selected an area of high interest for the students: ways in which black Americans had struggled after the Civil War to create a nation of equals. Thought-provoking! we had thought. Opportunity for students to do real critical thinking! we had congratulated ourselves.

Besides that, we had differentiated among students so that all students could choose a topic that would be challenging but not frustrating, and had resources that were accessible to them at their reading levels. We had bought many index cards, large envelopes and rubber bands, and had distributed them liberally. We had showed students how to cite sources and had reminded them (constantly) to do so.

Finally, we had written a model to give students a sense of what a good paper would look like. We had set up times for students to confer with each other on the first drafts and made ourselves available for questions during that time.

Yet, with all that, the conclusion was inescapable - the students’ papers were not
very good. Even the best ones were not consistently thoughtful. The least successful were not even focused.

“Well,” Julie and I told ourselves, philosophically, “let’s get through these posters, and when we come back from vacation we’ll think about what went wrong.”

The next morning, the students began their poster presentations. One strong student described the impact of the black church in America on the civil rights movement. Another student, more of a struggler, described Madame CJ Walker and her success as a businesswoman.

Middle school students love posters, and these showed evidence of lots of time put in (to say nothing of lots of glue and glitter). The student who had tackled Madame CJ Walker had made a colorful poster featuring quotes from Madame Walker about her business success and about hair products (Walker was a highly successful entrepreneur at the turn of the century in hair products for African-Americans). Besides glitter, there wasn’t much else there.

As the student presented, we asked her very concrete questions about Walker: how did she go about making all that money? What did she actually do with it? The student explored these ideas, sometimes going back to her material, sometimes recalling material she already knew. Madame Walker had shown other African-Americans that business success was possible. Even more, she had organized her businesswomen to become active in political causes like anti-lynching. She had helped bring awareness of lynching to the national stage and modeled the idea that business had a role in helping others.

Finally, we asked the student, “So, how do you think you’d describe the impact Madame Walker had in creating a nation of equals?” And, finally, speaking haltingly but aloud, with help as needed, the student was able to synthesize what she knew, to connect it to the Big Idea of equality.

As each student talked, we asked questions, some very specific and concrete, some more probing and thought-provoking. Students warmed to their subjects,
speaking more and more fluently about them. Other students, catching the flow and the pattern from the classroom conversation around them, joined in. The presentations/conversations were energetic, fascinating, inclusive.

At the end of that class period, Julie said, “Too bad we didn’t have them do these presentations before they wrote the papers. Seems like they understand their subjects a lot better now than they did when they wrote.”

It was one of those moments of epiphany that come to teachers every now and then, when for some reason we stumble on a truth that seems suddenly very obvious and clear.

Students need to know what they are talking about when they write.

We had always heard the axiom that one needs to write about what one knows. Here we were seeing the corollary: one needs to know about what one writes.

To make a long story short, we had our students rewrite their research papers after their presentations. They were vastly better than their first attempts. And we have never taught quite the same way since.

Writing can be thought of as construction and communication of meaning about content that matters. Whether that content is personal or academic, writing is a powerful, synthesizing experience that allows, even forces the thinker/writer to make connections among ideas, to sort and develop, and to finally create a coherent chunk of meaning out of a body of ideas and/or experiences.

This experience of writing is what all teachers want all their students to have. Sometimes, however, with the best of intentions, we have made it difficult for all but our strongest students to have that experience. (In our case, with our research papers, we originally made it difficult for even our strongest students to have that experience!) We ask them to write from insufficient knowledge. We ask them to write before they know what they are talking about.

Of course, some students figure it out themselves. They know enough, or they
read well enough, or they have enough determination (or helpful parents), to figure out how to make coherent meaning out of a subject in writing.

Many, however, don’t. They settle for partial meaning, partial understanding, that-will-do-for-now kind of writing, the kind of writing that shows “sort of” getting it. Eventually, perhaps, they come to expect that this is a good as understanding ever gets. Meanwhile, the students who struggle the most, who have the most limited vocabulary and the most limited reading abilities, often simply “write off” writing. This is for other people; it’s not for them.

Since that fateful research paper experience, we have developed in our classroom an approach to content writing that we call Writing for Understanding. To implement this, we go through a kind of “backwards design” process very similar to the Understanding by Design model of McTighe and Wiggins (McTighe and Wiggins, 1999). Graphically, the steps could look like this:
What Writing for Understanding Instruction could look like:
A middle school Social Studies unit

*Enduring Understandings / Big Ideas.* This unit begins with our identifying an Enduring Understanding, or Big Idea. In the world history year of our school’s two-year social studies curriculum, the Enduring Understanding /Big Idea is: History is complex. Any given event can be seen as a result of a complex variety of forces, and the same event will have a complex variety of effects. This is a concept that will permeate the curriculum for the entire year.

In addition, we want our students to continue to use/learn a Big Idea about writing, that they need to support a controlling idea thoughtfully with specific information/evidence and explanations, within a coherent, well-organized structure. We want them to have a tool that can be applied to other writing next week, or next month, or after they leave us.

*Posing the Essential Focusing Question.* In this unit, we begin by looking at a very particular event: the rescue of the British army, stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk during World War II, by thousands of little boats whose civilian captains risked everything to bring those soldiers off the beaches. At this point, we articulate the Essential Focusing Question. This is:

“How can we see the forces of technology, geography, desire for power, economics, and values/ideas coming together in the little boats’ rescue of the British soldiers at Dunkirk in World War II?”

This Essential Focusing Question is on the wall for everyone to see. This is where we’re headed. This is what the final piece of writing will explain.

*Building working knowledge.* Now that we (and the students) know the direction in which we’re going, it’s time to begin gathering knowledge.

What does this stage of building working knowledge include? One thing it
includes specific vocabulary work. Much has been written recently about the
importance of vocabulary in understanding any field of knowledge (Beck, 2002; Hirsch,
2003; Marzano, 2005). Hirsch, Marzano, Beck and others have written about the
fundamental necessity of precise vocabulary in making sense of reading and indeed of
the world. Its importance, therefore, in writing, is self-evident. Students need to know,
really know, the language, at the word and concept level, that they are going to be using
when they write.

So we work with the concepts. We work with the terms technology, geography,
desire for power, economics, values/ideas, in a variety of ways. What do those look
like in our own lives? What are some examples?

Students also need some background on World War II. What was going on in
Europe in 1940? What was driving Germany to try to take over the world? Why were
so many British soldiers stranded on the Dunkirk beaches that night?

Building working knowledge also includes paying specific attention to reading.
(In this case, all students are using the same text, “The Long Night of the Little Boats”
by Basil Heatter.) This is a great text, but the best resource material in the world is of
little help to students if they have not understood it well, and do not have the skills to
do so on their own. As much of the research on reading comprehension points out,
gaining deep knowledge of text, especially informational text, is not a quick process
for many students (Allington, 2001).

We spend several class periods on the reading. Mindful of the idea that reading
comprehension strategies are best taught in the process of acquiring real content
knowledge (Snow, 2002), the teacher reads the text aloud to the students first, using her
voice to give students a sense of the text. Students read the same text to each other. We
discuss, we reread; we paraphrase, we identify text structure; we draw pictures; finally,
we summarize, in writing.

Above all (or perhaps underneath all?), building this working knowledge of the
content includes frequent, intentional use of oral language. We are deeply indebted to
Vygotsky’s work and its emphasis on the importance of social learning, mediated by language (in Tharp and Gallimore, 1988). Middle school students, like the rest of us, are language-driven beings. We make meaning through use of experience and language: shared and discussed, exchanged and refined.

Further, we find that this frequent and intentional use of oral language becomes part of a sort of conversation-infused curriculum (Applebee, 1996). When we are working on the story of the little boats, students are talking about information that is common to them all. They get the opportunity to orally work with the ideas in a variety of ways. This is more than exposure-level knowledge. Because the planning is intentional and directed towards the final piece of writing, because the knowledge is constantly being mediated by oral language, students will know what they are talking about when they - finally - sit down to write a full, focused paper.

Processing the knowledge / capturing the knowledge.

At this point, students have a good sense of the event itself and the relevant background. They also have a working sense of the concepts of geography, technology, desire for power, economics, and values/ideas. However, for “working knowledge” to be useful to our students, especially to those who struggle the most with language, it must be processed (synthesized) and “captured” in some way.

We find we need to be very intentional about notes. We give our students a note-taking template which directs them very specifically to the Essential Focusing Question. Working in a highly guided setting (these are hard concepts for students on their own), we re-read the text. This time, we stop and discuss evidence of geography being a factor - and write it down in notes. We note that the values of patriotism and a “we can do this” mental picture of the world were essential in making the captains of those little boats set out that night in 1940. We note that dire economic straits in Germany in the 1930’s were a huge force in the ascendance of Hitler to power. In the presence of guided conversation, students take notes, using their own words, to synthesize the concepts and the particulars of the event.
They are, quite literally, making meaning. By the time students sit down to write, they will be coming from a position of...well, of knowing what they are talking about.

**Structures.** Our last step before writing is addressing structures. We know that most of our students have experience with expository writing structures, but we also know that some are more experienced than others, and that none of them have written using these concepts of history before. Therefore, we write a model (in our case, a paper analyzing a local, familiar event through the lens of the same Essential Focusing Question that our students used for their notes and will use for their paper). For a few students who struggle more than most, we provide a frame as well.

**The writing process.**

A word about the writing process is in order here. All teachers at all grade levels are indebted to the writing process. Its fundamental premises that 1) thoughtful writing does not spring full-blown from the writer’s head, but reflects an evolving process, and 2) writing with meaning is an experience available to all, not just a select few, have made an enormous impact on the world of writing instruction. The writing process has stressed the deep importance of conversation in the development of good writing, particularly in the revision process.

What it has not stressed so much, however, is the importance of gaining the knowledge about the subject in the first place. At least as the writing process has been used in many content classrooms, that knowledge has often been to some degree assumed. In the case of personal / expressive writing, the knowledge has been assumed to have come from the writer’s own experience. In the case of academic / content writing, the knowledge has been assumed to have come from classroom content, or individual research, or reading.

Our experience with our black experience research paper was a revelation about knowledge. Knowledge cannot be assumed. For a variety of reasons, our students had information but not real knowledge about what they were attempting to write.
Because of that, the writing process, by itself, was not enough to be of real help to most of them.

At this point in our “little boats” sequence, however, the writing process is a great help. Armed with deep knowledge, good notes, and a clear sense of structure, students are ready to draft and confer thoughtfully. By the time they are writing their final drafts, students have papers that truly represent understanding.

**What are the results?** How well does the Writing for Understanding approach to content writing work in a heterogeneous middle school classroom? First, let’s be clear about what it does not do. It does not ensure that all students magically reach uniformly high standards in writing or in the content knowledge shown in the writing. It does not mean that the student writing never shows misunderstanding, or that all students show equal insight or depth of comprehension in their writing.

What we have found, however (and seen replicated in other classrooms in other schools), is that this approach to writing keeps all students firmly in the game. For some, the process does indeed sometimes seem miraculous. Watching reluctant seventh and eighth graders blossom when they realize they do, in fact, “get it” is one of teaching’s finer moments. With Writing for Understanding, the strongest students frequently show levels of insight and depth of understanding that amaze us. And even the students who struggle the most in school are producing writing that shows solid understanding - in a word, meaning.

Last fall, I was visiting an area high school and ran into one of our former middle school students, now a ninth grader. Of course, I asked her about her writing.

“Well,” she said, “I just had to write a history paper that was hard. At first I couldn’t really do it.”

My heart sank. “Why not?” I asked her. “What didn’t you know how to do?”

“Oh, I knew how,” she replied without hesitation. “I just didn’t know enough. I didn’t, like, understand the stuff. So I had to do that first. Then I could write it okay.”
“Good,” I said. “Good for you.” I could not have asked for more.