

From Top Down to Grass Roots: Writing Across the Curriculum Districtwide

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The Beginning

The young black student entered a classroom for the emotionally handicapped (EH) and announced, "I don't want to work today; can I write?" This student had found the joy of discovery through writing. This young man became hooked on writing when he realized that he had something to write using his own words. When his paper was completed, his peers and adults read and appreciated his writing. The teacher started with a wild animal unit because this eighth grader did not believe he could write anything; he had not been taught from kindergarten that he had something worthwhile to say. The students were to write about a wild animal that they had personally seen. For this young man the only one that came to mind was an opossum. The teacher said the opossum was perfect! The student researched the facts about the animal and wrote a facts list. The requirement for these EH students in this classroom was to have at least ten facts before they started writing.

The program to promote the use of the writing process in all content areas was called Writing Across the Disciplines (WAD) in Volusia County Schools in Florida. This program, which was supported by Dr. Evelyn Lynn, the assistant superintendent of Volusia County Schools in 1981, used writing as a viable learning strategy. This same young man attended a school board meeting in 1982 and told the members of the board that his paper, entitled "Mr. O. Possum," was the first he had ever written. Until he had a trained writing teacher, he had only copied from an encyclopedia.

Top Down to Grass Roots

The WAD has supported writing instruction for all students in all content areas. Writing makes a difference in the way students learn and process what they've learned. With a vision for writing in all classrooms, Dr. Lynn put the plan into motion through two actions: first, she hired Dr. Nancy McGee, a consultant from the University of Central Florida, for one full year to teach teachers how to write and how to coach writing in their classrooms. Payment for the consultant was arranged with the staff development department in the district. Dr. McGee would supply workshop leadership, facilitate monthly sessions of the planning group's work, assist in writing the end-of-year report, and consult in program development.

Second, Dr. Lynn requested that the secondary administrators choose one or two faculty members who were respected by their peers to serve on a writing task force. She wanted to use the "teacher teaching teachers" model. This group of teachers was asked to attend a summer writing in-service and to participate in monthly meetings for updating research-based knowledge about writing and sharing successful strategies in their classrooms.

Sharing the Wealth of Writing

The first week of in-service started with personal writing—writing about what we knew. Dr. McGee had each of us write about ourselves, our dreams, and our fears. She introduced us to the writings of Donald Murray and Donald Graves. Books by Lucy Calkins, Nancie Atwell, and Regie Routman would come later. Many of us were afraid of writing, especially in front of our peers! We learned we could overcome that fear, and we experienced how our students felt when we assigned writing instead of taught writing. As the two-week in-service progressed, we began to gain confidence in ourselves. We acted as coaches assisting each other and sharing what we had written. Sharing was an important process. It gave us insight into the importance of publishing.

The last two days of the summer in-service, our assignment was to devise a plan for promoting and coaching writing at our individual schools. Everyone had a different plan, but we shared and borrowed from each other. The vision from "top down" was beginning to receive "grass-roots" enthusiasm.

After one short month in our schools, every person on the task force came back to the meeting with tales of success. We shared our writing and writing samples from students. One school had started a publishing incentive program. When students wrote something that was published at the school level or outside the school, they received a

student-designed T-shirt. The most popular T-shirt had a picture of a dog with the caption: GET ON THE WRITE TRACK. After that sharing session, everyone believed this program was now “our” program.

A newsletter was one of the first suggestions for broadening our base of operation. *Writing Tips* became the first newsletter, and it is still the writing newsletter that our teachers receive each month. Other ways of broadening our base for information were

- module development for major content areas
- development of writing idea booklets(s)
- development of demonstration lessons

At the same time that WAD was developing, the Department of Education in Florida passed the Jack Gordon Writing Act, which decreased the size of English classes and mandated a major writing piece per week for students in the Writing Enhancement classes. The WAD in-service gave many of our teachers the confidence they needed to provide the required instruction to high school students in the Writing Enhancement classes.

Teachers who tried writing as an alternative to workbooks or multiple choice questions saw its value as a learning strategy and as a motivator of students. Math teachers would ask students to write the steps they took in solving a problem to discover where they were having difficulties, as well as to model problem-solving strategies for students who needed help. (See Appendix, Exhibit A.)

An English teacher had her students write about their reactions to what they were learning in social studies (Appendix E, Exhibit B), and music teachers had fun with concrete poetry using the musical instrument as the object of the poetry (Appendix, Exhibit C). Many classes began with content journal writing, in which students respond in their own words to the meaning of a key word or concept for that day’s lesson. This technique of responding before learning allowed the teacher to have quick pretests without the students’ fearing their responses would be graded or not acceptable. After the lesson, many teachers would again request a reaction to the concept to determine if the concept was clear or if more teaching was needed. (See Appendix, Exhibit D.)

Students who loved science found that writing about aerodynamics in English was acceptable; acrostic poems using science terminology or diamantes transcribed onto kites gave students pride in their accomplishments. After students were exposed to different writing strategies, acrostic and concrete poetry appeared in all classrooms, and writing organizers using drawings or boxes assisted students in understanding problems or the task at hand. (See Appendix, Exhibit D.)

Like our EH teen, students came to class wanting to write because

the teacher had provided strategies that allowed them to find success in their writing. Realizing that publishing provides real audiences for writing, many of the schools started their own publishing houses using parent volunteers. The district's two major publications, *Imprints* and *Impressions*, reflected the writing talents of students in all grades.

How it Survived

The program had top-down and grass-roots support; but in a large district of over 45,000 students, the program had to provide ongoing in-service. The in-service each month provided the task force members researched-based information. Individual teachers experiencing success using writing provided school-based workshops, wrote newsletter articles, and encouraged new teachers to integrate writing into content. From October 1981 through August 1982 the task force continued to promote and encourage writing as a viable classroom strategy. With the end of the year and our consultant's contract, many teachers felt that the program needed its own consultant. Therefore, with help from the assistant superintendent for curriculum, a teacher on assignment (TOA) was hired to assist with the management of writing in the district. This person became the catalyst who coordinated the task force meetings, provided in-service for new teachers in writing strategies, and promoted writing in all content areas.

Cynthia Pino, the first TOA, provided in-service to new teachers, gave demonstration lessons, and served as a writing coach in classrooms. She edited *Writing Activities Recommended by Classroom Teachers*, published for and by teachers, plus many other, smaller booklets to assist in teaching writing.

Taking the High Road: How it Changed

From 1982 through 1986, the program expanded to the elementary level, making it a K–12 program. The district continued to support the program with a TOA coordinator. Although there were several TOAs over the years, the original vision has not changed. Writing across the disciplines in Volusia County Schools is a program that believes writing is an essential skill for all students. Humans need to communicate their experiences—ideas, knowledge, and creativity.

In 1986 our new superintendent, Dr. James Surratt, identified as a goal that our teachers and students become technologically literate. His plan included purchasing over 5,000 computers for the classrooms. In his wisdom, he realized that the quickest way to teach computer literacy was through writing. All our kindergarten students began using a computer program called "Writing to Read." Using computers for

writing after kindergarten was a natural sequence. Thus, in 1986 all elementary teachers and all English teachers were allowed to take a computer home to learn how to use it as a writing tool. The program was entitled “Process Writing,” defined as using the steps of the writing process with the computer as the writing tool.

In addition to the newsletter, *Writing Tips, Behind the Screens* provided helpful computer writing hints. The teachers wrote *Computer Writing Activities* to assist in using the computer as a writing tool. Now that all elementary teachers and all English teachers were required to teach writing and use the computer as a writing tool, as well as our high school level writing in the content areas, an additional TOA was hired to ensure support through in-service. This continued support made it possible for our district to grow as a writing district receiving state and national recognition.

A Decade of Writing

October 1991 marked the tenth anniversary of WAD in our district. Veteran and new teachers still are attending in-services and promoting writing in their classrooms and school sites. Writing folders are expected for every student, grades K–12. Each spring, representative folders are read from every teacher’s classroom to provide feedback, as well as to plan for the type of in-service needed. Monitoring the folders gives an opportunity to celebrate and praise the students and teachers for a job well done.

Today the program has these components:

- school-based and districtwide writing in-service
- computer writing in-service for all new teachers and others who need additional computer assistance
- *Writing Tips* and *Computer Tips* newsletters for all teachers
- districtwide writing contests culminating in district-published books for elementary and secondary students
- Youth Authors’ Conferences for elementary and secondary students
- area meetings for writing task force open to all interested teachers
- classroom demonstration lessons upon request
- technical assistance and coaching in writing
- K–5 integrated curriculum that does not use workbooks—reading, writing, and speaking are emphasized
- teacher publication, *Images*, with public praise for teachers who write
- senior portfolio writing contest in English

- writing folder for all students K–12
- writing audit grades 1–12 from February to April.

Teachers are suggesting that a portfolio follow the students instead of just a writing folder. In the future this will be an alternative form of assessment that directly affects curriculum development and student progress. In this process teachers and students will be the key. No program survives and thrives unless it has the elements of support at all levels, responsive in-service, and a productive monitoring plan that teachers view as positive, not punitive.

The Future?

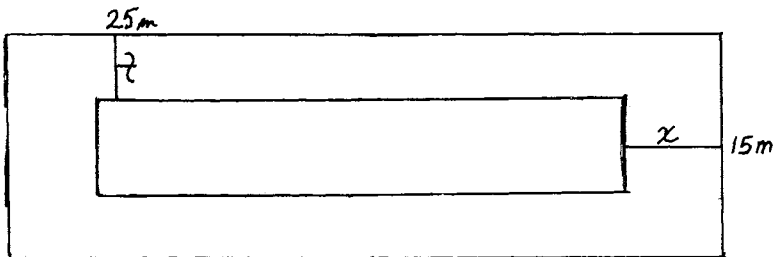
Writing by its very nature crosses content and cultural boundaries. If we listened to the experts, students need to write about what they know. Everyone has different knowledge; that makes writing interesting. With portfolio assessment as an authentic method of evaluating writing and changing curriculum to meet students' needs, a bright future exists for us. Our EH student, who wanted to write instead of work, graduated from high school knowing the importance of the writing process as a learning and discovery tool. This dynamic instructional strategy—Writing Across the Disciplines—is a vital way of meeting students' individual needs.

Appendix Exhibits and Examples

Exhibit A

Math Problem

The area of the border in the figure is 225 square meters. How wide is this border if the outside length is 25 meters and the outside width is 15 meters?



Student's Strategy: First, I multiplied $25\text{m} \times 15\text{m}$ to get the area of the entire rectangle. Then I subtracted 225m (area of the border) from 375 (area of the entire rectangle) and got 150m as the area of the center section. The inside length equals $25-2x$ because you have to take away the two sidewalk widths and the inside width is $15-2x$ (same reason). Next I set 150 equal to the inside width times the inside length. I multiplied this FOIL and subtracted 150 from both sides to set it equal to zero. I tried to factor it but it didn't work so I put it into the quadratic formula. The two answers I got for the width of the border were 16.614 meters and 3.3956 meters. The width of the sidewalk couldn't be wider than the entire width (15m) so 16.614m wouldn't work. I was left with 3.3956 meters for my answer.

Denise Goforth, Algebra II
Grade 10

Exhibit B

English/Social Studies

Student was asked if he felt Phillip Nolan's punishment fair.

Student's response: Was it fair? Did Phillip Nolan really commit treason? Phillip Nolan, lieutenant in the Army of the United States, was tried for treason in the year 1807. At Fort Adams, it was proven that Nolan disliked the Army. He was associated with Aaron Burr and was part of the militia for Burr's new country.

I think Nolan is guilty of being naive. He saw Burr as a god and would undo anything for him. Nolan is a traitor with a childlike belief in Burr.

In the way of a trial, Nolan had an extremely fair one. He got his chance to speak his mind and he did so. I think that his sentence was fair because the judge knew that his "wish" would teach him a lesson.

If the same event were to happen in 1992 the result would be very different. Today, people burn flags and get away with it. Also, we have a freedom of speech which allows us to say what we wish without being penalized. In conclusion, I think that Phillip Nolan was treated fairly according to the justice system available at that time. He was quick to speak and surely regretted his words.

Jennifer Blom
Middle School Integrated Unit
Grade 8

Exhibit C

Music

Notes

Notes
are
beautiful.

They
have a
good
sound.

Notes
will
make
people
fall in
love.

Music is made up of
hundreds of notes.

Melodies are made up
of many of them. So
the next time you think
music, think of notes.

Naquisha Nelson
Grade 8, Music

Exhibit D

Science/English

Assignment: Tell how you made your kite.

We had been studying aerodynamics in science for sometime when we made kites. This project was part of our science class and also part of our English class.

In English we had to write diamante poems. We picked one to place on the kite which we flew.

The other half of the task was building the actual kite. The first step was taping two long sticks together in the shape of a large, lowercase “t.”

Mike Rubino
M/S Integrated Unit
Grade 8

Multicultural:

Student's response is to a literature story about fears.

About the war that's nothing to laugh about. It's real hard not to be scared by the bombs, the rifles, grenades and the guns. My country is

