

TEACHING PRACTICES MODEL #1

School Demographics

The school at which I currently teach contains a very diverse population. We have many students who come from very financially stable households and whose educational backgrounds are strong. In contrast, we have students who come from extremely economically disadvantaged homes. Many of these students came to school never seeing a book or writing their names. As a whole, our school is approximately 58% free and reduced lunch. In my classroom, I have 24 students, 13 boys and 11 girls. I have twenty Caucasian students, one African-American student, and three bi-racial students. I have six students with IEPs. In order to reach students from varied backgrounds, I must adjust my teaching to meet the needs of all of them.

Practice 1: The Importance of Prewriting to Maintain Focus

At the fourth grade level, one area of difficulty I have noticed with my students is maintaining a focus on their purpose for writing. However, I have found that the completion of focus directed activities prior to writing can enable students to maintain their purpose more effectively. According to Karen Schweiker-Marra and William Marra, "Research has shown that teachers who emphasize prewriting activities have enabled their students to produce higher proficiency scores in writing. In addition, students who were encouraged to plan and define their writing purpose were found to be better writers."

Investigating the Effects of Prewriting Activities on Writing Performance. By: Schweiker-Marra, Karen and Marra, William. Reading Psychology, April 2000, Vol. 21 Issue 2, p99, 16p.

1. Before students begin a new piece, they complete brainstorming homework with their parents. For example, if we are writing memoirs about special people in our lives, they brainstorm a list of 5 people and describe each person.
2. After completing this sheet, students conference with a teacher to decide which person, place, etc... they would like to write about.
3. Students then fill out a focus sheet that directly relates to the form of writing they will be completing (i.e. Memoir Focus Sheet, Feature Article Focus Sheet, etc...)
4. Students begin by writing their purpose statement. For example:
 - a. I want my reader to know that my grandpa is special to me because he teaches me new things.
5. After completing their purpose statements, students list three details that support that statement. For example:
 - a. He shows me the right way to cast a fishing pole.
 - b. He teaches me how to fix the pick-up truck.
 - c. He teaches me how to make his world famous chili.
6. Using this sheet, students begin writing their piece. They keep the sheet on their desks to refer to as they write. As a class, we discuss how everything they write in their memoirs should relate to their purpose statement.
7. Before I conference with a student, I ask them to read me their purpose statement and their details from their focus sheets first. I tell them to keep that in mind as they read. Most often, students are then able to determine on their own when they have lost their focus.

Practice 2: Using Technology to Enhance Student Experiences

As I previously stated, my classroom is a very diverse place. I have many students whose life experiences and background knowledge are limited. This sometimes makes building personal connections to writing difficult. For example, if we are writing short stories about a trip to the zoo and I have students who have never been to the zoo, this activity will be extremely difficult for them. In order to expose my students to a world outside their own, I have turned to technology. By using virtual tours, digital photography, the Internet, and countless other possibilities, I have been able to build the background knowledge of my students and thus, help them to produce better writing.

1. Before beginning a new topic that we will be writing about, I compile several resources that address that topic. Some examples include:
 - a. Before beginning a unit on Haiku, our class took a virtual tour of Japan.
 - b. Before writing articles on the Titanic, we took a virtual tour of the ship.
 - c. Before writing fantasy stories about what happens at night at the zoo, we looked at a PowerPoint demonstration that contained digital photographs of all the different animals that live there.
2. Students are encouraged to ask questions and discuss thoughts with the class.
3. Often times, we have to look up answers to their questions on the Internet. This encourages them to become more interested in their topics.
4. After building our knowledge base, students begin writing.
5. During the writing process, students are permitted to return to the computers to get a second look at the topic if they get stuck or need to add more details.

Practice 3: Connecting Reading and Writing

It has long been said that reading and writing should be intertwined in the classroom. If you expect students to write a personal narrative, they should first read personal narratives. If you want students to use more voice in their writing, they should be exposed to books, articles, and passages that demonstrate this skill. In my classroom, I have found that modeling good writing is the number one key to helping my students become stronger writers.

1. Using "Springboards for Writing," a document put out by the Fayette County Board of Education, I select a variety of books that cover the style of writing I will be teaching. I can also use this document to locate books that focus on particular skills.
2. I start my lesson by defining the genre or skill that we will be focusing on.
3. I inform my students what they should be listening for in the story and then I read the story out loud to them without stopping.
4. We then read the story again, stopping along the way to focus on strong strategies that we might want to include in our own writing.
5. We complete this process with several different stories.
6. As students write or revise their writing, there are several books that focus on our genre/skill located throughout the classroom that they may reference to pull ideas from.

Teaching Writing Practices #2

School Demographics

I teach fourth grade at a school that is a Title I school with approximately 600 students. Students represent a diverse collection from different economic backgrounds. A little over 50% of the student population participates in the free/reduced lunch program. The majority of the students are Caucasian. My classroom is a good representation of the whole. There are 11 boys and 10 girls in my class. I have nine students that participate in the free/reduced lunch program. Two of my students are classified with Individual Education Plans where they receive resource services for all subjects except science and social studies. All of my students except one are Caucasian. One student is bi-racial. My students come from many different home situations. Students from traditional, blended, and single-parent families are all represented in my classroom.

1. Modeling with Examples

One of the most critical steps in teaching writing is modeling to students how writing should be meaningful and serve a purpose. For this reason, I begin each new writing piece by reading aloud or allowing the students to read/view the type of writing that they will be creating. Here a few examples:

- To get students thinking about their brochures, students read and viewed real brochures from various places across the United States. Students were also encouraged to view and print any online brochure they came across while researching their chosen state. This really aided my students in discovering the purpose for their brochure, which was persuading tourists to come to their states.
- To give students an idea of their intended audience, they looked at children science magazines like *Super Science* to model their own feature articles. By reading these articles on a daily basis, my students learned about voice and tone and how these two elements of writing are affected by the selection of an intended audience, which for this piece was other intermediate science students.
- To begin writing separate poems about the students' favorite colors and sensory poetry, the Title I writing teacher read *Hailstones and Halibut Bones* by Mary O'Neill to my students. The book acted as a perfect model for what was expected out of the students when they wrote poems about their favorite colors.

2. Emphasizing Vocabulary in Test Answers

I use a graphic organizer in my science classes to put an added emphasis on the use of content-specific vocabulary, which is science is very important.

1. The class reads the test question together. In most cases, the question is presented in multiple parts and uses very specific instructional vocabulary.
2. Using a T chart, the students fill out both columns. The left column of the T chart lists the "power verbs" or instructional vocabulary that is used in the question. Students do this using a bulleted list.
3. The right column is title simply "What?" In this column, students answer the question "what?" by listing what the question calls for. For example, if their first bullet in the left column says "explain," then they would write down what the question wants them to explain in the "What?" column.
4. Underneath the T chart, the students draw a box in which they will list vocabulary terms that will be used to more effectively answer the question.

For my students, I began referring to this as a "TV Box" (a T chart that looks like TV antennae on top of a Vocabulary box). Like I mentioned above, this puts much more of a focus on using the content

vocabulary in answers to test questions. Completion of a “TV Box” makes the question easier to understand and sometimes less intimidating for my students.

3. Peer Conferencing

No matter the subject, teachers want their students to become more independent as opposed as always leaning on the teacher and their peers. Because of this, my fourth grade students receive training at the beginning of the school year from myself and our Title I writing teacher on how to ethically peer-conference. My students are taught to conference in the same manner that I conference with small groups. They learn to never to directly state an opinion that could change the value of the content of the student being assisted, but rather ask questions that will guide them to finding a solution themselves. This peer-conferencing stage usually comes in the early stages of the drafting process because obviously students are not going to recognize the same things as the instructors. However, students chose to help peer-conference, for the most part, are able to assist their classmates in areas like idea development, sentence structure, and simple editing procedures. In the end, this pays dividends for all the students involved. The struggling is often more receptive to ideas and less intimidated due to the fact that the assistance is coming from a peer opposed to a teacher. By helping other students, the student helpers are able to self-evaluate their own learning and development of the piece.

Three Teaching Practices #3

Madison Middle School is a truly unique and wonderful school. The building itself was constructed in the early part of the last century, but even before that time the site had a rich history. During the Battle of Richmond, the location was used as a Union Army hospital. I bring up the school’s rich past because this is unique among local schools. Other schools may have newer equipment, but Madison Middle School is proud of its rich heritage and traditions. As for my individual classroom, I have approximately thirty students in each class. The population of our students is very diverse, especially in the 8th grade. I hate putting my kids into any kind of category, which is fortunate this year since that would be impossible to do anyway. We have city kids, country kids, students living in extreme poverty, and students living in mansions. There is no “typical” student in my classroom. Because of this diversity, I have had to alter my teaching practices this year, as every year, to be more inclusive to all students.

One teaching practice I’ve used with my students is one that most people would not probably consider teaching at all, even though I feel it is the most important. I really enjoy getting to know students on a one-on-one basis, but there is seldom enough time during a regular school day to accomplish this with everyone. I feel that having a rapport with students, connecting with students on a personal level, is the best teaching practice to open the door to learning. Doing so also allows students to better communicate their ideas with others, especially the teacher. To accomplish this I have had students complete interest inventories, work on a book about their lives called the “Who I Am Project,” and much more. In addition to the classroom, I have volunteered many hours outside of school to spend time with students. This year I coached our girls’ soccer team, then coached an indoor soccer team made up of girls from across Madison County. I have also started an after-school class called “Rock 101.” Twice a week for two hours we listen to music, play our own instruments, learn about the history of the genre, and even play Guitar Hero to unwind at the end of a long day. I have also helped our school’s newspaper staff with story ideas and editing. I feel that spending this precious time with my students (current and future) is well worth the effort as it has made the *job* part of teaching much easier.

I've also found that uncovering creative ways to engage students in writing tasks helps produce higher quality work. This might be an obvious statement, but finding appropriate solutions is not as clear. One example of how I've tried to bring out the imaginative side of students is through podcasting. Podcasting is basically just the practice of recording spoken word, music, etc., and making it available to others, usually online. I have created my own podcasts for fun, which was the impetus for using podcasting in the classroom. Last year I received a Bechtel-Parsons grant to purchase the equipment for podcasting and I began having students record their own works. I have found that this gives students much more ownership and pride in their writing tasks. In the future, I plan to expand this to create a classroom book full of student stories. Inside of this book there will be a compact disc containing the students reading their own pieces. My hope is that this will further motivate my students not just to write, but to desire to write.

One important practice for teaching Language Arts is to have students personally connect with what they are reading or writing. I constantly ask students what books they want to read, have them research books that fit their interest, and just share my thoughts on what they would like. I was once a struggling reader myself, so I understand how many of my students feel. It wasn't until I was in my 7th grade year that I found a book that I could not put down. My Language Arts teacher that year had several discussions with me about my interests, conversations I cannot say I looked forward to; however, the teacher did pull out of me the fact that I loved the outdoors – hunting, fishing, etc. She handed me a copy of Gary Paulsen's wilderness adventure, Hatchet, and I was hooked. The rest is history. Had I not picked up that book, who knows where I would be today. I try to keep this memory of my own learning experience in the front of my mind when dealing with reluctant readers. I spend a great deal of time finding that one special book for each child that will interest them enough to read more. I do this through book talks, literature circles covering a wide range of interests, and most importantly through one-on-one conversations with students. As for writing, I try to celebrate student work through innovative ideas, such as the poetry café we held to finish our poetry unit. I brought in tea, cookies, fruit, and juice and cleared the room of desks. The students each read their original poems in front of a floor full of students. Our school has also obtained a license for Destiny Quest, an online program that aids students in searching for books that might interest them. Destiny Quest takes into account each student's reading level and suggests books that students might find engaging. I have used this as a requirement in my classroom and I have found it to be highly successful so far. I plan on incorporating this program into my classroom much more intensely next year.

It was very difficult for me to choose only three practices I use in my classroom, but I feel these three are perhaps the most integral when it comes to student learning and communication. I am constantly changing the structure of my class to accommodate all of my students. This process is not easy, but it is certainly well worth the effort. It is too easy for us teachers to do the same activities year after year. The work is already completed from the previous year – worksheets and tests are already made, lesson plans are filled out, and so on; however this practice makes teaching more of an act and less of an art. Revising my teaching practices each year helps both the students and me become better at communicating and at learning. I can think of no other profession where the intrinsic reward is so great. It brings a smile to my face whenever I see that light go on in a student's mind, and I cannot imagine working in any other career than teaching.