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Module 3 Discussion Primary Post

I currently teach 5th Grade Language Arts, but my normal course load also includes a section of 6th Grade English. Because of some additional responsibilities this year, I am not teaching my regular 6th grade section. In my school, 5th grade is part of the middle school and our curriculum has a heavy emphasis on reading in this grade level. Our 6th grade program is writing-focused and students work throughout the year to prepare for a student-led writing conference which is held in the Spring.

In the 5th grade, we have created our own version of the Battle of the Books, which is an independent reading program. In our curriculum, students read four novels over the course of eight weeks and for each novel, they must create and answer a set of questions. There are various types, but the most important is the essay question. We spend a great deal of time teaching the 5th graders how to create a good open-ended question and answer it in a detailed paragraph that uses many supportive examples from their text. As I read through Best Practices in Writing Instruction, I was happy to see that some of our teaching strategies were supported by current research. In Chapter 2 (Location 834/7761, Kindle version), it states "students need a framework or a sequence of steps to accomplish demanding assignments."

Over the years, my colleagues and I have tried to refine and improve how we teach this sort of expository paragraph, with special attention to looking for ways to help students organize their ideas. Because one problem seemed to be that students had trouble writing a question that provided enough substance to answer in a paragraph, we created a list of eight open-end questions that could be adapted to any book (ex. Describe the biggest challenge that _____ had? Describe the relationship between _____ and _____ in the novel. What is the importance of _____ in the book?)

Our second step was to create various planners and graphical organizers to help the students think about the elements needed in an essay (ex. topic sentence, supporting examples, conclusion). Next, we created a model essay in which we highlighted the elements in different colors so students could see how everything fit together to make a coherent paragraph. Lastly, we used collaborative writing to have students generate another model as a class to use as a reference. We use our current class study book as our common text and together decide on a question, topic sentence, examples, and a conclusion. I think these steps have definitely helped our students become more effective writers, but I still see room for improvement. I still have students who struggle, even with the scaffolding I've provided, and I am looking for ways to better meet their needs. I think the process of "self-reflection" and "self-evaluation" is one that might help. Once students have drafted a paragraph, some rubric or checklist to help them evaluate what they have written before they turn it in, might help them identify their own areas for improvement.

In our 6th grade course, students are introduced to several genres of expository and narrative writing including the fable, personal narrative, persuasive essay, process essay, poetry, and descriptive essay. I have also enjoyed teaching tributes and eulogies and parodies or retellings of fairy tales. My understanding of genre has always been to describe the structure or form of writing. Typically, we introduce each writing assignment with a description and examples of the genre, sometimes from a text and sometimes student-generated. Students are encouraged to pre-write in a variety of ways. For the personal narrative, students use the prior knowledge gained from our short story unit to complete plot charts and identify all the elements of their stories (exposition, rising action, climax, resolution). With

the persuasive essay, they are asked to choose a "debateable" topic and choose a side they plan to argue. In the essay, they must provide a thesis, statistics, an expert opinion (quote), an opposing viewpoint and counter-argument, and a conclusion. Obviously, this requires a great deal of research and students must also track and cite their sources.

I am learning that genre pedagogy and genre-based teaching is somewhat different. When looking at the genre cycles that we studied in Module 2, I think our approach has left out some strategies that could make a difference in our students' understanding of these forms. In the Tower article (pg. 32), it states "Perhaps it is premature to expect students to conduct research and write informational 'reports' before they have had experience with the smaller pieces that make up the experience of research." Three teachers teach the 6th grade English class and all of us agree that the persuasive essay is the hardest unit to teach. We've discussed whether our students are developmentally ready to create the type of essays we are asking of them and we've modified the assignment over the years, but I don't think we have thought about whether following a different process, like the genre cycle, might be the missing element. Shorter pieces also focused on persuasion might provide better scaffolding for students in preparation for such an in-depth piece of writing.

I saw several intriguing ideas as I read [Best Practices for Writing Instruction](#) and the *WritingNext* article and find it hard to pick two that I would like to try first. Our students in both grade levels do very little collaborative writing, and as indicated in the *WritingNext* article (pg. 16), collaborative writing is one of the highly effective strategies for improving writing. I would like to incorporate more collaborative writing assignments using Google Docs this year. Our school just activated our Google Apps for Education accounts and we are in the process of rolling them out to students. I would like to create opportunities for students to collaborate on pieces as a group and/or engage in peer review of each others' writing using the commenting feature.

Another idea I found via the Expository Writing PowerPoint was geared towards supporting struggling writers with learning differences. At the Access Center's website (<http://www.k8accesscenter.org/writing/knowledgebank.asp>) strategies are shared for helping students with difficulties with areas like text transcription. This year I have a student that has severe dysgraphia and I am looking for ways to help him communicate his ideas more effectively. I think he has more knowledge than he shares in writing because it is so cumbersome to get it on paper. He is beginning to use the computer at home for some assignments, but his typing skills are not fluent yet.

In the chapter on *Best Practices for Teaching Writing to Students With Special Needs* (Location 6661/7761, Kindle version), it states "Transcription affects the quality of writing for students with and without LD because having to attend to lower-level skills of getting language onto paper presumably interferes with higher-order thinking skills, such as planning and content generation. For instance, having to stop and consider how to spell a word may cause the writer to forget plans and ideas already developed or may disrupt content generation." I am thinking about using an iPod or iPad to let my student access a dictation app in the drafting stage of his writing, and then letting him go back and revise and edit the text before turning it in. I have not used this process with a student yet, and am hopeful it could help, but a little worried about the logistics of it (ex. he'll need a quiet place to dictate, so I'll need to find a place for him to go, etc.).

I am still in the process of formulating my Teaching Project, but I know I want to incorporate technology into the process. As I mentioned, I have Google Docs newly available to me, but in addition, I have access to Weebly.com student accounts. I am very interesting in having my students blog this year and with my 5th graders it makes sense for them to write about what they are reading. I

have already mentioned that collaborate writing is a weakness of our current writing program, so whatever I do will definitely have a collaborate aspect. I feel like I'm making a gelatin dessert... the ingredients are in and the mixture is swirling, but it hasn't quite gelled yet! I am finding the chapter on *Best Practices in Using the Internet to Support Writing* (Location 4810/7761, Kindle version) to be a helpful resource. The suggestion of using web quests, collaborative Internet projects, and class websites are all things I would consider as I am definitely someone comfortable with technology. My goal is to create a project that meshes well with our current units and activities, as opposed to creating a unit that seems unconnected to what we are studying, and perhaps something that can be carried on throughout the remainder of the school year.