Literary Learning

The Newsletter for Vermont's English Language Arts Educators and Supporters

VERMONT AGENCY OF EDUCATION

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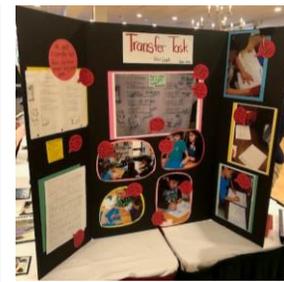
Writing to Build Understanding (Instead of Just Showing It)

I recently attended the Vermont Writing Collaborative's fall workshop and have come away with a new appreciation for the power of writing as a teaching tool beyond being a means of exploration or assessment. In addition to writing extensively in the area of nonfiction, the Common Core puts emphasis on the importance of reading (and understanding) complex texts, building deep understanding of content, and developing strong thinking and reasoning skills. In *Writing for Understanding*, the authors discuss the ways in which writing can help students do all of this and more. Their book (and the instructional strategies therein) was among the many things the Vermont Writing Collaborative presented at their workshop, The Key Connection: Knowledge, Thinking, Reading, and Writing.

It's easy to see how research-based expository writing can help students develop understanding of a topic, but what about the other types of writing? In order to write intelligently about a topic, it is necessary to have a deep understanding of that topic. Along with expository writing, argument and narrative writing can also help students form that deep understanding.

When you look at the way the Common Core State Standards for ELA describe argument writing, it becomes clear why it is a major focus of the standards. Appendix A of the document tells us that "...the proper context for thinking about argument is one 'in which the goal is not victory but a good decision, one in which all arguers are at risk of needing to alter their views, one in which a participant takes seriously and fairly the views different from his or her own'" (24). In other words, students should be instructed to research multiple sides of an issue in order to develop a deeper understanding before forming a claim that is based in evidence from reliable sources. This type of thinking about writing forces students to do more than just back up a knee-jerk opinion with random facts that happen to support it. In addition to helping them to think more deeply about a topic, it also encourages them to examine and acknowledge alternate viewpoints, something with which many educated adults continue to struggle.

Narrative writing can also be used to develop a deeper understanding of a topic. Content-based narratives require strong content knowledge in order to be able to write successfully. This type of narrative can find a home in any content area, whether a student is writing a journal from the point of view of an early American colonist, a

skin cell, or an improper fraction. This is just more support for the idea of teaching literacy across the curriculum.

Because writing is a complicated process that can produce varied products, the presenters at the workshop stressed the importance of models as an instructional tool. For this reason, they provided attendees with benchmarks and other resources for planning instruction, coordinating curriculum, and calibrating expectations for levels of proficiency. They also presented on ways to choose complex texts that support specific learning goals and how to facilitate close readings of these texts using focused text-dependent questions.

None of this negates the importance of teaching the writing *craft*, but since a major purpose of writing is to communicate clearly, teaching a writer how to develop deep understanding of *what* they want to communicate becomes an increasingly important step in instruction. The bottom line is that it is imperative for instructors to have a planned focus in mind for the writing they want their students to produce, to make sure their students understand what that focus is, and to design their learning activities in a way that informs that focus.

Unlocking Meaning: What Is Effective Vocabulary Instruction?

We have all heard the phrase, "Less is more," but have you ever stopped to consider the reverse may be true as well? When it comes to teaching vocabulary, educators are coming to realize that requiring rote memorization of endless lists of words is not the way to get students to develop their vocabulary. Rather, students need to really drill deeply into a few new words at a time in ways that help them to internalize both denotations and connotations. In her article for TeachHUB, "Teaching Strategies: 5 Ideas for Instructing Vocabulary," Janelle Cox writes, "Studies are now showing that students need multiple exposures to a word before they can fully understand it. They also need to learn new words in context, by reading. Teachers can emphasize active processing by having students connect new meanings to words they already have knowledge of." She also presents some strategies that include connecting new words to known words and images, working cooperatively to unpack new words, and comparing similarities and differences between words.

Similarly, the article "Effective Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary," published on K12 Reader, describes strategies that include the use of "word maps" and other graphic organizers, looking at roots and word parts, and using context clues to unlock meaning. Teachers can also model what the article calls "incidental vocabulary learning" by showing students what they do when they come across unfamiliar words while reading. Finally, when pre-teaching words, it is important to let students identify the words they don't know and discuss their meaning as used in the text – don't just give them the definitions.

For more ideas, Just Add Students has some great vocabulary teaching strategies.

The Importance of Innovation

For education to truly undergo massive transformation, educators need to be innovative. The type of innovation that is necessary goes beyond simply coming up with creative lesson plans (although that helps too). In her recent article for forbes.com, Profiles In Innovation: Leading At The Edge Of Education, Barbara Kurshan highlights five innovative educators who embody what she calls the "five critical conditions [that] are necessary for innovation to grow in a sustainable manner: conviction in the importance of the work; clarity on the vision; capacity to implement the ideas; coalition of broad and diverse stakeholders; [and] culture of honesty, trust, and learning."

Kurshan explains: "Our world is changing rapidly; schools need to be redesigned equitably and foundationally; leaders who take on the work of redesigning schools understand that they are the bearers of this urgency." One such school that she writes about is addressing income disparity in the community by making sure that all students learn how to code well enough to have side jobs so that they can earn money to support their families while they are still in school. Another school leader believes in a "whole child" approach to education, so she is providing professional development around trauma informed practices to her entire staff. A third leader started a coding academy to create equity of access to future jobs for students who are traditionally marginalized.

Recognizing that there is a gap between the culture of education and that of the business world, another school is embarking on a job shadow program that would have not only students experience a day in the life of a business professional, but teachers as well. These teachers "understand that this may entail growing the capacity for risk-taking and vulnerability" as they open themselves up to trying new things outside of the world of education. The idea is that the partnership between schools and local businesses will "create bridges across the different cultural mindsets" that currently exist between the world of school and the so-called "real world."

The fifth educator profiled in this article is Vermont's own Adam Bunting, principal of Champlain Valley Union High School (CVU). With the help of a storyteller from The Moth, staff and students at CVU developed their own stories about the need for change in their school, leading them to recognize the limits their grading and reporting system posed in a personalized environment. This realization lead to their participation in a pilot program with the Mastery Transcript Consortium, using their new mastery-based transcript that would graduate students without grades. This is a huge step in the journey to true proficiency-based learning.

These are just a few examples that illustrate the limitless nature of innovation in education. It's truly an exciting time to be an educator, with countless opportunities to make a real difference.

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Resources
Read more about this month's topics here:

- Writing for Understanding
  - [Vermont Writing Collaborative](#) and its [resources](#)
  - *[Writing for Understanding](#)*
  - [Argument Writing Benchmarks](#)
  - [Narrative Writing Benchmarks](#)
  - [Informative Writing Benchmarks](#)
  - [Annotated Student Writing Samples](#) ([Achieve the Core](#))
- Vocabulary Instruction
  - "[Teaching Strategies: 5 Ideas for Instructing Vocabulary](#)"
  - "[Effective Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary](#)"
  - [Just Add Students](#) (strategies)

Professional Offerings

[Teaching & Assessing Reflection](#), a full-day workshop facilitated by Bill Rich, will be taking place on May 13th at the Delta Hotel in South Burlington. After a brief and compelling exploration of why and how the human brain reflects, participants will experience and explore strategies and systems for engaging students in meaningful and varied reflection that improves performance. This is a WORKshop, so arrive ready to draft a plan for refining your approach to teaching and assessing reflection. All educators are welcome, regardless of the age of your learners.

The Key Connection: Knowledge, Reading, Thinking and Writing, presented by the [Vermont Writing Collaborative](#), will take place June 29th, 30th, and July 1st 2020 at the Lake Morey Resort in Fairlee, Vermont, for all K-12 educators. You will learn about tools and approaches you need to integrate knowledge, reading, thinking, and writing in order to help all your students become proficient writers. Over the three days, you will become deeply familiar with curriculum-and-standards-based benchmarks in argument, narrative writing, and informative writing. In addition, using hands-on exploration of well-tested tools and materials, you will work with the key principles of Writing for Understanding that helped produce these benchmarks, and that underlie much solid writing instruction in published curricula. Whether you want to design your own instruction, or to thoughtfully use published curriculum materials, this conference will give you tools and practice that will help you to help your students write proficiently. Visit their [website](#) for more information (coming soon).

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