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Writing Curriculum:

A Mathematical Approach to Successful Writing

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Background

Being a math teacher myself, I had quite a bit to learn about our current writing curriculum and what a writing curriculum has to offer. While the majority of Poudre School District is using Springboard to teach in the English classroom, Cache La Poudre Junior High is continuing to use the six traits of writing to guide their writing curriculum.

The six traits of writing emphasizes ideas, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice and conventions.

According to the six traits of writing, the first aspect of writing properly is ideas and content. Ideas and content is a place to gather and organize the reasons for the writing. It stipulates that every paper should be easy to follow and convey an appropriate message. This is often accomplished through the use of graphic organizers, in which students generate ideas given a pre-formatted flow chart or organization system.

The second aspect of writing is organization. While there is organization in creating a flow chart of graphic organizers, organization refers more to helping a reading flow through the paper. Some key aspects to organization include hooking the reader at the beginning of the paper, creating an easy to follow flow through the paper, is the main concept vivid in each aspect of the paper, and does the conclusion wrap up the paper.

Voice is a writer's chance to include personality and flavor into the paper. This is where a writer conveys their enthusiasm for the topic, inserts their own styles and is able to manipulate how a reader feels. This is also a valuable tool used to hold the reader's attention.

The last three aspects of the six traits of writing are more technical. While reading a paper, each sentence should have a particular rhythm, length and structure. Sentence fluency makes the paper enjoyable to read aloud. One aspect of this includes that sentences should have different beginnings, a mix of length and should be smooth.

Word choice directly relates to the words being used in the paper. The words should create a picture in the reader's mind, grab the reader's attention, and make the paper memorable. This is a chance for the writer to use unique words, words which are appropriate to the reading level of the audience and avoid repeating common words.

Finally, conventions refer to the editing process. This is where the writer has a chance to review spelling, punctuation, grammar, capitalization and paragraphing. A writer should check for proper spacing between words, sentences and paragraphs, the inclusion of a title for the paper, correct punctuation, capital letters where appropriate, and spelling and grammar.

At Cache La Poudre Junior High students focus on writing poetry, expository papers, persuasive arguments, and research papers. An expository paper focuses on providing an explanation or description. The purpose is to inform the readers. During the persuasive unit students are first asked to pick their own topic and later to argue either the pro or con side of a controversial, current, debate that is important in our culture. The English department utilizes teaching across the curriculum to implement research papers. Students are typically asked to research an aspect of the Holocaust, which is the topic of study in their history class.

According to Hayes and Flower, writers think about three aspects of writing during the writing process. First, the planning process includes utilizing the writer's long-term memory of what has been written previously. Within the planning phase are three sub-phases including generating, organizing and goal setting. The second phase is translating. In this phase students generate text following what was produced in organizing. Finally, during the reviewing phase, students read and edit the work for improvements. (Mayer, 124).

Additionally, Richard Mayer, emphasizes a few points about writers and how different instructional methods have had an impact on the individual student. He has reviewed studies that find that successful writers do more planning than their less successful peers. (128) Furthermore, students need practice in proper research techniques as well as understanding credible sources.

In correlation to the final three traits discussed previously, Mayer describes "since the mechanical and syntactic aspects of writing are not automatics an emphasis on correctly formed sentences results in poorer overall writing quality." (135) Richard Mayer also expresses that asking a student to develop work without fully flushing out the ideas can result in "a final draft that lacks integrated content." (136) In addition, Richard Mayer, suggests that by teaching students proper mechanics, to the point of automaticity, students will be able to focus more of their attention to the other aspects of writing properly. (139) Finally, he points out that students need to work on revisions as an entity rather than simply focusing on each individual word and merely adding to a piece. Students must be able to step back from their written work and look through it from a broad perspective. In

addition, students may be willing to change what they have written, possibly even deleting or rephrasing pieces of information.

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I would not change the writing curriculum as a whole at our school, rather how it is implemented. While there are only six traits, which seems fairly minimal to a math teacher covering thirteen chapters, each of those six traits have important sub-headings and intricacies involved.

One aspect that is approached at both the school level as well by Richard Mayer is research. I would set aside one unit, as our school presently does, to focus purely on research. Rather than beginning the writing process or even a particular topic I would begin with students learning about multiple resources. This is an excellent place to help engage the school media center into the classroom environment. Students should begin by learning about the resources that are available and the benefits to using each one. Students should also spend time learning about how to access such resources as well as to search for them, utilizing various search tools incorporating EBSCO host and other online print media searches. During this unit students should learn how to properly format a reference page and site sources within a text. Once this knowledge is obtained and practiced, students will be more able to allocate their personal resources to writing the research paper and less to the mechanics of the paper.

Within each of the other units taught during the year I would begin with the first trait of writing and focus on that. For example, while the students are learning to write, the only important aspect of the first unit, most likely held at the beginning of the year, would be ideas. Although the student would still go through the phases of writing, the main focus of the grade, hopefully the only aspect being graded, would be the ideas being generated. I lesson would begin by merely discussing the generation of ideas and graphic organizers. Students would then continue to write a paper, for the pure practice of writing, but the only aspect counted would be generating ideas. During the final units students would not have to concentrate as much on the earlier developmental aspects of the piece and would be able to focus on the content incorporating what they have learned leading up to that work.

Although the six traits of writing covers the over-all flow in the writing curriculum, some aspects are not discussed. In this essence, writing becomes very similar to following the steps of a mathematical procedure. Beyond each of the six traits students also need to learn to focus in on the basics, number of paragraphs, what does an opening paragraph entail, what a topic sentence is, what content is included in the body of the paper and finally how to wrap up the paper in the conclusion. These are skills that could be established first and continually visited throughout the course.

Reference

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