Accelerating writing achievement

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Our school is in the process of targeting writing achievement for students in Years 1 through to 8. Students in my Years 5 and 6 class who were below or well below the writing standard at the end of their previous year have been targeted as a focus group for improvement. These students need to have their achievement accelerated. What strategies do I need to put in place to ensure that this acceleration can happen? Can this accelerated improvement be sustained over a long period?—*Lanie Moore, Years 5/6 homeroom teacher, Reefton Area School*

These questions are among those that teachers and schools grapple with every day. And because they are such important questions, they are difficult questions to answer in the space of a few pages. As you will appreciate, any response will depend on what the students' individual and collective strengths and needs are. There are, however, a number of general principles that might guide your decision making for these students.

Setting the pace

The notion of acceleration is concerned with increasing the pace of progress. If you are able to get your students to make progress at the same rates as higher-level students, they will remain on a parallel, but lower, track. To achieve acceleration, your students need to learn at rates that are higher than average, so that they "catch up" with their peers. As teachers, then, one of your most important decisions will be about the pace of the teaching. Time for teaching is a finite resource and to inject a sense of urgency requires being judicious with every use of students' time. Hence, every teaching decision involves weighing up the learning potential as well as the opportunity cost. For example, to teach somebody something they already know is to deny them the opportunity to learn something new. Moreover, to achieve acceleration, the learning progressions will need to be carefully developed so that they are of an appropriate size. Take the analogy of running. The way to make the journey really slow is to take tiny steps. Lots of tiny little steps will not only slow you down, it will start making you "focus on your feet" rather than

looking at your destination: you lose the sense of what you are trying to achieve. Conversely, trying to get there by leaping may not get you there faster either, because each leap takes so much effort. Ideally, we want the steps on the journey to be like running—focused on making progress in large strides. The first general principle, then, is to design challenging but achievable learning experiences.

Finding out about three types of expertise for writing

To begin to design the most valuable learning experiences possible, start by finding out what the students already know and can do. This has two benefits. First, it allows you to start at the most appropriate place. Secondly, it allows you to maximise the pace, by continuing to capitalise on the funds of knowledge and resources that students have already. Thus, the second general principle is to build on students' existing expertise. For writing, this expertise is of three types. Students will have experiences with the social communicative purposes of writing, they will know about texts and the way texts work, and they will also have strategies that they can use when writing.

Expertise with communicative purposes

Let's consider the students' experiences with the purposes for writing. Writing is a communicative act, where writers use tools to "get things done" (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). This is why "authentic" or purpose-based approaches are commonly advocated (for a detailed discussion on purpose-based approaches see Twist, 2012). Your writers will have many experiences with "getting things done". They will have explained things and had things explained to them, given instructions and been given instructions aplenty, had anecdotes recounted to them, and regaled others with their accounts of amusing or important events. While many of these experiences may be oral and visual, as well as written, teachers can consider the social purposes that students have experience with, and how these form the basis for writing that achieves similar purposes. We know, for example, from such studies as Collaborative Reasoning (Anderson et al., 1997; Reznitskaya et al., 2001), that students' oral participation in purpose-based activities builds expertise which can be capitalised on for writing. In the case of Collaborative Reasoning, students' prior participation in oral evidence-based discussions can build students' "argument schema" which improves the quality of their written argumentation. It is thought that the students' experience with taking a position, giving evidence, and logical reasoning in class discussion transfers to these same skills in the written format. This provides us with evidence that the ways of participating in activities with similar social purposes can transfer across modes, in this case from spoken to written language. The challenge for teaching is to foster that transfer by framing students' out of school experiences (as well as their school experiences) as relevant and important to bring to the writing classroom.

Expertise with texts

Finding out about students' experiences with communicating for social purposes—and then teaching on the basis of this information—sounds easier to do than it actually is. Because of the way young peoples' memories work, perhaps the *least* effective way of finding out what students know about something is to rely only on the question "what do you know about it?" Studies suggest that students' ability to probe their memories for knowledge in this way depends on their development (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Instead, I suggest that teachers design activities that allow students to show what they can do, and that allow teachers to notice, uptake, and then extend. For example, when debating a current event students might show their ability to take a position and give evidence. Participation in this type of discussion provides an opportunity for you and the students to identify and name what communicative moves they already know how to make, or techniques they already employ. What is important in this approach is to capitalise on students' repertoires of expertise (Gutierrez & Lee, 2009).

Students will also have textual knowledge (knowledge of/about how texts work) that they can draw from. The same knowledge and skills that your students employ when reading form the basis for the knowledge and skills used to write. Moreover, our students increasingly live in a "voice-filled social landscape", (Dyson, 2010, p. 308), and therefore the texts that surround them offer the "putty" (Myhill, 2011) which they can mould for their own purposes. The trick here is to translate this receptive knowledge into productive knowledge. For example, we all know some words well enough to understand them when others use them, but not quite well enough to use ourselves. We need to notice the words, make sure we have a good understanding of them, and then appropriate them for our own purposes. Once again, to capitalise on this sort of knowledge, students and teachers need to appreciate its value for writing. One of the ways teachers can do this is to ask students to take the control of text analysis. They can give students a written example (of

an explanation, for example) to read and discuss among themselves, then ask students to identify the techniques or textual features the author has used. Teachers report to me that letting the students analyse texts independently allows the students themselves to record what they already "know", and the teaching can then focus on supporting students to decide how they might best achieve their own authorial purpose given these "tools", that is, using what they know how to do.

Strategic expertise

Finally, students will have strategies that they already employ when writing. It is critically important for teachers to find out about these strategies so they can support students who are composing. Studies suggest that there are three main processes that we engage in while writing. At the most macro level, people generate ideas for their writing. They then need to turn these ideas into words: this is the process of translation or deciding how to arrange, phrase, or to "put" what you want to say. The final process is transcription, getting those words onto the paper or screen (Hayes, 2004). Students will have a different profile of strength and need in each of these areas. And it may take some careful teacherly listening to discern which of the processes may be causing a student difficulty and which might be relative strengths. When students complain that they don't know what to write, this might seem like they are having trouble generating ideas. But it may be the case that they are having difficulty turning their ideas into words—which is a different issue. Based on their individual strengths and needs, students will need strategies to 'hold' these processes, so that they play to their strengths, while still dedicating cognitive attention to those parts which cause difficulty.

For this reason, different types of writers go about the writing process in different ways (Myhill, 2009). Some take longer to decide what they want to say; others get their ideas quite quickly, but spend much longer crafting sentences. Evidence suggests that expert writers spend much more time considering their "communicative" or "rhetorical" choices. They spend most time deciding how to "transform" what they know to meet the needs of the reader. Less-expert writers are much more focussed on "telling" the reader their knowledge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Knowing about your students' strategies here will help you choose appropriate prompts for thinking about their writing. Asking "what do you want to write?" may, for example, elicit a "knowledge-telling" strategy. Asking instead, "what does your reader need to know?" may evoke a different strategy.

Teaching based on students' existing expertise

As you can see, "knowing the learner" as a writer goes much deeper than knowing their test scores. And teaching at the edge of what students know and can do requires considerable expertise on behalf of the teacher. It requires contingent response, in terms of taking up the expertise that students show, acknowledging it, and then showing how that expertise is applicable to the writing context. Part of that contingent response is selecting teaching strategies that best match the aim. Modelling, for example, is often used as a form of demonstrating what to do. But modelling is most powerfully employed to let students into the secret of what expert writers think about and ask themselves when they write. Thus, as a teaching strategy, modelling is well suited to the teaching of mental strategies. And used as such, modelling may be a powerful strategy. However, it may be less powerful, or even work against, other teaching aims, such as identification of knowledge. Procedural facilitation strategies, in the form of mnemonics or writing frames, similarly, are very powerful techniques to support the initial routine learning of organisational needs, but will be less effective if the learning aim is flexibility or authorial voice. I argue that all teaching strategies have outcomes that they promote, but all will equally have outcomes that they ignore, or even inhibit. Thus, my third general principle is to employ teaching strategies contingent on the students' strengths and needs.

Sustaining the shifts

You are right to consider issues of sustainability at the outset. We know that there is no educational intervention that operates to "inoculate" the students for the future. This stands to reason: you can't teach them now everything they will encounter in the future. You can, however, teach learning strategies to develop self-efficacy, self-regulation, and metacognition. You can also put systems in place to support the students' ongoing success: robust and regular monitoring, and consistently high shared expectations and close connections among those involved with the students' education: themselves, their teachers, and their whānau.

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