ADOLESCENT LITERACY: ENGAGING RESEARCH AND TEACHING

Good for All, Necessary for Some HOW TO HELP STUDENTS WHO STRUGGLE WITH WRITING

THE SITUATION

Mr. Kai asks his students to write for two main reasons. (1) To explore ideas related to the subject, and (2) to demonstrate their understanding about topics and issues. Students write for a variety of purposes, including their own. In his Grade 10 Open Civics course, Mr. Kai recognizes that writing is a skill his students will need to use, now and in the future, to state a position, to voice their opinions and to take civic action.

Recently, Mr. Kai gave his students a writing task based on the inquiry question "Can one person make a difference?" This inquiry question acts as a framing question for the entire course. The inquiry question initially sparked students' interest. However, when he assesses the student work, two issues emerged. First, based on observations, Mr. Kai notices that some of his students are reluctant to write. Second, based on the student work, he finds that some student responses only superficially addressed the question, and Mr. Kai wonders whether students have limited understanding of the topic.

"When writers are engaged in the process of writing on something that matters to them, for which they have their own purposes, that writing often surprises, delights, and empowers them, encouraging a stronger commitment to the crafting of the writing. " - Linda Rief, "Writing: Common Sense Matters", *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise* into Practice, 2007.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

As with all adolescent learners, the students in Mr. Kai's class are continuing to develop a wide range of literacy skills, and, as a group, they exhibit a range of proficiency in their use of those skills. Typically, as students progress through the grades, they are required to meet more complex writing demands. These demands include needing to support their ideas with details that are sound and convincing and with a greater awareness of their purpose and audience. They also are using a number of written forms that may be relatively unfamiliar, and are required to write for very specific purposes. In his class, Mr. Kai wants students to recognize that writing may be used as a means of taking civic action, such as writing to a town council to call for changes to a proposed by-law or to express an opinion about changes to services provided by an agency.

Besides meeting the increasing demands of writing, Mr. Kai also knows that motivation can play a part. Sometimes students go through the motions of writing, and do not see writing as an opportunity to develop their thinking and express their voice. Motivating adolescents to write is another key. When students are more motivated, they tend to spend more time and effort engaged in tasks. For adolescents, being motivated is often connected to their sense of autonomy. Giving choice is one way to allow for autonomy as long as the choice offers students options that they really care about. Daniel Pink, in his book Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us, makes the distinction between independence and autonomy. According to Pink, independence suggests working alone, whereas autonomy "means acting with choice" (Pink, 2011). Mr. Kai wonders how he can help his students to express ideas in their writing in a more meaningful way and be more invested in the writing and have a greater sense of autonomy.

"When learning is responsive to the developmental needs of students, and takes their lives into account, adolescent learners are more likely to experience success." - Adolescent Literacy Guide, 2012.

"When we write we don't simply spit out what we already know. Often, writing leads us to ideas we didn't know we had. The very act of writing creates new thinking... writing generates deeper thinking." - Kelly Gallagher, Write Like This, 2011

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

Students need regular opportunities to write in all subject areas for a variety of purposes. Some of those purposes are unique to specific subject areas, and helping students understand those purposes helps them gauge the extent to which their writing is doing the intended job. Adolescents also become more aware of their own purposes for writing, and many learners are writing outside the classroom. Finding ways to draw on these skills can also be useful in helping students master other kinds of purposes and forms. For example, allowing students to brainstorm ideas and drafts using 'texting' may encourage them to get ideas down without worrying about forms and conventions until later drafts. It is also beneficial to help students understand that writing need not always result in polished pieces of work. Writing is a vehicle to explore topics and issues. Writers discover ideas in the act of writing, or as Kelly Gallagher says "writing leads us to ideas we didn't know we had" (Gallagher, 2011). In this way, writing may support the development of more in depth ideas than talking.

All students, especially those who struggle with writing, benefit when they can write about topics and ideas that they find personally compelling and relevant. They also develop higher quality writing when they have had time to access and build background knowledge about a topic. Adolescents tend to do this more effectively when they generate ideas through social interaction, for example through purposeful talk, and through accessing a variety of sources, for example viewing an interesting clip on a related topic and by interacting with other authentic texts.

Although Mr. Kai knows there are many aspects of writing that students may need to work on to improve their writing over time, he decides to focus on a few key skills at this point. Using his assessment information, including his observations of students working on their writing and on the writing itself, Mr. Kai decides to provide targeted instruction on helping his students expand their ideas in writing. At this point, he is more concerned with students' ability to do this, even if it means not completing fully polished pieces of writing. He will also try to increase students' desire to write by tapping into their sense of autonomy and interest.

Mr. Kai decides on a plan that includes the following steps:
- **do some professional learning** about effective writing instruction in identified areas
- **co-create** an inquiry question with the students
- **use a process** which involves before, during and after stages of writing
- **build background** knowledge for students to draw on and develop their own thinking
- **use a variety of *writing to learn* techniques** to help students generate ideas
- **work with model texts** and **co-develop success** criteria for quality writing which expresses an opinion
- **provide access to technology** for students to write
- **talk with students** about how they are feeling about their writing and **use group conferencing** to help them improve the quality of their writing

Mr. Kai decides that he wants to support students in developing their thinking in writing, and to engage students so that they are more invested in the work. This leads him to learning more about writing to learn.

In writing to learn, the writing does not need to take a particular structure, although some structures, such as graphic organizers or sentence stems developed for the task, may be useful for students to generate ideas. The "writing" can take many forms, including pictures, symbols, lists or other forms of expression which offer students ways to make meaning from what they are learning. The writing forms can incorporate both low tech (e.g., pen and paper) and high tech (e.g., apps on tablets) options.

What to Look for in Student Writing

When monitoring students while they are writing, teachers can look for and support the following:
- a positive attitude toward writing
- opportunities to think about a topic and generate ideas for writing
- opportunities to write to explore (for themselves) and to create pieces for others to read
- an understanding of a variety of writing forms and their purposes
- an openness to feedback for revisions
- opportunities to talk about their own writing, the writing of others, and with other writers (e.g., peers)
- have a flexible use of a writing process that takes the writer from planning to draft and/or polished form
- use models of writing to help shape their own
- resources (e.g., models) to support their own writing
- opportunities to recognize different levels of quality of writing and use established criteria

When assessing the quality of writing, teachers can look for and support the following:
- an identification of audience and purpose that is accurate and appropriate
- a voice that is authentic and appropriate given the purpose and audience
- form that is appropriate and that helps understanding of the ideas
- a clear expression of ideas
- a logical and sequential organization which helps the reader move from one idea to the next
- details which are focused, thoughtfully selected, and which all contribute to a focus of the writing (e.g., supports main idea(s))
- sentences that flow, express ideas and hold the reader's attention
- word choice, including subject-specific vocabulary, that is appropriate, specific, and has an impact (relative to purpose and audience)
- writing conventions (e.g., punctuation, spelling) that are appropriate and effective
- proper method of citing sources when ideas are borrowed from other writers

Teachers support these behaviors, attitudes and skills during the writing, and will use some of these criteria for evaluation.

Adapted from Think Literacy: Cross curricular Approaches & Guide to Effective Instruction, Volume 6

Mr. Kai knows that engaging students in inquiry makes the learning richer. He likes how inquiry typically presents an open question that allows for a range of possible avenues for students to explore.

With his knowledge of motivation in mind, he works with the students to co-create an inquiry question. Using what he knows about motivation, he believes that students will be more invested in exploring the inquiry since they have some ownership in creating the question, and he believes it is a way to truly get at a topic they have an interest in. He has students submit suggestions for topics which connect with their learning on social action. He reviews the suggestions to make sure that the topics fit with the curriculum. Then he works with students to frame these topics as questions, for example, one question becomes "Are teenagers a positive presence/force in our community?" Through this process, he and the students generate a list of inquiries that students might pursue. He then offers students a choice of which question to focus on, and this question will form the basis of their opinion piece.

WRITING TO LEARN

Writing to learn can be a powerful tool in all subject areas. Writing to learn involves students writing for themselves by recording, exploring and analyzing ideas and information based on what they already know, and on what they've heard and read from other sources. The focus is on developing ideas in writing and not so much on form and conventions.

There are a number of writing to learn activities which allow students to record their thinking and generate ideas.

Carousel Brainstorming

In small groups, students gather around a chart paper (or other writing surface) posted around the classroom. Each chart paper contains a different image, quotation or other type of prompt for students to respond to. Groups spend a set amount of time at each chart paper and respond to the prompt, and then move to the next. At the next station, students read what was written by the previous group and either add responses to the prompt, pose questions, and/or comment on what they have read. When they arrive back at the station they started at, students highlight key information and report out to the class. This can then be a platform for a whole class discussion to bring together common ideas and make connections. It can also be a starting point for students to do their own writing based on what they heard.

Carousel brainstorming allows students to socialize through talk, to build ideas collaboratively, and for movement which, for many adolescents, enhances their engagement. In structuring the activity, students may only need to be at each station for a short length of time (e.g., 3-5 minutes) to help keep the carousel moving and students focused on the task (Daniels, Zemelman & Steineke, 2007, 81-84).

Rapid Writing

The goal of rapid writing is to generate ideas quickly, and then use the material to set direction for further writing. This technique is intended to allow writers to rapidly record fresh ideas about topics, without pausing or self-editing.
Students may begin rapid writing in response to a prompt (e.g., an image, quotation, topic statement, opinion). Students are encouraged to keep the 'flow' going; that is, not lifting their pen from the paper (or fingers from the keyboard). The speed and continuity of the writing helps students to record the ideas that come to mind but reduces the pressure of crafting ideas in complete sentences (Think Literacy, 2003, 98- 100).

Think-Write-Pair-Share

Think-write-pair-share is a variation of think-pair share, adding the step of having students jot down ideas during think time before they pair up and discuss. This writing allows students to capture ideas in point form. This can be done on a stickie note, for example, which may take the pressure off some

students who may be intimidated by the blank page. Students may be invited to add to their jot notes after they have discussed with their peer. Think-write-pair-share allows a few opportunities for teachers to assess students, for example, by observing if and how much students are jotting down on their stickies, and listening in to the paired conversations.

Tweet Response

Asking students to write in responses which mimic a tweet confines students to the 140 character limit of the form. This may help students to be focused in their response, limiting it to essential information. It may also allow them the freedom to be flexible with spelling and conventions when getting their ideas down, but it may also provide content for them to refine for a longer piece of writing at a later time.

Written Conversations

Written conversations or write-around process takes the class discussion (where there may be only a small portion of the voices in the classroom involved) and puts it on the page. Students convene in small groups. Each student has a piece of paper, and puts his or her name on the top. An article, video clip, image or other material is used to prompt thinking. Students then are given a short amount of time to jot down their thinking so that it can be shared with another student. There is no talking during this time so that students' train of thought is uninterrupted. Once the time has elapsed, each student passes their paper to another student in the group. Each student reads what is on their peer's page and responds as they might in an oral discussion by making a comment, asking a question, sharing a connection, or raising a new idea about the prompt.

Each student continues to pass to another student. More time can be allowed for writing each time since students have more to read and respond to. Eventually each paper is returned to the student who started the written conversation. Students read over all the responses. At this point students may be invited into a whole class discussion about the topic, where each of their ideas went, and how the process may have extended their own thinking (Daniels & Steineke, 2011, 83-87).

Writers Need:
- multiple and meaningful opportunities to use writing in subject specific contexts, including for writing to learn as well as for developing pieces of writing
- opportunities for generating ideas through talk, interacting with various related texts (e.g., media), and exploring resources
- understanding of how purpose and audience help guide writing
- knowledge of different types of forms of writing, and the structures used in them
- to read and interact with models of writing
- a writing process which they can use flexibly as their writing develops
- explicit and targeted instruction on specific aspects of the writing
- descriptive feedback including information which helps students know what to do next
- opportunities to talk about their writing during revision, and to use quality feedback to refine their work
- expanded vocabularies and ways to develop word choice
- strategies for becoming independent writers

Shanahan, 2004

USE A PROCESS WHICH INVOLVES BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER STAGES OF WRITING

One of the things Mr. Kai wants to point out to his students is that writing is created through a process. He recognizes that completely formed ideas don't just appear on the page, and in fact, writing is often a way to discover ideas the writers don't know they have until they are engaged in writing.

Mr. Kai wants his students to recognize that they can use a process flexibly. That is, sometimes a lot of time needs to be spent exploring a topic and generating ideas. Sometimes, not every piece of writing is completed in a polished form, but as drafts that can be collected and considered at a later time.

Mr. Kai decides to guide his students through a process that follows before, during and after stages of writing. He has decided that for this assignment he will help students focus more on the before and during writing stages. In doing so, he hopes students will build competence with a process to complete a draft rather than a completely polished piece of work. This allows him to focus on assessing the development and organization of ideas, and in this writing task, he will not focus explicitly on some of the other areas of communication (e.g., spelling).

Mr. Kai also plans to use each of the *before, during,* and *after* stages as opportunities to assess student writing and provide instruction based on those check-ins.

BUILD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

In previous writing tasks, Mr. Kai heard from his students that they want to write, and they know that it is important to be able to write, but they felt they didn't have much to write about. From the previous writing task, he learns that students' initial interest in a topic may not be enough. They still need opportunities to build their background knowledge about a topic.

He builds on that connection by planning and delivering a number of lessons where students draw on their interests, thoughts and opinions related to the inquiry questions. He plans for ways to have students talk about ideas and then capture those ideas through a number of techniques. One of the techniques he uses is carousel brainstorming (See Carousel Brainstorming, page 4). Carousel brainstorming allows students the social aspect of talk, building ideas collaboratively, and allows for movement which for many adolescents enhances their engagement.

Mr. Kai takes all the questions that were generated and he posts them around the classroom. In small groups, students discuss and jot down their ideas related to the question. Through the purposeful talk at each station, and through the record that is produced from these conversations, students generate some preliminary ideas about each of the questions.

USE A VARIETY OF WRITING TO LEARN TECHNIQUES TO HELP STUDENTS GENERATE IDEAS

As students are building background knowledge related to the topic, Mr. Kai engages students in a series of other writing to learn activities. The writing to learn activities allow the students to write to develop their thinking and ideas. One of the activities they use is written conversations (See Written Conversations, page 5).

For example, Mr. Kai selects an editorial about how a group of teens presented a petition at a town council meeting. During the written conversation, Mr. Kai circulates around the room and notes how students were writing without talking. He observes that students, for the most part, are genuinely engaged and interested in their peers' responses. He also sees how students are giving a structure to their ideas as they build on one another's input.

With the writing to learn techniques he incorporates in his instruction, Mr. Kai finds that the students seem more motivated because they are emotionally connected to the work and they are writing primarily to express ideas without worrying about conventions. He also finds that these opportunities give him some assessment for learning information so he can monitor how well students are demonstrating their understanding. As students engage in more writing to learn opportunities, he reminds students how they are developing content, and he can concretely point out to students how much writing they are actually doing.

"Effective writers use different strategies to sort the ideas and information they have gathered in order to make connections, identify relationships, and determine possible directions and forms for their writing." - Think Literacy, 2003.

WORK WITH MODELS OF TEXTS AND CO-CREATE SUCCESS CRITERIA
Mr. Kai asks students to look at examples of writing that act as models of work that students are aiming for. In groups, Mr. Kai has students view parts of the writing with particular questions in mind. Sample questions include: How does the writer open the opinion piece? Where is the opinion stated? How does the writer support his or her claim? How does the writer end? Mr. Kai intersperses the model text work with other writing to learn activities and opportunities to talk about what the students are reading.

Once students have worked with a number of opinion pieces, Mr. Kai poses the question: What makes a good written opinion? This question acts as a springboard for the teacher and students to develop success criteria. Mr. Kai invites students to come up with the descriptions of what makes a quality opinion piece, and he records the students' suggestions. He often prompts students to refer back to the model pieces of writing to base their criteria. The criteria are posted as an anchor chart.

PROVIDE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY
Once students have engaged in a number of writing to learn experiences and have generated several 'records' of their thinking, Mr. Kai invites students to begin drafting their opinion piece. As much as he can, he provides students with tools for writing, including word processors and speech-to-text applications. When struggling writers have access to technology for their writing, they tend to write for longer periods of time and create higher quality work (Peterson, 2014).

TALK WITH STUDENTS AND USE GROUP CONFERENCING TO COACH STUDENTS WITH THEIR WRITING
When Mr. Kai provides time in class for students to write, he makes sure he talks with students about how they are feeling about their writing. Although these conversations are informal, they help him gauge the students' attitudes about their writing, and he can address any issues related to their interest and conditions that may arise.

More formally, Mr. Kai uses conferencing to support students' writing, but he does not have time to meet with each student individually. He decides to use group conferencing, meeting with small groups of students at a time, to coach them on their writing.

To make the conference efficient, Mr. Kai groups students based on assessment for learning observations of student work during the process. Within the group, he and his students focus on short portions of the writing. He reads sections aloud with students, and asks other students in the group to listen if they have any questions about what they are hearing. During the conferences, Mr. Kai continually refers to the success criteria that were co-developed with the class.

IN BRIEF

Writing skills continue to develop for the adolescent learner, and students will continue to build their skills over time through multiple opportunities in all subjects. In this situation, Mr. Kai decides to focus his support on helping students expand on their ideas. When teachers can pinpoint specific writing needs and objectives, they are in a much better position to plan and implement specific supports for their students.

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FOR MORE ON...

Adolescent Literacy
Literacy GAINS. (2012).
Adolescent Literacy Guide: A Professional Learning Resource for Literacy, Grades 7-12.

Building Background Knowledge
Literacy GAINS (Spring 2013)
ALERT: Make Room for Building Background Knowledge

Promoting Purposeful Talk
Literacy GAINS (Fall 2012)
ALERT: Make Room for Talking to Learn